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IN ANTHROPOLOGY

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WOMEN, POWER, AND GENDER : A CRITICAL
ANALYSIS OF FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES
IN ANTHROPOLOGY

By

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ABSTRACT

WOMEN, POWER, AND GENDER :   A CRITICAL
ANALYSIS OF FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES
IN ANTHROPOLOGY

By

Karen Collamore Sullivan

The   purpose of this study is to present a critique of
feminist perspectives in anthropology.   Focusing on the
topical   issue of women and power,   the critique   addresses
efforts to construct an 'anthropology of women'.   The dis-
cussion argues that feminist perspectives in anthropology
are built around assumptions of Western feminist thinking
rather than anthropological understanding.   The first part
of the study identifies three general themes underlying
feminist anthropology.   The first theme concerns the
association of female status with female biology and the
idea that women's 'biological superiority' is everywhere
translated into social inferiority.   The second theme con-
cerns the use of male bias both as a form of explanation
for anthroplogy's lack of attention to women,   and as a
premise guiding women-focused research.   The third theme
centers on the idea that manifestations of women's power
and their social value as individuals are to be found in
specifically female domains of social life,   in what is
frequently   referred to as   'women's   culture'.   The
discussion shows how each of these themes combine to create
a general picture of 'women'   that can   accomodate

intellectual commitments to Western feminist ideology but cannot, at the same time, accomodate the ethnographic problematics with which anthropology must deal. Drawing on ethnographic data from the culture area of Melanesia, the latter part of the discussion looks to recent anthropological frameworks for the study of gender construction as an alternative to feminist frameworks for the study of women.

To

Kay and Sully

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The existence of what Western intellectuals recognize as female subordination is documented throughout the world. That 'one half of humanity' is consistently accorded what many refer to as 'secondary status' presents a troubling fact. Motivated in part by Western feminist concerns regarding political and economic equity for women, anthropologists over the last decade have given considerable attention to the position of women in non-Western societies. If, through new interpretations or new data, anthropologists cannot revise the picture and show perhaps that women are not as subordinate or powerless as previous studies suggest, they can at least attempt to explain why the structure of human relations in so many of the world's societies consistently places constraints on the opportunities and participation of women in their society.

Anthropological efforts to explain women's powerlessness, and conversely, to ascertain indicators suggesting women's power in a particular socio-cultural context, reflect a varied range of analytic approaches.[1]

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Yet, a common thread throughout most of these discussions is the recognition of an inadequate representation of women in the ethnographic record. Explanations ranging from overt male bias to an uncritical acceptance of 'male-generated' models for ethnographic anlysis have been posited for the historical paucity of data detailing women's lives. We have been unable to identify the existence and nature of women's power, it is argued, because the theoretical models available for analysis of power relations have been developed by male anthropologists whose studies have focused on male perspectives. In an effort to counteract this imbalance a great deal of ethnographic attention has been directed toward collecting data on women that reflects women's perspectives. In the process, some anthropologists have gone back to older ethnographic accounts in an attempt to piece together the 'neglected' data on women and thus provide a re-interpretation (Weiner 1976). Others have turned their attention to evolutionary questions on the origins of gender inequality (Leacock 1983), of male dominance (Sanday 1981), of the exploitation of women (Moore 1977), as well as attempting to identify universals concerning the position or status of women and patterns of female subordination in human societies (Sanday 1974, Whyte 1978).

Embedded within this literature are two assumptions. The first is that in order to understand the power women do or do not have, analyses are needed that take women as the primary focus. The second assumption is that there exists something that can be called "women's power". While recent critiques of women-focused research have noted the limitations such single-gender approaches have for our understanding of social relations,[2] few have seriously questioned the theoretical basis upon which notions such as 'women's power' rest.

The purpose of such research is to raise such questions and to present a critique of feminist anthropology. The argument throughout is that the genre of women-focused anthropology (and within that, the issue of women and power) is based on Western feminist thinking rather than on anthropological understanding. Instead of expanding our knowledge about the nature of human social relations, or about male/female relations in particular, the current trend of research on women limits us to a very superficial and simplistic view of women and women's lives. From a feminist point of view this may seem to be sufficient in that such research is intertwined with ideological efforts to redress a perceived historic neglect and misrepresentation of women in sociological analysis, and to facilitate structural change in the position of women worldwide. From an anthropological perspective, however,

such an approach misreads the integrity of indigenous structures of knowledge and what we know, as anthropologists, to be the complexity of social relations cross-culturally. By focusing only on women, we in fact learn very little about women or about the societies in which they live.

It should be emphasized that the critique presented here is not meant to discount the relevance of feminist issues and discourse in Western society, but to question the ease with which these issues are transposed onto other cultural systems. The focus here is on efforts to construct an 'anthropology of women'. One of the results of these efforts has been a heigtened awareness of the impact of cultural influences on modes of analysis. Few would argue against the value of insights gained through the self-reflection of an intellectual discipline, and part of the value of feminist research rests on the reflexive stance it often takes regarding anthropological discourse. Yet at the same time, feminist anthropology remains curiously exempt from such scrutiny.

In reviewing anthropological research concerning women one is struck by a preoccupation with female biology, with perceived linkages between female biology and female status; with the search for empirical indicators and measurements of such things as male dominance and female

subordination; with assumptions about the existence and distinctiveness of 'women's culture; and with an abundance of criticism aimed at male-generated analytic models, yet little critique of the models themselves. By taking a closer look at this literature we begin to see how popular beliefs about the universality of male dominance, and about the historical prevalence of male bias, combine with the assumption that intrinsic qualities of 'femaleness' render women not only biologically distinct from men but psychologically and culturally unique as well. In other words, we begin to see the construction of 'women' as an analytic category separate from men. As this critique will show, the formulation of feminist perspectives on women (and on the 'anthropology of women') requires a revision of the anthropological record and assumes that such revisions will provide a significantly different picture of women. That this is often the case seems to lend support to the idea that previous male-biased studies ignored and devalued the participation of women in society, and that the picture of women that emerges from feminist studies is more authentic. The discussion here questions this assumption of authenticity by arguing that the significantly different picture of women that seems to result from women-focused research already exists in the frameworks used to study women; and that these frameworks are derived from feminist objectives in our own culture rather than a clearer or less biased reading of the ethnographic data.

While addressing the 'anthropology of women' in general, there are several reasons for selecting women and power as a focal point. First, there is the practical necessity of narrowing down what is a large and continually expanding amount of anthropological literature focused on women. Second, studies of women, regardless of their explicit focus, are often about power (and powerlessness). This is because feminist perspectives in anthropology incorporate components of the wider field of Western feminism which is, after all, about power relations. The fact that topics such as women's status, or women's roles, or women's productive (and reproductive) activities are frequently framed in terms of contrast to men, in terms of exclusion from 'male' activities, and in terms of structural features seen as representing power hierarchies bounded by gender, is a reflection of the relationship between the anthropology of women and the wider world of Western feminist thinking.

In part the issue of 'women's power' has been merged with recognition of an historic neglect of women on the part of anthropologists. Over the last decade attempts to account for why women have been ignored in anthropological analysis pointed to the need for (and at times heralded the arrival of) new theoretical perspectives and analytic models designed specifically to accomodate the study of women (Reiter 1975, Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974). From such

research we are frequently reminded that women don't just give birth, raise children, and tend to domestic chores. Women do have wider social concerns and interests and they pursue these interests with as much intent and savvy as men. The difference, however, between the power women may have and that of men is that women are often not part of the formal (male) power structure, being instead, confined to the domestic domain. Therefore, it is argued, women's skills at achieving their goals must be measured by their ability to circumvent the formal power structure.

The discovery that women often do have power, or at least are not as powerless in their own societies as is frequently thought, has been credited to new perspectives and interpretive frameworks generated by feminist anthropologists. Unlike earlier male-biased, male-oriented frameworks that paid scant attention to women in the societies studied, these new analytic frameworks focus on women as ethnographic persons, as individual contributors to social life who have a social identity in their own right and are not just appendages to the male world. Close inspection reveals, however, that aside from their focus on women, these new analytic frameworks are not really new at all, but are essentially the same models used in the 'male-oriented' studies. Thus, while it is true that such work has enabled us to better situate our knowledge of the nature and range of women's participation in their

societies, the feminist call for re-thinking anthropological models has not lived up to its earlier enthusiasm. Instead of re-thinking the models, anthropologists studying women have, for the most part, merely shifted the focus to women. In this manner, focusing on women has become confused with and sometimes misrepresented as re-thinking analytic models. This is particularly apparent in studies of women and power where it is assumed that there is such a thing as 'women's power' (as distinct from 'men's power') and that women's power is derived from a uniquely female repertoire of social action.

The discussion that follows falls roughly into two parts. In the first part (chapters two, three, and four) three general themes are identified as forming the basis of feminist perspectives in anthropology. Throughout the course of the discussion it will be shown how each of these themes overlap and combine to create a general picture of 'women' that can accomodate intellectual commitments to Western feminist ideology but cannot, at the same time, accomodate the ethnographic problematics of cultural differences with which anthropology must deal.

The first theme concerns the feminist association of female status with female biology and the idea that women's 'biological superiority' is everywhere translated into social inferiority. Chapter Two will show how arguments

attempting to explain male dominance and female subordina-
tion take as their starting point the assumption that the
'secondary status of women' is a cultural universal derived
from an association (assumed to be equally universal) of
women with nature and men with culture. Based on the idea
that biology is the primary determining factor in cultural
perceptions of 'femaleness', the male/female :
culture/nature association forms the basis of a range of
logically equivalent analytic dichotomies employed by
anthropologists to ascertain the status, position, power,
and ultimately, the cultural value of women.

The second theme to be discussed concerns the use of
male bias both as a form of explanation for anthropology's
lack of attention to women and as a premise guiding women-
focused research. Because it has become commonplace now to
account for an absence of data on women by invoking the
existence of male bias it is easy to miss the deeper
implications of the way this issue is used in feminist
perspectives. Chapter Three explores these implications
by looking at the thematic role of male bias in the
development of an anthropology of women. As this chapter
will show, continued interest in the accumulation of
'evidence' of male bias among anthropologists has led to
the rather easy dismissal of earlier ethnographic accounts
and suggests that what constitutes a 'new interpretation'
need only be a singular focus on women. Here the feminist

preoccupation with the biological facts of 'femaleness' takes on an added dimension -- biology becomes a measure of ethnographic competence and insight as feminist discussion of male bias asserts that studies of women by women are somehow more authentic.

The third theme centers on the idea that manifestations of women's power and their social value as individuals are to be found in specifically female domains of social life, in what is frequently referred to as "women's culture". Chapter Four focuses on analyses of women's power. In examining feminist approaches to the study of women and power one model in particular -- referred to throughout the discussion as the "political action model" -- stands out both for its impact on anthropology in general and for the pervasive influence it has had (and continues to have) on the study of women. The salient features of this model include : the analytic focus on individuals (as opposed to groups); the conceptual expansion of the notion of politics such that 'politics' is seen to inform behavioral dynamics at all levels of interaction; and the assumption that power, derived from politics, is thus an aspect of all social relations and is accessible (though in widely varying degrees) to all members of society.

This model has been widely criticized on the grounds that it implicitly incorporates Western convictions about individual free will and the competitive marketplace, equating the latter, by analogy, to society in general (Ahmed 1976, Asad 1972). As employed in anthropological studies of power, this model imputes a calculated rationality to individual decision-making suggestive of a further analogy to Western economic theory : the cost/benefit analysis. Faced with choices, individual actors make decisions based on personal self-interest, and the behavioral dynamics of individual decision-making are frequently discussed in terms of "action strategies". According to this framework the acquisition of power is tied to the individual's skill in manipulating the actions of others and the cultural resources available to them.

Despite the theoretical flaws and the conspicuous ethnocentrism identified by other anthropologists, the political action model has been widely adopted for studies of women and power. While feminist critique of this framework does exist, it is consistently focused on the issue of male bias and the assumption made by anthropologists that power and politics are exclusively male pursuits. But why use an analytic model characterized as male-biased to study women? As the discussion will show, for feminist anthropology the problem was not the model but the male perspective it generated; and the resolution to this prob-

lem was sought not in the development of new theoretical frameworks but in the application of this same model to studies focused on women. Within much of feminist anthropology the question is not "do women have power?" -- for in fact the political action model already assumes that, to some degree at least, they do. Rather, the question asked is "what is the nature of women's power?". The nature of women's power, as it turns out, is directly linked to distinctively female styles of action occurring in female domains of social life.

To understand the popularity of this model for studies of women we must look to the themes underlying feminist anthropology. On the one hand this model supports contentions about male bias and the belief that female ethnographers have a special insight into their (female) subjects. On the other hand, the model accomodates assumptions that 'women's power' exists and, because it derives in part from the unique qualities of 'femaleness', it is best understood by focusing on women as a separate analytic category. As Chapter Four will show, the political action model provides an ideologically appealing framework for the 'anthropology of women' because it facilitates the feminist depiction of women as individuals and actors in their own right. In the process it grants a degree of social and cognitive autonomy to women in societies which appear to structurally deny them both of these qualities.

It should be emphasized that the purpose of this critique is not to suggest that women may or may not be subordinate, oppressed, powerless, or exploited, but rather, the intent is to question this as a starting point for comprehending cultural differences in the treatment of women (or 'position' of women) in human societies. What do we learn about women when we view them as separate from men; when the analytic models we use not only categorically separate women and men in pre-defined domains of social life, but implicitly rank these domains as well? And what do we learn about male/female relations when we begin by assuming an imbalance exists, or that questions concerning sexual parity and equality are relevant cross-culturally? The answer to this might be that we learn pretty much what we already suspected -- that for the most part throughout the world an imbalance exists in male/female relations with women playing a subordinate role vis-a-vis men.

Contrary to much of the women-focused literature in anthropology, this discussion argues that if we are compre-hend the 'position' of women we must do so by first comprehending the culture of which they are a part, and that the topic of 'women' or 'women's power' is not a particularly relevant starting point for accomplishing this. It is not relevant because the analytic models used cannot accomodate cultural context in a manner that would allow for an understanding of native meanings as these

pertain to men and women alike. What these models do accomodate is the creation of an artificial picture of 'women' and 'women's culture', the origins of which can be found in the problematics surrounding women's roles in Western industrial society.

How, then, do we come to understand the place women hold in their societies? While the first part of this discussion focuses on the identification of problems with feminist approaches to the cross-cultural study of women, the latter part looks to the anthropological examination of cultural notions of gender and social personhood as providing a substantive alternative. Chapter Five presents the view that cultural theories of gender are the conceptual key to understanding the social organization of relations between the sexes, and that this must be the starting point for examining the position, status, or power of women. In other words, if women's power is a relevant issue, it is so only in the wider context of culturally constructed theories about gender identity and gender relations. On a more general level, the argument here is that the depth of our understanding of women's place in society is a direct reflection of the depth of our understanding of cultural diversity and variation in the way different societies comprehend and reckon with their own worlds. So while feminist writers might argue that this understanding can only be achieved by focusing on women, by presenting a

female perspective, or by looking at women's activities, this research suggests that a different perspective is needed, one which takes into account the fundamental importance of cultural context and cultural theories of maleness and femaleness.

Before proceeding with a description of Chapter Five, it should be noted that over the last six or seven years 'gender' has become an increasingly popular topical focus within anthropology in general and feminist anthropology in particular. For feminist anthropology this interest in gender suggests a shift in orientation away from women-focused research toward a more balanced examination of the cultural configurations of male/female relations. But this shift in focus is somewhat deceptive insofar as feminist research tends to view 'gender systems' as the ideological basis supporting structural arrangements that define women as inferior. As Chapter Five points out, the assumptions embedded in feminist perspectives -- about male dominance, about the secondary status of women, and about the biological basis of cultural perceptions of 'femaleness' -- remain essentially intact, and examining gender becomes a contemporary approach to verifying them. Gender and sexual (physiological) identity tend to be treated as synonomous, and 'gender constructs' (which frame a culture's ideas about what constitutes male and female) are viewed as the cultural translation of biological differences rather than

the cultural construction of differences that transcend the biological facts. It is on this latter point -- how the cultural construction of gender differences transcend biology -- that Chapter Five focuses.

The ethnographic focus of much of the overall discussion, and specifically Chapter Five, is the culture area of Melanesia. The ethnography of Melanesia presents us with numerous examples of why women-focused anthropology can provide only a superficial and simplistic picture of women and the societies in which they live. In the process the data re-directs our attention away from issues concerning power per se, toward the complexities of gender ideologies and the ways such ideologies are manifest in relations between men and women. Anthropologists working in Melanesia have historically had to deal with the diversity, the contrast, and the complexity of cultural patterns that characterize this region. Partly because of this, research on this culture area reflects a rich cross-section of anthropological thinking and re-thinking of key issues concerning kinship, political organization, ritual and religion, economics, and most recently, gender. Indeed, several of the examples cited in the earlier chapters will illustrate how anthropologists, drawing on data from Melanesian societies, have disputed the relevance of the nature/culture dichotomy and the domestic/public distinction, and have questioned feminist emphasis on

looking at 'women's culture'. In addition, recent analyses of male-focused ritual behaviors found throughout this region highlight efforts to recast anthropological perspectives on gender in order to theoretically accomodate the complex cultural formulations upon which individual societies construct their social worlds. Thus it can be said that both on the level of indigenous culture theory as well as on the level of anthropological interpretation, the ethnography of Melanesia provides a compelling counterpoint to feminist perspectives in anthropology.

Located in the Western Pacific, the major land areas that define Melanesia geographically include : Fiji, New Caledonia, Vanuatu (formerly New Hebrides), Loyalty Islands, Solomon Islands, New Britain, New Ireland, Admirality Islands, Trobriand Islands, and the island of New Guinea[3]. (See map in Appendix A.) Estimates of the number of distinct cultural groups within Melanesia range between 700 to 1000, and the number of indigenous languages is etimated at over 2000 (Herdt 1984). Such estimates suggest a striking range of cultural difference, and ethnographic reports on particular groups continually bear this out. While broad patterns and similarities can be identified regionally, one can simultaneously identify exceptions and distinct local variations specific to individual societies.

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On a very general level, however, traditional Melanesian societies can be characterized as predominantly small-scale technologically simple settled communities supported by a combination of subsistence gardening, pig-raising, and hunting (though each of these may receive vastly different regional emphases). Political organization throughout the area suggests a continuum ranging from small localized polities where politics is enmeshed in kinship, to those exhibiting increased scale, specialization, differentiation, and hierarchy (Allen 1984a). And although patrilineality is the predominant mode of descent reckoning, cognatic and matrilineal systems also exist.[4] (The nature of group structure in Melanesia has long been an issue of considerable interest and debate among anthropologists.[5])

Despite its immense cultural and environmental diversity, Melanesia displays a fairly consistent and pervasive theme of sexual polarity which manifests itself in a variety of pronounced and vivid ways through myth, ritual, and daily life. Cultural expressions of this polarity range from beliefs concerning female pollution and dangers associated with sexual contact, overt displays of antagonism and hostility between men and women, dramatic rituals of male initiation and secret male cults, to the virtual exclusion of women from decision-making contexts (political, economic, and ritual), and general cultural

perceptions which denigrate the capabilities of women and the value of their labor. While variation exists in the degree of intensity and elaboration of this polarity, the ethnographic literature on Melanesian societies provides numerous striking illustrations of an overarching cosmology which emphasizes male dominance and control over women, over social relations, and over material resources. Prominent cultural patterns such as patrilineal descent, warfare, and ceremonial exchange systems provide much of the structural support of this cosmology, while variations on symbolic themes concerning life processes, the body, gender, work, marriage, and personhood give shape and meaning to social relations.

On the level of generalized ethnographic description of Melanesian societies it is fairly easy to view women's position as subservient to men, the relationship between men and women antagonistic, tension-ridden, and at times overtly hostile, and from this to assume that women lack power and control over their own lives. Yet social relations are rarely so simple or so unidimensional as this characterization implies. Data from Melanesia, and in particular Papua New Guinea, continues to draw our attention to the complexity inherent in worldviews vastly different from our own.

Chapter Five takes a closer look at ethnographic data from Melanesian societies to illustrate the point that there are more fundamental questions concerning native worldview that must be asked prior to trying to assess the behavioral evidence of female subordination or powerlessness, or, conversely, the existence of female power. One must first look to the ideological constructs which give shape and meaning to cultural notions of personhood and gender (and hence give meaning to social roles and behavior). Indeed, topics such as female subordination and female power tend to fade into the background as one begins to look more closely at cultural patterns of gender definition in Melanesian societies.

Anthropologists have long drawn our attention to the ways gender distinctions seem to permeate Melanesian societies. Throughout the region culture theories of procreation, human development, health and illness, as well as success and failure in daily pursuits invoke a powerful imagery of the interaction of human substances such as blood, milk, and semen with the natural environment and with the social affairs of human beings. This is particularly apparent in beliefs concerning the polluting qualities of women, and restrictions surrounding the handling and consumption of certain foods. For the most part, the practices ensuing from these beliefs are perceived to protect men from women, and it has been widely

noted that such beliefs serve to reinforce and institutionalize women's subordinate status.

