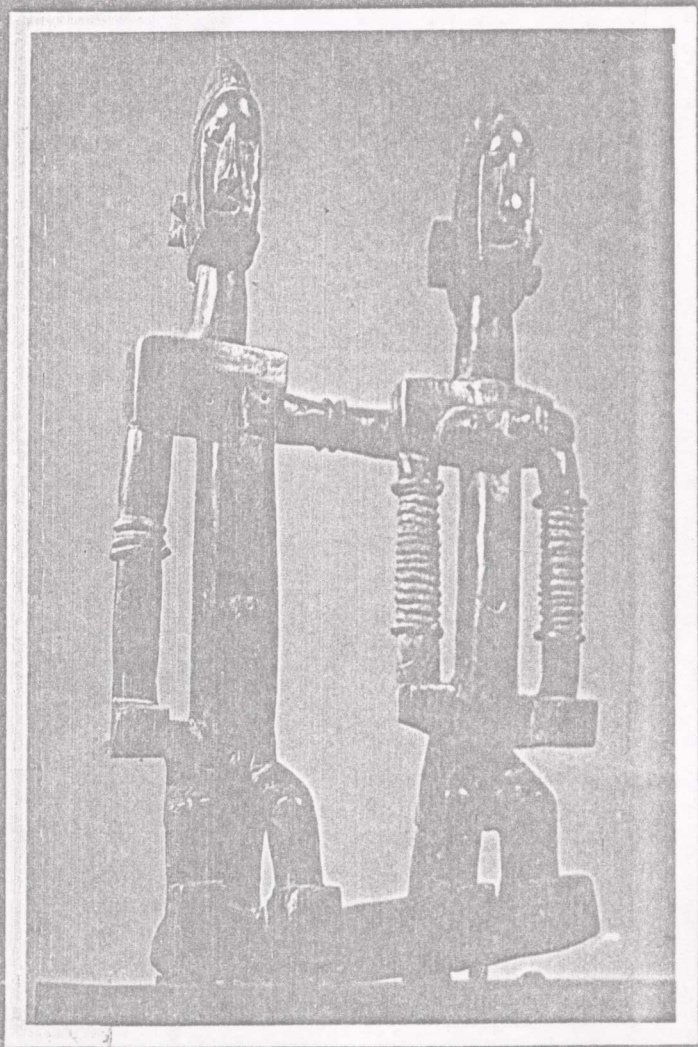


FEMALE POWER AND MALE DOMINANCE

**On the origins of
sexual inequality**



Peggy Reeves Sanday

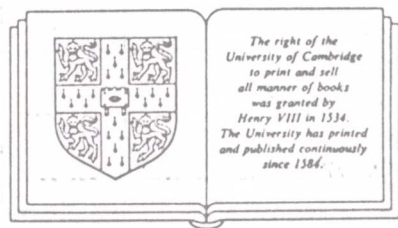


Female power and male dominance

On the origins of sexual inequality

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Preface

When I began this book, I intended to test the explanatory framework for the evolution of female status I had postulated in two published articles. My major question then was: What are the conditions under which the relative status of women changes in the direction of public equality? I assumed that, by and large, men were in a better position to gain both access to and control over strategic resources because of the constraints on the expenditure of female energy posed by their reproductive activities. This assumption corresponded with the then-prevailing view that women were universally subordinated. I hypothesized that women would gain public power by default, in the absence of men. Female power acquired in this fashion, I suggested, would be "legitimized over time through the expressive cultural system"; that is, through the development of female deities.¹

Supported by grants from the National Institute of Mental Health, I supervised the collection of information on over 150 societies in order to examine this view more closely.² It soon became evident that I had to revise my initial hypothesis. This sense of not having seen the forest for the trees was further confirmed upon reading the ethnographies of male and female power published in the 1970s. I was impressed most notably by the work of Albert Bacdayan (Western Bontoc), Jean Briggs (Eskimo), Kamene Okonjo (Igbo), Cara Richards (Onondaga), Susan Carol Rogers (peasants), Alice Schlegel (Hopi), and Nancy Tanner (matrifocal societies).³

The realization of the inadequacies in my initial conception was accompanied by the discovery that symbolism played a key role in channeling secular power roles. Preliminary analysis of the data indicated that sacred symbols are not, as I had originally supposed, an epiphenomena of secular power roles. In fact, it became clear that the reverse was more likely: Secular power roles are derived

Preface

from ancient concepts of sacred power. This realization meant that I had to switch my theoretical stance midstream and become at least semiliterate in symbolic anthropology. Along these lines, I found the work of Clifford Geertz and Mary Douglas the most helpful for seeking meaning below the surface details.

