



SEXUAL MEANINGS

*THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION
OF GENDER AND SEXUALITY*

SHERRY B.
ORTNER

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WHITEHEAD



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EDITED BY

Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead



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Preface

This is a book about the ways in which gender and sexuality are conceptualized in various cultures, and about the sources and consequences of such cultural conceptions. It is not primarily about what men and women normatively do ("sex roles") although the roles of men and women both shape and are shaped by cultural conceptions. Nor is the book primarily about gender asymmetry ("male dominance," "the status of women") although again this dimension of gender relations systematically influences and is influenced by cultural notions of gender and sexuality. The book, in short, is about what we have called "sexual meanings," taking "sex" in the double English sense – pertaining to gender, and pertaining to the erotic – and considering it as a symbol, or system of symbols, invested with culturally variable "meanings."

We consider the attempt to understand gender and sexuality in social and cultural context to be among the most important tasks of contemporary social science, and this book is first and foremost a contribution toward that understanding. In addition, however, we view the book as a contribution to the field that has come to be known as "symbolic" or "hermeneutic" anthropology, in two ways: First, the symbolic approach is shown to be particularly powerful in dealing with the tangled domain of gender problems; seeing sex and gender as symbols liberates this whole area of inquiry from constraining naturalistic assumptions and opens it to a range of analytic questions that would otherwise not be asked. Second, as we discuss more fully in the Introduction, the symbolic-analysis or hermeneutic approach is itself significantly expanded by its encounter with some of the problems peculiar to the domain of gender. Thus, for example, where symbolic anthropology often tends toward a somewhat uncritical cultural relativism, the systematic asymmetry of gender relations in all known cultures forces the analyst toward a more critical analytic stance. Similarly, although symbolic anthropology, like anthropology in general, tends to ignore the individual, the fact that gender symbols always pertain simultaneously to individual and social processes forces the analyst to maintain the vital analytic link between the individual and society, between "the personal and the political."

Originally, the impetus for doing the book came from knowing that there were a number of people independently working on issues of gender from a symbolic-analysis perspective. It seemed worthwhile simply to try to bring their work together in a volume, with an introductory essay explicating the value of such an approach to gender and related issues. This minimal objec-

tive, however, has been continually expanded in relation to the wealth of insights that emerged in the essays. We came to realize that the collection was more than simply a state-of-the-art compendium of symbolic approaches to gender; it also opens up a number of theoretical approaches that appear significant for future research in this important field of inquiry. Drawing on the essays, but going somewhat beyond any single one, we have tried in the Introduction to summarize and systematize these theoretical prospects.

We should probably say a few words about what is underrepresented, or not represented, in the collection.

First, complex societies are underrepresented. This was unintentional. We would have liked to have had more papers on European and Asian societies, but this simply did not work out. There is thus an unevenness of "coverage" in the collection, not only in terms of geographic "spread" (which we do not think is critical in itself), but more importantly in terms of certain theoretical issues. In particular, none of the essays directly address issues of interaction between gender and class. Many of the essays, however, do address the relationship between gender and other forms of social inequality, at least those forms to be found in non-class-based societies. In the Introduction we have tried to summarize some of the main points of these discussions, and to suggest their implications for the analysis of more complex systems.

Second, none of the essays in the collection systematically analyze gender culture from the "female point of view," although many of them incorporate a discussion of women's viewpoint within an analysis of the hegemonic (male-biased) ideology. We consider this approach to be theoretically justified, in that some form of asymmetry favoring men is present in all cultures, and that women's perspectives are to a great extent constrained and conditioned by the dominant ideology. The analysis of the dominant ideology must thus precede, or at least encompass, the analysis of the perspective of women.

Most of the essays were submitted in first draft in 1978. The manuscript was subjected at various stages to a total of five readings by anonymous referees. Although it is often thought that collected volumes are subject to less, or less stringent, refereeing than journal articles, this has not been the case with this collection. We thank the Press readers for their careful and helpful comments and criticisms.

Ann Arbor, Michigan
Haverford, Pennsylvania
July 15, 1980

S.B.O.
H.W.