In several respects, then, Melanesia enables an easy application of a feminist framework insofar as the most visible features -- residential segregation of the sexes, male fear of female pollution and avoidence of prolonged contact with women, exclusion of women from ritual and political affairs, devaluation of women's productive labor and in some cases women's reproductive role as well -- stand as evidence of male dominance and female subordina- tion. In addition, the cultural emphasis on the influence of human substances (particularly female substances) on the physiological and social progress of an individual's life is frequently taken as evidence of how biology is culturally translated into structural relations of superiority and inferiority. Thus it has been argued that despite the overt separation of the sexes in daily life, men cannot symbolically separate themselves from the biological and regenerative powers women possess; that through their control over social and ceremonial affairs men are able to publicly deny what they privately know to be the 'natural' superiority of women (Meigs 1984, Weiner 1976).

The problems identified for feminist perspectives come into sharp relief when juxtoposed against recent studies of

gender acquisition in Melanesian societies. As the earlier chapters explore <u>why</u> feminist perspectives in anthropology fail, this chapter will illustrate <u>how</u> they fail by re-examining a recent analysis of gender among the Hua (Papua New Guinea) by Anna Meigs (1976,1984) in light of other ethnographic discussions of gender construction in Melanesia. Meigs' work is interesting because it incorporates the general premises of a feminist perspective : first, that physiological differences between men and women are the determinants of cultural perceptions of gender, and second, that the apparent male dominance in Hua society derives from male recognition and envy of female reproductive superiority. At the same time she tries to frame her analysis in terms of the cultural construction of gender. That she fails in this has to do with her reliance on a theoretical model informed by Western feminist theory and Western models of human physiological and psycho-social development.

According to Meigs' analysis, gender constructs in Hua society are extremely restrictive. Both sexes feel constrained by gender roles and both sexes, at different times and in different ways, "imitate" the opposite sex. Although men do so more frequently than women, Meigs contends that all such "imitative" practices constitute conscious efforts to break through or "blur" the cultural boundaries of gender. The evidence for Hua imitation of

the opposite sex is located in specific behaviors identi-
fied by Meigs as :   male menstruation, male pregnancy,
periodic and   semi-secret   consumption of (prohibited)
foods identified   with   the   opposite sex, and gender
reversals occurring in old age.

The 'imitative' behaviors cited by Meigs are not
unique to Hua society but occur (with varying frequency and
elaboration) elsewhere in Melanesia.   Drawing on recent
anthropological discussions of similar practices in the
region, it will be argued that rather than fighting against
the rigidity of gender boundaries, Hua are collectively
involved in creating and re-creating these boundaries; that
the feelings of constraint Meigs attributes to Hua (and in
particular Hua males), are perhaps more appropriate viewed
as expressions of amibivalence about their control over
processes through which social identity is forged.   In the
course of the discussion it will be shown how the data
Meigs presents actually supports this re-interpretation,
but the analytic framework she employs prevents her from
situating the cultural behavior she describes within the
larger context of Hua cosmology.

In considering how and why Meigs' analysis fails to
achieve the interpretive depth that her data actually
suggests, we must return again to the problems inherent in
feminist-oriented models in anthropology.   One of the

points to be made in this part of the discussion is that feminist analysis of gender, like the earlier analysis of female status and women's power, rest on a superficial reading of cultural behavior and context. Evidence for the structure of gender differences in social life, and cultural perceptions of these differences, are taken from the most obvious levels of social interaction. Drawing on alternative frameworks for the study of gender, this chapter represents an effort to explore how ethnographic data might be 'read' differently without the assumptions embedded in feminist perspectives. From the standpoint of the overall discussion Chapter Five may seem to move somewhat afield of the earlier focus. But this in fact is one of the points the chapter tries to make. Once one begins to look closely at native cosmology in Melanesian societies it becomes increasingly difficulty to analytically sustain such narrowly conceived topics as those addressed by feminist perspectives in anthropology.

The final part of the discussion, Chapter Six, weaves together the various arguments presented throughout this critique. While summary in nature, this chapter will also highlight some of the tangential issues regarding feminist analysis in anthropology that emerged throughout the discussion. In particular this chapter will address some of the ironies and contradictions that arise from efforts

to develop an anthropological perspective that incorporates Western feminist ideology.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

1. See for examples E. Ardener 1972, S. Ardener 1977, Atkinson 1982, Collier 1974, Leacock 1983, Milton 1979, Rosaldo 1980, Sandy 1974, Weiner 1976.

2. Notably, M. Strathern 1984, Lindenbaum 1984, Rosaldo 1980.

3. The island of New Guinea is politically divided in two : the eastern half is the independent nation of Papua New Guinea; the western half, Irian Jaya,(formerly Dutch New Guinea), is currently under the political control of Indonesia. (See map in Appendix A.) In this discussion references to New Guinea are drawn from data on cultural groups located in Papua New Guinea.

4. While much less common than patilineal or cognatic descent systems (particularly on the island of New Guinea), there is a fairly widespread occurrence of matrilineality in Melanesia. In his recent discussion of the political implications of group structure in Melanesia, Allen (1984a) states that matrilineal descent systems are found extensively in areas of the Huon Gulf, most of New Britain and New Ireland, the Massim arche-pelago (Trobriand Islands), Bougainville, parts of the Solomon Islands, and a large portion of north and central Vanuatu. On a general level, politics in these areas still conform to the Melanesian pattern : polities are small in scale and there is a consistent absence of overarching structures of a bureaucratic or administra-tive kind. On a more specific level, however, differ-ences do exist and Allen notes that the Melanesian communities where matrilineal principles are accorded importance also exhibit the most elaborate and complex forms of political association reflected in such features as : ranked descent groups, hereditary titular systems (often combined with increased political significance of territorial organization),voluntary male associations (ranging in form from the secular clubhouse found in the Huon Gulf area to discrete secret societies found in New Britain and adjacent areas), and elaborate male status hierarchies based primarily on achievement (Allen 1984a:26).

5. For an overview of some of the main issues involved in
   anthropological   discussion   of   group structure   in
   Melanesia, see Barnes 1962, Langness 1964, Pouwer 1964,
   Kayberry 1967, de Lepervanche 1967, 1968, Kelly 1976,
   A. Strathern 1972.

CHAPTER TWO

FEMALE BIOLOGY AND FEMALE STATUS

In looking for explanations of male dominance, several anthropologists provide evolutionary perspectives highlighting a biological basis for cultural roles attributed to women. Because of women's 'biological superiority' (i.e. the ability of women to give birth and the physical dependence of young children on the mother) it has been hypothesized that women are perceived by men as a threat; men envy women for their reproductive abilities and thus proclaim dominance over them in the one area where they can exhibit control -- social life (Ortner 1974). Along these lines, Raphael (1975) argues that the biological demands of bearing and raising children and providing for the daily of needs of a domestic household leave little time for women to enter the political sphere in a significant way. Likewise, the time required for dealing with political and economic concerns leaves men with little time for becoming involved with caretaking and domestic functions. According to Raphael, however, this does not mean women are powerless, for in fact women's role in "determining the outcome of each new generation" holds

an "intrinsic power unparalleled elsewhere in society" (1975:11). The division of labor and the ensuing structure of relations between men and women is thus attributed to the biological facts of human reproduction. According to this view, cultural evolution provides us with a record of the cultural variation in, elaboration upon, and further embedding of what is essentially a 'natural' (biologically based) system of male/female relations in human society.

A similar yet somewhat more sophisticated version of this explanation is presented in the work of Sanday (1973, 1974) who attempts to develop an empirical model of the evolution of female status. She suggests that throughout cultural evolution social survival has depended upon different energy expenditures by males and females in three major activity areas : reproduction, defense, and subsistence (1974:189). Similar to Raphael, she maintains that the constraints of reproductive activities limit the amount of energy women can direct to other activity areas, and these other activity areas, in turn, place greater demands on the energy of men. It is through this increased energy expenditure that men gain access to and control over cultural resources.

> Since reproductive activity falls to the
> female, a constraint is imposed on the
> proportion of total female energy to be
> utilized in other activities. Such a
> constraint in turn increases the proba-

> bility that the other two tasks draw more
> on the energy of males, thus placing men
> in a strategic position to gain control
> of resources.
>
> (1974:189)

A characteristic feature of arguments attempting to explain male dominance and female subordination from an evolutionary perspective is the assumption that the 'secondary status' of women is a cultural universal. Sherry Ortner (1974) calls women's secondary status one of the true universals -- "a pan-cultural fact" (1974:67). Ortner's work explores the universal devaluation of women in terms of the biological fact of female reproductive abilities and universal cultural perceptions (drawn from the biological facts) of women as being closer to nature. As a theory it is wrought with assumptions that remain problematic. In the formula posited by Ortner (culture: nature::male:female) the association of nature with women and culture with men assumes the superiority of men as a category over women as a category. But it also depends on a further association between the dyad men/women and another opposition, public/domestic. Given the assumption that culture is everywhere perceived to be superior to and dominates nature, so too the male public world of politics and ritual dominates the female world of domestic labor and childbearing. In this sense, the opposition nature and culture is seen as mediating the facts of biology and the organization of society, and providing a basis for legiti-

mizing and institutionalizing women's social location with-
in the domestic sphere and their subordination to men.

Another problematic feature of this argument is the
way in which Ortner moves from the cultural recognition of
a distinction between nature and culture to the cultural
assertion of a hierarchical relationship with nature.

> Thus culture (i.e. every culture) at some
> level of awareness asserts itself to be
> not only distinct from but superior to
> nature...
> (1974:73)

This notion of hierarchy is essential to her argument. If
women are everywhere devalued vis-a-vis men, and if women
are culturally associated with, or perceived of as closer
to nature, then nature, too, must be culturally devalued
vis-a-vis society. In other words, in order for the equa-
tion -- culture:nature::male:female -- to hold up, it must
be logically consistent. Culturally recognized distinction
(as between nature and culture) alone is not enough because
while all cultures distinguish between male and female,
they do so (according to Ortner) within a framework of
superiority and inferiority. Therefore, a universal
distinction between nature and culture must also reflect
elements of hierarchy, with culture deemed to be not only
different from but superior to nature.

Part of the appeal of the culture:nature::male:female formula stems from the acceptance of physiology as the primary determining factor in cultural perceptions of 'femaleness'. Those who use this model have already located 'femaleness' in biology and 'maleness' in the social domain. Yet the meanings culturally attributed to male and female are as arbitrary as the meanings attributed to culture and nature. Ortner's argument has been characterized as "remarkably ethnocentric" in its sweeping assumptions about cultural perceptions of male and female and about nature and culture (MacCormack 1980). As MacCormack asks, "is there anything more intrinsically natural about women's physiology than men's?" (1980:16). She notes that although categories exist within a culture that anthropologists may wish to label 'culture' and 'nature', male and female do not categorically constitute a metaphoric transformation of culture and nature. Others have argued that the opposition is complementary rather than hierarchical; that culture is different from nature in a manner such that questions of inferiority and superiority are simply not relevant, nor easily superimposed onto male/female relations (Forge 1972, M. Strathern 1980). This line of criticism is echoed by several recent studies on gender in Melanesian societies which dispute the ethnographic relevance of a universal culture/nature, male/female equation.[1] For example, Goodale (1980) notes that among the Kaulong of southwest New Britain the

distinction made between married/unmarried holds greater significance than the distinction Kaulong make between male/female. Married people constitute a category most closely associated with pollution (through heterosexual contact) and most similar to animals (through the act of copulation). For the Kaulong, it is married persons, not females, who are viewed as marginal, ambiguous, and 'closer to nature'. Similarly, Gillison (1980) notes that the beliefs of the Gimi people of the Eastern Highlands in Papua New Guinea do not conform to the nature:culture::male:female perspective. One cannot assume Gimi women are symbolically associated with the surrounding rainforest because, according to Gillison, the rainforest is considered a male refuge from women and ordinary life in the settlement. Gimi men's intense fear of female pollution and their efforts to avoid contact with women are ritually expressed as a desire to escape from women "into nature", into a non-human world which is seen to revitalize their masculinity (1980:146). Thus, if one were to apply the nature/culture model to Gimi society, the formula would have to be reversed, associating men with nature and women with culture.

Assuming a universal cultural association of women with nature lends support to the prior assumption that cultural perceptions of 'femaleness' are universally drawn from the facts of female biology. These two notions are

further linked through projections of inferiority and superiority on elements of each dyad : because of female biology women are everywhere perceived as 'closer to nature' and nature is everywhere seen as inferior (and threatening) to ordered social life. What results is a speculative and superficial view of cultural uniformity in the structure of relations between men and women and a re-affirmation (framed in evolutionary terms) of the power-lessness or subordination of women.

The imputation of a hierarchical framework structuring male/female relations in pre-industrial societies has drawn criticism from anthropologists who contend that non-class societies were (are) in fact characterized by a 'relative' sexual egalitarianism. For example, Leacock (1981, 1983) cautions against using hierarchically informed analytic frameworks to assess the 'role of women' or 'women's status' in egalitarian societies and argues that female subordination is an historical, not a natural (biologically based), phenomenon. According to Leacock, the origins of gender hierarchy "are inextricably meshed with the origins of exploitation and class stratification" (1983:269). Sacks (1976, 1979) poses a similar argument when she criti-cizes the assummption that a sexual division of labor implies asymmetrical relations between men and women. Addressing the assumption that women's status in society is dictated by their reproductive functions, she calls to task

other anthropologists for failing to recognize that the production of children and the production of culture are neither incompatible nor mutually exclusive. Rather, she notes that certain forms of social relations, particularly those instigated by the rise of industrial capitalism, have made them so. As both authors argue, the perceived sexual asymmetry among pre-industrial (non-class) societies can be explained either by historical transformations resulting from contact with and incorporation into the world market system -- a process by which symmetrical systems are transformed into asymmetrical systems; or, by Western observers who are often conditioned to see hierarchy every-where and who simply assume the existence of asymmetry. Stating that sexual inequality is not a given (non-class societies have 'relative' equality among the sexes), they argue that anthropologists have been blind to sexual equality in non-class societies.

Both Leacock and Sacks have been criticized on the grounds that while their arguments concerning Western intellectual preoccupation with hierarchy may be sound, they are unable to indicate what a sexually egalitarian society might be (Atkinson 1982). Furthermore, they fail to recognize the fact that notions of equality are as much a part of Western consciousness as those of hierarchy. Strong in their criticism against assumptions of universal male dominance, and in their objections to the contention

that female reproductive capabilities play a determining role in female subordination, they presume the existence of a rather uni-dimensional historical process leading to the subordination of women as well as all other forms of social inequality. Again we have a view of cultural uniformity, this time augmented by uniform historical process.

Along with the issues discussed so far, how one defines 'female status' is a perennial problem in cross-cultural research on the position of women in society. Few writers, however, provide discussion on what is meant by female status. The work of Sanday is particularly interesting in this regard because her efforts to construct an operational definition actually highlights the conceptual limitations of the notion of female status. According to Sanday (1974), any operational definition of female status first requires a distinction between the public and domestic domains of social life. Having drawn this distinction, she suggests that a general definition might be framed in terms of : 1) "the degree to which females have authority and/or power in the domestic and/or public domains"; 2) "the degree to which females are accorded deferential treatment and are respected and revered in the domestic and/or public domains" (1974:191). Because of the difficulties in empirically measuring 'deferential treatment' and respect, this latter aspect is excluded from her own analysis. And, because of her

insistence that the domestic and public domains remain analytically separate (treating them together would "confuse the analysis"), Sanday's treatment of female status concentrates exclusively on the degree of female power and authority in the public domain. While this seems to narrow things down considerably, it does not clarify the diffuse quality of 'female status' -- a concept which is essentially dependent upon cultural context to give it meaning.

What we can see here is a fairly prominent tendency among feminist anthropologists to assume that indications of female status are found by first identifying those activities of women that link them (however briefly or minimally) to the public domain. The extension of the male/female culture/nature association to include public/domestic continues the logical symmetry and reinforces the notions of superiority and inferiority already implicit in each of these dichotomies. Female status is seen as dependent upon the degree of women's involvement in what is assumed to be a male domain. Using the degree of female participation in a male domain as the primary gauge for weighing female status (insofar as greater participation is seen to indicate higher status) supports the prior assumption that the secondary status of women is, in fact, a cultural universal. More importantly, it reflects our own culture's evaluative sentiments

regarding 'work' as opposed to 'domesticity' and through this the value of men as opposed to women. (This will be discussed at greater length in chapter four.) Sanday's work typifies the way in which feminist discussion of women's status is skewed toward establishing evidence for what is widely accepted as women's subordinate position relative to men. Instead of dealing with the problematic qualities of female status as a concept, Sanday focuses on a very limited (and limiting) range of measurable criteria. One needn't be surprised then, that Sanday's analysis leads her to conclude that :

> There is no doubt from the data examined
> that there is a wide range of variation
> in female public status cross-culturally.[2]
> (1974:205)

Other anthropologists have noted methodological diffi-culties in trying to establish criteria for assessing the status of women and the cultural variation that results from such cross-cultural research. While she maintains that women's secondary status is a "pan-cultural fact", Ortner nonetheless acknowledges the immensely diverse ways it it culturally manifested.

> ...within this universal fact, specific
> conceptions and symbolizations of woman
> are extraordinarily diverse and even
> mutually contradictory -- actual treat-
> ment of women and their relative power

and contribution vary enormously from one
culture to the next and over different
periods of history.
                                    (1974:67)

In his study of pre-industrial societies, Whyte (1978)

reaches a conclusion similar to Sanday's as he notes that

no pattern of universal male dominance emerged from his

study. Instead, the study indicated "much variation from

culture to culture in virtually all aspects of the position

of women relative to men" (1978:167). Yet, unlike Sanday,

Whyte does not accept cultural variation as indicating only

that there exists no society where males are totally domi-

nant over females. Rather, it prompts him to question the

assumption of universal male dominance, and to characterize

such cross-cultural studies on the status of women as "an

unproductive enterprise" (1978:168). Drawing from his own

work he states that one can no longer assume there is such

a thing a the status of women cross-culturally and sugg-

ests that future research must begin with a very different

assumption :

That there is no coherent concept of the
status of women that can be identified
cross-culturally, and when we think that
we are looking at aspects or indicators
of the status of women we are dealing
with essentially unrelated things.
                                    (1978:170)

Similar sentiments are voiced by Rosaldo (1980).
Reflecting on efforts over the last decade to ascertain
women's status cross-culturally, she notes that she has
come to realize that 'women's status' is not one but many
things.

> The failure of attempts to rank societies
> in terms of 'women's place' or to explain
> apparent variations in the amounts of
> privilege women elsewhere may enjoy (in
> terms consistent with cross-cultural data)
> suggest that we have been pursuing some-
> thing of a ghost -- or rather, that an
> investigator who asks if women's status
> here or there ought to be reckoned high
> or low is probably conceptually misguided.
> (1980:401)

The issue of cultural variation, while frequently
noted, is rarely dealt with by anthropologists attempting
to construct general (evolutionary) statements about female
status in human society. Yet the immense variation that
does occur from such studies should be a signal that not
only are new questions needed, but new frameworks of
inquiry as well. Little critique has been given to the
overall feminist emphasis on searching for origins and
evolutionary patterns, but the fact that anthropologists
outside the feminist category rarely concern themselves
with such questions is significant.

In reviewing the literature, it could be argued that
much of the writing on the status of women over the last

decade reflects Western feminists' ambivalence toward and preoccupation with the biological process of childbirth and the changing structure of female roles in Western society. Many feminist writers, in fact, state explicitly the programmatic nature of their interest in exploring women cross-culturally in that such research will advance our understanding of the position of women in Western society.[3] But the focus on the physiological fact of female reproductive capabilities and its association with female status (and, by implication, powerlessness) nonetheless reflects a striking form of biological determinism which, curiously, is used to explain both how women are powerless and how they are powerful. As was stated earlier, to some the constraints imposed by childbearing and childrearing, which prevent women from becoming active participants in the political and economic spheres, are overshadowed by the "instrinsic" power women have as mothers and thus creators of whole new generations (Edholm, et. al. 1977, Raphael 1975). To others, these same constraints are seen as the ultimate basis for women's secondary status and the institutionalization of female subordination (Sanday 1974). Ortner's (1974) argument, that the secondary status of women results from a universal association of women with nature, is interesting in that it implies that women are culturally perceived as possessing a kind of power (somewhat mystical) which men feel threatened by and are compelled to exert control over -- in much the same way as

they are (ostensibly) compelled to exert control over nature. In a sense then, women have power and lack power simultaneously. Both the link between women and nature, and the source of female power is female biology.

