

Ritualized
Homosexuality
in Melanesia

Edited by
Gilbert H. Herdt



Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia

University of California Press
Berkeley • Los Angeles • London



University of California Press

Berkeley and Los Angeles, California

University of California Press, Ltd.

Oxford, England

Copyright © 1984 by The Regents of the University of California

First Paperback Printing 1993

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Main entry under title:

Ritualized homosexuality in Melanesia.

Bibliography: p. 362

Includes Index.

1. Melanesians—Rites and ceremonies—Addresses, essays, lectures. 2. Melanesians—Social life and customs—Addresses, essays, lectures. 3. Homosexuality, Male—Melanesia—Addresses, essays, lectures. 4. Sex customs—Melanesia—Addresses, essays, lectures.

I. Herdt, Gilbert H., 1949—

GN668.R45 1984 306.7'662'0993 83-18015

ISBN 0-520-08096-3

Printed in the United States of America

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9

The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI Z39.48–1984. ∞

Introduction

to the Paperback Edition

In a little less than a decade the notion of ritualized homosexuality—made prominent in the first edition of this book—has become a significant perspective on Melanesian societies and the comparative study of sexuality at large. In 1982, when my review in the original introduction was completed, the concept of “ritualized” same-sex eroticism or “age-structured” homosexual relations hardly existed. As that text showed, “homosexuality” research was little developed in the anthropological literature on tribal societies, and was scarcely noticed in certain Melanesian and Australian Aboriginal tribes. What was known but ignored was—to use the early and insightful remark of Van Baal (1963:206)—that the “homosexual initiation cult [was] common to all these tribes.” Since that time a small treasure of new ethnographic accounts and reinterpretations of older studies have appeared, especially in the work of Bruce Knauft (1985, 1987, 1990). The publication of this new edition provides the opportunity to update the cross-cultural review, expand upon the earlier critical analysis, and respond to certain interpretations (both positive and negative) of the research published herein that have appeared since the early 1980s.

Anthropology rests upon the twin purposes of translating Western folk ideas into cultural science and back-translating non-Western theories into ethnographies that reflect upon lifeways in all corners of our shrinking world. The cross-cultural study of sexuality is forever caught in the struggle between such purposes: the effort to chart local sexual practices and knowledge on their own terms, and the effort to represent these folkways in Western texts

that “universalize” the forms from our own perspective. In the heyday of their main contributions to the anthropology of sexuality both Malinowski and Margaret Mead struggled with this issue (reviewed in Herdt and Stoller 1990). And the “sexual” continues to challenge our Western post-Enlightenment conception of the “natural” person and the “social” contract between the individual and polity.

Now all anthropological efforts can be thought of as either “lumping” or “splitting” strategies for comparison, and the domain of sexual culture (Herdt and Stoller 1990) is no different. Yet there is something bothersome to scholars about applying these strategies to the field of sexual study. Think, for example, about how notions and practices of the sacred—of worship, or of beliefs about the soul—vary widely across human groups, resulting in myriad forms of “religion” (Herdt and Stephen 1989). Westerners are not so uncomfortable about this idea as they were in the time of, say, William James and Sigmund Freud. Many do, however, feel more threatened by the notion that there are divergent sexualities, and even more uncomfortable with the suggestion that there are multiple homosexualities (and heterosexualities: Stoller 1985). Perhaps this is because sexuality is felt to be so close to our folk theory of “human nature.”¹ Whatever the case, the structural trend in Western epistemology has been to collate, consolidate, and wrest from a comparison of Western sexuality with these other sexualities the supposedly shared common denominators of human sexual nature, suggesting to some that, ultimately, a rose is a rose no matter what its color.

The anthropology of sexuality has made progress on these general issues, but it was not until the early 1980s that a critical impasse ended (Read 1980). “Homosexuality” has been especially problematic for anthropology because we have remained divided over whether this is a universal or local condition of culture and “human nature” (Herdt 1990a, 1991a). It remains as controversial today as it was a decade ago, when this book was composed, in part because the AIDS epidemic has thrust itself into the cultural representation of same-sex relations.² Nonetheless, our society is more sophisticated than before, and scholarly work has clarified the conceptual relationship between different types of same-sex relations.