Contents

<i>List of contributors</i>	page vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix
Introduction: Accounting for sexual meanings SHERRY B. ORTNER and HARRIET WHITEHEAD	1
<i>Part I: The cultural organization of gender</i>	29
1. The gender revolution and the transition from bisexual horde to patrilocal band: the origins of gender hierarchy SALVATORE CUCCHIARI	31
2. The bow and the burden strap: a new look at institutionalized homosexuality in native North America HARRIET WHITEHEAD	80
3. Transforming "natural" woman: female ritual leaders and gender ideology among Bimin-Kuskusmin FITZ JOHN PORTER POOLE	116
4. Self-interest and the social good: some implications of Hagen gender imagery MARILYN STRATHERN	166
5. Sexuality and gender in Samoa: conceptions and missed conceptions BRADD SHORE	192
6. Like wounded stags: male sexual ideology in an Andalusian town STANLEY BRANDES	216
7. Pigs, women, and the men's house in Amazonia: an analysis of six Mundurucú myths LESLEE NADELSON	240
<i>Part II: The political contexts of gender</i>	273
8. Politics and gender in simple societies JANE F. COLLIER and MICHELLE Z. ROSALDO	275
9. Women, warriors, and patriarchs MELISSA LLEWELYN-DAVIES	330
10. Gender and sexuality in hierarchical societies: the case of Polynesia and some comparative implications SHERRY B. ORTNER	359
<i>Index</i>	410

Introduction: ACCOUNTING FOR SEXUAL MEANINGS

Sherry B. Ortner & Harriet Whitehead

It has long been recognized that "sex roles" – the differential participation of men and women in social, economic, political, and religious institutions – vary from culture to culture.¹ It has also long been recognized that the degree and quality of social asymmetry between the sexes is also highly variable between cultures. What has not been generally recognized is the bias that often underlies studies of both sex roles and male dominance – an assumption that we know what "men" and "women" are, an assumption that male and female are predominantly natural objects rather than predominantly cultural constructions.

This book assumes a radically different premise: that natural features of gender, and natural processes of sex and reproduction, furnish only a suggestive and ambiguous backdrop to the cultural organization of gender and sexuality. What gender is, what men and women are, what sorts of relations do or should obtain between them – all of these notions do not simply reflect or elaborate upon biological "givens," but are largely products of social and cultural processes. The very emphasis on the biological factor *within* different cultural traditions is variable; some cultures claim that male–female differences are almost entirely biologically grounded, whereas others give biological differences, or supposed biological differences, very little emphasis.

Margaret Mead, of course, argued these points – one might even say "discovered" them – over forty years ago, and few anthropologists today work with an explicit theoretical model of biological determinism. Yet until recently, few have bothered to identify in any systematic way the cultural and social processes to which culturally variable sex and gender notions might be related. Either by referral of all such matters to biologically grounded psychological theory, or simply by neglect of the subject, anthropologists have allowed the naturalistic bias to dominate the field of sex and gender. This volume assumes the challenge of correcting this imbalance by focusing upon gender and sexuality as cultural (symbolic) constructs, and inquiring into the sources, processes, and consequences of their construction and organization.

Thus, all of the authors in the collection systematically begin by asking what male and female, sex and reproduction, *mean* in given social and cultural contexts, rather than assuming that we know what they mean in the first place. Gender, sexuality, and reproduction are treated as *symbols*, invested with meaning by the society in question, as all symbols are. The approach to the problem of sex and gender is thus a matter of symbolic

analysis and interpretation, a matter of relating such symbols to other cultural symbols and meanings on the one hand, and to the forms of social life and social experience on the other. The shared view of gender and sexuality as meaningful symbolic forms that require interpretation before explanation unites the entire collection.

The results of applying such a perspective are, first, to bring to light previously unrecognized diversity in the meanings of the sexes and sexuality cross-culturally, while simultaneously making us more aware of those cross-cultural similarities that do exist. And second, the symbolic approach helps to draw our attention to those societal and cultural factors that impinge most immediately upon the culture of gender.

Before examining these results, however, it is important to make clear what is meant by a "symbolic approach" to sex-gender data, and to specify some of the methodological differences that exist among our contributors. In the present essay, we will first discuss methodologies, then survey the sorts of cross-cultural differences and similarities in gender ideas brought to light by the symbolic perspective, and finally consider the question of which areas of society and culture appear to be most influential in shaping cultural notions of gender and sexuality.

