Exotic No More

Anthropology on the Front Lines

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9.

Interpreting Gender and Sexuality: Approaches from Cultural Anthropology

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Does an American woman know what it means to be a Japanese woman just because the two are both women? What is a "woman"—is it any person capable of bearing and breastfeeding children, or something more? Something else?

Contemporary Western ideologies often assume the self-evident nature of the terms *woman* and *man*, *boy* and *girl*. In particular, sex and gender are frequently elided, so that the biological inevitability of the sex organs comes to stand for a perceived inevitability of social roles, expectations, and meanings associated with gender. Yet investigation of people's lives in other places and other times leads us to question this assumption. In this essay we explore how anthropology can help us to reimagine the meanings we often take for granted of seemingly obvious concepts related to *male* and *female*. We will focus on several key issues concerning gender and sexuality as they are conceived in a variety of cultural spaces. We begin by endeavoring to disentangle the two concepts of "gender" and "sexuality," which themselves are so often conflated. To do so, we will problematize the very nature of gender identity. We then explore the issue of power as it relates to constructions of gender and gender identity. We end by considering the cultural construction of sexual desire itself—that seeming bastion of biological urge that, like gender identity, may nevertheless be analyzed through a cultural lens.

GENDER AND IDENTITY

For many people, the most obvious thing to be said about gender is probably that there are two of them. By kindergarten, most schoolchildren know that people come, like the animals in Noah's ark, in pairs—boys and girls—and they easily classify both themselves and everyone else they know into this binary system.

Adults do so too, often beginning with the tiniest people: on hearing of a new arrival to this life, the first question that friends and relatives ask is typically, "Is it a boy or a girl?" Having heard the answer, we may easily assume that we understand something of the baby and his or her future. At the immediate consumer level, we know what sort of present to buy for the newborn; at a less conscious level, we may have an idea of how to communicate with the creature. For example, if it's a baby girl, many Westerners are more likely to speak directly even to a newborn; with a baby boy, many Westerners are more likely to gently roughhouse. Put differently, the infant's sexual identity comes easily to stand for what we assume will become—or perhaps what already is—its gender identity. From there, it is a small step to imagine the child's identity overall.

But how much do we really know about someone once we have identified her or his gender? Much as we may assume otherwise, gender is not an inevitable predictor of a given person's life experience For one thing, the experience of gender is not the same from place to place, nor from time to time. Cultural variability reduces considerably the reliability of using gender to foretell the future texture of individual lives. Moreover, one's own experience of gender may change through one's life. Indeed, it is possible that one might experience both genders at different points in the life cycle. Gender identity itself is variable, both in time and in space. This leads us to what is perhaps the most counterintuitive question of all: Do all people everywhere classify each other into two and only two genders? This is an especially unsettling question—some might even think it absurd. After all, isn't the answer self-evident?

Many cultural anthropologists would say that it is not. What we "know"—or, rather, what we think we "know"—is very much shaped by what is available to us in the way of knowledge. Anthropology is constantly challenging the bounds of our knowledge by uncovering new ways of being, thinking, feeling that someone, somewhere, experiences. Just when we think we "know" what it means to be a man, another "man" comes along, say, serving milk and cookies at a children's party, or organizing a fiction readers' book club, or leaving work early to take a sick child to the doctor, or doing any number of other activities with which we may (stereo)typically associate women and not men, and we are forced to reconsider our definitions—however implicit—of "manhood."

Gender identity, then, is not as fixed, determinate, predictable as we may assume. Indeed, it is the supposition of this essay—and of many practitioners of cultural anthropology—that gender identity is so decisively shaped by cultural effort—the mandate of values, the whims of history, the weight of economy, the power of politics—that it may be a task doomed to failure to delineate where "nature" ends and "culture" begins. Our identity is shaped by our gender, yes—but

only insofar as we acknowledge that our gender is, in turn, shaped by everything and everyone around us, and how those around us themselves interpret our gender, the expectations they bring with them to understanding our gender.

If all this seems abstract, let us take a real-life situation as an example: the case of women and men who choose work that is unconventional for their gender, as judged by the common norms in their society. In most postindustrial nations, we might think of male secretaries, pediatric nurses, or preschool teachers, or then again, of female firefighters (figure 1), executives, or construction workers. All these tend to be professions that require a gendered qualifier before them when describing the unexpected gender reversal. Unless a "female astronaut" is specified, for example, one tends to envision a male when reading about an "astronaut"; by the same token, it would be surprising to hear of a "male astronaut," since the default value of "astronaut," as it were, is male, hence a "male astronaut" is culturally redundant. Female surgeons, male midwives, female engineers—all work against the gendered grain of most contemporary Western societies, challenging gender stereotypes insofar as these individuals embody gender contradictions, defy common expectations. How do such people perceive themselves and their

FIGURE 1 Female firefighter. (Photo by Georganne Rundblad)

relations with other (gendered) people? How do others perceive them? Do they have a single identity, and if so, is it the one that is implied by their biology, or the identity that is associated with their chosen career?