It is now clear that we must place the term “homosexuality” in quotation marks because its folk theory merges the distinction between kinds of cultural identity and types of sexual practice. What we once thought of as a unitary “it” entity—homosexuality—is, to use the metaphor of my original preface, not one but several “species” of same-sex relations. They differ not only in symbolic form but, I would claim, also in their deeper nature. Thus, the received category “homosexuality” in Western culture must now be represented as one of several different sociocultural types. It is argued by many experts that these “traditional” forms of culturally conventionalized same-sex erotic practices occur in clusters of culture areas of the world (Adam 1986; Greenberg 1988).

Indeed, four ideal types of same-sex practice can be contrasted in the category schema that I use (Herdt 1987, 1988): age-structured, gender-structured, role- or class-structured, and gay- or egalitarian-structured homosexualities.³ In the Austro-Melanesian area, as the authors of *Ritualized Homosexuality* established, “age” is the key variable and defining factor in the same-sex relation between the boy and his sexual inseminator in this part of the world, as it was, by comparison, in ancient Greece and Tokugawa Japan. To refer to this practice as “homosexuality” seems now inelegant and unreflective (cf. Herdt 1981). I prefer to represent this symbolic type of same-sex practice as *boy-inseminating rites* (Herdt 1991*b*).

In the societies of New Guinea, the South Seas, and Australia in which these practices occur, age is a generalized and key organizing principle in many domains of culture and social action. The kinship and marriage systems are strongly marked by an age-graded principle of social hierarchy. Age also defines a critical aspect of the relationship between the partners in heterosexual marriage, in religious practices, and body substance beliefs. Ten years ago it was not known that age-defined same-sex practice was widely distributed in the tribal world. After all, no less authorities than Ford and Beach (1951:130), in their highly influential HRAF-type study *Patterns of Sexual Behavior*, could confidently state: “The most common form of institutionalized homosexuality is that of the *berdache* or transvestite.” They were wrong. We now know that the age-structured form does not include genderized cross-dressing; that transvestism is rare in Melanesia. Indeed, the gender-reversed

form of same-sex practice, especially the famous *berdache* custom, is geographically bound as a symbolic practice to North and South America and fringe areas of the Pacific Rim (reviewed in Callender and Kochems 1983; Greenberg 1988; Herdt 1991a; Murray 1987; Nanda 1990; Roscoe 1988, 1991; Williams 1986).

The comparative study of boy-inseminating rites is now faced with an embarrassment of riches owing to the creation of this new category of age-defined same-sex practice: a veritable explosion of analyses in anthropology, sociology, social history, and the classics. For instance, the Canadian sociologist Barry Adam has shown significant links between sexuality, kinship, social relations, and age in tribes, citing, for example, Evans-Pritchard's (1970) historical Azande data; along with studies of the archaic societies of ancient Greece, Japan, China; as well as contemporary ethnographic studies, most notably those from this book, after which he refers to a "Melanesian model" of homosexuality. The encyclopaedic study by David Greenberg, *The Construction of Homosexuality*, also contains a longish section on "transgenerational homosexuality" (1988:26–40) that highlights the function of "age" and kinship in the ethnographic analyses of *Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia* (see also the sociologist Murray, 1984:44–46). In classical studies, Sir Kenneth Dover's analysis of *Greek Homosexuality* (1978) brought an end to a long-implicit taboo among classicists on the topic (see Halperin 1990:4–5) and opened the way for a new series of controversial comparisons of boy-inseminating in archaic and Melanesian societies (Sergeant 1986:40–54; and see Bremmer 1989; Cohen 1987). Recently, for example, Dover (1988) has compared Greek sexuality and ritual to the initiation practices of Melanesia and other tribal places; and Winkler (1990) compares contemporary and ancient Greek practices in the classics and anthropology to yield new and bold insights, as, for instance, the question of what constitutes "unnatural acts."