That women are capable of giving birth is a fact acknowledged by all human societies, but this fact can provide only the most superficial of starting points for understanding the range of social roles and expectations of women. The inevitabilities of biology amount to the 'fact' that women give birth and men don't. Anything beyond that is open to cultural interpretation. On a theoretical level, the emphasis placed on female biology in studies of female status blurs the complex relation between sexual identity and the allocation of social roles within society. In much of the literature men are seen as freed from the confines of the domestic group and less constrained by an identity derived from male physiology. While women are defined by childbearing and lactation, the possibility that men are equally defined by their reproductive capacity is not usually considered. Rarely is reference given to the male role in socialization processes, or in procreation for that matter. Yet nowhere are women the sole participants in biological reproduction, nor are they ever culturally perceived as such. As LaFontaine (1978) notes, in most societies men are culturally recognized as begetters of children and their role in biological reproduction is given

comparable symbolic significance.

> Male potency is the conceptual counterpart
> of female pregnancy and receives symbolic
> emphasis in ritual contexts in many societies.
> (1978:9)

LaFontaine argues that much of the literature on the social

and symbolic significance of the division between the sexes

is premised on the notion that physiological differences

('natural' differences) are universally transformed into

cultural inequality. The 'universal asymmetry of the

sexes' is seen as a means by which women are classified as

inferior and excluded from the exercise of power in

society.

> The study of sexual differentiation has
> often been confused with the study of
> women with the result that perceptions
> of the inferiority of women have colored
> both discussions of the symbolism of
> sexual differentiation (only women are
> perceived as defined in 'biological'
> terms) and the relationship between such
> symbolism and the allocating of social
> roles (all men are seen as dominating
> women).
> (1978:6)

Along with the conceptual vagueness and the inability

to deal analytically with cultural variation, what this

literature seems to be missing most is a sense of cultural

context and, with this, a sense of the diversity and depth

of cultural meanings. How much do we learn about female

status when we view women primarily in terms of their biological role; when we assume that every culture views women in terms of biology? How much do we learn about women when we view them as analytically separate from men, indeed, separable from culture itself? Finally, what do we really learn about male/female relations when the analysis begins with apriori assumptions about universal male dominance or female subordination?

As this chapter has tried to show, the literature on female status and the origins of sexual asymmetry constitutes one thematic segment of women-focused studies in anthropology. Underlying these studies is the belief that prior neglect of women in anthropological research has prevented us from fully comprehending women's lives and the nature of their contribution to society. Assumptions about male bias are a pervasive feature in feminist anthropology and have clearly influenced the direction that research on women takes. These assumptions also constitute a justification for focusing only on women. The following chapter looks at the issue of male bias as the second thematic segment of women-focused research.

NOTES TO CHAPTER TWO

1. See in particular discussions by Biersack 1985, Poole 1981, 1984, and M. Strathern 1980, 1984.

2. In her later work, Sanday (1981) shifts away from the concept of 'female status' to a focus on female power and male dominance -- equally ill-defined concepts. Influenced by Ruth Benedict's (1934) _Patterns of Culture_ and Margaret Mead's (1935) _Sex and Temperment in Three Primitive Societies_, she suggests that each culture must select a "sex-role plan", a "template for the organization of sex-role expectations" (1981:3). Accordingly she argues that the power of women may be diminished as new metaphors for sexual identities replace old (as new "sex-role plans" replace old sex-role plans) and men gain advantages from increased access to strategic resources. This is essentially the same thesis she presents in her work on female status, and while the model she employs for her cross-cultural survey of "sex-role plans" appears more refined than her earlier work, she nonetheless ends up with the same kind of nebulous conclusion :

> Power is accorded to whichever sex is
> thought to embody or be in touch with
> the forces upon which people depend for
> their perceived needs. Concerning power
> in this way, one can say that in some
> societies women have more power, or men
> have more, or both sexes have an approx-
> imately equal amount.
>
> (1981:11)

3. See for example, Leacock 1981, 1983, Ortner 1974, Sacks 1976, 1979, Sanday 1973, 1974, Rosaldo 1974, 1980, and Weiner 1976, 1979, 1980.

CHAPTER THREE

MALE BIAS AND THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF WOMEN

As has already been noted, the issue of male bias is a pervasive theme in much of the women-focused anthropology. Yet it is not always clear what is being referred to, as anthropologists writing about male bias move back and forth between accusations of male bias within anthropology (i.e. the male anthropologist's perspective), and general statements assessing the degree of male bias culturally expressed toward women in a particular society.[1] As with notions such as 'female status' and 'male dominance', male bias is particularly difficult to define cross-culturally and tends to rely on the same kind of broadly based criteria leading to similar "some societies are, some socieities aren't, some are more so than others" conclusions.[2]

Accompanying this conceptual vaguery is an assumption that there exists a special (somewhat mystical) bond shared by female anthropologists and the women they study. This common bond of womanhood is often invoked as a measure of ethnographic credibility.[3] As M. Strathern (1981) notes in her critique of women-focused anthropology, the gender of

the male ethnographer proves to be a liability in that it is seen to contribute to a biased, culture-bound perspective. The gender of the female ethnographer, however, enhances her work by providing her with a unique 'natural' insight into her subject -- a "double-consciousness" (M. Strathern 1981:670). Hence the assumption that women constitute a distinct analytic category that can be comprehended only by taking up a woman's point of view; and that when women study women the interpretation is somehow more 'authentic'.

One of the earliest (and one of the most influential) formulations of this approach to the study of women can be found in the work of Edwin Ardener (1972). Addressing the question of 'male bias' in ethnographic reporting, he argued that at issue is not really the status or position of women but the "problem" women present to anthropologists. He suggests that both male and female ethnographers generally accept and interpret male models of the societies they study "because the men consistently tend, when pressed, to give a bounded model of society such as ethnographers are attracted to" (1972:2). The frequency of the ethnographer's reliance on male informants, particularly for translation and linguistic assistance, influences the ethnographer's interpretation of the data, and ultimately the understanding of the society. To Ardener, this is a technical problem : the difficulty

in ethnographically dealing with women, which leads to an analytic problem : if the models of a society that anthropologists present are derived from the male portion of the society, how does the 'other half', the female portion of the society, perceive, interpret, and express the world in which they live? He suggests that women's models of their society are different from those held by men; that women do not perceive society as bounded from nature (as presummably men do). Because their models are not organized along the same lines as men's, women's models are less acceptable to ethnographers. In effect, Ardener states, women lack the "meta-laguage" to discuss their society.

The idea that women may be culturally inarticulate, in the sense that they lack the skills possessed by men to describe their society and express themselves, has frequently been invoked as a partial explanation for difficulties anthropologists may have in eliciting information from women in the field. But other cultural factors are involved as well, not least of which is the gender of the anthropologists and the nature of the information being sought. To move from what are some of the inherent complexities of conducting field research in a cross-cultural context, to the general claim that men and women hold categorically different models of their society ignores these factors and provides a rather superficial justification for the further analytic isolation of women.

The suggestion that women actually perceive their world differently from men gained considerable ground in the 1970s with feminist- oriented anthropologists.[4] Indeed, Ardener himself added a further refinement to this idea when, several years after first suggesting that women lacked the meta-language to discuss their social worlds, he concluded that women constitute a relatively prominent example of a "muted group" which, like other marginal groups within society, lack access and skills to manipulate the symbols of the dominant culture (E. Ardener 1977).

While Ardener's argument is intriguing, it presents a rather simplistic interpretation of the relationship between the ethnographic process and the cultural context upon which this process is superimposed. Furthermore, by taking gender as the primary factor such an approach neglects the numerous other social facts that enter into the formulation of individual's perceptions of the world around them. There remain questions as to whether one woman's model of her society would agree or be consistent with that of another woman from the same society. Who are the people being asked to comment on their society? Soliciting a model of society from a New Guinea big-man -- whose reputation is based on oratorical skill and ability to command attention and influence over people both within and outside his own society -- and soliciting a model of the same society from a woman who is neither the wife nor

the daughter of a big-man could easily produce two very dissimilar interpretations of a shared social world. The same holds for old and young (of either sex), as well as those who are perceived by others in their society as successful and those considered failures.

The reflections of Roger Keesing (1985) on his earlier failure and later success in obtaining life history material on Kwaio (Solomon Islands) women provides an interesting perspective on this problem; one which points more to the nature of the anthropological life history than to assumptions about contrasting ways women and men may perceive their social worlds. Having recorded the life history of a leading Kwaio feastgiver (see Keesing 1978), Keesing then tried to obtain a parallel account from a Kwaio woman (of middle age, who also happened to be the daughter of another important Kwaio feastgiver). As he states, "little came of it", the interview sessions were brief and the woman was easily distracted, frequently inviting men to join the discussion and provide their own accounts of events. The experience led Keesing to conclude that perhaps Kwaio women, like other women throughout the tribal world, are "relatively mute about themselves and their place in their cultural tradition" (1985:30). However, several years later, accompanied by a female colleague, he succeeds in obtaining numerous richly detailed self-accounts of Kwaio women. While he

acknowledges that his long-time friendship with his informants, along with the presence of his female colleague, certainly helped in the process of interviewing the women, he suggests that this alone is not enough to account for the earlier failure and later success. Rather, he argues that when dealing with personal accounts of the lives of non-Western peoples we must constantly remind ourselves that they are likely to reflect very different folk models of self and person than those we take for granted. According to Keesing, more emphasis should be placed on what he terms "the context of elicitation" (1985:31) which goes beyond the immediate context of actually obtaining life history material from a native informant to include the historical context of the society itself. Profound change continued to confront Kwaio society in the intervening years between his first and second attempts at gathering female life histories. He cites the Kwaio struggle for autonomy and the "elevation of 'culture' as a political symbol" (1985:37) as fundamentally affecting Kwaio models of themselves and the world around them. He suggests that the accounts Kwaio women gave of their culture can only be understood in the historical context of colonial domination and the dramatic changes that occurred in Kwaio culture in general and women's lives in particular. Related to this, he also suggests that perhaps the many cultural accounts constructed for ethnographers by male informants should similarly be viewed

as "artifacts of the historical context of colonial domination" (1985:37).[5]

To Keesing, then, the question is not whether women constitute a 'muted group', or whether women's view of their culture is less 'global' than men's, or even whether the colonial experience widened women's perspectives (and thus their expressiveness) by enlarging the range of their participation in things both within and outside their societies. Rather, he asks, what is it about Kwaio society that made it possible at this later date to obtain numerous detailed self-accounts of Kwaio women? And what, then, do these accounts tell us about Kwaio society?

The point to be made here is that self-accounts are by nature subjective and individuals from the same society are likely to differ in their personal perceptions; men may differ from other men, women may differ from other women, and certainly men may differ from women. The idea that individuals from the same society might hold significantly different cognitive interpretations of their social world is not new anthropology; attention has long been given to the ways that an individual's social and temporal location within the economic, political, and ritual structures of a society influence their sense of place vis-a-vis other members.[6] Focusing only on the apparent contrast between relative expressive skills of men and women too easily

suggests that such differences are reflective of more fundamental differences within society and that these differences are indigenously framed in terms of gender. Within such a perspective, the 'inability' of female informants to express themselves and reflect on their culture in a manner comparable to male informants is interpreted as further evidence of their subordination.

Although few anthropologists have pursued Ardener's notion that women constitute a 'muted group', the idea that women constitute a distinct and separate analytic category remains a prevalent theme, and many of the assumptions about 'women's models' continue to inform both theoretical works and ethnographic studies focused on women. Ardener's idea that women do not perceive their social world as bounded from nature fits well with Ortner's thesis that women are everywhere seen as 'closer to nature'. And the assumption that women's models reflect this closeness is further reinforced by a preoccupation with the biological facts of 'femaleness' and the assumed cultural translation of these facts into cultural constraints preventing women from fully participating in their societies. Yet, if one is to accept the notion that there is something intrinsically different about women's cognitive models of their society as compared to those of men, one must also accept that ethnographic reporting will not only reflect these differences, but will be subject to them as well. In

Other words, as men's and women's views of their cultural world differ, so too will male and female ethnographers differ in their descriptions and interpretations of the societies they study. It is this line of reasoning, combined with the acceptance of universal male dominance, that continues to provide the underlying foundation for arguments concerning male bias in the ethnographic depiction of women. As Milton (1979) notes, feminists argue that the devaluation of women exists in all societies and, as a cultural universal, it is as much a part of our own society as those we study. Its presence in our own society is seen as the basis for male bias in anthropology. But at the same time, it is argued, the bias reflected in anthropology has been reinforced in part by the bias that already exists in the society under study. The ethnographic treatment of women as unimportant is seen to result from both our own cultural bias as well as the devaluation of women in the societies we study.

Although writers frequently note that the political history of our own culture has made us more sensitive to the nuances of gender relations in other societies, it is rarely acknowledged that contemporary studies in the 'anthropology of women' carry an imprint of this political history as well -- except insofar as writers feel personally subjected to it. The result is a style of ethnography characterized by a kind of self-consciousness

derived from subjective experience but lacking in subjective reflection. As anthropologists we can intellectually understand that earlier male ethnographers were not wholly to blame for their neglect of women, yet at the same time we exempt contemporary female ethnographers, who focus only on women, from similar considerations. In this sense, male anthropologists become products of their culture, while female anthropologists are seen as 'victims' of it (Rosaldo 1980, Weiner 1976, 1980). This is a particularly important thread in much of the women-focused writing and it provides yet another point of commonality between the (female) anthropologist and her subject. They not only share their 'womanhood', they now share the status of 'victim' as well.

One of the most serious problems with the argument of male bias and the acceptance of 'women' as an analytic category is the way in which such a stance precludes critical assessment of the theoretical perspectives and ethnographic methods thought to exhibit such a bias. In other words, reference to male bias often serves as a rhetorical device which enables contemporary writers to effectively discount (at times disregard) prior theoretical tradition in anthropology on the grounds that it was male-generated and provides a male perspective. The fact that the models used by certain (perhaps male) ethnographers might be analytically inadequate to begin with too often goes unnoticed except insofar as such methods or models

exclude women. (This will be discussed at greater length in the following chapter.) The issue then becomes one of the historical existence of a male perspective and the impact this has had (and, as many would argue, continues to have) on the discipline itself. This leads, in turn, to the curious task of exploring male bias rather than exploring the issues that have been ignored because of 'male-biased' perspectives (issues that are likely to include more than just 'women' in a categorical sense). The "ethnography of women" thus becomes a forum for commentary on the ideological biases of anthropologists and their own society. The 'victim-hood' of women is further enhanced through this genre as women are portrayed ethnographically as 'double-victims', oppressed and exploited by their own society, and then ignored, misrepresented, and treated as non-persons by (primarily male) ethnographers.[7]

Denise O'Brien's (1984) discussion of the portrayal of women in Melanesian ethnography provides a striking example of some of the trivialities that the genre of women-focused anthropology too often falls prey to. In her overview of the last fifty years of Melanesian ethnography, O'Brien notes that although women are not invisible, they are consistently portrayed as primarily wives and mothers, and that women's economic activities are generally ignored. Activities and experiences shared by both sexes are described from a male perspective and while lengthy

descriptions of specifically male experiences are given, female experiences are given only cursory notice, and this usually in contrast to males. While men are usually portrayed as individuals with names, women are less frequently identified by name. In her attempt to illustrate these points, O'Brien presents a brief and selective survey of the Melanesian literature which amounts to little more than an exercise in page-counting. For example, referring to John Whiting's study of the Kwoma, O'Brien states :

> Whiting (1941:111-116) devotes four and a
> half pages to male hunting and is careful
> to note "women never hunt" (1941:112).
> (1984:55)

Later in the same paragraph, after mentioning that Kwoma women are responsible for producing surplus sago flour for trade, and actually orchestrate and participate in these exchanges, she repeats the above observation :

> It is ironic that Whiting devotes four and
> a half pages to male hunting activities
> and less than one page to the sago trade.
> (1984:55)

Contrasting Whiting's work on Kwoma socialization to Margaret Mead's 1930 research on Manus, O'Brien notes that Mead presents a more balanced picture of male and female socialization.

> A chapter entitled "The Development of
> Personality" deals with boys and girls
> and the two subsequent chapters, "The
> Adolescent Girl" and "The Adolescent
> Boy", are approximately equal in length.
>
> (1984:57)

Concerning Marie Reay's 1959 ethnography on the Kuma of Highland New Guinea, O'Brien again notes a more balanced approach.

> In her description of Kuma behavior,
> Reay allots equal space to men and
> women.
>
> In describing the life-cycle, Reay
> spends six pages on "Learning Situa-
> tions for Boys" (1959:164-170), five
> pages on "Male Initiation" (1959:170-
> 174), and seven pages on "Learning
> Situations for Girls" (1959:175-181).
>
> (1984:61-62)

Although several of her examples do suggest issues worthy of serious attention, O'Brien criticizes these (and other) works on the grounds that they do not "provide adequate, unbiased data on women comparable to the data on men" (1984:68). But what does "comparable" mean? O'Brien's review seems to suggest that comparability can be measured by the quantity of physical space allotted to discussions of women in ethnography. And, as it turns out, it is not just the number of pages that is at issue, but how this number of pages compares to the number of pages devoted to descriptions of men's activities.

While critical of the general portrayal of Melanesian women in ethnography, O'Brien does concede that over the last decade monographs have emerged that "portray female economic roles with the same amount of fullness and complexity as has been devoted to male economic roles" (1984:68). As examples she cites Marilyn Strathern's study of Melpa women, Women In Between (1972), and Annette Weiner's study of Trobriand Island women, Women of Value, Men of Renown (1976). Noting that in both cases male economic roles had already been described in detail (by A. Strathern and B. Malinowski, respectively), O'Brien makes the following observation :

> The Strathern's Mount Hagen studies are
> complementary, whereas Weiner (1976),
> studying the Trobriands long after
> Malinowski (1922), is clearly revisionary
> toward his work and goes beyond supple-
> menting his view of Trobriand exchange.
> (1984:68-69)

What stands out here is the suggestion that "complementary" is not enough, that somehow a study which is "revisionary" toward the previous male-generated ethnography provides a clearer, more accurate, and more thorough picture of women's participation in a particular society. Thus, while Marilyn Strathern merely describes Melpa female economic roles in the depth and complexity which complements what we already know about Melpa male economic roles (through A. Strathern's work), Weiner's work

represents an effort to revise the picture of Trobriand women by breaking through the 'male perspective' (of Malinowski) on which most of our knowledge of Trobriand society is based. This is done by focusing attention on Trobriand women, and thus, by presenting a 'female perspective'.

O'Brien's work is interesting as a recent attempt to document yet again the biases of male anthropologists and their neglect of women, and the entrenchment of female anthropologists in male-generated perspectives. We learn nothing new anthropologically about the position of women in Melanesian societies. Nor are we provided with any original thinking on theoretical alternatives for achieving the depth of understanding of women's lives thought to be lacking in previous ethnographies. Instead, O'Brien asks "what do Melanesian women do?". In posing this question she is really asking "what are women's economic roles?". She states that her brief overview of Melanesian ethnography demonstrates "that women's economic roles are ignored, whereas the role of mother, a cultural role that depends on biology, is emphasized" (1984:68). Here again we have ambivalence about where biology fits with the cultural roles of women. More importantly, we have the assumption that the way out of this ambivalence is to look at 'what women do'.

In the previous chapter it was noted that feminist rejection of biology as a determining factor in the cultural roles of women is combined with the notion that female biology is at once a source of 'natural' female power and a source of women's secondary status and subordination to men. In this chapter we can see how both of these ideas are, in turn, set against an implicit acceptance of biology as a measure of ethnographic competence and insight as feminist discussion of male bias suggests that studies of women by women are somehow more authentic. The following chapter examines the further elaboration of these ideas reflected in efforts to identify the nature of 'women's power'.

NOTES TO CHAPTER THREE

1. It should be noted that this discussion is not an assessement or evaluation of the charges of 'male bias' in anthropology. The view presented here is one which accepts as a given the existence of the perception of male bias within the field. Arguments concerning male bias tend to take various directions ranging from accusation to explanation, and are found to frame both ethnographic description and theoretical discourse alike. The point to be made is that such charges have become a form of common knowledge within anthropology in general and in recent anthropological studies of women in particular. As such it constitutes a reflection of ideological currents which, in turn, impinge upon and influence contemporary anthropological inquiry. How it does so becomes the issue, then, and not whether the received wisdom regarding male bias is valid.

2. Kay Milton (1979) points out that male bias is most frequently conceptualized in terms of male dominance, and while the concept of male bias is left largely undefined, its existence in any particular society is often taken as a given, requiring no evidence. Because the existence of male dominance is treated as dogma it is difficult to establish what it consists of.

3. O'Brien 1984, Reiter 1975, Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974, Weiner 1976.

4. S. Ardener 1977, Harding 1975, Reiter 1975, Weiner 1976.

5. Keesing notes that his own experience has prompted him to ask whether the idea of the life-history (like, one might also argue, the idea of anthropology) could exist outside the context of the colonial encounter.

> Perhaps only when a people are encapsulated
> within a colonial (now post-colonial) state
> and face an anthropologist within its struc-
> tures of power are the familiar routines of

fieldwork and the accounts men give of
"their culture" possible.

(1985:37)

6. See for instance Louis Dumont's (1970) discussion of
caste structures in India, and E. R. Leach's (1954)
description of the categories Kachin and Shan, and the
contrasted sub-categories gumsa Kachin and gumlao Kachin
in Highland Burma. Leach provides a particularly cogent
discussion of some of the analytical problems
ethnographers face when dealing with cultural models of
how people suppose their world to be organized.