To explore these questions, let us examine the case of female bullfighters in the Spanish region of Andalusia. Over the past century, women began to insert themselves in multiple ways into the Spanish bullfighting arena. Some Andalusians—traditionalists who feel comfortable relying on classic gender norms—reject the move wholesale. Among this group are male bullfighters who refuse to fight in the same ring with female bullfighters, parents who discourage their daughters from pursuing a bullfighting career, trainers who refuse to train women bullfighters, and spectators—both men and women—who avoid attending bullfights at which female bullfighters are present. For these Spaniards, the association of bullfighting with masculinity is so strong and single-minded that no challenge to the association will be tolerated.

Yet at the same time, another slice of contemporary Andalusian society is willing to breach convention, expand the bounds of the profession, and permit the possibility of female bullfighters. Among this group there is, of course, the group of women themselves who are training to become bullfighters; their trainers, who may endure criticism or ridicule from their colleagues for training women as bullfighters; and spectators who happily buy tickets to see women fight in the bull ring. Here we see the easy notion of bullfighter-as-embodiment-of-masculinity being contested, and social change—the rush of feminism (whether or not acknowledged as such), with its insistence that women can pursue any profession available to men—changing long-standing notions of professional appropriateness.

The situation is even more complex. In Andalusia, viewers themselves offer a range of opinions and interpretations of the phenomenon of female bullfighters. Some may be sexually aroused by the tight-fitting, bejeweled costume worn by the bullfighters; ironically, this puts the maverick bullfighting woman, who shows both tremendous social courage and tremendous physical courage, in the traditional role of passive sex object, subject to the sexualized male gaze. Other onlookers admire the physical control expressed in an aesthetically pleasing way that female bullfighters demonstrate (qualities these spectators may admire in male bullfighters), playing up the athletes' professionalism and playing down their sexuality. The female bullfighters themselves say they appreciate this latter attitude. Still other spectators maintain that women are doomed to fail at bullfighting because, they allege, women's biology—their fundamental nature or makeup—does not permit them to experience the same bravery and strength that bullfighting demands and that only men by nature fully enjoy. Such fans of the bullfight may feel anything from pity to contempt for women bullfighters.

Examining this range of reactions, we are led to question the long-standing, exclusive association of bullfighting with the masculine. At the same time, we are forced to consider the ways in which the image of a female bullfighter stretches our conventional notions of what it means to be a woman. Can't a female bullfighter be as much a "woman" as is a woman who chooses, say, teaching, nursing, or motherhood as her profession? Yet at the same time that the female bullfighter may opt for the hypermasculinized image in the bullring, she may adopt a more conventionally feminized image outside the ring. And in her late twenties, as many male bullfighters do, she typically renounces the extreme rigors of the bullfight—and may well marry and raise children. In other words, she herself may play with her own insertion into gender identity to the point of experiencing gender identity in the plural. For the contemporary, Spanish, female bullfighter, we might say, gender identity becomes gender identities.

The case of the female bullfighter is, admittedly, a dramatic one. What about the vast majority of people who (at least appear to) lead more ordinary lives, conforming (more or less happily) to conventional gender roles? Recent studies have begun to suggest that the sort of gender flexibility, ambiguity, and controversy characterizing the situation of Spanish female bullfighters may also apply, if more subtly, to others engaged in less public and less controversial professions. For example, the female office secretary who is sexually harassed by one male superior while being treated respectfully and professionally by another surely experiences her gender differently with her two male bosses from hour to hour on a given day. The woman who suffers from PMS does likewise at different points in the month. The male trucker may similarly experience his gender identity in different ways when talking to fellow male truckers, to waitresses, to the odd female trucker, and to his wife on the phone, all at the same truck stop along the highway. Such examples could be multiplied endlessly. They suggest that "identity" itself is not only a multifaceted construction from place to place, but a construction whose contours may change from situation to situation for any one of us.

This brings up a related issue: Is it justifiable to assert that the very difference between male and female is itself a universally acknowledged one? In fact, many non-Western societies have allowed for a gender role that is either a combination of male and female, or that is neither male nor female. In recent years, such an in-between category has sometimes been called a "third gender." The "berdaches" of many Native American communities—men who dress as women and take on some (but not all) typically female roles in society—have long confounded anthropologists trying to classify them via the dual-gendered system that is prevalent in Western thought. Variations on this theme abound in many non-Western societies. Among the Igbo of Nigeria, for example, "female husbands" and "male

daughters" are adults who are biologically female but, by playing typically male roles (husbands and sons), rise to high levels of wealth, power, and status in their society.

In urbanized, postindustrial societies, communities of gays and lesbians may similarly play with gender roles in ways that challenge the commonly held notion that gender is determined by biology. Lesbian parents may tell their children that they have two mothers, for example, but one mother may perform more traditionally "maternal" roles in housekeeping and child care, while the other may maintain a greater, more stereotypically "masculine" commitment to her career.