Moving into symbolic territory meant moving away from the positivist framework that normally accompanies the cross-cultural, large-sample approach. Examining various patterns of male dominance and female power in particular historical and cultural settings told me a great deal more than the skeletal information contained in statistical associations. And yet it was precisely these associations that guided my interpretation of specific situations and my overall framework for thinking about female power and male dominance. Only with time was I able to resolve the basic tension between explanation required by the positivist approach and interpretation required by the particular brand of the semiotic approach I adopted.

During this time certain individuals endured my search for intellectual sanity. Julie and Eric Sanday put up with their mother's strange moods after wrestling with "thick description" and the thinness of global comparison. Winthrop D. Jordan's conviction that the book would "make its way" sustained me through numerous drafts. Anyone who has read what he said about migrating men in his book *White over Black* will recognize the imprint of this way of approaching cultural analysis.⁴

Graduate students of the Department of Anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania worked as coders of information and as research assistants. Four students, in particular, contributed in a special way. Very early, Joan Schall convinced me that Mary Douglas's analysis of the meaning of taboos was pertinent. Devon Dederich (then an undergraduate student), Charles Hoffman, and Marilyn Lutz worked closely with me as I made the transition from one framework to another. At various times during the past five years or so, each of them spent hours with me going over questions that led to the point of view I finally developed. Though each contributed in large measure to the final result, each retains skepticism regarding particular details. The final product represents my distillation of the mix between my ideas and theirs.

When it came time to read a completed manuscript, Ruth and Ward Goodenough, Marilyn Lutz, and Charles Hoffman were

Preface

particularly helpful. Based on their comments and those of anonymous reviewers, I completely rewrote the manuscript. The final version benefited considerably from the generous comments of Rayna Rapp. Finally, I want to thank the two typists who worked so hard for so long—Marion Pierpont and Renee Ffrench.

Peggy Reeves Sanday

University of Pennsylvania
January 1981

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In this book, Professor Peggy Sanday provides a ground-breaking examination of power and dominance in male-female relationships. How does the culturally approved interaction between the sexes originate? Why are women viewed as a necessary part of political, economic, and religious affairs in some societies but not in others? Why do some societies clothe sacred symbols of creative power in the guise of one sex and not of the other?

Professor Sanday offers solutions to these cultural puzzles by using cross-cultural research on over 150 tribal societies. She systematically establishes the full range of variation in male and female power roles and then suggests a theoretical framework for explaining this variation.

Rejecting the argument of universal female subordination, Professor Sanday argues that male dominance is not inherent in human relations but is a solution to various kinds of cultural strain. Those who are thought to embody, be in touch with, or control the creative forces of nature are perceived as powerful. In isolating the behavioral and symbolic mechanisms that institute male dominance, Professor Sanday shows that a people's secular power roles are partly derived from ancient concepts of power, as exemplified by their origin myths. Power and dominance are further determined by a people's adaptation to their environment, social conflict, and emotional stress. This is illustrated through case studies of the effects of European colonialism, migration, and food stress, and supported by numerous statistical associations between sexual inequality and various cultural stresses.

In the Epilogue Professor Sanday examines the roots of Western male dominance and suggests that the forces contributing to the predominantly masculine system of beliefs characteristic of the Judaic and Christian traditions are similar to the forces that accompanied the development of male dominance in other cultural traditions.

Female Power and Male Dominance provides a new explanation of the origins and perpetuation of sexual inequality by using large-scale cross-cultural research on tribal societies. Yet the relevance of its discoveries extends to modern society, revealing the deep psychological and social roots of current sex-role expectations.

Cover design by Marsha Austin

Cover photograph by Lester Wunderman of Dogon Primordial Couple in the Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of Lester Wunderman, 1977.

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Introduction

This book offers certain answers to some basic questions regarding male and female power. These answers are necessarily tentative, because there are few more difficult questions about human relationships than those about the relationship of the two sexes. Throughout history and among various societies, human beings seem to have handled this relationship in an almost infinite variety of ways. Modern scholarship, particularly as represented by anthropologists, has tended to bifurcate the reasons underlying this reality into two opposites. Starkly put, the dichotomy has been nature versus nurture. In order to get out from under the weight of these polarities, I have tried to frame my questions in the most neutral possible mode. Why, for example, do women play a more prominent role in some societies than in others? Why do men dominate women, either as individuals or as a group? Why do some societies clothe sacred symbols of creative power in the guise of one sex and not of the other?