7. O'Brien 1984, Rosaldo 1981, Weiner 1976.

8. It is worth noting that this is not the first time
Marilyn Strathern has been charged with perpetuating a
'male perspective'. Weiner suggests that Strathern
"falls into the traditional male trap" of not taking
women's interests in exchange activities seriously
(1976:13). Similarly, Feil (1978) wonders if the model
Strathern constructs for male/female interaction among
Melpa is "more a male than a female one" (1978:275).

CHAPTER FOUR

POLITICS AND DOMAINS OF FEMALE POWER

In the previous chapter it was mentioned that one of the major problems with the topic of male bias within anthropology is the way in which it detracts from more substantive theoretical issues. The emphasis frequently placed on male bias creates a misleading impression that the most significant failing of earlier anthropological analyses is the exclusion of women and the projection of a male perspective, and this is resolved simply by shifting attention from men to women. One of the best examples of this can be found in studies of women and power.

The difficulties noted earlier in establishing criteria for measuring the status of women are similarly reflected in research about women and power. What does one look to in order to assess the degree of power women may or may not have within a particular society or cross-culturally? In response to the limitations of perspectives characterized as 'male-generated' and 'male-biased', feminist anthropologists have suggested alternative analytic frameworks. Instead of focusing on what women

aren't involved in, we should look first to 'what women do'. If women do not enjoy formal authority or political power, anthropologists should explore the informal power of women; if women do not participate in public decision-making contexts, researchers should turn their attention to the social arenas in which women do participate and make decisions. In other words, analyses are needed which view women as persons, as social actors in their own right. 'What do women do?' becomes the key question asked by feminist ethnographers as they attempt to identify tangible manifestations not only of women's contributions to social life, but of the power women derive from their activities.

Yet regardless of explicit efforts to counter what is perceived of as male-biased analyses of social relations, and regardless of the rhetoric proclaiming new theoretical frameworks and radical re-interpretations, studies focused on women tend to rely on the same kinds of models for their analyses. For example, ethnographic analyses of women and power tend to take one of two general directions : either women are seen as being powerless because of their cultural exclusion from the political (public/male) domain; or women are found to indeed have power, but the analysis turns out to be a mirror image of the ostensibly male-oriented analysis in that women are viewed as political strategists acting in the domestic (private/female) domain in a manner similar to their male counterparts in the public domain.

While the former approach leads to a simplistic verification of women's powerlessness, the latter becomes a kind of "women can do it too" approach. In both cases we have the continued use of perspectives initially designated by feminist critics as male-biased.

The analytic framework most influential in studies concerning women and power -- what will be referred to throughout this discussion as the "political action model" -- is characterized by the second of the two approaches cited above. Contrary to much feminist critique, male bias is not the most significant problem with the political action model, nor is it a particularly appropriate criticism. Other anthropologists (notably Ahmed 1976, and Alavi 1972) have sharply criticized the mechanistic picture of society that such a model invokes and the imposition cross-culturally of a Western worldview depicting competitive individualism as the basis of all human behavior. Applied to research on women, such a model perpetuates these problems and, in addition, reflects a preoccupation with gendered dichotomies and an assumed autonomy of the domestic domain. In this chapter it will be argued that the emphasis placed on male bias as the primary problem with this approach (as opposed to theoretical problems inherent in the model itself) has enabled feminist writers to make use of an otherwise ideologically appealing framework for exploring the topic of women and power.

Clearly, the appeal of the political action model centers on the way in which power and politics are conceptualized. Thus, in order to understand the influence this framework has had on analyses of women and power we must briefly turn our attention to the political action model itself.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s the anthropological study of political systems experienced a shift in focus away from the earlier preoccupation with taxonomy, structure, and function of political systems (see for example Fortes and Evans-Pritchard 1940, and Gluckman 1955, 1965), to a concern with the study of political processes and the role of conflict (Leach 1954, Turner 1957). Partly a response to the conceptual limitations of earlier models which assumed political systems always tended toward a state of equilibrium, this shift in focus also expressed growing interest in the dynamics of social change (Swartz, et. al. 1966). Attention was given to the role of informal groups such as factions and political (social) movements, and to leadership mobilization and competition for control over resources primarily at the local level. According to this view, individual action, always geared toward the maximization of personal advantage, finds its ultimate expression in the pursuit and acquisition of political power. An emphasis placed on decision-making processes led to an examination of 'action strategies' as a product of conscious choices made by individuals trying to maximize

their personal political assets.[1]

Along with this shift in orientation came recognition of the need to rethink the concept of power, but what is actually re-thought is 'politics' and anthropology's contribution to the study of political process.[2] Power continues to be defined as an individual's command over resources and control over the actions of others (Bailey 1960, Nicholas 1965), but the behavioral dynamics of how individuals manipulate their social environment to gain power takes on the central focus. According to R. Cohen (1970) :

> Power is an ability to influence the
> behavior of others and/or gain in-
> fluence over the control of valued
> actions.
> (1970:488)

> ... power stems out of the values of
> the culture in which the political
> system is enmeshed, plus the skills
> that political actors bring to their
> activities in the political system.
> (1970:492)

This is not to say that the concept of power was viewed as entirely unproblematic. The focus on individual action strategies and the dynamics between leaders and their followings required analysts to look more closely at the diffuse qualities of power (such as influence and persuasion) as these relate to individual abilities and

skills. In doing so, some writers tried to differentiate types or kinds of power by looking at action contexts. For example, Easton (1959) emphasized the distinction between power in general and power in a political context. Nicholas (1965) focused attention on the use of public power, but noted that in analyzing politics in small-scale societies it is not always clear how much socially recognized power is thought to be 'public' and how much is 'private'. The lack of a precise technical usage prompted some anthropologists to suggest that the notion of power should be taken in its broadest possible sense -- allowing the ethnographic context and cultural data to provide the meaning (Fogelson 1977). As Fried (1964) had noted earlier, the problem is not one of defining power with more precision, but rather conveying what we mean when we use the concept.

As was previously mentioned, the need to re-examine the concept of power was for the most part an offshoot of the interest in re-examining politics and exploring political process at the local level of individual action. Conceptually, power remained embedded in politics, but politics took on a more expansive range of meaning as it came to be seen as an aspect of all social relations (A. Cohen 1974). The resulting perspective suggests a kind of democratization of power : the question is no longer who has power and who does not, but what kind of power and how

much an individual or group controls relative to other individuals or groups in a society. Since all members of society are, potentially at least, political actors, power is accessible, in varying degrees, to everyone.

> ... power is available at all times, in
> some measure, to everyone in society so
> that there is always some competition
> between members of the society for it.
>   (R. Cohen 1970:488)

As Adams (1976, 1977) explains, all human beings are supposed to have some power, though certain individuals will possess more of it than others. Individual power (what Adams calls "independent power") consists of socially recognized (and valued) capabilities that characterize an individual. It is up to each individual to discover their own "potential power" and to look for signs indicating not only the nature and amount they control, but the necessary social confirmation as well (1977:389).

> To speak of a person's (independent)
> power is to identify collectively the
> entire range of one's abilities,
> insofar as those abilities play a role
> in influencing the behavior of others.
>   (1977:390)

In its most tangible form, power is tied to decision-making strategies of individual. But the content and import of any particular decision or range of decisions is contingent

upon the social location of the individual, the value the individual associates with the potential outcome of their actions, and the particular skills the individual possesses and utilizes to achieve the desired ends.

What we can see from this brief summary is an analytic framework based on the convergence of three related ideas. First, with the increased emphasis (within anthropology) on the individual as the focal point of social analysis came the idea that self-interest and competition are the primary (sometimes considered primordial) motivational forces guiding individual action. Second, there is the idea that politics permeates all facets of social relations and that the study of politics can be co-extensive with the study of all society. And third, the idea that power, as an aspect of politics, is therefore accessible in varying degrees to all members of society.

The focus on individual self-interest as key to social analysis has been strongly criticized on several grounds. In particular, attention has been drawn to the implicit Western bias in its game-plan orientation and use of the "archetype 'economic man' forever weighing costs and bene- fits in an effort to achieve the optimum point" (Ahmed 1976:2). Such an approach, it is argued, objectifies society and externalizes the individual from it. As Alavi (1973) notes, within this framework 'social facts' are

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believed to be reducible to 'individual facts' and "are conceived as the outcome of transactions between individuals in the social market place, analogous to processes of the market economy" (1973:42). Perhaps most troublesome to critics is the assumption that individuals are free agents who act out of rational purpose to maximize their control over others. Power is seen as the ability to bend others to one's own ends and to fail in this is to be powerless (Colson 1977).

Unlike the above criticism, the issue for feminist writers was not the model itself but the focus on men and the implication that politics and the acquisition of power are exclusively male pursuits. Locked within "dominant modes of male discourse" (Tiffany 1984:3), anthropologists have too easily accepted models for society that, by analytically excluding women, portray them as non-political and powerless. Feminists argued that women may not be as powerful as men, or exercise power over men in the manner that men often seem to exercise power over women, but neither are women passive participants subjected to the will of men in all aspects of social life. What is needed, then, is a framework for analysis that focuses on women's political interests and the power they do have.[3] An apparent irony here is that the framework employed to ascertain the form and content of women's power is, in essence, a political action model. Why use a model widely

criticized as 'male-biased' (a product of 'male discourse') to study women? Part of the answer lies in the fact that feminist critics were not concerned with the model per se, but with the male perspective it projected. A more significant part of the answer, however, centers on the idea of 'women's power'.

It is important to note that the question raised by feminist anthropologists is not "do women have power?", but "what is the nature of women's power?". The existence of power exercized by women (though varying in form and degree both cross-culturally and in relation to men within a society) is taken for granted. Furthermore, the assumption that there is such a thing as 'women's power' is not a feminist creation, but is actually implicit in the political action model itself. If power is an aspect of politics, and politics frames social relations at all levels, then women as social actors must, to some degree or another, have power. One need only look more closely at the social arena within which women operate to discover the nature and degree of power women possess. With its extensive notion of politics and a rather open-ended, individual-oriented definition of power, the political action model enabled feminist critics to actually compensate (or correct) for what they considered its primary failing; all that was required was a shift in focus from men to women. Thus, drawing on the view of politics as a

pervasive feature of social life, feminist writers counter the notion that political behavior is something men engage in by contending that women do participate politically and that their political behavior occurs in the domestic domain.

The fact that the same model could be so easily applied to studies of women reinforces the earlier observation that for feminist anthropologists the problem was not the model itself but the fact that analyses focused on men. In effect this is true. But feminist writers fail to recognize a more subtle part of the problem. In the political action model, politics was seen not so much as exclusively male behavior, but as public behavior. Because the public domain in a great many societies is perceived as a male domain, it is likely that the primary focus of such studies will be on men. The intention here is not to negate the charge of male bias or to try to explain it away, but to note that it is a rather easy criticism to level. The charge of male bias, in fact, leaves the basic premises of the model intact, and by doing so provides an ideologically appealing portrait of women as actors in their own right. No longer vaguely referred to as wives and mothers, women become persons and individuals in the same ethnographic sense that men are. Human behavior continues to be seen as the product of individual valuations and skill at manipulating the social environment and others

who live within it.   Women, as well as men, make such
valuations and develop strategies for achieving their ends.
Although the focus of men's and women's social interests
may differ (and these differences are significant), the
process for achieving desired goals is seen as essentially
the same.

Acknowledging the impact of an historically male per-
spective on studies of the family and domestic groups,
feminist writers have noted that the failure to recognize
the 'political' nature of women's actions in the domestic
domain is in part due to anthropological interest in formal
(legitimized) structures of power and authority rather
than informal power (Rogers 1975).   Women's power is, for
the most part, informal power.   Thus, the concept of
'influence' is seen as key to understanding women's politi-
cal behavior in the domestic domain.   In examining women's
strategies for manipulating male decision-making through
the use of influence, the work of Lamphere (1974), Rosaldo
(1974), and Collier (1974) in particular seem to typify
feminist accomodation of the political action model.

Drawing on the distinction made by M. G. Smith (1960)
between power and authority,[4] Lamphere (1974) states that
most social systems contain "unassigned power" such that an
individual or group not in authority may, in some circum-
stances, make decisions and gain the compliance of those in

authority. Her discussion is framed around what she calls the "political aspects of family life" -- the distribution of power and authority within the family -- and she attempts to identify which aspects are controlled by men and which are controlled by women. She does this by employing a political action model.

> An individual's relationship to the
> distribution of power and authority
> in a domestic group is best concept-
> ualized in terms of the strategies
> a person uses to achieve his or her
> ends. The notion that individuals
> employ strategies to achieve partic-
> ular goals has been utilized in the
> analysis of political systems (Bailey
> 1969, Barth 1959, Leach 1954), but
> it also has validity, I believe, in
> understanding relationships within
> the domestic group.
>   (1974:99)

As a response to the distribution of power and authority, Lamphere continues, women's strategies will differ depending on whether women are able to make decisions independently or whether decisions are made by men. Domestic groups where men hold authority and the legitimate right to make decisions binding on others provide the primary example of how women may hold unassigned power.

Along similar lines, Rosaldo (1974) states that while women may not have the right to make decisions, they frequently exert systematic influence on the decisions that

are made by men. She adds, however, that women who are successful in exerting such influence are often viewed as disruptive and anomalous. The idea that conflict is a key means by which women exert political influence is a common feature in much of the feminist writing, but it receives its sharpest emphasis in the work of Collier (1974). Collier objects to previous anthropological treatment of women's conflicts and their role in domestic disputes on the grounds that such studies portray women as actors "trying to minimize unpleasantness instead of actors trying to maximize gains" (1974:90).

> The model of my argument, therefore, is
> not the affectionate daughter, hardwork-
> ing wife, of loving mother who gets into
> trouble while trying to make the best of
> a difficult situation, but the cold,
> calculating female who uses all available
> resources to control the world around
> her. My model woman seeks power : the
> capacity to determine her own and others
> actions.
>   (1974:90)

To Collier, then, women's power and political activity can be seen in the range of domestic disputes and quarrels instigated by women.

Described as informal power, unassigned power, or systematic influence, women's political behavior is frequently characterized by the phrase 'behind the scenes'. While the phrase 'behind the scenes' is obviously used to

distinguish the domestic from the public domain, it also tends to cast a surreptitious shadow on the patterns of female political actions. This is by no means an accident, as it is widely noted that women, denied access (or at least access independent of men) to formal power structures, must find other means for achieving their goals. In other words, women must work around the male dominant power structures and in doing so they must "work in concealed ways to gain their ends" (Collier 1974:92). Women's political strategies, then, are often counter to and competitive with men's, frequently inducing conflict and disrupting domestic life. And in curious way, the perceptions of women as irresponsible, sexually threatening, disruptive, untrustworthy, and quarrelsome, held by men in many patrilocal societies, is interpreted as a male response to women's political activity (Collier 1974, Rosaldo 1974). Women's power is seen as derived through the success women have working against the interests of men.

> Wives are the worms within the apple of
> the patrilocal domestic group. ... In a
> world where men gain political power by
> having a large and cohesive body of co-
> resident kin, young women gain power by
> breaking up domestic units. Men work
> hard to bind lineage mates together;
> women work to tear them apart. This
> inevitable conflict between male and
> female strategies seem to give rise to
> similar perceptions of women's nature.
> (Collier 1974:92)

What emerges from these studies is an ethnographic picture of women which reflects the programmatic objectives of Western feminism in general, and assumptions on the part of feminist anthropologists that by focusing on women they have not only cleared the decks of 'male-biased' studies but in the process have discovered a universal saliency to women's struggles for identity and participation in society. Rather than passively accepting their exclusion from the public world of men, or the constraints imposed on them by dominant male power structures, women are shown to exercise some measure of control over their lives and social environment. More importantly, these analyses establish a picture of women as individual actors whose strategies are shaped by rational intent and whose actions (even 'behind the scenes') suggest an assertiveness and a kind of cognitive autonomy, not at all unlike those characteristics ascribed to men (Bailey 1969). And while Collier's work is perhaps the most extreme in attributing a clandestine character to women's political strategies, there is a clear effort on the part of feminist researchers to indicate that women are just as self-interested and competitive as men; that the political action framework is just as applicable to the study of women.[5]

But to try to fit women into such a model, rather than address the problems of the model itself, does little more

than indicate that women can and apparently do exist in societies dominated by competitive individualistic males, and that they do so by being competitive and individualistic 'behind the scenes' in the domestic domain. Confined to the domestic domain women's range of social influence is considerably smaller and more limited than that of men. But, we are repeatedly told, the power they do acquire through their calculated use of influence in this limited arena is just as effective in achieving their ends as that wielded by men in the wider public world.

The influence that the political action model has had on women-focused research varies. But the notion that women have some degree of power, defined by and in most cases limited to the female domain, constitutes an under-lying theme of such studies. Invoking the male/female dichotomy as the starting point for analysis -- in other words, defining the focus as 'women's power' -- automatically implies a difference based on gender in the kind of power men and women hold. The issue then becomes one of discovering the nature of female power. One of the results of this is the identification of distinctly gendered types of power seen as derived from what are, again, distinctly gendered styles of behavior.

Use of the political action model in searching for manifestations of 'female power' has led to some strikingly

simplistic interpretations of human behavior. Recent discussions of female suicide in two Melanesian societies provide a case in point. Counts (1984) suggests that female suicide among the Lusi (Kaliai District in Northwest New Britain) is a "culturally patterned act of political strategy" employed in certain circumstances by powerless women (1984:72). Similarly, Johnson (1981) states that female suicide among the Gainj (northern fringe area of the New Guinea Central Highlands) is an expression of power by otherwise powerless women. In both groups suicide is committed primarily by married women who are abused by their husbands, ignored by their kin, or otherwise publicly shamed. As the authors note, female suicide does not occur frquently and is always looked upon as a last resort, turned to in situations where all other channels available to women have failed to bring retribution. In both societies a woman who commits suicide makes sure others know why she is taking such action and who is responsible. In the act of taking her own life, she transfers the shame that she has suffered to her kin, forcing them to seek the retribution they denied her when she was alive. As a political alternative, then, suicide enables a woman to simultaneously limit the use of power by others and exhibit a form of individual power over others (Counts 1984, Johnson 1981).

Few would argue against the idea that suicide is, at some level, an expression of power. But can we really consider it (in the two cases cited) as a form of gendered behavior, and thus, a form of 'female power'? Similar to studies of women and power discussed earlier, the interpretations of female suicide provided by Counts and Johnson reflect feminist preoccupation with portraying women as individuals in their own right, categorically (and analytically) separate from men, whose actions have 'political' implications. Building on assumptions about the existence of male dominance in these two societies, we are told that female suicide is a political act performed in reaction to a male power structure which accords women little or no control over their lives. More importantly, this interpretation shows us, once again, that even in the context of extreme male dominance women are not entirely powerless.

It has been noted throughout this discussion that individualism and autonomy are important elements in the portrayal of women in feminist ethnography. Interpreting female suicide as a political strategy and an expression of female power creates a picture of women consciously fighting back against a gender system which (ostensibly) denies them both of these qualities.

> ...female suicide can be seen as growing
> out of a gender system that requires
> male dominance but that offers women in
> return a definite assurance of protection
> by dominant males. When women keep their
> part of the gender bargain but men do not,
> suicide becomes a possible course of action.
> (Johnson 1981:333)

The simplicity of this interpretation derives in part from that aspect of the political action framework that defines social life as a continuous round of competition, negotiation, and manipulation between individuals acting on self-interest. The above quote illustrates part of the appeal this model has for women-focused anthropology. From it we learn that gender systems are cultural bargains made between men and women in which men gain social advantages over women. We learn that women implicitly agree to accomodate this arrangement on the equally implicit promise of protection by men. We also learn that this accomodation on the part of women has definite limits, and when the limits are reached (when men break their part of the bargain) women take action on their own. In their studies, both Counts and Johnson note that suicide is neither the only nor the most frequent kind of action taken by women. Nonetheless it is, by its very nature, one of the most dramatic and definitive forms of human action. It should be noted that here too lies part of the appeal of interpreting female suicide as an expression of women's power. The act of suicide represents the quintessence of individual action. Viewing it as a political strategy

(extreme though it is) employed by women suggests a process by which women can achieve a kind of ultimate autonomy. As Johnson states :

> Suicide is a drastic, but a magnificently
> autonomous act; it leaves no doubt as to
> who controls one's life.
> (1981:335)

What is lost in all of this is the fact that suicide is always sociologically problematic. The destruction of the self by the self is the antithesis of social life. And although the act of suicide involves only the individual, the nature of he act draws others in by implication, often causing a sense of collective culpability. To reduce it to a political strategy (a response to a 'gender bargain' gone bad) is to ignore the layers of cultural and psychological complexity that make the act of suicide (by either sex and in any culture) so enigmatic. That in some societies suicide occurs more frequently than in others, and that the majority of cases may involve women as opposed to men, is of significant ethnographic interest. The discussions presented by Counts and Johnson, however, illustrate the way in which culturally profound issues (such as suicide) are eclipsed by efforts to establish an ethnographic picture of women as individuals making choices and, in some manner or another, exerting control over their own lives and the lives of others. On a superficial level the

interpretation of female suicide as a political strategy accomplishes this task, but in the process it also invokes a rather ironic scenerio in which women, already defined in the analysis as victims of male power, in effect become victims of their own power as well.

