

# Women Management of the Forest, Second Edition

Yolanda Murphy and Robert F. Murphy

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## FOR PAMELA AND ROBERT

who will find a portion of their parents' lives woven into these pages

## Preface to Second Edition

The second edition of *Women of the Forest* contains a new chapter in which we present a chronicle of our fieldwork and a description of our methods. The book is otherwise unchanged, except for minor editorial revisions. When we initially wrote *Women of the Forest*, we had not fully anticipated that it would be so widely used in introductory cultural anthropology courses. The language of the work was intentionally nontechnical, making it accessible to the beginning student, but we had not considered the possibility that a substantial segment of our audience would have only a vague idea of how data are collected. The new chapter meets this need.

Chapter 3, "Beyond the Looking Glass," gives the reader an idea of the nature of ethnographic fieldwork as both personal experience and scientific practice. In recent years, anthropologists have turned increasingly toward the study of life in modern industrial societies, and the recounting of our own adventures is a remembrance of the classic fieldwork situation of novices living with a primitive tribe in a total wilderness. We hope that the reader will catch some of the flavor of our odyssey. The beginning student will also learn something about anthropological methods of data gathering, as well as some of the pitfalls in interpretation. In this sense, our intention has been to increase the educational value of the book.

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In the thirty-two years since our field trip, many profound changes have taken place in Mundurucú society. These have been masterfully described and analyzed by Dr. Brian Burkhalter, now of the University of South Florida, who worked among the Mundurucú in 1979–81 (Burkhalter 1983). We have not, however, incorporated his findings in this edition, which remains a description of the Mundurucú in 1952–53. Dr. Burkhalter is now preparing a book based on his later research, and we look forward to its publication.

A few further notes are in order. All personal names of Mundurucú individuals in this book are pseudonyms, starting with Borai, the fictitious heroine of our composite "Woman's Day." We hope, too, that the addition of a chapter on our research will give proper recognition of our indebtedness to Sr. Francisco Manhuari, our field assistant. We also note with appreciation the services of Ms. Elizabeth Astwood, who prepared the manuscript of the new chapter. And we acknowledge with gratitude the fact that it was our colleague Dr. Elliott Skinner who first suggested the book's title. Finally, to all who have read the book over the years and told us of your reactions, our deepest thanks.

July 1985

### Preface to First Edition

Over two decades have passed since we studied the Mundurucú Indians, a time during which our data, both the truths and the errors, have of necessity remained the same, but during which we have changed. We were still in our twenties and recently married when we first walked into a Mundurucú village—we were students, and we lived in a world that, for all its problems, seemed somehow or other more predictable and orderly than today's. And we had studied an anthropology which, however relativistic, was expansive and optimistic in outlook, as befitted the times.

This book is written by different people than the young ethnographers who went to Brazil in 1952. The authors are middle-aged, they have raised a family in the interim, they have experienced the failure of confidence that has occurred in America in the last ten years, and they teach an anthropology that lacks the certitude and consensus of the one they learned. It is a science that, like this book, now takes a somewhat skeptical view of our common-sense perceptions, sees illusions where we once saw hard facts, and views society not as a clockwork but as a series of binds and contradictions. But it is a science that is in search of new directions, and we hope that where it has lost in exuberance it has gained in depth of reflection.

It is for all these reasons that this book will present a somewhat different view of Mundurucú society than in Robert Murphy's previous publications (1956, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1960). Of even greater importance, however, is that the subject matter has shifted, for we turn now to the role of the woman, a topic that Yolanda Murphy has discussed elsewhere (1972).

The project had its incipience when we were graduate students, long before the current rise of interest in "women's studies." Dr. Gene Weltfish, who was a professor at Columbia University at that time and an early and steadfast proponent of the rights of women, invited Yolanda into her office and told her in no uncertain terms that she should do a thorough study of the life of the Mundurucú women. Ethnographies have such a strong male orientation, Dr. Weltfish argued, that one could well wonder who or what gave birth to the men.

She was, of course, absolutely right, for most anthropological field research has been done by men, and there has been a distressing tendency for even the work of women to have the same bias toward male values and activities. This was not in the least true of Weltfish and the other great female anthropologists who trained at Columbia under Franz Boas but, until very recently, the later generations of women anthropologists attuned their interests to the theoretical and substantive issues posed by the men.

In their defense, one can note that they had career goals and livings to make, and these were the directions for advancement in a male world; one goes where the action is. But it is good to remember that the anthropological study of women is not one of the social phenomena of the 1960s, for decades earlier the research had been pioneered by such persons as Ruth Bunzel, Ruth Landis, Margaret Mead, and Gene Weltfish, and had been urged by them upon their students.