Aspects of method

The essays can be grouped broadly into two sets: one in which the methodological emphasis is upon working out the inner logic and structural relations *among* cultural symbols, and one in which the emphasis is on analyzing the relationships between symbols and meanings on the one hand, and aspects of social relations on the other. We may label the first set as more "culturalist" and the second as more "sociological," while stressing that even the more sociologically oriented studies are committed to a symbolic (or "cultural") view of gender, and that even the more culturally oriented papers have important sociological underpinnings.

The culturalist approach, first, stresses that no particular gender symbol can be well understood without an appreciation of its place in a larger system of symbols and meanings. In other words, it is not only that we must understand what "male," "female," "sex," and "reproduction" mean in any given culture, but that those meanings are best understood in terms of a larger context of interrelated meanings. The emphasis, then, is on "making sense" of sex and gender symbols in terms of other cultural beliefs, conceptions, classifications, and assumptions.

This approach is illustrated, with variations, by the essays in Part I of the collection: Whitehead on native North American gender crossing, Poole on the "androgynous" ritual leader among the Bimin-Kuskusmin of New Guinea, Strathern on the culturally perceived moral orientations of Hagen (New Guinea) men and women, Shore on the "algebra" of maleness and femaleness in Samoa, Brandes on male sexual ideology in Andalusia, and Nadelson on myths of the origin of women among the Mundurucú of Amazonia. Cucchiari's speculative essay on the origins of gender categories,

although not purely a cultural analysis, also belongs in this methodological category because it too deals primarily with internal relations (in this case, contradictions) among elements of an ideological system. In all of these essays, the meanings of maleness, femaleness, sex, and reproduction emerge in large part from the systematic relations, both logical and associational, in which they are shown to participate with other symbols.

For example, it emerges from a contextual analysis of Andalusian gender symbolism, that popular symbols of the Devil (the goat, the serpent of Eden) are predominantly identified in this area with the female sex rather than the male, contrary to their masculine associations in other branches of Western tradition (Brandes). Another example: In three of the culture areas dealt with in the collection – New Guinea, native North America, and Polynesia – gender-anomalous persons are culturally recognized (even created), but as our authors make clear, Western categories of sex perversion and hermaphroditism are inappropriate to describe them. In each case, their special status is based upon a culturally specific, non-Western, configuration of gender traits (Poole, Whitehead, Shore). These findings, as well as Nadelson's revelation of the fantasy of male self-sufficiency underlying Mundurucu mythic ruminations about the origins of women, or Strathern's explication of why the Melpa women's point of view on gender parallels that of the men, arise from a careful unraveling of the premises behind particular usages, classifications, and associations.

Although these essays focus primarily on the cultural level, that is, on the *interrelations* among symbols and meanings, it should be noted that such an approach does not in itself preclude raising further questions concerning the social, political, and economic contexts of the symbolic constructs in question. Indeed we would argue that systematically executed symbolic analyses often evolve in such a way as to indicate which aspects of social (or economic or political) relations will prove most significant for further analysis. All of the more "culturalist" essays contain, implicitly or explicitly, such indications. The analyses of Whitehead, Strathern, and Brandes suggest that the social organization of prestige and status is critical for understanding gender conceptions in the cultures of their studies. On the other hand, the analyses of Poole, Shore, and Nadelson suggest that the social organization of kinship and marriage is central to the construction of gender in their cases. In fact we will argue later that aspects of *both* prestige *and* kinship-marriage organization systematically influence cultural conceptions of gender in specific ways, but for the moment we wish to continue the discussion of more strictly methodological issues.

We are arguing here that the culturalist approach, emphasizing the relations among cultural symbols, does not preclude asking more conventional sociological questions, questions concerning the effects of political, economic, and other social arrangements on cultural notions. We would go further and claim that a culturalist approach provides a less reductionistic basis for framing such questions in the first place. One of the persistent problems of social anthropology (mostly British) has been, that in the rush to connect "culture" to "society," analysts have often taken culture in bits ("female

pollution," "virgin birth"), nailing each bit to some specific feature of social organization (marriage between enemy groups, matrilineal clan organization) without going through the crucial intervening phase of analyzing what that bit means. There is a failure in such accounts to understand that culture itself has the properties of a system, a system that mediates between any given symbol and its social grounding. The meaning of specific cultural features is as much a function of their fit within a wider symbolic context as it is of their relevance to (or reference to) a particular social institution, and serious interpretive distortions may arise when this wider cultural context is slighted in favor of a quick Durkheimian fix.