It should be pointed out that use of the political action model in studies of women is focused primarily on patrilineal societies. This is because evidence for women's powerlessness is more apparent within social structures which vest power and authority in men and, in combination with patrilocality, define all in-marrying women as outsiders. But the influence of this framework is not confined exclusively to patrilineal societies. It can also be seen in studies of matrilineal societies where despite the fact that descent is traced through women it is men who are seen to hold formal authority in decision-making.

Of particular interest here is Weiner's (1976) study of women in matrilineal Trobriand Island society. Similar to other feminist writers (such as Lamphere and Rosaldo), Weiner notes the limitations of narrowly conceived models of power which focus on the public politics of men. But she objects to the comparison, often implicitly made in feminist studies, between men's and women's involvement in decision-making which is then used as a gauge for assessing

the secondary status of women. And, unlike the others, she

does not invoke the notion of 'influence' or informal power

to describe the kind of power women might have.

> We have allowed "politics by men" to
> structure our thinking about other
> societies; we have led ourselves to
> believe that, if women are not domin-
> ant in the political sphere of inter-
> action, their power remains at best
> peripheral. ... From this view,
> since we compare women to men in the
> context of politics, we should not be
> surprised that we arrive at the al-
> most universal notion that women's
> status is secondary to men.
> (Weiner 1976:228)

This is an important point. Comparing the degree of men's

and women's involvement in public decision-making

(political) contexts and citing discrepancies that might

exist as evidence of female subordination and powerlessness

is a prevalent pattern in studies of women and power.   As

an alternative, Weiner suggests an analytic framework which

incorporates native cosmology concerning the creation of

social persons, and the relative controls exercized by men

and women over cultural resources.   By giving equal

attention to cosmological phenomena, such as ancestral

substance or objects which regenerate property and social

relationships, we can delineate the controls that men and

women exert over a wider range of cultural resources;

resources which include, but are not limited to, socio-

political phenomena.   Women's control over certain

resources can then be seen as articulating with male controls rather than having a negative value when measured against male power.

> Politics, then, does not appear as the
> ultimate measure of power but as power
> of a particular nature that operates
> with differing manifestations contingent
> upon the nature of the resources that
> women control.
> (Weiner 1976:229)

In this Weiner is strongly influenced by the work of A. Cohen (1974) and, more specifically, Adams' (1975) notions of "independent power" -- power derived from the differential control individuals exert over valued cultural resources. So while she objects to the tendency of feminist researchers to assess women's power by comparing it to the power men have, her analysis nonetheless encompasses the basic elements and orientation of the political action model. What makes Weiner's analysis different from other feminist discussions of 'women's power' is the emphasis she places on the cosmologicical dimension of Trobriand culture as the source (and domain) of women's power, and the related idea that the nature (not the degree) of power Trobriand men and women possess is intrinsically gendered.

Central to Weiner's discussion is an exploration of the process by which the "total social person" is created

through transformations occurring at different phases in the life-cycle. In the Trobriand cycle of life and death men and women effect transformations of persons differently, and in so doing, control different aspects of generational time. Trobriand women control the regeneration of matrilineal identity, the essence or spirit (baloma) that moves through "unmarked time". Women's power, operating in what Weiner refers to as an ahistorical continuum of time and space, is particularly meaningful at conception and death. Trobriand men control property, politics, and exchange relations. Operating within the socio-political fields of action, the male domain of power and control is situated in historical time and space.

For Weiner, then, the locus of power for Trobriand women lies in the cosmological (ahistoric) dimension of Trobriand culture. The manifestations of women's power are particularly poignant in the context of mortuary ceremonies. While birth represents continuity of the social order, death represents disruption. Death threatens to short-circuit social relations both among the living and between the living and the dead. In this sense death constitutes an abrupt reminder of the fragile and tenuous nature of social relations and, according to Weiner, repre-sents a time when the social person is "split apart" and must be re-integrated into the world of the living. This re-integration is accomplished by women. As Weiner notes,

the controls women exert at the death of a kinsman take on a greater significance through the objectification of their power into wealth objects : the fibrous skirts and bundles of dried banana leaves which are produced by women and through which women reclaim the material effects of deceased kin at mortuary ceremonies. It is through the distribution of these skirts and bundles, "women's wealth", that women publicly demonstrate their power.

In several ways Weiner's study is more suggestive than it is successful. While focusing on women's power, she essentially presents an analytic framework that allows for a closer reading of native cosmology in the cultural construction of gender and personhood. Given the collective interest and participation in the creation of social persons, so apparent in Melanesian societies, along with the symbolic and material significance culturally attributed to objects essential to this process, Weiner's analysis is, on a general level, very appealing. But Weiner seems distracted from these issues in her effort to demonstrate that Trobriand women (and by implication, all women) have some form of power in their own right; and if we have been unable to discover the nature of women's power it is because of the historical predominance of male perspectives within anthropology. The vast difference between her own depiction of Trobriand women and the earlier work of Malinowski (1922) becomes the baseline for evidence of the

effects of male bias in anthropological research, and at
the same time confirms the authenticity of women studying
women.

Along with the argument of male bias, part of Weiner's
thesis concerns the lack of attention anthropologists have
given to cosmological phenomena in their analyses of
male/female relations. In her own analysis she attempts to
provide a perspective on the "Trobriand universe" that
gives as much weight to the cosmic order as the social
order. One cannot help wondering, however, to what extent
her expressed interest in native cosmology is guided (and
at times overshadowed) by an interest in locating a
separate female domain of power. As she argues, if we look
only to male-dominated socio-political fields of action for
indications of female power, we are likely to conclude that
women are powerless. Attributing part of the problem to
anthropological reliance on the domestic/public dichotomy
as the starting point for analyses of female power, she
suggests we must look elsewhere, to other dimensions of
social life in which the cultural significance of women's
participation and control over events is more prominently
displayed. But by equating anthropologists neglect of
cosmological phenomena with the neglect of women, Weiner
sets up an association between women and cosmology and
essentially creates another gendered dichotomy, one which
situates Trobriand women in an 'ahistoric cosmological

domain' and Trobriand men in an 'historic material domain'.

It is in this manner that Weiner is able to account for women's lack of participation in the public (male) domain of politics without drawing the conclusion that women are powerless. She does this by identifying a uniquely female domain of power, distinct and separate from, but complementary to, the male domain of power. Women do have power, and their power is not somehow less than or peripheral to the power men have; women's power is not defined by their ability to influence male decision-making or surreptitiously sabotage male political strategies, as other feminist writers have suggested. Trobriand women, Weiner argues, have power in their own right and this power is an integral part of their 'femaleness'.

Although on the surface the view presented by Weiner seems to move away from the tendency among other feminist anthropologists to view women's power as drawn from the same set of motivational forces (such as competition and self-interest) attributed to men's power, this shift in perspective is more illusory than real. And rather than moving away from feminist assumptions about 'women's power' Weiner's work actually takes this view one step further. Women's power is not just different in degree from men's, it is of an entirely different nature, intrinsically tied

to their 'femaleness' (as, presummably men's power is tied to their 'maleness'). Women not only achieve ethnographic personhood in Weiner's work, as a category they achieve a social separateness which, because it is based on gender, is shared and more fully comprehended by female ethnographers. In the end Weiner's work lends itself too easily to the simplistic assumption that if one were to look closely enough at the cultural world of women, one will find a locus of women's power that in some way complements that of men. And while she emphasizes the importance of looking at the participation of both men and women in society, her own analysis reinforces the categorical separation of men and women and prevents her from being able to show (except on a very superficial level) how the activities of women articulate with those of men in wider social processes. One is left with the suspicion that perhaps the complementarity of male and female power, so important to Weiner's analysis, resides more explicitly in the logical symmetry of the cosmological(ahistoric)/material(historic) dichotomy it- self, rather than in the culturally constructed Trobriand worldview.

The various examples cited throughout this discussion suggest that one of the overall problems with the political action model is that, embedded in our own cultural con- sciousness, it defines the type of analytic attention given

the 'domains' of social activity culturally attributed to men and women. As was mentioned above, the assumption that political behavior is exclusively male behavior, which feminists have argued so strongly against, derives from the assumption that politics occurs in the 'public' (non-familial) domain of social life which, in turn, is assumed to be exclusively, or primarily, a male domain. Despite feminist contentions about the impact of male bias, what appears to be the real problem is an over-reliance on the domestic/public distinction and the analytic segregation of these domains in the examination of social activities (such as politics) which appear to be exclusive to one or the other. This analytic segregation also constitutes a form of sexual segregation (in terms of the analysis) in that the domestic/public distinction is a fundamentally gendered dichotomy. Feminist argument concerning male bias is actually poised on what amounts to the most superficial level of this problem -- for in shifting the focus to women, the rejection of politics as exclusively male behavior is nonetheless combined with the retention of the domestic/public dichotomy, now more closely associated with a range of other gendered dichotomies.

A number of questions concerning the use (and useful-ness) of the domestic/public dichotomy in analyses of male/female relations and women's roles have been raised by

anthropologists. For instance, Yanagisako (1979) notes that the range of studies of women's domestic activities have drawn our attention to the fact that these activities are not isolated within a separate sphere but have political as well as reproductive consequences. Her discussion emphasizes the fact that we now have too much evidence before us of the extra-domestic implications of women's activities to continue to accept the domestic/public distinction as a reflection of social reality. A similar criticism is expressed by LaFontaine (1981) who argues that the analytic reliance on the domestic/public dichotomy gives the domestic group a false autonomy vis-a-vis the wider community. As she points out, the domestic group is not an independent unit, its existence and form is derived directly from the wider society by virtue of the association of individuals as kin and spouses. The rules that establish domestic groups (rules concerning kinship, marriage, the transmission of property, and the exchange of goods) imply relations with the world. In this sense the domestic group draws its organizational structure from the same set of ideas which constitute the wider society. So too, the allocation of tasks within the domestic unit implies the wider association of men and women with the cultural categories of male and female (LaFontaine 1981:342).

> The domestic group is not 'prior' in any
> sense to the religious and political
> institutions which encapsulate and sustain
> it. The boundaries of the unit are drawn
> in terms of its relations with other units,
> its constitution deriving from society-
> wide divisions such as those of sex and
> generation, and socially accepted insti-
> tutions of property-holding and transmission.
> The division into domestic and public
> which is made in some, but not all, societies,
> is not a description of structural cleavages
> but a symbolic statement whose meaning we
> must interpret in each instance where we
> find it.
>   (LaFontaine 1981:346)

Other anthropologists, notably Reiter (1975), Rosaldo (1981), and Sanday (1974), question the utility of the domestic/public distinction, but they do so from the standpoint of its correlation with a non-political/political dichotomy. In other words, their objection is not to the domestic/public dichotomy per se, but to what they consider a faulty equation of 'domestic' with 'non-political'. As was seen in the earlier discussion, the feminist resolution to this problem is achieved through an expanded notion of politics and the identification of forms of women's political behavior in the domestic domain. But the association of the domestic domain with women, and its opposition to the public domain and men, remains nonetheless conceptually intact.

The problem here is more than just an over-reliance on what appears to be an analytically useful distinction. The

domestic/public dichotomy carries with it a myriad of cultural meanings derived from Western industrial society. It is the underlying ethnocentrism involved in transferring our own cultural categories of 'public' and 'private' that draws some of the strongest criticism.[6] In Western society 'public' and 'private' are integrally linked to notions of 'work' and 'domesticity'. Work and domesticity not only denote conceptually distinct and gendered categories of activities but, separated by time and space, they constitute structurally distinct spheres as well. 'Work' occurs in the public world external to the family unit, while domestic activities related to the maintenance of the family occur in the private world of the individual household. That the cultural evaluations of each of these spheres are notably different (work being valued, domesticity being devalued) has to do with Western assumptions about culture and nature, about gender roles, and about personhood (LaFontaine 1981, M. Strathern 1984). It also has to do with Western culture history, in particular the rise of industrial capitalism and the cultural association made between the value of the individual and payment for labor. In contrast to work performed outside the household, domestic work ('women's work') is unpaid labor and has historically lacked recognition as 'real work'. As M. Strathern (1984) points out, in Western society domesticity is seen to imply a state of dependency for women and an absence of full adult status.

While the structure of (non-domestic) opportunities available to women in Western society has changed markedly over the last fifty years, cultural perceptions and evaluations of domesticity have not. Domestic work is still seen to lack social recognition and value, and women associated primarily with domestic responsibilities are seen as somewhat less than full social persons. Western feminist writers (as well as others) suggest that the traditional structure of domesticity is a means of 'keeping women in their place', reinforcing their dependent status and preventing them from becoming individuals in their own right. In other words, preventing women from participating as full social persons in the public ('work') domain where the social value attached to what are perceived of as culturally creative activities is recognized and reinforced through public prestige structures and monetary compensation.

In anthropology, feminist generated critique suggests that researchers have underestimated the power women have and their role in politics by not adequately investigating the extra-domestic areas in which women participate in decision-making. As long as women are ethnographically depicted as tied to the domestic domain, it is argued, the significant contributions women do make to their societies will go unrecognized. But the very idea that women might be tied to the domestic domain is derived from what

M. Strathern refers to as "the Western denigration of domesticity" (1984:13). That within feminist anthropology women are often discussed in terms of being 'confined to' or 'constrained by' the cultural parameters of the domestic domain; that what falls under the rubric of 'domestic work' is described as menial, as drudgery, or as demeaning to women; and the recurring feminist comment that 'women aren't just mothers and wives', are clear reflections of our culture's devaluation of domestic work. More importantly, such characterizations serve to reinforce this devaluation by assuming its universality. For example, Rosaldo states that the domestic/public dichotomy does not determine cultural stereotypes or evaluations of the sexes "but rather underlies them, to support a very general (and, for women, demeaning) identification or women with domestic life and of men with public life" (1974:24). D. K. Feil criticizes previous accounts of ceremonial exchange events among New Guinea highlanders for the way in which they descriptively confine women to the "menial tasks" of pulling pigs to and from the ceremonial grounds, keeping the area tidy, and providing food for the large gatherings (1978:265). O'Brien's (1984) critique of male bias in Melanesian ethnography suggests that to view women as only mothers, wives, and caretakers, is to intellectually accept the universal subordination of women, and to deny the possibility that women do make significant contributions to their societies above and beyond the nurturance they pro-

vide their families. By countering this view with an
emphasis on 'what women do' she implies that what women do
does not include those activities performed as mothers and
wives -- that somehow looking at what women do directs our
attention away from domestic stereotypes imposed on women
and moves us toward identifying the important contributions
women make to social life.

O'Brien is not alone in assuming that 'important'
contributions to social life occur outside the domestic
domain. Feiminist anthropology as a whole suggests that
women's identity as individuals and social persons depends
on the researchers ability to locate areas outside the
domestic domain where women perform valued activities; or,
failing in this, to at least identify indirect ways in
which women contribute -- via the domestic domain -- to
what are presumed to be he more significant aspects of
social life. As M. Strathern notes, in Western society "to
be a full social person one must be culturally creative"
and this involves, among other things, breaking away from
the domestic circle. Politics and economics are clearly
sacred arenas in our own culture and direct or indirect
involvement in either (or both) represents a measure of
individual achievement, of success, of independence, and of
social value. It is really no wonder, then, that for
feminist anthropologists 'what women do' is most frequently
framed in terms of direct or indirect involvement in either

of these two arenas.

Along with the apparent ethnocentrism, one of the most troubling aspects of feminist use of the domestic/public dichotomy is the credibility it lends to the idea that anthropological analysis of human society can be accomplished by studying men and women separately, that in fact the categorical segregation of men and women is necessary for analysis. Earlier in this discussion it was noted that because the domestic/public distinction is a fundamentally gendered dichotomy this analytic segregation is at the same time a form of sexual segregation. This is perhaps most pronounced in women-focused studies where male bias is identified as a problem with previous research and seemingly resolved by new studies focused on women. Despite feminist contentions, however, the real problem is not male bias but assumptions made by anthropologists that social life is neatly bounded by categorically symmetrical distinctions which are derived, ultimately, from biological distinctions. Ironically, feminist writers try to counter this idea, not by challenging the basic assumptions under-lying the domestic/public dichotomy, but by using this dichotomy to identify the nature of 'women's power' -- seen as defined by women's association with the domestic domain and exclusion from the public (male) domain.

So although many anthropologists writing about women, and specifically about women and power, question the analytic usefulness of the domestic/public dichotomy, it remains implicitly essential to their analyses. This is because the emphasis placed on portraying women as individuals and social actors 'in their own right' requires the identification of distinctly female domains of activity. Those critical of the association of women with the 'domestic domain' (replete with its Western connotations of non-personhood and low status) nonetheless set up analytically equivalent gendered domains.[7] Weiner's study of Trobriand women provides an interesting example of this. She attempts to avoid the domestic/public dichotomy and the analytic problems identified with it, but she does so by constructing a new and essentially equivalent one : the cosmological/material dichotomy. While this has the effect of releasing women from the stigma of being confined to the domestic domain, it buys into the illusion of women's categorical and analytic separation from men. And because this particular dichotomy leaves men behind in the historic material domain of everyday life, it too easily reinforces popular feminist notions about the mystical and transcendent qualities of 'femaleness' and the existence of 'women's culture'.

Over the last several chapters three general themes have been identified as underlying women-focused

anthropology : the association of female status with female biology; the use of 'male bias' as a form of explanation; and the characterization of women's power as derived from an intrinsically female style of (political) behavior occurring in a manifestly female domain of social life. In this chapter it was shown how studies of women and power, in particular, illustrate the convergence of these three themes.

The chapter began by exploring the ideas that form the basis of the political action model in an effort to understand the influence of this model on studies of women and power. It was shown that within this framework increased anthropological emphasis on the individual as the unit of analysis is combined with : the idea that self-interest and competition are the primary motivational forces guiding individual action; the idea that politics permeates all facets of social relations; and the idea that power, as an aspect of politics, is therefore accessible in some measure to all members of society.

Widely accepted as a framework for the analysis of women and power, there is a conspicuous absence of substantive anthropological critique of this model on the part of feminist writers. In examinig why this might be so, it was noted that for feminist researchers the appeal of the political action framework centers on precisely those

aspects that have received the strongest criticism from other anthropologists : the analytic emphasis on the individual (and individualism), on action-strategies, and on self-interest and competition. For researchers interested in women and power, criticism was not directed at the model itself but at the male perspective it projected. Objections to what was (and is) considered a male view of power and politics merges with feminist objectives to take women's lives seriously. Rather than portray them as silent actors and passive participants in a social world constructed by men, attention is given to social worlds constructed by women. The appeal, then, of the political action model centers on the way it accomodates the thematic assumptions of feminist anthropology. On an analytic and interpretive level this model facilitates the portrayal of women as individuals and as social actors in their own right. Through this framework women categorically achieve a form of ethnographic personhood thought to be lacking in male-generated studies. As an intrinsically gendered attribute, 'female power' is seen to be executed through female styles of action that occur in female domains of social life.

Efforts to identify women's power and women's creative contributions to their societies have been prompted to a large extent by the assumption that, within anthropology, male-generated perspectives have historically neglected

and misrepresented women's cultural roles. Pervasive acceptance of the historical impact of male bias actually constitutes the linch-pin for the "anthropology of women". In order to demonstrate the impact of male bias one must show how different the analysis might be without it. While feminist writers seem to accomplish this, they do so by drawing analytic lines of distinction between men and women that are much·bolder than those attributed to male-biased studies. Whereas women might have been neglected in previous studies, the structure of feminist research suggests that men are peripheral or non-essential to studies of women. In other words, compensation for the perceived exclusion of women in anthropological analysis comes in the form of research that excludes men. Clearly the issue of male bias amounts to more that just the accusation of analytic neglect and exclusion of women. It incorporates the belief that biological differences between the sexes account for, and perhaps shape, perceptual differences, creating complementary but categorically distinct male and female social worlds. This alleviates some of the onus of conscious intent that charges of male bias often carry -- male ethnographers do not possess the kind of natural insight into women's lives that female ethnographers have, and therefore, with regard to anthropological reporting on women, one cannot expect the same detail or depth of analysis from men as one can from women. At the same time it provides a rationale for focusing only on women by

creating the illusion that 'women's culture' exists and is particularly accessible,ꞏ through shared biological identity, to female ethnographers.

To speak of 'women's power' is to assume the existence of 'men's power'; to speak of a 'female domain' is to assume the existence of a comparably structured 'male domain'. For feminist writers it is the male/female dyad, defined in terms of biological differences, that guides the identification of cultural boundaries marking differences in men's and women's social roles. Use of the political action framework for the analysis of women and power has contributed to the reification of the domestic/public dichotomy and its association with gender-specific social roles. When applied to research on women this model requires one to think not only in terms of contrasting gendered domains, but also of gendered styles of action.