To date, studies of such alternate gender systems have not had much impact on public discussions of the issue beyond the narrow confines of anthropology. Perhaps one of the contributions that anthropology can make is to keep reminding us that it is just when we are most sure of ourselves and our opinions—when we are convinced that our way of doing things, of arranging our society and our lives, is the most commonsensical, the most "natural"—that social roles such as a "third gender" can productively unsettle comfortable assumptions about the "nature" of gender identity.

GENDER AND POWER

Are women and men fundamentally equal or unequal? Do any societies exist whose members have achieved partial or even full gender equality? Are there limits—whether biological or cultural (or both)—to achieving such equality? In recent years, most feminist scholars have asserted that a significant majority of all known societies, both past and present, exhibit at least some degree of patriarchy—the dominance of women by men in socially significant spheres of life—and that many societies exhibit a high level of gender inequality. Nevertheless, feminist scholars assume that male dominance, although widespread, is not inevitable, because its roots lie in cultural practices rather than in any hypothesized biological mandate. Anthropologists are in an especially powerful position to address this enduring issue because of their investigation into the variety of lives as lived around the globe.

Authors have proposed several theories to account for the widespread existence of men's dominance of women. Some have stressed the idea of male dominance as an ideological system to emphasize its symbolic components. Feminist psychologists and psychoanalysts propose child-rearing styles or scenarios as essential to the development of patriarchal attitudes in adulthood. Models derived from Karl Marx's theories have tended to look at the rise of the state and private property as responsible for the fact that in many societies women have fewer legal, economic, and political rights than do men. One variation on this theme suggests that in prestate societies, women's roles as sisters remained critical after marriage;

this allowed a married woman to retain a degree of authority vis-à-vis the clan into which she was born, which continued to support her rights within her marriage. But over time, states have tended to erode the authority of the clan system itself. According to this theory, women's roles as (clan) sisters have become eclipsed by the importance of their roles as wives. This shift would have brought about a precipitous decline in women's status overall, accounting for the fact that most contemporary societies exhibit some degree of male dominance at least in the political and economic arenas.

Other authors have cited the restrictions that pregnancy, nursing, and continual care of infants and young toddlers seem to place on women everywhere as the preeminent factors that limit women's access to socially valued resources. Nowadays some middle-class women themselves may view motherhood as a hindrance and may delay or even avoid motherhood so as to further career goals. Yet, ironically, archaeologists have hypothesized that the requirement to carry and care for very young children may have led to the invention of the most significant early technological innovations in human history: the baby sling (freeing women to work and walk while holding a baby) and the hunting net. Moreover, scholars are beginning to question the degree to which the mobility of a given woman may in fact be hampered by pregnancy, nursing, or childcare. The long-standing dominance of many traditional West African markets and farms by women shows the extent to which mothers can maintain active work lives, including critically important economic lives, while retaining a commitment to raising children. In these West African settings, children either accompany their mothers to work or stay behind in villages, where they join in multi-age play groups that are typically supervised by grandparents or other adults remaining in the village.

In contemporary, postindustrial societies, increasing pressure to provide both sufficient maternity and paternity leave for new parents, and comprehensive day care for children of working couples, means that more mothers of babies and toddlers can enter the work force on a full-time basis. Many leaders in a variety of Western nations are now looking for models in the Scandinavian countries, which have been at the forefront of government-supported efforts allowing families to combine successful parenthood and successful work lives.

Indeed, many women around the world are no longer content to remain in "second-class citizen" roles. In recent years, feminism has moved from a small movement of middle-class, Euro-American women to a far more global movement, with international meetings at which women from around the world regularly make their voices heard. Engaging in such consequential activities as lobbying to change unequal inheritance laws that disenfranchise widows in many African countries, Third World feminists are setting their own agendas and reori-

enting previously dominant paradigms of the relations between gender and privilege. At the same time, in some Western nations, a growing "men's movement" is encouraging men to question both traditional and current gender arrangements with which they may earlier have felt comfortable—or perhaps felt uncomfortable.

Issues relating to power differentials—including both the power to compel or coerce another to follow one's dictates, as well as the power to define and represent another's perceptions of reality—not only mark relations between women and men, they also mark relations among men and among women. Thus it is important to avoid "essentializing" the category of women (or of men) into a single, homogeneous group—not only across societies, but within a given society as well. This is so because the differences that divide women from each other, like those that divide men, are at least as great as the ties that bind them. Ethnic affiliation, class, religion, language, marital status, and age all rupture the seemingly unified or "essential" categories of male and female. Like all other means of defining identities, gender identity is created and recreated by changing circumstances.

Let us consider, for instance, the range of experience that characterizes the lives of women who belong to one apparently homogeneous category: fundamentalist Muslim women in the contemporary era. In Afghanistan, as of this writing, the ruling Islamic Taliban party excludes girls and women from all public spheres and professions, including schools, medical services, and the judiciary. At the same time, in Iran, Egypt, and Turkey, fundamentalist women are creating new brands of Islamic feminism as women reinterpret the Qur'an to claim new rights and freedoms in the spheres of education, work, and family. Although both these groups of women veil themselves, the covering has drastically different effects. In Afghanistan, the veil bars women from the public sphere, whereas in Turkey, Egypt, and Iran, it accords women the comfort to work side by side with men in public without feeling shame or fear.