Following Gene Weltfish's advice was not difficult for Yolanda. As we will show, social life among the Mundurucú was sharply dichotomized by sex, and we drifted quite naturally into the same

pattern in our interaction with the Indians. Our experience was hardly unique among ethnographers. Most have found that male anthropologists have poor success in establishing rapport with females. No matter how antiseptic their advances, these are often misinterpreted by the women, and sometimes by their husbands. Often, too, women feel a sense of embattlement against their men, and a male who also asks persistent questions becomes doubly threatening.

Female anthropologists actually have better results with men than their male colleagues do with women. First, from the point of view of the women, she is one of them. Second, from the point of view of the men she is a Martian, somebody they really do not have to fit into the arrangements and values that guarantee their superiority; in this sense she is like an African in the American South. In the same spirit, the Mundurucú men thought that Yolanda was Robert's worry, not theirs, and she could do as she wished. Besides, the essential colonialism of the relationship between anthropologists and informants sees the male-female status difference canceled out by the fact that the female anthropologist comes from the more powerful society. An unpleasant observation, but true.

Most of our days were spent by Yolanda among the women and by Robert among the men. She sat with the women in their houses, worked with them in making manioc flour, went with them to the gardens, bathed with them, and helped them take care of the children. When she was not off with them, one or more women were usually in our house. Mundurucú women are eminently gregarious, and she soon became included in most of their activities. She did not have to search for informants or seek ways to intrude herself in their midst. Quite to the contrary, she sometimes wished for more privacy. Even today, she recalls nostalgically the hot afternoons when she would settle in her ham-

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mock for a nap only to be aroused out of slumber by the women, who would shake her hammock insistently, calling out, "Iolantá, are you awake?"

The fieldwork, lasting from June 1952 to June 1953, was carried out in two villages, one a traditional community of the savannahs far inland from the Tapajós River, and the other a more acculturated village along one of the Tapajós tributaries. The contrasts between the two were an essential part of Robert's book *Headhunter's Heritage* (1960), a study of social change, for they showed in a slice of time the history of the inroads of Brazilian society upon Mundurucú culture.

The two communities were equally valuable for limning Mundurucú sex roles, for one of them had a men's house and the other did not. We had thus found two very different modes of sexual interaction in the same group of people and at the same time. It might be added that though we lived in Mundurucú villages in Mundurucú houses, following a pattern of existence not too different from that of the Indians, Robert never lived in the men's house. We ate like the Mundurucú, but we still had a typically American marriage.

Our account of the life of the Mundurucú woman will, hopefully, reveal a great deal about their men as well, but from a different angle. One of the great faults of cultural descriptions that center upon males, whether they do so intentionally or not, is that they are one-dimensional, not just in their neglect of the female but in their treatment of the men. Elementary logic tells us that to know light, you must have a concept of darkness, for they are relative to each other and intelligible only in terms of each other. In the same sense, one cannot understand one sex role except in its interaction with the other, for they define one another, they beget one another, and they become actualized only vis-à-vis one another.

The relationship is a dialectical one in the exact sense of the term, and our book will then, in a broader framework, be an analysis of sex relations among the Mundurucú from the standpoint of the female. It has been written in what we believe is conformity to the proper standards of anthropological scholarship, but its language has been left deliberately simple and untechnical in order that it will be easily read by the student or layman. The book pretends to be a study only of the Mundurucú, and we make minimal reference to the voluminous literature on women in our own and other societies. Nonetheless, the general significance of the study will become evident, and the final chapter will explore its ramifications.

The substantive conclusions of this book belong properly at its end, but it should be said at the outset that one of its primary lessons is that the subject matter, for all the ink that has been spilled over it, remains obscure and refractory—perhaps because everybody is too close to the problems of sex roles and sex identities to think effectively about them. This bodes ill for all of us, for the depth and magnitude of the modern transformation of sex roles in our own society is greater than most of us are able to perceive.

In looking at the position of women in another, totally different, society, we hopefully can stand off from ourselves as well, and see the cant and illusion that invade our own thinking on sexuality. And in doing so, we must keep in mind that there are awesome gaps between our images of life and life as it is lived, between the rules of society and the course of daily events. This is one of anthropology's most elementary teachings; its relevance to the problems of females and males was lucidly expressed by Robert H. Lowie (1920, p. 188) over half a century ago: ". . . it is important to ascertain what customary or written law and philosophic theory have to say on feminine rights and obligations. But it is more important to know whether social practice conforms to

theory or leaves it halting in the rear, as it so frequently does."

We have had the opportunity in other prefaces to other publications on the Mundurucú to express our sense of debt to colleagues, teachers, and institutions, and to friends and associates in Brazil who contributed to our research. It is, however, a pleasure to once again acknowledge the fellowship support of Columbia University and the Social Science Research Council which made the research possible. A draft of the present work was read by Orna Johnson, who helped greatly with her comments, and we have prevailed upon many others to listen to our ideas. John Moore of the Columbia University Press lent his encouragement to the project and his trenchant observations to the manuscript. We also wish to express our thanks to Mrs. Jessie Malinowska for her editorial assistance and typing.