In an earlier chapter it was suggested that anthropologists' reliance on gendered dichotomies stems from a preoccupation with analytic symmetry and an intellectual attraction to the logical elegance such dichotomies give to interpretations of ethnographic data.[8] But there is more to it than just a preoccupation with with contrast and opposition. Within the genre of women-focused anthropology, the preoccupation with gendered dichotomies stems from a Western feminist preoccupation

with the biological basis of sexual differences and the assumption that such physiological 'facts' are universally recognized and transformed into cultural structures of inequality. This chapter took the argument one step further by showing how anthropologists looking at the cultural world of women, at women's power, at female styles of action, or at female domains, are dependent upon the dichotomies emanating from the male/female dyad because it is this dyad that defines the discourse on women. In other words, the various gendered dichotomies are essential to feminist analysis because, on the surface, they seem to provide evidence for a universal cultural translation of biological distinctions into social distinctions represented by gendered domains of activity. Such 'evidence' in turn lends credibility to the analytic separation of men and women. In this sense 'what women do' has become a sort of catch-phrase for specifying female forms of social action, and the context within which such action occurs has become a de facto female domain. Women may be excluded from male activities, but by looking specifically (and only) at 'what women do' we can identify tangible manifestations of their cultural value. Their cultural value, as it turns out, is as embedded in their biological 'femaleness' as it is in their social 'femaleness' because, ultimately, the former is seen to define the latter. This is why, even for those who question its usefulness, the domestic/public dichotomy is

never very far away, and is often analytically present in a different but equivalent form.

Clearly, we cannot expect to achieve an adequate understanding of women's roles or women's power when we employ analytic perspectives that isolate women categorically, or, when we neglect the cultural ideas that inform perceptions of men and women in a particular society. In feminist anthropology, the importance placed on granting women the analytic status of ethnographic persons has led to the mistaken belief that by doing so -- by focusing on women as subjects in their own right -- we somehow achieve an understanding of indigenous concepts of social personhood. That this is more a feminist than an anthropological achievement is evident insofar as the criteria used for examining (or 'discovering') women's social value bears a marked resemblence to the more general feminist assessment of and objectives for women in Western society. What gets lost here, as several anthropologists have noted in their criticisms of this genre, is the importance of cultural context and a sense of the complexity of social relations as they exist within the social whole, and not as they are thought to exist in the the world of women alone.

In the next chapter attention turns to cultural features of Melanesian societies in order to illustrate the point that there are more fundamental issues concerning native worldview that must be addressed prior to assessing the apparent evidence of female subordination. As Chapter Five will show, the culture area of Melanesia provides us with numerous examples of why women-focused research can only construct a superficial and simplistic picture of women and the societies in which the live. In the process it redirects our attention away from issues concerning power per se, toward the complexities of gender ideologies and the ways such ideologies are manifest in the relations between men and women.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FOUR

1. This view is typified in the works of Bailey 1960, 1969, Banton 1965, Barth 1959, Cohen and Middleton 1967, Fried 1964, Nicholas 1965, Swartz, Turner, and Tuden 1966.

2. See for example, A. Cohen 1969, 1974, 1979, R. Cohen 1970, 1973, Easton 1959, Fried 1964, Winkler 1970.

3. Collier 1974, Lamphere 1974, Rosaldo 1974, 1981, Weiner 1976.

4. Following Weber's (1947) classic distinction between power, authority, and influence, M. G. Smith defines authority as "the right to make a particular decision and command obedience", and power as "the ability to act effectively on persons or things, to make or secure favorable decisions which are not of right allocated to the individuals or their roles" (1960:19). Power can be exercized by influence or force and is seen as inherently competitive. Authority, however, operates within the context of a socially recognized hierarchy of roles, by virtue of which an individual has the legitimate right to make decisions that are binding on the collectivity (Smith 1960, Weber 1947).

5. Collier's "model woman" -- the cold, calculating power-seeker whose actions are directed toward controlling the world around her -- is essentially a cross-cultural projection of the popular Western stereotype of the 'liberated woman'; a stereotype, it should be added, based on cultural assumptions about how women succeed in a 'man's world'.

6. See in particular the discussions presented by LaFontaine 1979, 1981, and M. Strathern 1981, 1984.

7. In addition to those already discussed is LiPuma's (1979) distinction between the pragmatic (female) domain and the ideological (male) domain. In his analysis of the relationship between sexual asymmetry and power in Maring society (Highlands region, Papua New Guinea) he argues that the locus of women's power and influence is the pragmatic domain, and suggests that this dichotomy might be a more appropriate framework for the study of women and power in general.

The point to be emphasized is that all of these dichotomies possess a kind of logical consistency relative to each other and relative to the domestic/ public dichotomy, and this consistency is derived from the male/female dichotomy upon which all of them are based.

Female	Male	
domestic	public	
nature	culture	(Ortner)
cosmological	material	(Weiner)
pragmatic	ideological	(LiPuma)

8. Somewhat similar views are expressed by LaFontaine 1981, and M. Strathern 1980, 1981.

CHAPTER FIVE

FEMINIST ANTHROPOLOGY
AND THE CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

This chapter argues that cultural theories of gender
are the conceptual key to understanding the social organi-
zation of relations between the sexes, and that this must
be the starting point for examining the position, status,
or power of women. In other words, if women's power is a
relevant issue, it is so only in the wider context of
culturally constructed theories about gender identity and
gender relations.

Recent popularity of gender studies within feminist
anthropology suggests a shift in orientation away from
women-focused studies toward a more wholistic or balanced
examination of the cultural configurations of male/female
relations. This shift in focus, however, is somewhat
deceptive as research tends to view 'gender systems' as the
ideological basis supporting structural arrangements that
treat women as inferior. In many ways, feminist interest
in the topic of gender is depicted as the logical extension
of feminist theory on women.

Part of the problem here is what anthropologists (in general) mean when they speak of 'gender'. As recent work indicates, there is a tendency to conceptualize gender in terms of our own biological model of physiological differences between the sexes. 'Gender' and sexual (physiological) identity come to be treated as synonomous; and 'gender constructs' are viewed as the cultural translation of biological differences rather than as the cultural construction of differences that transcend the biological facts. That the topic of gender often becomes a contemporary gloss for studies of women is not surprising insofar as feminist interest in gender is derived from and formulated around the same set of premises which informed the earlier focus on female status and women's power. From a feminist perspective gender constructs tend to be treated as a kind of ideological floor-plan illuminating patterns of male dominance and female subordination. The same assumptions still inform the research, the same questions are still being asked with the same commitment to the programmatic objectives of feminist theory.[1]

This chapter takes a closer look at ethnographic data from Melanesian societies to illustrate the point that there are more fundamental questions concerning native worldview that must be asked prior to trying to assess the behavioral evidence (or lack thereof) of female subordination or powerlessness, or, conversely, the existence of

female power. One must first look to the ideological constructs which give shape and meaning to cultural notions of personhood and gender (and hence give meaning to social roles and behavior). Indeed, topics such as female subordination and female power tend to fade into the background as one begins to look more closely at cultural patterns of gender definition in Melanesian societies. What emerges as important is how native theory about gender guides social life. The strong cultural emphasis placed on the acquisition of gender identity, particularly with regard to males, not only calls into question our own notions about gender and how we study gender cross-culturally, but it also suggests that for Melanesian societies a more relevant starting point for understanding the 'position' or 'status' of women may well be men. While the previous chapters identified problems inherent in women-focused research, this chapter examines how, on the level of indigenous culture theory as well as on the level of anthropological interpretation, the ethnography of Melanesia provides a compelling counterpoint to feminist perspectives in anthropology.

Despite its immense cultural and environmental diversity, Melanesia displays a fairly consistent and per-vasive theme of sexual polarity which manifests itself in a variety of pronounced and vivid ways through myth, ritual, and daily life. Cultural expressions of this polarity

range from beliefs concerning female pollution and dangers associated with sexual contact, overt displays of antagonism and hostility between men and women, dramatic rituals of male initiation and secret male cults, to the virtual exclusion of women from decision-making contexts (political, economic, and ritual), and general cultural perceptions which denigrate the capabilities of women and the value of their labor. While variation exists in the degree of intensity and elaboration of this polarity, the ethnographic literature on Melanesian societies provides numerous striking illustrations of an overarching cosmology which emphasizes male dominance and control over women, over social relations, and over material resources. Prominent cultural patterns such as patrilineal descent, warfare, and ceremonial exchange systems provide much of the structural support of this cosmology, while variations on symbolic themes cocerning the body, gender, work, marriage, and personhood give shape and meaning to social relations.

The sexual polarity in Melanesian societies stems from what amounts to a region-wide cultural premise that males and females are radically different in their physiological and psychological make-up, and that fluids and essences of women are dangerous and inimical to men. Cosmologically grounded in theories about life-processes, this premise is the foundation of pollution ideologies which mandate

varying degrees of social separation of men and women and, with this, a cultural preoccupation with gender contrast and opposition -- not only as regards male/female interaction, but human involvement with the material and immaterial world as well. Taken separately, data from individual Melanesian societies show a great deal of diversity in the portrayal of what approaches a cultural obsession on the part of men with the possibility of sickness, debilitation, and death through prolonged or excessive contact with women. Looking at this data as a whole, however, we begin to see a region-wide preoccupation with the cultural construction of gender.

Anthropologists have long drawn our attention to the ways gender distinctions seem to permeate Melanesian societies. Throughout the region culture theories of procreation, human development, health and illness, as well as success and failure in daily pursuits invoke a powerful imagery of the interaction of human substances such as blood, milk, and semen with the natural environment and with the social affairs of human beings. This is particularly apparent in beliefs concerning the polluting qualities of women, and restrictions surrounding the handling and consumption of certain foods. For the most part, the practices ensuing from these beliefs are perceived to protect men from women, and anthropologists have given a good deal of attention to the idea that such be-

liefs serve to reinforce and institutionalize women's subordinate status.[2] Thus, it has been argued that despite the overt separation of the sexes in daily life, men cannot symbolically separate themselves from the biological and regenerative powers women possess; that through their control over social and ceremonial affairs men are able to publicly deny what they privately know to be the 'natural' superiority of women (Weiner 1976, Meigs 1984).

From the standpoint of recent feminist interest in the study of gender, Melanesian societies are particularly alluring because they suggest social worlds premised on clearly demarcated gender distinctions. A closer look at native theory about these distinctions, however, reveals a great deal of ambivalence about the categories male and female, and a sense that what may appear to the outside observer as clearly drawn boundaries between maleness and femaleness are at best problematic, and are in fact culturally perceived as problematic. Beliefs concerning female pollution, for example, do not stand alone but combine with a range of other cultural features to partially offset this ambivalence, most notably : beliefs about certain foods (and crops) and their relationship to the development of gender identity; the production of valued objects and their acquisition and distribution through exchange; various forms of induced physical trauma (e.g. nose-bleeding, cane-swallowing, tongue-bleeding,

scarification, and penis-bleeding) primarily involving young boys and adult men, but sometimes (in the case of nose-bleeding and scarification) also involving young girls (Lewis 1980, Hays and Hays 1982). What research from this region suggests is that for many Melanesian societies gender does not merely rest on the replication of categories, but appears to be an ongoing cultural process of creating and recreating gender identity; a process that is consciously directed, closely monitored, and perhaps never completely controlled (Poole 1982, 1984).

While native theories about the negative properties of human substance, such as menstrual blood, provide insight into the structure of relations between men and women, this is only part of the picture. Added to this must be an understanding of the ways in which human substance is also seen to forge individual identity (both male and female) and how it is mediated through objects such as land, pigs, food, and shells to create and extend ties of group affiliation (Langness 1974, A. Strathern 1972).

Of particular interest here is the degree of cultural attention given to processes by which young men attain manhood. Data on the occurence in various areas of Melanesia of male blood-letting (Hogbin 1972, Lewis 1980, Tuzin 1982), of ritualized male homosexuality (Herdt 1984, Kelly 1976, Schieffelin 1976, 1982), of male transvestism

(Bateson 1958), and male initiation ceremonies (Allen 1967, 1984, Read 1954, 1965) point to the deeper complexity of gender ideologies.[3] The widespread belief (found primarily throughout lowland and coastal New Guinea) that, unlike girls who 'naturally' become women, boys do not automatically become men, suggests that male identity is perceived as fundamentally problematic. It is problematic because it must be acquired, either directly from older men via the transfer of semen, or indirectly through contact with cultural objects (such as bull-roarers or sacred flutes) or consumption of foods believed to be imbued with substances vital to the acquisition of male identity. In addition, behaviors involving purging, purification, and blood-letting that recur periodically in the lives of adult men in some Melanesian societies indicate that 'maleness' or manhood, once achieved, must be consciously maintained.

Anthropological investigations of male initiation and male ritual in these societies have drawn attention to the ways in which such rituals are linked to other facets of social life. Examples include the building of male solidarity and its role in maintaining the viability and security of the local group; providing a context for inter-group exchange activities; and providing a structural framework through which the behavior of men and women toward each other is both defined and reinforced.[4] More recent research on the range of male ritual traditionally

practiced in this region has shown that encompassing all of this is a cultural focus on the creation of men (Herdt 1982, 1984). As Keesing (1982) states, male initiation in Melanesia constitutes :

> ... a graded progression to the manhood
> that must be created by acts of nurtur-
> ance, ordeal, purification and instruc-
> tion. Initiates learn how to be men,
> how to protect themselves from the dangers
> of pollution.
>   (1982:8)

The cultural interventions that occur to ensure that boys become men is one prominent example of the way concepts of gender permeate and guide the social lives of individuals. But not all societies in Melanesia perform male initiation or have secret male cults (the most common context in which these particular cultural interventions occur). In the absence of these activities, however, are other features which similarly suggests a world in which gender is more than just a physiological identity and more than just a little problematic, particularly for men. For example, the Highlands region of Papua New Guinea, where neither male initiation or rituals of manhood (involving blood-letting, purging, or the transfer of semen) occur, stands in marked contrast to much the rest of Melanesia. Instead of these practices one sees a great deal of emphasis placed on the accumulation and exchange of objects of value such as pigs and pearlshells. Men control these

objects, and through this control men build social identities and establish reputations for wealth and generosity upon which they construct personal networks and a political power base. Yet despite this absence of male-focused ritual practices, beliefs about the dangers of female pollution, about the debilitating effects sexual contact has on men (and the consequent necessity for residential separation of men and women), and the exclusion of women from public decision-making contexts, do exist in Highlands societies and in some cases appear to take a more prominent focus than in other regions (Langness 1974, Meggitt 1964). Some anthropologists have argued that Highlands societies seem to have replaced male-focused rituals found elsewhere in Melanesia with an elaborate system of ceremonial exchange, but within this system attention is still directed toward the creation of men -- in this case it is big-men, or men of status, rather than the ritual construction of male identity (Herdt 1984, Lindenbaum 1984). In addressing the conspicuous absence of ritualized male homosexuality in the Highlands, for instance, Lindenbaum suggests that the emphasis on the accumulation and exchange of wealth objects, characteristic of traditional Highland societies, is thematically linked to the ritual exchange of semen among traditional societies in the lowland areas of New Guinea and elsewhere in Melanesia; that the former actually represents an historic transformation of the latter (1984:341-2). In other words, while each regional

variation represents a different mode of gender formation, both constitute cultural efforts to "make men", and in the process obviate the problematics and ambiguity inherent in Melanesian gender ideologies.

Clearly women are not participants in these exclusively male activities. But women are often symbolically represented (Schieffelin 1982, A. Strathern 1999). Since women are not physically present do we discount their symbolic representation as merely a prop supporting the inculcation of beliefs about male superiority by young boys? Recent discussions of Melanesian gender ideologies suggest otherwise as they indicate how these male rituals are not, after all, exclusively about men -- they are about larger issues concerning growth, well-being, and becoming a proper social person (issues of vital interest to men and women alike). In a sense, then, the 'making of men' is also implicitly about the making of women. For Melanesia, it is precisely the prominence of male-focused ritual behavior that suggests that if we are comprehend women's place in these societies we must begin by exploring the larger cultural picture, a picture which encompasses processes of gender formation.

It is not the intent here to present a model for the study of gender, but to explore a way of viewing gender

that might enable us to comprehend the organization of social relations (and through this the 'position' or 'status' of women) in societies different from our own; and to do this without invoking our own culture theories concerning biology, hierarchy, and the inequities of male/female relations. This is a particularly difficult task, one that requires us to temporarily suspend our own culturally compelling knowledge about gender, about what constitutes the cultural categories of male and female, about sexuality, about the veracity of 'biological facts' and the relation of these 'facts' to symbolic and cosmological phenomena. As this chapter will try to show, gender constructs are not merely definitions of 'maleness' and 'femaleness', they are part and parcel of a worldview which, among other things, does provide definitions of male and female. Founded ultimately in the cosmological dimension of social life, the cultural construction of gender has to do with process, with time, with the material and immaterial world, with birth and death, and with the progress of life between these two inevitabilities.[5] As Poole (1981) notes in his discussion of gender constructs among Bimin-Kuskusmin (West Sepik, Papua New Guinea) :

> ... gender refers to ideological con-
> structs that "produce" male, female,
> and androgynous categories on the basis
> of selective cultural perceptions of
> ethnopsychological characteristics deemed
> natural and significant. This concrete
> naturalness invests gender constructs
> with an aura of factuality and renders

them fertile for metaphoric (symbolic)
elaboration and extension vis-a-vis a
diversity of more or less "sex-linked"
socio-cultural phenomena. They pertain
invariably, but not exclusively, to the
conceptual differentiation of men and
women. Gender constructs then are
systems of meaning, vehicles for a multi-
tude of apparently diverse ideas and
values, that are anchored in (cultural
representations of) "nature" and are
implemented in diverse aspects of socio-
cultural life.

(1981:158)

As anthropologists we come to understand the implica-

tions of the cultural construction of gender not by

contrasting and comparing women and men (and what each

does), or by imposing onto other systems of thought our own

dualistic associations of women with nature and men with

culture -- and the seemingly infinite permutations of this

formula. As the earlier discussion argued, while such

equations lend a kind of symmetry to the analysis the

resulting picture may bear little resemblance to the

cultural reality to which they are applied.

The remainder of this chapter will elaborate on this

point by examining a recent analysis of gender among the

Hua (Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea) presented by Anna

Meigs (1976, 1984) in light of other ethnographic

discussions of gender construction in this region. With a

few exceptions, the Hua fit the general cultural pattern

identified by anthropologists for (traditional) New Guinea

Highlands societies.[6] Prominent features include .: residential segregation of the sexes; existence of men's cults; male fear of menstrual or parturitional fluids; various rituals to protect and expel such substances from the bodies of men; general rules regarding the avoidence of women by men. Meigs states that these features,and Hua food rules associated with these features, support the widely accepted description of New Guinea ideology as one of overarching male superiority and power. She adds, however, that there is another underlying dimension to this ideology that suggests a deeply embedded insecurity on the part of Hua men.

> Beneath the arrogant male ideological stance,
> the ground is soft. Careful study reveals a
> second facet to male thinking -- an attitude
> of reproductive impotence and sexual inferiority.
> (1984:31)

Meigs' work is interesting because it incorporates the general premises of a feminist perspective : first, that physiological differences between men and women are the determinants of cultural perceptions of gender, and second, that the apparent male dominance in Hua society derives from male recognition and envy of female reproductive superiority. At the same time she tries to frame her interpretation in terms of the cultural construction of gender. That she fails in this has to do with the analytic framework she employs and her reliance on a Western psycho-

biological model which she uses as a basis for her interpretation of Hua conceptualizations of gender.

According to Meigs, gender constructs in Hua society are extremely restrictive. Both sexes feel constrained by gender roles and both sexes, at different times and in different ways, "imitate" the opposite sex. Although men do so more frequently than women, Meigs constends that all such imitative practices constitute conscious efforts to break through, or "blur" the boundaries of gender. In her discussion she identifies four "ethnographic facts" about Hua society that pose problems for anthropologists. First, Hua males imitate menstruation, a process they apparently loathe in women. Second, Hua males believe they can become pregnant, another condition they apparently loathe in women. Third, Hua males secretly eat foods associated with korogo, the "juicy, soft, fertile, fast-growing qualities of women", and women eat foods which are identified with hakeri'a, the "dry, hard, infertile, slow-growing qualities of men" (1976:394). Fourth, despite the extreme opposition between the sexes in Hua society, post-menapausal women are initiated into male society and take on male vulnerability to female pollution; similarly, old men lose their vulnerability and become "like women", no longer constrained by the food prohibitions that apply to adult men. Around these facts Meigs weaves her argument that Hua feel constrained by gender boundaries and continually attempt to

blur the lines of distinction. Accordingly, it is Hua males who feel the most constrained. Recognizing women's reproductive superiority, Hua men secretly envy women and are compelled to imitate the quintessentially female processes of menstruation and pregnancy.