To complicate matters even more, in Turkey, Egypt, and Iran, the contemporary appearance of veiled working women follows on earlier reforms in the 1920s and 1930s in which women in these three countries were either encouraged or obliged by the state to remove their veils, in a governmental effort to modernize and liberate Muslim women. Ironically, some scholars now claim that this earlier removal of the veil coerced women into conforming to men's positions, and that this in turn eroded women's own social networks, which were traditionally a source of power to them. The contemporary decision to "re-veil" among young Muslim women in Turkey, Egypt, and Iran is thus a significant step filled with multiple, historically layered meanings. It serves at once to affirm a deep devotion

to Islam; to critique what these women perceive as depraved Western (especially North American) values and practices; and to provide a visual image that renders acceptable their insertion into the modern workplace. In this case, gender intersects with religion, education, history, and nationalism in complex ways that resist easy associations and predictions.

In the Muslim world, as elsewhere, differences in class and culture are also critical in shaping the experiences of children, both girls and boys. For example, whether among Bedouins in Egypt or Pathans in Pakistan, authoritarian and patriarchal elders in the clan strictly control the day-to-day activities of Muslim boys and girls throughout their youth and adolescence, limiting exposure to activities from soccer to marrying for love, as a means of ensuring continuity of values from generation to generation. Yet elsewhere, elite Muslim men transcend the usual boundaries of both religion and state by jetting in and out of European capitals, where they enjoy the pleasures of wealth, all the while retaining a commitment to Islam. Clearly, class and education radically divide the texture of the lives of men and of women around the globe, even men and women who devoutly espouse the same religious faith. Collectively, these examples of the varied lives of contemporary Muslim people in a variety of cultural spaces compel us to consider the possibility of multiple "masculinities" and multiple "femininities" that lie behind simple notions of male and female.

Moreover, intragender relations are by no means necessarily benign. Differences that divide the members of one gender can produce bitter conflict. A dramatic case of women actively pitted against one another by difference concerns relations among mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law. China provides us with the paradigmatic case. Here, the specific place that one occupies in the life cycle is what determines a woman's experience far more than does the simple fact of her being a "woman." As girls and young brides, Chinese females typically wield no authority in any sphere, but if and when they begin to produce sons, Chinese women slowly but inevitably gain prestige and authority. Acquiring a daughter-in-law to dominate—as she was dominated as a new bride—is the ultimate reward to a mature Chinese woman. Ironically, in this system, women gain power and authority only at one another's expense. In this patriarchal structure, women who are barren, or who produce only daughters, traditionally led tragically restricted and belittled lives; in earlier times, such a fate often led to suicide. Here, one observes both the existence of extensive male privilege and the possibility of female authority, albeit in a restricted context.

As this discussion suggests, the interplay of gender with other features that are critical in a local landscape goes a long way to define both our sense of who we are and other people's senses of who we are. Reducing our identity to gender alone is

an unrealistic move that postulates identity as composed essentially of a single factor, when it is far more multiplex than that.

Although feminist anthropologists generally agree that most of the world's societies have exhibited, and continue to exhibit, some degree of domination by men over women, nevertheless scholars have begun recently to document the existence of societies that exhibit a significant measure of gender equality. This is especially the case among some small minority groups living on the fringes of large states. For example, among the Lahu of southwest China, an ideology of gender complementarity dominates virtually all (traditional) spheres of social life. A male and female village chief wield power collectively, and each household is headed by a heterosexual married couple. Men and women perform as much labor collectively as they can. Husbands take over much of their wives' labor load during pregnancy, they serve as midwives during childbirth, and they share with their wives all the tasks of childrearing other than breast-feeding from the first days after the birth (see plate 4). Some Lahu villages have maintained these practices more or less intact even in the face of efforts by the Chinese state to institute socialism—efforts that, in some Lahu villages, have inadvertently undermined the indigenous system of gender relations. This unintended effect is especially ironic, given the ideological commitment to gender equality espoused by the Chinese Communist Party. In such places, the tangle of competing models of (top-down, if unintended) patriarchy and (bottom-up) gender equality challenges us to avoid characterizing the society at large before looking at significant regional variations and contestations.

In general, the way that "gender equality" will look may surprise, taking on features in one place that seem far from what prevails as "equality" in another. As Western feminists struggle to achieve consensus over what an appropriate structure of gender equality might look like in postindustrial societies, feminists elsewhere pose their own answers that challenge us to expand our very definitions of power and equality.

THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF SEXUAL DESIRE

Anthropologists have a unique ability to argue for the cultural foundations of sexuality as well as of gender identity, having documented an astounding variety of practices and ideologies around the world concerning both sex and gender. If our own sexual practices and our own gender ideologies, whatever those may be, are all demonstrably nonuniversal, what claims can we make for their "naturalness"?

Let us consider a celebrated case in the anthropological literature. Among the Etoro people of Papua New Guinea, every adolescent boy must serve regularly as the "passive" partner in oral sex with his maternal uncle throughout his teen years.