For instance, one could argue – with justice – that the "importance of patriliney" is being expressed in the Bimin-Kuskusmin's ritualized androgynous character, the *waneng aiyem ser*. But the very possibility of such a character is, as Poole demonstrates, contingent upon a cultural complex in which *both* kinship *and* gender identities are expressed, and inter-fused, in a code of bodily substances. The prior analysis of the systematics of cultural relations thus acts as a brake against oversimplifying sociological reductionism.

This brings us to the second broad approach represented in this collection – what we have called the more "sociological" approach. Whereas culturalist analysis works from the top down, as it were, the sociological approach works from the bottom up. Although both analytic modes as represented in this book share the same problematic – to elucidate the culture (symbols, meanings, ideologies) of gender – the more sociologically oriented essays approach this by considering how certain types of social orders tend to generate, through the logic of their workings, certain types of cultural perceptions of gender and sexuality. The approach is most directly represented by the essays in Part II: Collier and Rosaldo's analysis of gender in "bride-service" societies, Llewelyn-Davies's analysis of gender among the Maasai of East Africa, and Ortner's analysis of gender and sexuality in Polynesia. The nature of this approach, and particularly its distinctiveness from more traditional sociology-of-meaning approaches, is again best considered by comparing it with certain standard patterns of social anthropological analysis.

In the traditional social anthropological view, cultural features have been seen largely as "reflections" of primary jural structures (lineages, castes, classes), serving essentially to "reinforce" those structures. In the Marxist variant on this view, culture has been seen largely as "ideology," "justifying" the status quo and "mystifying" the sources of oppression and exploitation. The Marxist view has the distinct advantage of stressing that culture is rarely an accurate "reflection" of the whole, but rather a distortion of a systematic sort. All of the more sociologically oriented authors in this collection have been influenced, implicitly or explicitly, by the Marxist refinement, at least in part because the study of gender is inherently a study of relations of asymmetrical power and opportunity.

Yet traditional Marxism, like traditional Durkheimianism, suffers from an inadequate conception of culture as anything other than, or more than, a handmaiden of the social process. For sociological analysts with a strong

background in symbolic anthropology, on the other hand, more sophisticated analytic tools are available. Of particular importance is the method of actor-centered, more precisely, actor-mediated, analysis, which has its roots in Weber and which carries through into modern symbolic anthropology by way of Parsons and Geertz. The concept of the "actor" is central to the sociology of symbols and meanings in a way that it is not central to more conventional social anthropology, partly for the simple reason that meaning does not inhere in symbols but must be invested in symbols and interpreted from symbols by acting social beings; thus social actors must be part of the analysis.

In actor-centered (or actor-mediated) analysis, the focus is not only on the formal characteristics of the structure, but on the ways in which, in operating within such structures, actors' perceptions of the world – of nature, of the self, and of social relations – are shaped in certain ways. Gender conceptions, and notions of sexuality and reproduction, are seen as emergent from varying forms of action, or practice, within varying forms of organization of social, economic, and political life. Thus Collier and Rosaldo show why, "in a world where a man needs a wife, and nothing else, to achieve the highest status available to him in his society, . . . sexual intercourse takes on the character of a truly 'political' act," and operates as a "dominant idiom for political relations." Llewelyn-Davies shows how among the Maasai the process of becoming an "autonomous" "elder" depends in part on obtaining "property" – wives and cattle; in this context the period of (male) transition from propertyless to propertied is ritualized and takes on great cultural "glamour." And it is in this period, Llewelyn-Davies argues, that "the [Maasai] *idea* of masculinity is constructed." Finally, Ortner shows how in Polynesia, where prestige is importantly maintained and augmented through enlargement of descent lines, kinswomen – sisters and daughters – appear as particularly valuable beings who have the capacity to attract men and to retain children for their lines, and who are thus treated with (rather contradictory forms of) respect.