The ethnographic facts identified by Meigs are not unique to Hua society but occur (with varying frequency) elsewhere in Melanesia. On the following pages each of these facts will be considered in light of other ethnographic reports of similar practices. Drawing on recent discussions of male-focused ritual and gender construction in Melanesia it will be argued that rather than fighting against the rigidity of gender boundaries, Hua are collectively involved in creating and recreating these boundaries; that the feelings of constraint Meigs attributes to Hua are perhaps more appropriately viewed as expressions of ambivalence about their control over processes through which social identity is forged.

The first ethnographic fact considered by Meigs is "male menstruation". According to Meigs, the Hua view menstrual blood as dangerous, but they also recognize it as a source of growth and strength for women. Girls seem to grow more rapidly than boys and this faster growth is attributed to menstrual blood. Thus, while female menstruation is considered repugnant and dangerous to males

it is also seen as an enviable process contributing to growth and good health. To Meigs it is this envy that prompts Hua men to imitate menstruation, either through various forms of blood-letting (nose-bleeding, cane-swallowing, drawing blood from cuts placed on the legs, stomach, or lower back), or through the consumption of plants containing red juice.

The issue of male imitation of menstruation is not new to Melanesian ethnography.[7] Anthropologists have frequently drawn parallels between male blood-letting practices and female menstruation, suggesting that the former represents a symbolic menarche.[8] Some anthropologists disagree with this interpretation, however, citing the fact that in their own ethnographic work no indigenous connection was ever made between the two, and they have no data indicating the relevance of this interpretation for the society they studied (Hays and Hays 1982, Lewis 1980).

Gilbert Lewis (1980), who worked among the Gnau (West Sepik area, Papua New Guinea), is particularly critical of the imputation on the part of New Guinea ethnographers that blood-letting practices among men constitute an imitation of menstruation. Among the Gnau, both boys and girls undergo puberty rites which involve penis-bleeding for boys and scarification for girls. Lewis comments that while it is tempting to interpret Gnau penis-bleeding as a symbolic

menarche, Gnau men nonetheless told him they had never thought of it in that way. He suggests that it would be a distortion to say that we should interpret the rites for boys as a reflection of men's envy of women's ability to menstruate, or that male rites are a 'cultural' means by which men seek to prove that they can match the 'natural' powers of women. To interpret the act of penis-bleeding in such a way requires a type of contextual isolation of cultural behaviors that, in the case of Gnau penis-bleeding during puberty rites, excludes all of the other activities performed on the same day that are also performed for girls, "and leaves only the blood flowing from the genitals, and the first time, as elements for interpretation" (1980:110). Noting the various forms of male blood-letting practiced in other Melanesian societies (for instance, penis-bleeding among the Wogeo and the Arapesh, nose-bleeding among several groups in the Eastern Highlands, bleeding of the tongue or gums among the Iatmul and the Wogeo, and scarification among the Iatmul)[9], Lewis asks whether all forms of blood-letting among boys and adult men constitute an imitation of menstruation. In other words, are all forms of male blood-letting weighted equally by anthropologists or are some forms, such as penis-bleeding and nose-bleeding, more amenable to this interpretation than others such as scarification?

> At what point does one begin to be uncertain
> when it is the observer left to decide about
> imitation or mimicry on the sole evidence of
> his eyes?
>
> (Lewis 1980:111)

The question of imitation, of how anthropologists establish evidence for interpreting certain cultural behaviors as imitative acts, is important to any consideration of the issue of 'male menstruation'. But there is another less frequently recognized facet to this issue a well. Built into the notion that male blood-letting is an imitation of menstruation is the assumption that we already know what menstruation is about in these societies, that menstruation is culturally perceived as a cleansing process, a 'natural' means of removing impurities and polluting agents from the bodies of women. Lacking this ability, it is argued, men must culturally construct a process similar to what nature provided women. The interpretation of male blood-letting as 'male menstruation' is generally based on explanations of male informants who say that men perform the bleeding to remove harmful substances from their bodies. In disputing this interpretation anthropologists note that, despite informants explanations, no indigenous correlation is made between male blood-letting and female menstruation. Rather than assume that a correlation nonetheless exists on some unconscious level, it would seem that anthropologists need to look more closely at indigenous views of menstruation and, more

importantly, at how both male blood-letting and female menstruation are situated in cultural theories about life processes.

Lewis' work is particularly instructive on this point. He notes that Gnau do not view menstruation as a means of removing harmful impurities from the blood or bodies of women. But they do say that this is the purpose of penis-bleeding for boys at puberty and adult men in certain circumstances. It is important here to consider the nature of the impurities males remove from their bodies. Slow growth in boys and frequent or persistent illness in men are seen by Gnau as indicators of "bad blood". "Bad blood" is almost always a result of prolonged contact with women and thus it is a derivative form of female pollution. At puberty young boys must be cleansed of the residual aspects of mother's blood acquired at birth, as well as other female substances ("female essences") absorbed through close contact of boys with their mother and other female kin during the early years of their lives. Puberty marks the end of this contact for boys, but at the same time it marks the onset of sexual contact with women and continued vulnerability to female pollution. For adult men, "bad blood" results from excessive contact with wives or carelessness in the conduct of sexual relations.

So while the Gnau do frame the act of penis-bleeding around notions of bodily impurities that must be released to ensure proper growth and general well-being for boys and men, female menstruation does not appear to carry the same set of cultural meanings -- except insofar as both are seen to promote the healthy development and transformation of young boys and girls into adult men and women. And here one must look at the wider cultural picture. How this transformation is accomplished and its success depends on more than penis-bleeding (or other male blood-letting practices) and menstruation. It also involves the acquisition of knowledge, the avoidence of certain foods (as well as temporary reversals of some food prohibitions), and circumspect contact with the opposite sex. For males as well as females this transformation involves the taking on of responsibilities which are associated simultaneously with gender identity and adulthood. It is in this context that Lewis explores the cultural meanings attached to Gnau blood-letting practices. Although bothered by the debilitating effects of female pollution, Gnau men are less concerned than other groups (such as the Hua) with potential contamination through sexual contact. Rather than linking the need to bleed with the dangers associated with genital sex and the expulsion of female pollution, bleeding (among Gnau men) is linked to manhood and to participation in rituals men control; with, as Lewis notes, attributes of the whole (social) person in mind, rather

than sex the in genital sense.   Men perform penis-bleeding

after their participation in ritual activities in order to

protect their wives and children from potentially dangerous

residues of their ritual state.   In doing so, Gnau men

recognize :

> ... that there is a balance to be protected
> between the dangers of women for the success-
> ful outcome of what men do in rites, and the
> need to preserve women and children from the
> assimilated hot danger intrinsic to the
> powers involved in ritual activities.
> (Lewis 1980:133)

Rather than viewing it as an imitative act men perform out

of envy of the 'natural' powers of women and to reinforce

beliefs about male superiority, Lewis suggests that penis-

bleeding among the Gnau is best understood as an act of

personal and collective responsibility.

> Penis-bleeding is an act in part of re-
> sponsibility for the well-being of the
> person as a whole and his growth, in
> part of responsibility for the well-
> being of his dependents and those he has
> contact with.
> (1980:133)

The issue of context, like the issue of imitation, is

particularly important when considering male blood-letting

practices in Melanesia.   As Lewis argues, interpretations

of male blood-letting as 'male menstruation' depend on the

contextual isolation of certain behaviors (penis-bleeding,

nose-bleeding) and the further selection of particular

aspects associated with these behaviors (such as pollution beliefs, secrecy, and the exclusion of women) for analytic emphasis. As he notes for the Gnau :

> ... penis-bleeding could be isolated from
> its more diffuse context, and by mistaking
> that context we could put emphasis on penis
> rather than bleeding, look for expression
> of something about the sexes or sex rather
> than something about blood, or growth, or
> ritual heat.
>
> (1980:132)

On a general level, then, Lewis' work suggests that instead of expressing something about gender relations and sexual asymmetry, male blood-letting is an aspect of gender construction. In other words, the analytic focus shifts away from the <u>act</u> of male blood-letting to cultural theories on the role of human substance in procreation, in the development of both the physical and the social person, and in the acquisition of gender identity and adulthood. Cultural interventions (such as male blood-letting) in life-processes emphasize the manipulation of these substances -- and the objective here is not just removing dangerous negative substances (such as female pollution) but also acquiring a proper balance of positive substances seen to promote growth and health.

The contextual isolation of male blood-letting prac-tices that Lewis speaks of forms the basis of Meigs' discussion of 'male menstruation' among the Hua. In her

analysis, male bleeding becomes an isolated imitative act prompted by somewhat contradictory motives : fear of female pollution and envy of the 'natural' powers of women. Viewed in this manner, Meigs is able to use male blood-letting as evidence for what she argues is Hua dissatisfaction with overly restrictive gender boundaries. In contrast to Lewis' work, which suggests that male blood-letting is part of a larger process of gender construction, Meigs' analysis suggests that the cultural construction of gender amounts to acts of imitation of the opposite sex. Clearly it is difficult not to think in terms of imitation when considering 'male menstruation'. The same is true for 'male pregnancy' -- the second ethnographic fact Meigs identifies as evidence of the rigidity of Hua gender constructs.

What Meigs describes as 'male pregnancy' is identified as kupa by the Hua. According to Meigs, kupa refers to "the condition of being pregnant but unable to give birth" (1984:51). The abdomen of the afflicted man becomes progressively distended as the intrusive element, envisioned as a 'blood clot' believed to have been accidently or unwittingly ingested by him, grows and develops fetal characteristics. Unless action is taken to counter the condition of kupa, the abdomen will eventually burst and cause death.

The Hua identify three possible causes of _kupa_. First, _kupa_ may result if a man were to eat food touched or stepped over by a menstruating woman, or a woman recently married into the community. Second, if a man were to eat possum -- one of the strongest male food prohibitions among Hua concerns the eating of possum (an animal seen by Hua as possessing quintessentially female characteristics). And third, _kupa_ can be caused by sorcery, in particular, a form of sorcery called _kembige_ which involves the introduction into the victim's food of a fragment soaked in menstrual blood. The primary countermeasure for _kupa_ involves blood-letting (drawing blood from cuts placed on the legs, stomach, or lower back).

As with male menstruation, Meigs sees _kupa_ an another form of men imitating women. But a closer look at Meigs' description raises questions which make her correlation between _kupa_ and female pregnancy increasingly problematic. For instance, the very definition of _kupa_ ("the condition of being pregnant but unable to give birth") indicates an aberrent condition, not a normal (female) pregnancy. Someone with _kupa_ is afflicted and always perceived of as a victim. Regardless of how loathesome and distasteful Hua men (and perhaps women) may view pregnancy, it does not carry the fearsome negative connotations of _kupa_. Furthermore, Meigs notes she was given several descriptions of the occurence of _kupa_ in females, which indicates that

this is not an exclusively male condition, (are those women afflicted with kupa also imitating female pregnancy?). Meigs' attempt to explain kupa as a male imitation of pregnancy leads her to the circuitious speculation that males believe they can become pregnant because "they are highly motivated for psychological reasons to do so" (1976:397). And the basis for this motivation is a secret desire on the part of men to be like women.

> It should be emphasized that kupa is a feared and abhorred condition. Yet one cannot resist suggesting that it is also desired. All the facts deny the premise that males can become pregnant. I submit that the reason males believe in the fake fetuses provided by the curers, is that they have strong psychological reasons to do so. They have a will to believe that they are fertile.
>
> (1984:57)

Meigs offers no serious evidence that Hua males in fact desire the condition of kupa. And one has to ask, (with or without such evidence), why would men desire a condition that leads to almost certain death? Why would men construct a process for imitating women that involves intimate contact with substances considered most lethal to them (menstrual blood and possum[10])? Finally, if men really do desire this condition, why is it initiated through the negative behavior of others (i.e. eating food that has either been handled by a menstruating woman or actually contains menstrual blood)?

In Melanesia, beliefs about male pregnancy do not appear to be very widespread, though they have been reported for some groups located in the same geographical region as the Hua. According to Newman and Boyd (1982) 'male pregnancy' among the Awa (Eastern Highlands, Papua New Guinea) results from lack of restraint or errors in sexual conduct.[11] A man may become afflicted if he indulges in sexual intercourse too frequently or if he has sexual contact with a menstruating woman. Among Awa, the condition of male pregnancy is thought to be produced when a man's penis comes into direct contact with "womb blood" and the womb blood moves up the man's urethra and mixes with semen. This process causes a man to become "like a pregnant woman", but because men lack a womb, a man so afflicted will die if appropriate measures aren't taken to cure him (Newman and Boyd 1982:277). Similar to the Hua, the Awa cure for this condition involves bleeding the afflicted man at several points over the surface of his body (though among the Awa, blood is also drawn from the penis).

In contrast to Meigs, Newman and Boyd do not refer to this condition as 'male pregnancy' (though they do acknowledge that other anthropologists have used this term for similar practices), nor do they note any desire expressed or alluded to by Awa men to acquire this condition. Instead, they discuss this condition in terms of its

place in the context of male initiation, where initiates are instructed on matters concerning sexual relations and cautioned against carelessness in the conduct of sexual encounters. The authors note that, according to Awa, failure of men to take proper care with regard to sexual intercourse will not inevitably result in this condition. Nonetheless it always remains a possibility, and it is this possibility, along with appropriate measures of caution, that is impressed upon the young initiates.

What is interesting about Newman and Boyd's discussion is that by not referring to this condition as 'male pregnancy' they avoid the implicit correlation with female pregnancy and the implication that men are imitating women. (Similar, in this sense, to Lewis' discussion of male blood-letting rather than 'male menstruation'.) What we see instead is where this condition is situated in the (Awa) structure of cultural knowledge about life-processes, about manhood, and about adulthood.

And the idea of personal and collective responsibility that Lewis suggested as the basis for Gnau blood-letting is indicated as well in Newman and Boyd's discussion of how Awa initiates are instructed on the importance of proper behavior for themselves and those they come in contact with. In other words, the occurrence of the condition described as 'male pregnancy' is seen by Awa to result from

some form of carelessness, a transgression by the individual of his personal responsibility for his own well-being and that of those around him.

The difference between Meigs analysis and those of Lewis, and Newman and Boyd point again to the issue of context and the degree to which certain behaviors are selected out for analytic emphasis and thus become isolated from the larger cultural picture. It should be noted that part of the reason interpretations of 'male menstruation' and 'male pregnancy' seem to work is because beliefs about female pollution are often analytically isolated as well, taken as a kind of cultural fact that supports ideologies of male dominance and female inferiority. For Melanesian societies in particular it is rather easy to suggest that pollution beliefs serve to keep women in a categorically subordinate status by restricting their participation in social life. However, in several recent analyses of Melanesian pollution beliefs, the underlying theme of protection and responsibility has also been suggested as the basis for actions women take to ensure that men do not come into contact with female pollution. Newman and Boyd, for instance, describe how, during the seclusion segment of female initiation, Awa girls are instructed on their responsibility to protect their husband and his patrikin from harm caused by contact with female substances (1981:264). In their discussion of pollution beliefs in

Highland New Guinea societies, Hage and Harary (1981) state that women express their concern for their husband's and kinsfolk's well-being through the behavioral precautions they take to avoid endangering them. M. Strathern notes this as well in her discussion of menstrual taboos among Melpa :

> Women regard the taboos which they observe
> not as an oppression but as a means by
> which they can protect their menfolk (sons,
> husbands), as they put it : so that the
> 'good work of the men' is not spoiled. It
> is a bad, careless, lazy woman, they say,
> who does not pay proper attention to the
> rules.
>
> (1972:172)

As was noted earlier, cultural notions of gender and personhood in Melanesia display a pronounced belief in the value and power of human substances (such as blood and semen) in building individual identity and transferring part of the self to others. But such substances are not the only vehicles through which personhood is expressed and conveyed -- food figures prominently as a vehicle of transfer, as do other objects accorded special cultural value.[12] This brings us to the third 'ethnographic fact' identified by Meigs : the consumption by Hua males of 'female foods' and the (somewhat less frequent) consumption by Hua females of 'male foods'.

Similar to the discussion of 'male menstruation' and 'male pregnancy', Meigs argues that the consumption of (prohibited) foods identified with the opposite sex represents Hua dissatisfaction with gender boundaries and efforts to imitate the opposite sex. But what are the boundaries defining Hua notions of male and female? As Meigs' analysis indicates, key to understanding Hua gender constructs is the concept of nu, a vital essence present in some degree in all human beings. Bodily substances are seen as the constituent elements of nu. Semen and menstrual blood are the most intimate substances and thus are the most potent manifestations of an individual's nu, but nu is also present in a person's breath, hair, fingernails, feces, and urine, as well as in footprints and shadows (Meigs 1984). It is the Hua concept of nu that links Meigs' four ethnographic facts, not as separate imitative behaviors, but as part of a larger process involving the cultural manipulation of substances deemed essential to the social and physical progress of human life. In order to situate the remaining discussion we must first look more closely at the concept of nu.

According to Hua, an individual's nu content varies with age and with gender. Males have a relatively small amount of nu, as evidenced by the fact that as children they grow and develop more slowly than females and have difficulty maintaining adequate vitality as adults.

Females have a greater amount of <u>nu</u> than males, hence they grow faster, age slower, and have less difficulty maintaining their vitality during their adult lives. At the same time, however, this greater amount of <u>nu</u> that women inherently possess is seen as somewhat excessive and contributes to the dangers men associate with contact with women or female substances.

Most tangibly manifested in the form of blood, sweat, and sexual fluids, <u>nu</u> substances are readily transferred between persons. In addition to the transfer that occurs through sexual contact, some of an individual's <u>nu</u> is incorporated into any living thing a person invests effort in growing, such as children, pigs, and certain garden produce. In a similar sense, the preparation of food involves an infusion of the <u>nu</u> of the preparer into the food being prepared. This applies as well to hunting : in the act of killing, a man transfers some of his <u>nu</u> to the animal he kills. Food, then, constitutes a major vehicle for the transfer of <u>nu</u> between persons. As Meigs notes, every act of <u>nu</u> transfer has two possible effects : it can cause the recipient's body <u>kosi</u>, "to grow, increase in weight, strength and vitality," or <u>kevaro</u>, "to become stunted, dry out, whither, decrease in weight, strength and vitality" (1984:40). The positive or negative value attributed to <u>nu</u> transfer depends on the particular context and the social relationships of the persons involved (Meigs

1976, 1984).

Among the Hua gender differences are attributed to variation in nu content. But this is only part of the picture. Hua notions regarding nu content and intrinsic sexual differences find further cultural elaboration in what Meigs refers to as the "korogo-hakeri'a classification of all natural phenomena" (1984:73). All plants, animals, and humans are classified as either korogo : soft, juicy, fast-growing, fertile, cool; or hakeri'a : hard, dry, slow-growing, infertile, hot. The labelling of something according to these two categories is determined by its nu content. Thus, women are designated as korogo, men as hakeri'a.

For both males and females, a strong healthy body and a proper growth rate are dependent upon the regulation of nu content. It has already been mentioned that all human beings are born with some degree of nu but the amount varies according to gender -- males have only a small amount of nu, while females seem to possess an excess. Both of these conditions (insufficient and excessive quantities of nu) are seen to have potentially damaging effects on an individual's growth, development and general well-being. Thus throughout their lives, men and women continually manipulate the nu content of their bodies in order to acquire and maintain an appropriate balance. One

aspect of the manipulation of nu content is the intentional adjustment of one's korogo-hakeri'a state through the consumption of foods classified in the category opposite of that of the consumer. In other words, male (hakeri'a) consumption of korogo foods, and female (korogo) consumption of hakeri'a foods.

The efficacy of certain foods for the promotion and development of social identity is not unique to Hua. Throughout Melanesia one is consistently reminded that few foods are neutral. Nearly all foods have relative values associated with them which make their use and consumption right or wrong for persons in certain social categories or relationships, or by persons in particular situations or social contexts. Rules about the use of certain foods affect the person to whom they apply in such a way as to reinforce an awareness of an aspect of his or her identity. Thus, while the availability of particular foods may not change, the pattern of consumption and the range of consumers may shift periodically as individuals move through various life-cycle categories (such as bachelors vs married men), or life events (such as pregnant women vs non-pregnant women), or ritual contexts. Some foods may be permanently prohibited to men or to women once they have reached adulthood. For example, taro among the Bimin-Kuskusmin (West Sepik region of New Guinea) is considered the paramount cultigen in ritual significance and as such

is planted, harvested, and consumed only by initiated men (Poole 1981). As many anthropologists have noted, a prominent theme running through the varied range of food rules is that of sequence -- a recognition of, and association with, the kind of food and the development of the person (Lewis 1980, Schieffelin 1976, Wagner 1967).