This obligatory practice is explained by the Etoro as a method to build up a supply of semen in the young man that will enable him later to prove fertile with a future wife. In this society the biological substance of seminal fluid, far from being seen as the natural outcome of hormonal development, as it is in the scientific model, is instead seen as a constructed creation—one that must be produced actively by the sexual efforts of closely related men. Without such efforts, the Etoro maintain, adult males would never become "real men," and their sterility would prove catastrophic, preventing the society from reproducing itself. Ideas and sexual practices such as this remind us that much as we might find it reasonable to envision sexuality itself as a natural aspect of our identities, it is—like gender identity—as much a cultural as a biological construction.

The model implied in the Etoro practice is, of course, far from the dominant Western model of sexuality, which has a notion of "naturalness" at its very core. Earlier in the century, Sigmund Freud convinced readers of the "naturalness" of sex as an "instinct" or "drive," and of gender roles as outgrowths of the postulated urge. Before Freud, many Westerners endorsed their own folk models of sex as an unavoidable impulse in humans, and many still maintain this position today. Recently, this "naturalness" has been invoked in politicized arenas—for example, in the increasingly public debate about the origins of homosexuality. Thus in the United States, many gays and lesbians insist on a "natural" foundation to their sexual orientation as a reason to grant them equal rights and legal protection, while Christian opponents of gay rights may instead claim that homosexuality is "unnatural." In both arguments, we are far from the Etoro model of sexuality, which instead emphasizes compulsory male homosexuality as a cultural practice that is necessary to create the later possibility of normative heterosexuality.

In many Western societies, a commonly espoused folk model of sexuality insists not only that sexual desire itself is an immutable and/or irrepressible, natural urge, but that it is naturally stronger in men than it is in women. In the United States, men and women alike often attempt to explain the high rape rates prevalent in the nation as the outcome of an unbridled sexual impulse in men that society has not effectively tamed. Sometimes the frequency of rape is accepted as a tragic but inevitable result of the widespread conviction that "boys will be boys."

Yet the existence of an irresistible sexual urge in men concerning women is not a universal perception. For example, Muslims often maintain that women have a greater sexual urge than do men. Indeed, in the views of many Muslims (especially Muslim men), it is precisely to protect women against their own strong desires for sex (which, it is feared, could lead to adultery and other culturally unacceptable transgressions) that the extreme practices of female seclusion *(purdah)* and female

circumcision have come about. By contrast, Dani people of Irian Jaya, Indonesia (West New Guinea), would likely repudiate the common proposition that the urge for sex is a natural one in either men or women. Married Dani men and women alike claim that they refrain from all sexual activity for a period of between four and six years after each child is born to them, and a Western ethnographer who reported this was convinced that no infractions occurred. The contrast is stark when we compare the reported infrequency of sex among the Dani with the frequency of sexual activity in the contemporary United States, where "the average . . . couple has intercourse two or three times per week in their twenties and thirties" (though somewhat less frequently as they age; Masters, Johnson, and Kolodny 1986, 326–27).

Even the very private feelings of sexual pleasure that we may experience are themselves shaped—subtly yet decisively—by cultural factors. Let us consider one controversial case: female genital operations performed on some African and Muslim girls. Today, some outspoken leaders are challenging the tradition for myriad reasons—relating not only to medical and ethical issues, but also to sexual pleasure. These critics lambast the practice as destroying any possibility of experiencing sexual pleasure for the women who have undergone the procedure. At the same time, defenders of the practice, including women—in some places, especially women—offer a different scenario. For example, some Pokot women of Kenya report that the pleasure they experience during sex with their husbands is heightened by the fact that their clitoris was ritually removed during their adolescent initiation ritual—a surgico-ceremonial procedure that the girls were told would ensure their fertility. One can surmise that knowing that they are fertile may make these women feel attractive to their husbands, which would in turn produce in them feelings of erotic arousal. Such claims and counterclaims—and the increasingly lively, even explosive internal debate about this issue that is wracking many African and Muslim societies—must surely unsettle any easy dismissal or condemnation we may be prone to espouse regarding a practice that occasions such extreme reactions. At the least, it suggests that the outsider's ability to imagine what circumstances foster private sensations of sexual pleasure in others is limited.

LEGITIMATE SEX, ILLEGITIMATE SEX: VIRGINITY / ADULTERY / INCEST

The social construction of sexuality is not limited to the experience of desire. Every known society also makes clear to its members when it is permissible—or forbidden—simply to have sex, and with whom.

For example, many socially stratified societies that have well-developed dis-

tinctions between commoners and elites have required young women (though not young men) to remain sexual virgins before they marry. Nevertheless, the concept of virginity itself is not self-evident: far from being a simple biological fact, the notion has as much of a cultural as a biological foundation. Among the Trobriand Islanders of Papua New Guinea, for instance, the category of "virginity" is extended to adult women whom Westerners would surely not classify as virgins: mothers who have given birth to children that are said to be sired by family spirits rather than by mortal men—even though such women may be married and lead active sexual lives. This ideology is consistent with the matrilineal organization of Trobriand society. In this type of society, women are structurally more critical to the reproduction of the society than are men, who are somewhat peripheral both genealogically and symbolically.