For several reasons, finding answers to these questions has not been easy. As an anthropologist I have been committed to the task of systematically establishing the full range of variation in male and female power roles before trying to explain this variation. This commitment has meant that I have had to rely on a representative sample of the world's known and well-described societies. I chose more than 150 of these societies for which detailed descriptions are available.¹ Missionaries, colonial officials, and anthropologists provided these descriptions of societies widely divergent in geographical, historical, and social circumstances. These societies are little known and, in many cases, are now extinct. From them, however, we have much to learn about the nature of female power and the reasons for male dominance.

This book is intended for an interdisciplinary audience interested in a global view of female power and male dominance in

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tribal societies. The following pages present many examples showing the range of variation in the relations between the sexes. In addition, numerous tables display the frequency of male dominance and female power in different environmental, social, and religious settings.

Unfortunately, most of the sources on which I had to rely, which range from the sixth century B.C. to the present, were written by males who paid cursory attention to female attitudes and behavior in the societies they described. As a rule, Western observers of other societies have not thought of women as important contributors to culture. However, despite this paucity of information on the female side of life (in many but not all cases), descriptions of male attitudes and behavior toward women provided important clues to the relationship between the sexes. There are clear differences between societies in which men fear and oppress women and societies in which the sexes intermingle in a friendly way in most activities of everyday life.

The view that emerges in this book is unconventional in that it conforms to no particular theoretical perspective or current style of thinking. Although the legacies of Durkheim, Marx, and Freud haunt the explanatory sections, I did not begin by testing any of the theories associated with these men. Rather, I began by immersing myself in the descriptive material, trying to keep an open mind and a receptive ear to what the actions of men and women in widely different circumstances might suggest regarding the questions I had posed. At the same time I reread the work of Ruth Benedict on cultural selection, Margaret Mead on sex roles, Clifford Geertz on sacred symbols, and Mary Douglas on implicit meanings while trying to keep up with the burgeoning literature written by anthropologists on relative sex status.

The following scenario about male and female power, and the origins of male dominance, does not attempt to summarize all that has been written. Nor do I intend to test one theory and reject others. There is something to be learned from most anthropological treatises on relative sex status. Yet none of them examines the full range of possibilities in a worldwide context. In examining this range, my goal is to focus on why cultures select different styles of interaction between the sexes.

The central argument unfolds by posing questions regarding cultural selection. I assume, as Ruth Benedict said long ago in *Pat-*

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terms of *Culture*, that each culture “selects” or “chooses” from the “great arc” of behavioral possibilities. Human beings, Benedict wrote, build their institutions “upon the hints presented by the environment or by man’s physical necessities.”² How human beings staff these institutions, the freedom and autonomy they grant women relative to men, I argue, is part of a complex interaction between environmental considerations and physical and emotional needs as people construct the “cup of life” Benedict called “culture.”

In *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies*, Margaret Mead argued that cultural selection included the standardization of temperamental types. Within each culture, Mead noted, there is the same range of basic temperamental types established on the basis of heredity. These differences provide “the clues from which culture works, selecting one temperament, or a combination of related and congruent types, as desirable.” The choice of the acceptable temperamental type or types was embodied in “every thread of the social fabric – in the care of the young child, the games the children play, the songs the people sing, the structure of political organization, the religious observance, the art and the philosophy.”³

In addition to selecting approved temperamental types, I suggest, each culture must select a sex-role plan – that is, a template for the organization of sex-role expectations. Because human behavior is so plastic and responsive to many kinds of pressures, as Clifford Geertz says, people must set up “symbolic templates” to set the limits of behavior and to guide it along predictable paths.⁴ Sex-role plans form one kind of symbolic template. Such plans help men and women orient themselves as male and female to each other, to the world around them, and to the growing boys and girls whose behavior they must shape to a commonly accepted mold.

In addition to guiding behavior, sex-role plans solve basic human puzzles. Human beings seek answers to such questions as where did we come from; how did we get here; how did others get there; what is our relationship with all the others out there – others being animate, inanimate, and human objects; and what are we to do about the powerful forces within any of these categories not fully understood. Confronted with the obvious, generally accepted, but frequently ignored facts that babies come out of fe-