The myths on pages 114–15 and 124–25 are reprinted, with permission, from "Mundurucú Religion," *University of California Publicatijons in Archaeology and Ethnology*, Vol. 49, No. 1, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1958.

One of the great joys of writing the book has been the revival of dormant memories of the Mundurucú, for it has allowed us to relive the most fascinating year of our life. Yolanda, especially, remembers the kindness, good humor, warmth, and generosity of those lovely people, the Mundurucú women. They accepted her as a friend and as a sister, and she will never forget them. This book is her witness to their lives.

Y. M. R. F. M. Leonia, New Jersey May 1974

# Women of the Forest

Second Edition

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# Woman's AAAAAAAA Day

Dawn came first as a shift of light and shadow in the eastern sky, etching out of the blackness of the night the outline of the hills on the watershed of the rivers. With it, the forest fell silent, the raucous noises of the night creatures faded, and the great quietude separating the life of the night from that of the day reached its brief ascendancy. As the eastern sky turned a dark, then a lighter, gray, the houses of the Mundurucú village of Cabruá began to emerge from shadows into pale images, and the first stirring of the people was heard.

Borai tossed in her hammock, wrapped it tightly around and snuggled her baby closely against the chill dawn. The child began to whimper, and she took a breast from under her worn dress and placed it by his mouth. While he suckled, Borai lay half-asleep, gazing out through the space between the walls and roof of the house, watching the light strengthen in the east. The eight-month-old baby finished feeding, fell back to sleep, and Borai gently disengaged herself from it and eased out of her warm cocoon into the cold of the wakening house. She yawned

#### 2 · WOMAN'S DAY

and stretched, scratched herself luxuriantly, and then kicked at the dogs nestled around the smoldering household fire.

The earth around the hearth was still warm, and she stood close to it, warming the bottoms of her feet. Borai then took some kindling and placing it next to the fire, took a still glowing end of a piece of wood from last night's fire and blew it into flame. She placed the kindling carefully around the small flame, like spokes about a hub, and when the fire crackled into life, brought over larger pieces of firewood to prepare for the day's cooking. She swung rather halfheartedly with a piece of firewood at the lingering dogs, chasing them out of the house, and then went to stand at the back door, pensively watching the breaking day.

The sky in the east had by then turned to delicate and striated bands of mauve and pink, and the land in the valley below was beginning to appear from the gloom. The hills beyond the headwaters of the river could now be seen in sharp relief, and the islands of forest in the rolling savannah appeared as dark blotches, their trees gaining distinction as the light grew stronger. The valleys were still covered with the mist of the dawn, and small pockets of fog moved slowly across the faces of the hills. It was a calm and serene period, and the other women of the house only spoke to each other in whispers, lest the stillness of the natural world be torn by human beings.

The life of the village gained momentum as the natural order of the day asserted itself. Before the sun had edged over the horizon, a rooster crowed from somewhere in the underbrush bordering the village, another in the brush near the *farinha*-making shed answered, and the morning litany of cock-crowing was joined by the first snarling fight of dogs competing for a shred of tapir intestine outside the village. In the men's house many of the men were stirring, though a few were still lying in their

hammocks, their feet dangling over the small fires they had built beneath. Most of them planned to hunt that day, and they were already testing bow strings and sighting down arrow shafts for straightness. Others squatted by a fire to discuss where to hunt, passing from one to another the single cigarette one of them had rolled.

Borai's husband, Kaba, broke away from the group of men and came to the house. He sat on a log that served as a seat, and Borai brought him a half gourd of farinha, flour made from bitter manioc, mixed with water. He tilted the container back, pushing the farinha toward his mouth with a hunting knife, and passed it back to her when he had finished. Borai had warmed up, over the fire, two monkey legs left from the previous night's dinner, and she passed one of the legs over to him with a small gourd of salt. He dipped the scrawny and heat-shriveled meat in the salt between each bite, washed it down with water, and went back to join the gathering hunting party. Few words had been exchanged. The baby had a slight cold; Kaba asked how he had spent the night, and he played with the child for a short time before leaving.

Borai's older son by a previous marriage, a boy of twelve, arrived from the men's house for food and water, but left quickly to join the other boys, who were planning a day of stalking fish with bow and arrow in a nearby stream. The boys would roast the small fish near the stream and eat palm fruits, so she did not expect to see him again until the men began to return from the hunt, bringing the boys out of the forest to examine the day's kill. The baby having begun to cry, she picked him out of the hammock and gave him the breast again, then passed the child to her sister's ten-year-old daughter, who put the now squalling baby in a carrying sling passed around her shoulder, forming a seat for the baby on her narrow hip. Freed of her burden, Borai