Of all these accumulating scholarly interests, however, none is more significant for cultural studies than the question of what is specifically "erotic" about boy-inseminating practices. The challenge is to understand both the "natural" properties and "cultural constructs" of boy-inseminating relations in the cultural reality of the actors themselves, as represented by ethnographers (Herdt and Stoller 1990; Parker 1991). No less a scholar than Michel Foucault (1986:221) has been absorbed with the meaning of homoerotic de-

sire in these traditions: "To delight in and be a subject of pleasure with a boy did not cause a problem for the Greeks; but to be an object of pleasure and to acknowledge oneself as such constituted a major difficulty for the boy." Whether we may legitimately represent the "subjects" and "objects" of the ancient Greeks and New Guinea tribesmen by the Western cultural tropes for homoerotic "pleasure" and "arousal" remains a central problem in the anthropological study of sexuality.

Where this scholarly work on the anthropology of homosexuality began, however, is surely not the same as where it will end up. We have already had to reexamine our preconceptions of the phenomenon. As Marilyn Strathern (1988:11) has advised in another context: "All that can be offered is a prescription: one cure to the present impasse in the comparative anthropology of Melanesia might be to indulge less in our own representational strategies—to stop ourselves thinking about the world in certain ways."

THE HISTORICAL PRESENT

The anthropology of ritualized boy-inseminating owes its interpretative meanings to comparative studies and leftover controversies we are beginning to understand from the shadowy social history of homosexuality in the 19th and early 20th centuries (Herdt 1991*a*, 1991*b*; see also Greenberg 1988; Halperin 1990; Weeks 1985).

The cultural reality of sexual meanings, in a pluralistic and complex society such as our own, is a matter of politics, of competing social interests (Adam 1987; Foucault 1980; Hekma 1989). Nowhere has the contest been of more import than in social science studies of homosexuality, which have—often as not—been used to "prove" or "disprove" one or another claim, usually a biological claim, about "human nature," such as whether desire for the same sex is "natural" or "unnatural," with the cultural definition of "nature" here a struggle between the innate and social surround (DeCecco 1990; Gagnon 1988, 1989; Herdt and Boxer 1992; LeVine 1992; Whitehead 1985/86). In fact, the social history of homosexuality has seen the status of the entity change from a sin to a crime (either against nature or the state), then to a sickness or disease, and now to an alternative "lifestyle" on the margins of society (Bayer 1987; Boswell 1990; Money 1987).⁴

Such is the historical bridge to the present. It is generally argued

that 1992 marks the 100th anniversary of the invention of “heterosexuality,” a quintessence of modernity. Some associate the invention in 1892 with the sexologist Havelock Ellis and the cloying cultural ethos of late Victorian society (Weeks 1985). The invention of homosexuality, on the other hand, is usually credited to the German Benkert, about 1869, which becomes more widely identified as the fin-de-siècle “disease of effeminacy” popularized by the trial of Oscar Wilde (Herdt and Boxer 1992; Ellman 1987). Why, we might ask, did the category of deviance—homosexuality—precede that of heterosexuality—the “normal”—in the historical record? The answer rests with the structure of relations of power; with how conformity to a middle-class standard of reproductive sexuality was highlighted by sexology and medical science in the later 19th century; and with how the categorical “homosexual subject” became an “object,” a matter of inverted “preference,” a flaw in the assumptive heterosocial world of the day (see, e.g., Cain 1991; D’Emilio and Freedman 1988; Foucault 1980; Hekma 1989; Sedgwick 1990).

Much has changed since then, not only in the scientific constructs and folk theory of same-sex relations, but in the strategies that we in anthropology deploy in comparative analyses. Indeed, what we previously called “sexuality” is now recognizable as a bundle of entities and meaning systems. The new anthropological writing on sexuality thus suggests that comparative studies must both split as well as lump sociosexual constructs and practices (see, for instance, Parker 1991). Sexuality must be analyzed as part of a whole, contextual, social tradition, one that *embodies* cultural meanings and personal desires within the same ontological subject (see, for instance, Herdt and Stoller 1990; Schott 1988).

Such social and historical traditions create their own ontologies, and Melanesia is no different in this respect, except that in its immense cultural diversity, many and divergent cultural realities are contained within its vast social landscape. By cultural ontology I mean the sense in which reality is phenomenologically formed by active participation—“lived experience”—that defines the kind of a world it is; the categories of meaning that are formative of that world; and the kinds of persons who inhabit it. Such ontologies are critical in the effort to define the same-sex eroticism distinctive of a particular people (Herdt 1991a). We must resist the strong ten-

dency in Western culture to dualize them: notice how easily our discourse converts subjects into objects in the Western tradition, as when same-sex practices of any kind, playful or committed, are labeled "homosexuality." By comparison, the form of same-sex desire in old China did not nominalize the subject or objectify the practice in the same way. The ancient Chinese spoke of what persons "do" or "enjoy" rather than what they "are" as essentialized objects (Hinsch 1990:7; Spence 1983, chap. 7). Here we find a familiar echo of the contemporaneous boy-inseminating rites of Melanesia.