Distant though it may seem to the Westerner, the Trobriand ideology that it is possible for a woman to be impregnated by a god or spirit rather than by a mortal man, is not as "exotic" as it may at first glance appear. How far is it from the Trobriand conception of "virgin birth" to the "virgin birth" that is said to characterize the conception of the major deity that Christians worship around the world? By contrast, other societies do not recognize the category of "virgin" at all. In such settings—Samoa is one example made famous by Margaret Mead's study in the last century—some boys and girls may be permitted to engage in sexual experimentation from a very young age. In such a setting, local sexual practice makes any concept of "virginity" essentially irrelevant.

Even though sex is encouraged or at least permitted early in some societies, nevertheless all societies restrict sexual access to some people. Minimally, a few closely related family members are universally considered taboo as sexual partners. Sex between parent and child is forbidden virtually everywhere, as it is almost everywhere between siblings. Going beyond the "incest taboo," the idea of who is considered an acceptable sex partner and/or an acceptable marriage partner is variable indeed when we look at the gamut of societies cross-culturally. Indeed, just how "incest" is defined is not as easily foreseen as we might imagine. Thus, whereas most Western countries forbid all first cousins and sometimes all second cousins as spouses, many non-Western societies find another distinction far more relevant: cousins who are the children of two sisters or of two brothers are in many societies forbidden as marriage partners, but in many of these same societies, the children of a brother and a sister are not only permitted but are encouraged or even required to marry one another. Here, the definition of "incest" looks different indeed from the shape it typically takes in Western societies, where people tend to insist on the extent of genealogical or genetic difference as the relevant criterion.

At another level, some societies make a clear distinction between an acceptable sex partner as opposed to an acceptable spouse. For one thing, whereas marriage often implies sex, it does not necessarily require it. In some contemporary countries, the case of foreigners who marry natives for citizenship purposes (in the United States, "to get a green card") includes many such sexless marriages. Other circumstances produce complex marriages in contemporary Indonesia. There, gay men generally conceal their homosexual identities; but if they are discovered to have male partners, their sexual habits are usually tolerated so long as the men also marry women, sire children, and lead seemingly conventional—if secretly bisexual—lives. Closer to home for Western readers, many gays and lesbians, including well-known artists, have found it useful to remain in heterosexual marriages as a screen for their homosexuality—though in many of these cases, unlike in Indonesia, their marriages may well be childless and perhaps sexless as well.

In complex societies with significant ethnic and class divisions, the choice of a suitable marriage partner often includes considerations of social background. Marrying (or trying to marry) the "wrong kind of person," or a person from the "wrong kind of family"—however that is defined—can result in ostracism from the family or community, or even in suicide. Marriage is frequently a contentious issue for many religious groups, especially minority groups whose members have had difficult relations with the locally dominant religion. Such is the case of Jews in the contemporary United States, for example, where high rates of intermarriage between Jews and Christians frequently cause disputes in Jewish families. Marriages that are considered inappropriate from the perspective of the prospective couple's families have long been the staple of great art, from *Romeo and Juliet* to Spike Lee's film, *Jungle Fever*. Even as contemporary Western couples typically covet the right to choose their own spouses, families may intervene in subtle but decisive ways to shape the marriage decisions their children will one day make—at the least by teaching certain values that will give their children a conceptual grid through which to evaluate possible mate choices.

In many societies, patriarchy further complicates the picture of who marries whom. Typically, in class-stratified societies, men are permitted to marry downward in class, status, education and age, while women are forbidden or at least discouraged from doing so, being allowed or encouraged only to marry upward in class, status, education, or age (a practice that social scientists term "hypergamy"). One important consequence of these rules is that male dominance within the marriage is generally reinforced. This is so because when a man of high standing and/or wealth marries a woman of low standing and/or wealth, his authority over his wife is generally strengthened by his higher general status. By contrast, if a man of

low standing marries a woman of high standing (termed "hypogamy"), his authority over his wife might well be undermined by her higher general status, thus challenging the overall patriarchal structure of the society. Surprisingly, women themselves may avoid such marriages, anticipating that they may cause trouble for their potential husbands. Only in unusual circumstances does hypogamy become attractive. For instance, in recent years some well-educated, Euro-American women in their thirties have begun to perceive that they have a shrinking pool of eligible, unmarried men from whom to choose as spouses; as a result, some of these women are opting to marry men who are significantly less educated than they are (hence occupying positions of lesser prestige), although previously these women (and their families) would have ruled out such a marriage.

When different ethnic groups are systematically (and unjustly) accorded variable levels of prestige in a given society, class factors may be further intensified when it comes to choosing a marriage partner. For instance, in the United States, many (racist) Euro-Americans are more perturbed by the thought of a "white" woman marrying a "black" man (hypogamy) than by the thought of a "black" woman marrying a "white" man (hypergamy).