In these examples, then, the method of analysis consists not of mapping certain symbols onto certain features of social structure as "reflections of" or "justifications for" institutional arrangements. Rather, it consists of showing how, for actors operating within certain kinds of institutional orders, and complying in effect with the rules of the game, the world tends to take on certain seemingly inevitable and "natural" appearances. The political nature of sexual intercourse in "simple" societies, the "glamour" of Maasai warriors, and the high cultural value of sisters and daughters in Polynesia – all of these become comprehensible as features of the "common sense" world *as it appears* to actors participating in social relations organized in particular ways. Obviously the process is circular. The structure of social relations itself is shaped and crystallized by the very cultural notions that social dynamics have acted to inspire.

For these more sociologically oriented analyses, certain questions emerge that had only been lurking in the background of the more culturalist essays, particularly the question of *which* aspects of social relations have greater influence upon the shape of gender ideology than others. We will take up this

question in the section on the social contexts of gender culture. Here, however, we simply wish to reiterate that the two broad approaches just outlined must be seen not as opposed and mutually exclusive types, but as differing methodological emphases within the broader attempt to interpret and analyze gender as a cultural system. As noted previously, the contributors share a commitment to the proposition that male and female, sex and reproduction, are cultural or symbolic constructs, whatever may be the "natural" bases of gender differences and human reproduction. Each contributor thus begins by questioning the *meanings* of sex and gender as symbols in the societies with which he or she is concerned. Analysis then proceeds by seeking and showing the *contexts* within which such constructs "make sense," whether the context is a wider set of symbols and meanings, or whether it is some particular ordering of social relations.

Before considering the substantive issues, we should say a few words about the essay by Cucchiari on the origins of gender in cultural thought. This essay is essentially a thought experiment. Cucchiari asks the reader, by way of asking himself, to imagine a world without gender, and at the same time asks what other features of social organization and cultural thought would be absent, or present, in such a world. In the process, he discusses in greater detail than we do in this Introduction the sense in which gender *is* a cultural (and social and historical) construct. We have placed his essay after the Introduction both for its expanded discussion of the symbolically constructed nature of gender ideology, and for the general purpose of unhinging the reader's mind from standard modes of thinking about gender-related matters.

General features of gender ideologies

Although cultural gender ideologies vary greatly, certain general themes concerning the nature of men, women, sex and reproduction appear across a wide variety of cases. In this section we call attention to some of these themes, particularly those that emerge from the essays in this collection.

It must first be noted that the degree to which cultures have formal, highly elaborated notions of gender and sexuality is itself variable. One may think, for example, of the contrast between the Mediterranean and northern European cultures; the former have highly complex and explicit views on the nature of gender, views that, in turn, organize and define many other spheres of life – work, leisure, religious activity, and so forth. In northern Europe, on the other hand, notions of gender and sexuality appear to be less highly elaborated, and they do not seem to operate as master organizing principles for other domains of social life and activity.

Furthermore, not all cultures elaborate notions of maleness and femaleness in terms of symmetrical dualisms. Collier and Rosaldo point out, for example, that although notions of manhood are highly developed in "brideservice" societies, notions of womanhood are relatively unsystematized. Men are glorified as hunters and killers, but women are not by that fact glorified as mothers and "life givers." In these cases, cultural beliefs about the sexes do not form

systems of logical oppositions or complementarities; the sexes appear more as gradations on a scale (see also Llewelyn-Davies).

In the majority of cultural cases, however, the differences between men and women are in fact conceptualized in terms of sets of metaphorically associated binary oppositions (and even a single scale, after all, has its top and bottom, its polar points). Moreover, there are certain oppositions that recur with some frequency in gender ideologies cross-culturally, and we wish to call attention to, and reflect upon, a number of them here.

First, some version of the "nature/culture" opposition makes an appearance in some of the studies in this book. In a 1972 article, Ortner argued that there is a universal tendency in cultural thought to align male with culture, and to see female as closer to nature (see also Ardener 1975; Barnes 1973; Mathieu 1973). In the present collection, Strathern, Shore, and Llewelyn-Davies find resonances of this tendency in their material. All of them, however, find reasons to modify the formulation in various ways. It seems worthwhile to review briefly these modifications and the theoretical status of universal oppositions between the sexes generally.