What difference does the ontology make? It is critical to an understanding of sexual development and cultural identity, and on this score the putative *cause* of homosexuality in our Western folk theory is an enormously influential and much-abused issue of theory (Herdt 1989).⁵ Take, for instance, the dominating-mother/absent-father complex of classical Freudian discourse. The relationship between absent fathers and the development of homosexuality has an important place in the study of ritual and sexual identity transitions in anthropology (see, e.g., Burton and Whiting 1961). The received Western folk theory predicts that where homosexuality is institutionalized we should find fathers absent from the childhood home. This is because our folk theory understands the ontology of sexuality to be vested in the lone child, rather than in relationships of a whole tradition. In Melanesia, contrary to the Freudian/Western ontology, we find instead that boy-inseminating rites occur *only* in societies wherein children live close to their fathers and mothers (e.g., the Sambia; Herdt 1981)! Surprisingly, in Melanesian societies in which fathers are absent from the childhood home (e.g., Gahuku-Gama, as studied by K. E. Read, chap. 5 in this volume) boy-inseminating rites are *never found*. Such interpretations challenge our ontological conception of "homosexuality" as a monolithic entity with common causes, developmental subjectivities, and functions in all cultures.⁶

"Homosexuality" is a dustbin of entities: it can no longer be used as an uncritical concept across cultures. Furthermore, it diverges ontologically and historically from the sociocultural system that we know today as "gay" in the meaning system and practices of many Westerners (Adam 1987; Herdt 1992; Weeks 1985). A simple historical contrast (Cain 1991), for example, suggests that

“homosexuals” are hidden and fearful of disclosure, whereas “gays/lesbians” are socially open (“out”) in many walks of their lives (e.g., home, work, school). Such a sociohistorical change demonstrates the enormously rich and rapidly changing cultural system of sexual meanings to which these identities and categories apply in the present (Herdt 1992; Sedgwick 1990).

Many scholars thus reject gross categorizations that lump, for instance, notions of “sodomy” with “pederasty,” or refer to “homosexual” and “gay” as if these were interchangeable entities. Each of these is a distinct ideal type; and these are energized ideologies, modes of cultural reality. Or again, take, for instance, the lumping of “pederasty” with boy-inseminating rites. It remains confusing when scholars, even gay scholars (Boswell 1990), not to mention Western psychiatrists, speak of the nominalized “homosexual” (Lidz and Lidz 1989:195–199) as the same ontological type as the ritualized boy-inseminator in Melanesia: Bleibtreu-Ehrenberg (1991), Hage (1981), and Sergeant (1986) continue to refer to such practices as “pederasty,” a trope that owes its pejorative meanings to 19th-century clinical sexology, when all sexual variations were interpreted as disease (see Plummer [1991:246] on this point). Of course it is tempting to hedge on the matter and apply the Western concept of “bisexuality” (Davenport 1977) to these Melanesian forms, but this is inaccurate for reasons demonstrated below. Better to use a purely instrumental language than such imported concepts; and here we are wise to follow the lead of Schiefenhovel (1990), whose language is descriptive and speaks only of “ritualized adult-male/adolescent-male sexual behavior” in Melanesia.

From this perspective what I and other authors in our original 1984 collection labeled “homosexuality” was, I now think, a misnomer. To speak instead of boy-inseminating practices or age-structured homoerotic relationships is to open a far richer set of cultural worlds. One might object that the issue of adjectives and representations is at this point passé. After all, have not many ethnographers (though not me), including Margaret Mead (1930, who also used the trope “invert”), nominalized the Melanesian man’s desire for a younger initiate with the representation “homosexual”? Indeed they have; and the continued reliance upon these tropes in the anthropological literature not only is confusing

to scholars in other fields, but also smells of strong prejudices, including that nemesis of cross-cultural analysis, ethnocentrism. Melanesian sexual practices present, in my opinion, a different phenomenon than that of the "homosexual" subject of Western culture, though virtually all ethnographers in the Melanesian situation, myself included, have nominalized the local phenomenon as an "it entity" (Herdt 1991). It is time to mark a watershed in this conventional usage.