Once married, adults are generally expected to obey relevant laws concerning sexual fidelity to their partners, whatever those laws may be. In many societies, gender and power intersect to produce a "double standard": women are expected to remain sexually faithful to their husbands at the same time that those husbands are permitted to have extramarital sexual liaisons. In recent years, the political scene in the United States has revealed the extensive occurrence of powerful men's extramarital affairs, culminating recently in the near-toppling of Bill Clinton's presidency.

Ironically, women themselves may excuse their husbands' transgressions (as Hillary Clinton did publicly) and in some cases may even refrain from critiquing the existence of the sexual double standard, rationalizing that "it's in men's nature." In parts of Greece, a woman who discovers that her husband is having an adulterous affair typically blames the other woman rather than her husband, whom she likely sees as incapable of controlling his sexual urges. In some societies that subscribe to this sexual double standard, the existence of polygyny (which permits men but not women to remain married to two or more spouses simultaneously) goes hand-in-hand with this ideology. In this case, which characterizes many traditional African societies, "philandering" men may view extramarital liaisons as an attempt to locate a second or third wife, rather than as adultery.

Still, the sexual double standard, while common, is not universal. Elsewhere, far different mores may prevail. In traditional Nuer communities in southern Sudan, for example, certain women were permitted to have multiple lovers while re-

maining married. Any children such a woman bore would have considered their mother's husband as their legal father, whether or not he was genetically related to them. Elsewhere—as in south India, the Himalayas, and on the Jos Plateau of Nigeria—the practice of "polyandry" permits women to remain married simultaneously to two or more men (who are sometimes brothers). While rare, this marriage system nevertheless demonstrates the non-inevitability of the admittedly far commoner practice of polygyny.

Although transgressing locally upheld rules about sex—whether concerning incest, adultery, or otherwise—may result in punishment, many rules themselves are now being contested. For example, the gay liberation movement, which is increasingly active in non-Western nations as well as in the West, is challenging traditional notions of acceptable sexuality even as its activists are still frequently harassed. The struggle over the commonly accepted definition of legitimate sex continues in arenas as diverse as conference planning and book fairs. For example, many academic organizations have declined to hold their annual meetings in any of the North American states that continue to maintain antisodomy or anti-homosexuality laws, and a book fair in southern Africa was wracked by controversy over its decision first to ban and then (by court order) to allow a gay rights group to have a stand at the fair. In such ways, social traditions concerning sexuality are subject to revision, redefinition, and negotiation.

SEXUALITY IN OLD AGE

In urbanized, contemporary, Western societies, sex is typically seen as a monopoly of the young. Advertisements using sex as a lure for consumers to purchase a product almost inevitably hire young actors and actresses to seduce viewers. Even if old people are not secluded in nursing homes (as is common enough in the United States), their sex lives are rarely considered by others. Some societies carry this to an extreme. For example, in contemporary Japan and Taiwan it is considered shameful for even middle-aged, let alone elderly, women to be interested in sex. Routinely sleeping with (some of) their grandchildren is likely to promote long-term celibacy in older Japanese women.

Nevertheless, discomfort with elderly sexuality is not universal. For example, among the !Kung people of southern Africa, women as they age are said to become both more sexually active and more sexually attractive to men. Indeed, it is not uncommon for young !Kung men to have affairs with elderly women, many of whom dress more and more scantily, revealing more and more of their legs, with each passing year. While the idea of geriatric sex may unsettle our stereotypes about the aging process and the appropriate deployment of sexuality, it encourages us to acknowledge the cultural construction of sexual desire itself.

PLATE 1 Entering the global market: a recently bought artifact is laid on a canoe before being paddled to the main island and, ultimately, sold in either Europe or America. (Vao islet, Malakula Island, Vanuatu, February 1980; photo by Jeremy MacClancy)

PLATE 2 Anti-drug slogan painted by Leroy at his crack sales spot. (Photo by Philippe Bourgois)

PLATE 3 Jovellanos, Matanzas Province, is the site of a nineteenth-century sugar plantation where the current residents' ancestors were enslaved workers. In Cuba, conditions of economic austerity and related shortages of construction materials have resulted in dilapidated housing in both rural and urban settings. Black Cubans tend to be overrepresented in the most dilapidated neighborhoods. (Photo by Faye Harrison, July 2000)

PLATE 4 Lahu man preparing dinner for his family while carrying his sleeping toddler on his back. In this part of southwest China, Lahu men and women traditionally share childcare and domestic responsibilites equally. (Photo by Shanshan Du)

PLATE 5 A women's fishing group in Sierra Leone, enacting ideas about the links between the female bodily processes and fishing productivity, early 1990s. (Photo by Melissa Leach)