Of particular interest is the formulation that appears in Strathern's and Llewelyn-Davies's essays. Both contributors suggest that the dimension of opposition between the sexes most relevant for the peoples they studied (the New Guinea Mt. Hageners and the African Maasai, respectively) is the contrast between what Strathern calls "self-interest" and the "social good." Women are seen as tending toward more involvement with (often divisive) private and particularistic concerns, benefiting themselves, and perhaps their children, without regard for larger social consequences, whereas men are seen as having a more universalistic orientation, as being concerned with the welfare of the social whole. It appears likely that this association obtains in a large number of cultures throughout the world, and that it relates to a widespread sociological distinction between the sexes suggested by Rosaldo (1974): Nearly universally, men control the "public domain" where "universalistic" interests are expressed and managed, and, nearly universally, women are located in or confined to the "domestic domain," charged with the welfare of their own families.

This basic structural relation has been sensed and articulated, with varying emphases, by earlier theorists, notably Talcott Parsons and Claude Lévi-Strauss. In fact, it was Lévi-Strauss who, seeing the domestic domain primarily as a biological entity (the "biological family") and the public domain as that network of alliances brought into being by the first truly "cultural" act, the institution of the incest taboo, invoked the nature/culture opposition in reference to the domestic/public distinction. Ortner, following Lévi-Strauss's train of thought, closed the circle by suggesting that men will tend to be culturally aligned with "culture" and women with "nature," one reason (among others) being that men control the sphere of wider social coordinations, while women occupy the subunits being coordinated (Ortner 1972).

As we reflect upon these points, it seems clear to us that all of the suggested oppositions – nature/culture, domestic/public, self-interest/ social good – are derived from the same central sociological insight: that the sphere of social

activity predominantly associated with males encompasses the sphere predominantly associated with females and is, for that reason, culturally accorded higher value. The different ways in which this insight has been formulated have to do with theoretical interests. Rosaldo, for instance, is concerned primarily with articulating male and female positions in parsimonious sociological terms, and maintains only that her formulation is consistent with the ways in which men and women are culturally perceived, not that her terms – domestic/public – replicate the native perspective. Ortner's nature/culture opposition, by contrast, was intended as a rather global approximation of the categorizing tendencies of many cultures. (The variations of its appearance at the level of *explicitly* articulated cultural ideology constitutes a separate analytic problem). The self-interest/social good contrast proposed by Strathern, finally, also captures a dimension of native viewpoint, and one that is perhaps closest to the central sociological insight itself: that men do indeed control the larger social operation (whether or not this invariably redounds to the good of everyone), while women's social horizons are narrowed to the small range of closely related kin and their immediate needs. The question of which of the cited male–female contrasts will show up in the idiom of a particular culture is, of course, empirical. But all could be present without inconsistency; all are in a sense transformations of one another.

A further permutation of the themes raised by the interrelation of men's and women's spheres of action may be seen in the general cultural tendency to define men in terms of status and role categories ("warrior," "hunter," "statesman," "elder," and the like) that have little to do with men's relations with women. Women, by contrast, tend to be defined almost entirely in relational terms – typically in terms pertaining to kin roles ("wife," "mother," "sister") – that, upon closer inspection, center around women's relationship to men. This contrast is not in most cases an explicit component of cultural thought. Nonetheless it constitutes a very general feature of the way in which the categories of male and female are differentially defined and organized cross-culturally.

The tendency for the image of women to be refracted through different modes of attachment to men is brought out especially clearly in Ortner's and Shore's analyses of Polynesian cultures, and in Poole's analysis of the ideas of the New Guinea Bimin-Kuskusmin. In the Polynesian case, both Shore and Ortner further note that the female relational categories, "wife" and "sister," which dominate the Polynesian concept of woman, embody among other things an important distinction between women who are, from any male ego's point of view, sexual and those who are not. The distinction between sexual women ("wives") and nonsexual women ("sisters"), and more importantly, the relatively greater cultural prominence of "sisters," has broad implications for the Polynesian cultural valuation of women and for patterns of cross-sex relations.

In what seems to be an extension of the androcentrism of defining women relationally, one finds a number of cultural cases in which there is an explicit