NEW ETHNOGRAPHIC CASES

Research over the past ten years has tended to confirm the speculations of my earlier analysis, based upon piecemeal linguistic, ethnohistorical, and ecological evidence, that boy-inseminating ritualized homosexuality in certain traditional societies of Melanesia is prehistoric, perhaps 10,000 or more years old (Feil 1987:176–177; Knauff 1987; Schiefenhovel 1990:410–411; and see Greenberg 1989:33 n. 44). Comparative scholars such as Greenberg believe that this tradition should be seen as a survival of a Paleolithic practice once widespread throughout the world (see also Sergent 1986:50–51).

Geographic diffusion between Australian Aborigines and certain New Guinea societies has also been reaffirmed (Feil 1987:189n.; Greenberg 1988:35–37). The additional Australian case (not available at the time of my original review) of the famous Tiwi of Northwestern coast affirms boy-inseminating practices among them.⁷ More broadly, in a significant ethnological review, Hiatt (1987:98) concludes, "It is hard to escape the conclusion that man-making rites and their sequels, the ceremonial maintenance of universal fertility, were in some degree homoerotic."

Several significant scholarly reviews of "ritualized homosexuality" in New Guinea societies have appeared during the last few years, among which the anthropological analyses of Knauff (1986), Lindenbaum (1987), Feil (1987: esp. 176–199), Marilyn Strathern (1988: esp. 208–219), and Schiefenhovel (1990) are prominent. These scholars conceptualize boy-inseminating practices as thematic of Melanesian society and to culture theory at large. A new review of the sacred flutes in New Guinea (Hays 1986), and a fine analysis by Hauser-Schäublin (1989) of symbolic

procreation and insemination, are suggestive of how boy-inseminating rites lead to symbolic and sexual “reproduction” in Melanesia and Australia (Mead 1949; see also Bohle 1990; M. Strathern 1988; Whitehead 1985–86).⁸

None have thought more carefully than Bruce Knaft (1986, 1990) about the conceptual issues in this book, and his superior analyses display remarkable scholarship and insight.⁹ Recently, Knaft (1990) has reexamined the historical situation in Kiwai Island at the mouth of the Fly River, reviewing one of the most important 19th-century cases of Melanesian rites. His critical reconstruction of the general pattern, distribution, and frequency (in maps and estimates) of boy-inseminating rites among adjacent societies along the southern coast of Papua is a tour de force.¹⁰ Knaft criticizes the inclusion of Kiwai Island culture among groups that traditionally practiced boy-inseminating, and he systematically deconstructs each piece of ethnographic evidence on the Kiwai set out in my original introduction. He builds a strong case that Kiwai Islanders never practiced the custom. The main effect of this effort is to establish that only the Keraki (Williams 1936) and other tribes *west* of the Fly River participated in the practices (see the review in Busse 1987; and the unpublished dissertation of Ayres 1983, esp. chap. 3). Knaft (1990:208) then concludes that “ritualized homosexuality was not as prevalent along the New Guinea south coast as previously supposed.”

The question of the frequency and pervasiveness of boy-inseminating rites has long dominated discussions of the phenomenon, as mentioned in the original edition. In fact, we can never be sure about the precolonial incidence of the rites in Melanesia, and the facts are still open to question, much as they were in the time of the first speculative theory on the matter, set out in Alfred Haddon’s introduction to *The Kiwai Papuans of British New Guinea* (1927). We do know that boy-inseminating rites, like the serial male/female sexual relations of certain ritual occasions in South-western Papua, profoundly troubled many of the early white colonists (Godelier 1986; Herdt 1991*b*; Schiltz 1985; Van Baal 1966). It is difficult for us to adequately gauge the tremendous toll that Western agents and missionaries have taken on these practices, including their suppression by force, and their subsequent practice in secret. Still, Knaft is right to be skeptical of “misattri-

butions" of boy-inseminating rites; certainly "homosexual slanders" of a popular kind, mentioned in my review in this volume, continue at the present time.¹¹