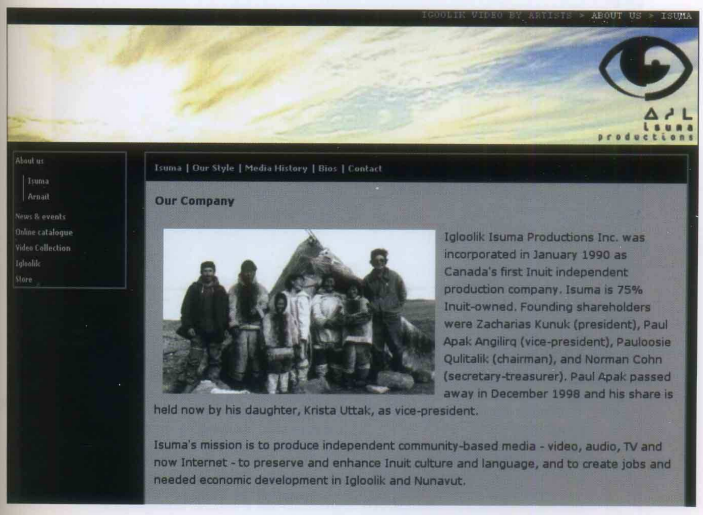

PLATE 6 Web page (adapted) of Igloolik Isuma Productions. (Courtesy of Igloolik Isuma)

PLATE 7 Praise singer, Tamale, Dagbon. (Photo by John Chernoff)

PLATE 8 Assembled drummers, Karaga, Dagbon. (Photo by John Chernoff)

PLATE 9 Picasso, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*. Paris (June–July 1907) Oil on canvas, 8' × 7' 8" (243.9 × 233.7 cm). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Acquired through the Lillie P. Bliss Bequest. Photograph ©2001 The Museum of Modern Art, New York. ©2001 Estate of Pablo Picasso/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

PLATE 10 Jimmie Durham, *Pocahontas's Underwear*, 1985. Feathers, beads, fabric, fasteners. Part of installation piece *On Loan from the Museum of the American Indian*. (Courtesy of Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery, New York)

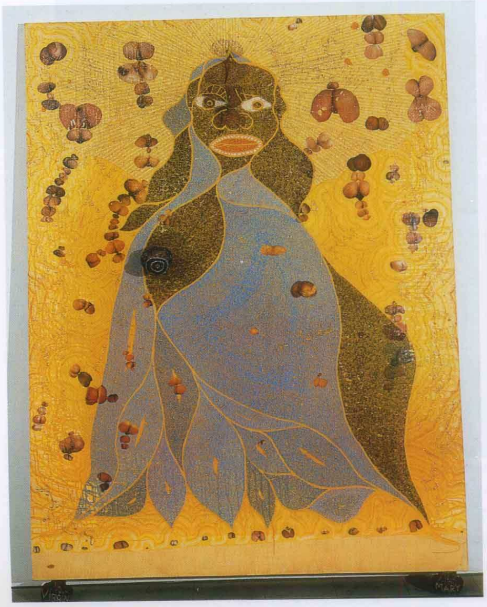

PLATE 11 Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996. Paper collage, oil paint, glitter, polyester resin, map pins, and elephant dung on linen. 244 cm × 183 cm, 96 in. × 72 in. (Courtesy of Victoria Miro and the Saatchi Gallery, London)

PLATE 12 One of the last divers in the 1981 land-dive performed by the "custom villagers" of Bunlap, Pentacost Island, Vanuatu. Note that the platforms of all the previous divers have collapsed as they have dived. (Photo by Jeremy MacClancy)

PLATE 13 Jeff Koon's floral sculpture, *Puppy*, at the entrance to the Bilbao Guggenheim, quickly became a favorite spot for tourist photos. Here, a group of visiting businessmen commemorate their stay in the city, February 1999. (Photo by Jeremy MacClancy)

Attitudes about the appropriateness of sexuality through the life cycle are also shaped by the power structure of the society. For example, in a given society, is a widow, especially a young widow, free to remarry? Or, by contrast, is she obliged to remarry a particular man—for example, the brother of her deceased husband, as is (or was) common in some early Western and contemporary, non-Western societies? In India, one sign that women lack autonomy was the traditional rule that prohibited a widow ever to remarry. In classic times, the Indian rule against widows' remarriage even extended to infant girls, who were classified as widows if the infant boys to whom they were betrothed as part of an arranged marriage agreement happened to die as children. As an adult, the highest respect an Indian widow could show her just-deceased husband was to join the funeral pyre with his corpse. Although this practice of *suttee* was outlawed by the British in 1829, it has on occasion been revived in local villages, especially in Rajasthan. These incidents have generated enormous controversy in the Indian press in recent years as Indians (feminists and otherwise) rethink ways of being both Indian and modern. As these examples show, sex, gender, and power continue to be deeply implicated in one another as humans progress through the life cycle.

In this essay we have explored the gamut of possibilities for our lives as gendered and sexual beings. While Western discussions tend to "naturalize" both these components of the human experience as being rooted in biologically immutable structures, cultural anthropologists have long argued that both sex and gender have powerful cultural roots, making it difficult—perhaps impossible—to say where "nature" leaves off and "culture" begins. If anthropology can have any impact on our society as we endeavor to create a more egalitarian set of opportunities for all people regardless of gender, perhaps it is through the realization that gender arrangements and sexual practices alike have an astounding variability as we look around the globe, reminding us that no pattern, however much it may appear to be "natural," is inevitable.

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