That boy-inseminating practice is less frequent than I had claimed must be examined at several levels of analysis (as Knauft [1986] quite rightly argues). Knauft's evidence on the matter is persuasive but inconclusive. As the reader will judge, I would concede that Kiwai tradition probably did not require boy-inseminating. How important is the actual number of groups and the size of the populations they contained? We are dealing with both statistical and normative phenomena, and it matters that we keep these separate. For the numbers, we lose the Kiwai as a case, but must add several new cultures to the ethnographic corpus originally cited for the region (see below). The difference in numbers of actual actors is a wash, though I doubt that this game of numbers has a level of significance to underscore. Though the numbers of groups are open to dispute, their importance for theory and the understanding of Melanesian area-wide cultural structure and ontology clearly is not (Knauft 1986; see also Herdt 1989, 1991*b*; M. Strathern 1988).

What Knauft is particularly concerned about is the "misattribution" of the ritual complex: he questions the "appropriateness of using ritualized homosexuality as an archetypal cultural feature of lowland south New Guinea in the pre-colonial era, as suggested by Shirley Lindenbaum and Daryl Feil" (Knauft 1990:190). It is misleading and ethnographically false to label whole traditions as "homosexual." The mention of "organization[s] of male homosexuality" as a generic categorization of the Big Nambas tribe of Malekula Island (Deacon 1934) and the use of the phrase "homosexual initiation rites" in reference to the immense South-western Papuan area bordering the Arufura Sea (Van Baal 1966) have created scientific and cultural stereotypes. Thus we find Andrew Strathern, in a book entitled *Mountain Papuans*, arguing that "homosexuality occurs in fringe societies" of New Guinea compared to its "complete absence" in "Central Highland cases" (1988:209; and see also Feil 1987). Such a sweeping assertion by a leading scholar raises troubling questions because it is not indexed to the ethnographic evidence or reviews in the literature. What troubles me and seems to pique Knauft (1990) as well is the

representation “homosexual cultures” used in reference to the entire culture area (Feil 1987, Lindenbaum 1987), an outrageous trope that reifies the whole by the part (Herdt 1991*b*).

The best-documented recent case of traditional boy-inseminating comes to us from Bruce Knauff himself (1985, 1986, 1987, 1989, 1990), whose ethnography, more than that of any other recent writer, has taken seriously the social and symbolic problems of ritualized boy-inseminating in the fabric of a New Guinea society. The Gebusi live in close proximity to the Great Papua Plateau societies so well known for their boy-inseminating rites (reviewed on pp. 33–37 of this volume). Knauff has demonstrated a symbolic complex of a men’s spirit cult including trancing, dancing, spirit impersonation, homoerotic horseplay, and longer-term affectional relations between older and young males. Among male pairs the practice of oral intercourse was common. Among the findings of his work are the demonstrations that cultural fantasies of desire and attraction for the opposite sex permeate same-sex relations and that Gebusi are sometimes compelled to break their own rules of same- and opposite-sexual practice due to their passions (Knauff 1986, 1987).

In a new and significant study of the (Wamek) Boadzi people of the Middle Fly River, Mark Busse (1987) has demonstrated vast social change in the sexual practices of an area once made famous for its boy-inseminating ceremonies (F. E. Williams 1936; Van Baal 1966). Today, Busse tells us, missionary activity has all but eliminated even the memories of such rituals. A few older informants continue to hold beliefs regarding the magical power of semen as an elixir for growth (reviewed in Busse, n.d.). The “medicine” not only of semen but of the vagina is “very good for children,” these informants told him (1987:295).¹² Traditionally, boy-inseminating occurred under the aegis of the men’s house. “When a boy’s beard begins to come in, his maternal uncles take him to the single boys’ house where he will live until he marries, an event which usually takes place when a man is in his early or mid-twenties” (ibid.:323). In fact, it was the prospective father-in-law of the boy who might inseminate him, a cultural practice deeply entangled with marriage exchange and bride-service to the older man.

Was erotic desire a potent motive in boy-inseminating here? To anticipate my final discussion, I would cite an important myth collected by Busse entitled “The Boy Who Became Pregnant.” This

traditional story describes a boy with a “girl’s face” that was so “beautiful” that “all the . . . single boys fucked him all the time. As a result, he became pregnant. The boys hid him from the women.” Later the myth tells that the inseminated boy died because he could not deliver the baby (Busse 1987:317; see also Ayres 1983). The myth is similar to those collected more than 70 years ago by Landtman (1917, on the nearby Kiwai Islanders) and it affirms an observation of Van Baal’s regarding the Fly River area, that “among the people of the Trans-Fly, anal intercourse is believed to be necessary for boys’ physical development” (Busse 1987:318). The Boazi men are reported to have viewed this ritual period as the “best time” in their lives, with hunting, comradeship, story telling, trysts with women, and the “option of homosexual relations with other males in the single boys’ house” predominant themes of masculine culture (Busse 1987:323–324; see also Schieffelin 1982).

In a controversial book that describes same-sex practices, the popular writer Tobias Schneebaum (1988) provides a memoir of life with the Asmat people who inhabit a stretch of the coast of West New Guinea (Irian Jaya). As reported in the first edition of this book (pp. 29–30), Asmat were insinuated (but without documentation) by Van Amelsvoort (1964) to practice ritualized boy-inseminating. Schneebaum’s personal account situates the Asmat in the general ritual complex of the area by reporting early initiation into opposite-sex relations (1988:84), important medicinal uses of semen, and the combinatory power of male and female fluids that are used for ritual production of masculine growth (*ibid.*:194). This part of his Asmat memoirs compares well to the ethnographies of the Marind-anim, Kimam, and related cultures as reported by Van Baal and Serpenti in their respective chapters below. The comparison is further strengthened by the fact that Van Amelsvoort himself had compared Asmat with the neighboring Jaquai tribe. And on the Jaquai, Boelaars (1981:60) has written: “Sodomy is the mentor’s duty; it is his task to see to the boy’s masculinization. Coming [from the initiation] . . . where he has been secluded like a girl, the boy is still girlish, and sodomy is the main means of making him strong and masculine and a good warrior.” So far so good, in relation to the anthropological literature on boy-inseminating rites.

What is most controversial about Schneebaum’s book are two sexual practices known only from one other group in Melanesia,

East Bay Island. First is his assertion that *both* anal and oral sexual practices occur within the same tradition and that such a combination occurs elsewhere only in East Bay (see pp. 16–18 below and Herdt 1989). But Schneebaum appreciates this novelty, and he properly compares it to Davenport's (1965) ethnography of East Bay. Second, and more problematical, is his report of an *egalitarian* mode of practice with exchange between same-aged partners. Asmat, he says, have a traditional concept of reciprocal sexual practice between peers as equals; they refer to it as *mbai*, a lifelong “friendship” of affection and sexual intercourse between males that is not entirely unlike heterosexual marriage (1988:43ff.). Asmat themselves, he continues, recognize the distinctive character of their homoerotic practices and they make their own inter-ethnic comparisons about it: “We know it is different with the Marind[-anim]. There are no *mbai*. There are no young men who have sexual intercourse together. There, it is *always a young boy with an older man*” (1988:194). The statement of this inter-tribal comparison on the part of the Asmat is remarkable, though not without precedent; however, such statements in themselves do not remove the suspicion of culture change in the matter. Such relations do not occur among women, the Asmat say; and the author feels that this is a time-honored tradition.

We cannot but wonder, nevertheless, given the long history of colonial contact and missionization among Asmat, whether this sexual culture was entirely indigenous, as Schneebaum believes, or was rather an effect of (in part or whole?) missionization and colonial control. When all the evidence is lined up, I am inclined strongly to the latter view, largely because these two novel features violate so many aspects of the cultural ontology of Melanesian sexuality and boy-inseminating in other tribes. Furthermore, the comparison with East Bay is telling, because, as I will show below, the situation there seems now to have been a product of social change.

From the study of a previously undescribed culture, the Kamula, Dr. Michael Wood (1982) describes ritualized boy-inseminating on the Papuan Plateau area south of Mount Bosavi. Kamula boys “receive semen through anal intercourse during initiation,” Wood (1982:79) says, “and as a result are said to ‘grow’ and become ‘big.’ ” The lad, at around age 9 or 10, becomes the object of ritual