This is particularly apparent among the Hua where prohibitions surrounding the preparation and consumption of various foods reflect the changing status of both producers and consumers (Meigs 1984). For instance, as a young girl living in her natal village, a female can produce and prepare food for anyone except newly initiated males. After she marries and moves to her husband's community, however, no initiated male (including her husband) can consume any food she has produced, prepared, or served. Following the birth of her first child a woman's 'outsider' status in her husband's community (and the potential danger she poses) begins to diminish. After the birth of several children she is considered a mature woman (_ropa'a_) and while most of the food she produces and prepares can be consumed by older initiated men, restrictions on consumption by her husband and new initiates still apply. These restrictions are informally terminated after a decade or so of marriage at which time a husband may freely con- sume most of the previously prohibited foods prepared by his wife. Menapause marks the time when a woman is least

dangerous (least polluting) to men, and a post-menapausal woman who has more than three children is formally initiated into male society, whereupon she must obey all of the food rules to which initiated men are subject (Meigs 1976, 1984).

The intensity and degree of the polluting dangers of women and the vulnerability of males tend to mirror each other throughout the Hua life-cycle. Prior to initiation, a young boy may consume food produced and prepared by anyone except a menstruating woman. The period following initiation is the time of greatest vulnerability for a male. During this time the consumption of any food produced or prepared by a menstruating woman, by a post-parturient woman, by a 'new woman' (newly married into the community), or by anyone, male or female, who has recently engaged in sexual intercourse, could permanently stunt his growth. After marriage and the birth of several children he is considered a mature man (ropa de), his vulnerability to female pollution diminishes in intensity and he is required to obey relatively few food restrictions. In extreme old age, a man re-assumes the role of non-initiate and gains back the total invulnerability to female pollution that characterizes non-initiates. Along with this, he acquires almost total freedom from food restrictions (Meigs 1976, 1984).

Hua food prohibitions are formulated around the belief that food carries some of the producer's and/or preparer's nu. The infusion of some of the producer's nu into the food he or she produces creates a context for the direct transfer of nu to another person. The possibility that this might be dangerous or damaging to the consumer exists only in cases of cross-gender food transfers. Hua food restrictions do not appear to apply to a man receiving food produced or prepared by another male, or to a woman receiving food produced or prepared by another female. (One exception to this would be the post-menapausal woman who, having undergone a form of male initiation, must obey all food restrictions normally applying to initiated males.)

Hua concern about the transfer of food -- and thus nu -- between persons in certain social categories and relationships takes on an added dimension when linked with beliefs about the intrinsic attributes of certain foods. Here our attention turns again to the two categories of korogo (soft, juicy, fast-growing), and hakeri'a (hard, dry, slow-growing). According to Hua, the consumption of korogo foods implicitly increases one's korogo content. Similarly, the consumption of hakeri'a foods increases one's hakeri'a content. Women are considered korogo and many of the foods women cultivate and prepare are classified as korogo foods. One category in particular -- leafy

green vegetables -- is strictly prohibited to initiated males (only after the birth of several children can a married man consume leafy green vegetables cultivated and prepared by his wife).[13]

It is unclear from Meigs' analysis whether the prohibition on male consumption of _korogo_ foods is based on the fact that they are classified as _korogo_, or that the most common _korogo_ foods are cultivated and prepared by women and thus carry some of their _nu_. To a large extent her discussion suggests that the classification of something as _korogo_ is derived from its direct association with women. In other words, _korogo_ foods are those foods grown and prepared by women, and because of this, prohibited to men.[14]

The problems with Meigs' analysis of Hua food restrictions stem from the way she oversimplifies the _korogo-hakeri'a_ classification through her consistent reference to _korogo_ and _hakeri'a_ foods as "female" and "male" foods. Here the _korogo_-_hakeri'a_ distinction is reduced to a cultural expression of sexual differences and gender perceptions rather than a part of a larger culture theory on life and the development of social persons. In her analysis the _korogo_-_hakeri'a_ classification comes to represent a system that not only defines gender boundaries, but at the same time defines cultural means for 'blurring'

those boundaries.   Hua food rules are portrayed as a means of reinforcing sexual polarity -- males are prohibited from consuming certain 'female foods', females cannot consume certain 'male foods'. The fact that on occasion both sexes do consume the categorically prohibited foods is interpreted by Meigs as evidence of a culturally embedded desire on the part of individuals to imitate the opposite sex. The problem here is that a korogo or hakeri'a designation is ultimately determined by something's (be it plant, animal, or human) nu content. A large quantity of nu makes something korogo, less nu makes it hakeri'a. To characterize korogo foods as 'female' (or hakeri'a foods as 'male') is to assume that the basis of the korogo-hakeri'a distinction is a male/female dichotomy which has been transposed onto the physical and social world. By treating the korogo-hakeri'a distinction as an indigenous rendering of a male/female dichotomy, Meigs' anaysis obscures the link between these two categories and Hua notions regarding the manipulation of nu content.   In this manner, Meigs is able to analytically construct a contradiction in Hua behavior -- male consumption of normally prohibited 'female foods' -- which she then explains in terms of male envy of female reproductive superiority. The fact that women also, on occasion, consume 'male foods' suggests a similar contradiction and, according to Meigs, indicates a more general dissatisfaction on the part of both sexes with the structure of gender in Hua society.

Clearly Meigs reference to the categories _korogo_ and _hakeri'a_ as female and male diminishes the wider implications this distinction has for the indigenous structuring of the Hua world. It was noted earlier that one facet of the manipulation of _nu_ content takes the form of individual efforts to adjust their _korogo_-_hakeri'a_ state through consumption of foods classified in the category opposite that of the consumer. Meigs acknowledges this, but instead of situating this behavior within the larger process of the development of social persons, she reduces it to acts of imitation of the opposite sex. Looking at the data she presents, however, the argument can be made that the consumption of _korogo_ foods by Hua males becomes problematic only when it is assumed that _korogo_ foods are 'female'. A very different picture emerges when considering the contexts within which both females and males take steps to adjust their personal _korogo_-_hakeri'a_ states.

In general, women avoid increasing their _korogo_ content -- an increased intake of _korogo_ foods can lead to excessive loss of menstrual blood, and through this, an excessive loss of _nu_ and physical vitality. At the onset of menarche a girl's diet is strictly controlled and _korogo_ foods are prohibited. During this time (and during menstruation throughout her adult life) a woman should not eat _kito'_ (leafy green vegetables), pit-pit, or sugarcane

as all are considered korogo. Instead, women who are menstruating should consume foods classified as hakeri'a (hard, dry, slow-growing). There are, however, several specific occasions when women do intentionally increase their korogo content : during pregnancy, childbirth and lactation, and in cases of infertility -- contexts which indicate an excessive depletion of nu for women, or, in the case of infertility, an insufficient amount.

Similarly, men avoid increasing their hakeri'a content. Young males undergoing initiation are strictly cautioned against eating hakeri'a foods because these might inhibit their growth by increasing dryness. Instead, the initiates are encouraged to eat korogo foods, in particular, soups made of kosidi'zasa (leaves for growing). So just as the onset of menarche is a time when females consume large quantities of hakeri'a foods, male intiation represents a time of the most concentrated consumption (by males) of korogo foods and avoidence of hakeri'a foods. Male efforts to increase and maintain their korogo content continues beyond initiation, occurring periodically throughout their adult lives primarily during "initiation-like rejuvenation ceremonies" (Meigs 1984). Within this context daily consumption of korogo foods is thought to revitalize male strength, health, and vitality.

The transgression of food prohibitions by Hua men and women becomes at once less problematic and more complex when viewed as part of a much larger process by which social personhood and gender identity is constructed. Meigs' analysis truncates this process and in effect inverts it by assuming the basis of the korogo-hakeri'a classification is a male/female dichotomy. Contrary to Meigs' view, the argument here is that the association Hua may make between, for example, things designated as korogo and females has to do with the cultural perception of shared attributes (i.e. soft, juicy, fast-growing, fertile, etc.). Things are classified korogo not because they are 'female', but because they hold in common certain intrinsic characteristics. Men consume korogo foods not because of a secret desire to imitate or be like women, they do so in order to acquire attributes which they (classified as hakeri'a) intrinsically lack, but which are essential to their development (physical and social) and general well-being.

Rather than a form of imitation of the opposite sex, the consumption of korogo foods by men, hakeri'a foods by women, is better understood as the intentional metaphoric incorporation of positive attributes (associated with the opposite sex) through the ingestion of foods seen to possess and promote these attributes. The korogo-hakeri'a distinction is not derived from a male/female dichotomy;

rather, it is part of a conceptual framework within which male and female are defined. As it was noted earlier, an adjustment made in one's korogo-hakeri'a state is implicitly an adjustment in one's nu content. For both sexes, the patterns of consumption (and avoidence) of korogo or hakeri'a foods invoke notions about the loss and gain of nu. And it is within this wider framework that Hua food rules and the apparent breaking of these rules must be understood.

From this discussion we can begin to see how the concept of nu not only encompasses Hua notions of gender, but represents a larger culture theory about the working of the physical and social world. Despite the problems with her analysis, Meigs description of the role of nu in Hua society is richly detailed. As she states, nu is more than just "native belief", it constitutes a way of looking at the world. Yet while she recognizes that the Hua concept of nu is culturally constructed, she fails to recognize that the world in which nu is operative is also culturally constructed. In her analysis nu becomes a conceptual framework within which biological processes are explained and interpreted. That social relationships among Hua are phrased partly in terms of nu and its transfer (real or potential) between persons indicates that nu is as vital to social reproduction as it is to biological reproduction. Meigs misses this point, however, citing that this only

further indicates that :

>... the (Hua) social order itself is
> interpreted as biological, and that the
> ultimate reality is not society but the
> mysteries of the body.
>
> (1984:121)

As the discussion here has tried to show, integrated within the concept of nu is a theory about the necessity of human intervention in life-processes. Not, as Meigs emphasis on imitation suggests, human intervention intended to somehow alter or change life-processes, but to direct and promote them, to ensure they follow a proper course. For individuals this 'proper course' includes (along with physiological development) the acquisition of gender identity and social personhood. Because she associates gender with sexual identity Meigs fails to fully appreciate how gender constructs transcend the 'biological facts' or sexual identity; how the formation of gender identity and social personhood are part of an ongoing process anchored in cultural beliefs about the need for direct and sustained human participation. The Hua concept of nu reflects human involvement through the manipulation of vital substances. Because males and females are fundamentally different, requiring different amounts of nu at different times in their lives, each manipulates these substances differently. Interestingly, in addition to the periodic consumption of korogo foods, blood-letting constitutes another means by

which Hua men adjust their personal *korogo*-*hakeri'a* state (Meigs 1984). Bleeding generates new blood, purifies through the removal of pollution, and strengthens a man's body. Through the periodic release of blood, males increase their *nu* content. The fact that blood-letting is also one of the primary measures taken to counteract the condition of *kupa* ('male pregnancy') is significant in that it suggests that *kupa* is equally embedded in Hua conceptualizations of the manipulation of *nu* content.

Meigs inability to analytically accomodate the cultural basis of gender constructs becomes particularly apparent in her discussion of the occurrence of Hua gender reversals in old age. This is the final 'ethnographic fact' cited as evidence of Hua dissatisfaction with restrictions imposed by gender constructs. As Meigs notes, despite the apparently extreme opposition of the sexes in Hua society, post-menapausal women are initiated into male society taking on male food prohibitions and aspects of male vulnerability to pollution. Such women become known as *kakora*, "a term usually reserved for the initiated male who is, because of his purity, vulnerable to the pollution of others" (1984:48). Similarly, old men become 'like women', losing their vulnerability to pollution and freed from most of the food prohibitions that previously applied to them. Such men become known as *figapa*, "a term usually reserved for the uninitiated and for polluted women and

children" (1984:48). According to Meigs, such gender reversals constitute another form of imitation of the opposite sex and in the process represent a means of alleviating sexual opposition and tension in Hua society.

This is by far the most speculative of Meigs' 'ethnographic facts'. The problems already identified in the previous discusson recur here as well, and again the data suggests an alternative interpretation. For example, given what we already know about Hua society, one could argue that on the one hand a post-menapausal woman is no longer a threat to men because she no longer menstruates or is reproductively potent -- in essence she is no longer female. On the other hand, it might be said that she now poses an even greater threat because of her sexual neutrality. Initiating a post-menapausal woman into male society, making her vulnerable to the same things initiated men are vulnerable to, transfers her back into a gender category. The same kind of transfer (though less formal) occurs with old men who lose their male vulnerability and become 'like women', able to eat anything and having to avoid nothing (Meigs 1976). In a social world which in many ways is defined by principles of gender differentiation, where human identity and behavior is guided by rules invoking these principles of differentiation, you cannot have individuals permanently moving outside these categories. Yet, with age, both men

and women do. The Hua seem to have an institutionalized means of re-incorporating these persons.

As the earlier discussion showed, it is _nu_ content that essentially defines 'male' and 'female'. Females inherently possess a larger quantity of _nu_ than males and are thus considered _korogo_ (soft, juicy, fertile). Because they inherently lack an adequate quantity of _nu_, men are _hakeri'a_ (hard, dry, infertile), and must periodically augment their _nu_ content. The aging process, however, implies a progressive loss of _nu_ for both sexes. With this loss comes a change in how individuals manipulate and adjust their _nu_ content. A post-menapausal woman no longer menstruates, is no longer fertile, and in this sense is no longer _korogo_. She has instead become hard, dry, and infertile -- in essence she is _hakeri'a_. In taking on male (_hakeri'a_) food prohibitions and vulnerability to pollution she is, in part, compensating for her loss of _nu_. Similarly, it could be argued that the aging process transforms men (_hakeri'a_) into _korogo_. Here again we can see how Meigs' translation of _hakeri'a_ and _korogo_ into male and female is misleading. Old men become _korogo_, not in the sense that they become 'like women', rather, they become _korogo_ in the sense that uninitiated (male) children are _korogo_ : while they themselves are not vulnerable to female pollution, through their contact with women and freedom from food prohibitions they absorb aspects of

pollution which make others (i.e. males at various stages of initiation) vulnerable to them.

Despite Meigs' attempts to incorporate recent anthropological thinking on Melanesian modes of gender formation, her analysis nonetheless reflects a fundamental misreading of the cultural basis of gender in Melanesian societies. For example, as Poole (1981) notes for the Bimin-Kuskusmin (West Sepik, Papua New Guinea), gender constructs :

> ... involve a recognition of process, of
> flow, of transition, and of dynamic (and
> different) balances in relation to
> (different and similar) substances that
> are given form in their articulation.
>
> (1981:116)

Meigs tries to suggest a similar view of gender as a process rather than a static immutable set of constrasting images. But her preoccupation with empiricist models and Western assumptions leads her to view gender construction as a process of transference rather than transformation. Thus she states the re-classification of old women and old men into the categories kakorà and figapa is part of a culture theory "of sex as transmittable" (1976:406). To Meigs, the 'process' of gender construction among the Hua takes an almost literal form.

> To be female is to be polluted, to be male
> is to be pure. A person's gender does not
> lie locked in his or her genitals but can
> flow and change with contact as substances

seep into and out of his or her body.
Gender is not an immutable state but a
dynamic flow. Such a view permits most
persons to experience both genders before
they die.

(1976:406)

Perhaps more than in any other part of her discussion of Hua behavior, Meigs oversimplification here belies the complexity of her own data. Hua are not fighting against gender boundaries that constrain or restrict them. Rather, they are collectively involved in creating, adjusting, and reformulating these boundaries around individuals whose social identities and roles are shifting as they move through the life-cycle. The re-classification of women and men who are passed their reproductive years into kakora and figapa categories represents another phase in this process.

In the earlier part of this chapter it was noted that in Melanesian societies gender constructs are not merely definitions of 'maleness' and 'femaleness', they are part and parcel of a worldview which, among other things, does provide definitions of male and female. Several recent anthropological discussions of gender ideologies in Melanesian societies -- particularly those that address the prominence of male-focused ritual practices (such as blood-letting, purging, and ritualized male homosexuality) -- indicate how the cultural construction of gender is an

integral part of the construction of social persons. In
other words, the formation of gender identity is one facet
of a larger unified culture theory on the workings of the
social and physical world. Founded ultimately in the
cosmological dimension of social life, the cultural con-
struction of gender has to do with process, with time, with
the material and immaterial world, with birth and death,
and with the progress of life between these two
inevitabilities. While focused ethnographically on gender
constructs among Bimin-Kuskusmin, Poole's work conveys this
sense of process which, on a general level, could be said
to characterize Melanesian patterns of gender definition.

> A particular construction of gender may
> crystalize in a particular context or at
> a particular moment in the life-cycle only
> to be dis-articulated and transformed into
> a new synthesis of 'natural' dimensions as
> the life-cycle progresses or the context
> shifts.
>
> (1981:116)

This is not to say that an individual's gender changes as
such, but that it is always in process, and always demands
social attention. It is in this sense that one can say
that the Hua are not consciously trying trying to blur the
boundaries of gender distinction -- they are consciously
recreating these boundaries. What Meigs takes to be a kind
of deep psychic dissatisfaction (particularly on the part
of men) with assigned gender roles is actually a deeply
felt ambivalence about the necessity for human intervention

in a process that is fundamentally cosmological and, hence, precarious. To suggest, as Meigs does, that the ritualized gender reversals that occur in Hua society "permits most persons to experience both genders before they die", trivializes the immensity of this process. In Meigs' analysis the cultural construction of gender takes the form of institutionalized efforts to cloud, mystify, or otherwise deny the (biologically based) boundaries of gender. With the emphasis placed on imitation of the opposite sex, human intervention becomes compensatory rather than creative. The picture that emerges is not one of a cultural process of gender construction, but of cultural efforts at de-construction. Clearly the gender reversals Meigs describes do not represent a (perceived) change in sexual identity per se, (or a hidden desire for such a change), but constitute cultural recognition of progressive changes in the composition and quantity of attributes associated with one sex or the other. At the same time it signals a categorical change in vulnerability -- old women assume male vulnerability to pollution, old men progressively lose their vulnerability. Neither becomes the other, rather, each moves into a different phase of life.

In part this discusson has tried to show how Meigs' interpretation of gender in Hua society is a product of the analytic framework she employs and not the data she

presents. By way of a brief summary, Meigs contends that Hua gender constructs are anchored in the biological facts of sexual differences, and the Hua not only perceive gender in this way, but their perceptions of the social order itself is formulated around the facts of biological reality. She further contends "that Hua are not content with the rigid sexual boundaries imposed by their culture" (1984:61), and they express their dissatisfaction through various behaviors that constitute imitations of the opposite sex. It is through this imitative behavior, Meigs argues, that Hua attempt to blur the boundaries of gender.

The four 'ethnographic facts' identified by Meigs as imitative behaviors are : male menstruation, male pregnancy, consumption of foods identified with the opposite sex, and gender reversals occurring in old age. While all .four of these behaviors involve men (and it is primarily male behavior that concerns Meigs), the latter two also involve women, suggesting to Meigs that although males are more intensely aware and concerned about their physiological limitations, the dissatisfaction with gender constructs is shared by both sexes; and both sexes, at different times and in different ways, try to imitate the opposite sex.

Contrary to Meigs, it was argued here that the interpretation of these behaviors as imitative acts depends on

the analytic separation of each of these behaviors from one another and from the cultural context and framework of meaning within which they occur. Looked at individually the practices Meigs describes do suggest imitation and do take on a somewhat problematic and anomalous quality. A closer reading of the data, however, reveals how Meigs' interpretation folds in on itself as evidence and explanation merge. For example, Meigs argues that male imitation of menstruation and pregnancy is prompted by male envy of female reproductive 'superiority' and a deeply felt anxiety about their own biological inferiority. But what is the evidence that Hua men envy women for their reproductive powers? According to Meigs, the evidence for this is the fact that Hua men imitate women (through 'male menstruation' and 'male pregnancy' as well as through the consumption of 'female' foods, and the achievement in old age of a sort of categorical femaleness). Why do men imitate women? They are compelled to do so through their recognition and envy of 'natural' female powers and insecurity about their own limited reproductive capabilities. Analytically isolated, and combined with an implicit feminist emphasis on the implications of beliefs about female pollution for a hierarchical imbalance in the structural relations of men and women, the four 'ethnographic facts' seem to support an interpretation of Hua gender constructs as overly restrictive and Hua social action as continually geared toward the 'blurring' of gender

boundaries.

Underlying Meigs' work is the assumption that gender and sexual identity are the same thing; that cultural perceptions of gender are formulated upon the immutable biological facts of sexual differentiation. And even while trying to show the cultural basis of Hua behavior she continueally re-aligns her data to support the idea that for Hua society ultimate reality is 'biological reality'. The point Meigs seems to consistently miss is that gender constructs are culturally constructed, and as such they incorporate, elaborate upon, and in several respects transcend biological reality. In other words, the cultural construction of gender is not just about the development of sexual identity, rather it encompasses the formation of sexual identity within a larger cosmological framework which concerns the development of the whole social person. Nu is key to any understanding of the forging of gender identity and social personhood in Hua society. As the discussion here showed, it is the Hua concept of nu that links the various 'problematic' behaviors Meigs identifies, not as separate acts of imitation, but as part of this larger cultural process involving the manipulation of substances deemed essential to both the social and physical development of human beings. Because Meigs assumes that it is biological facts that define Hua gender constructs, the concept of nu (and within this the korogo-hakeri'a classi-

fication) becomes a cultural response somehow structured to offset or alleviate the inevitabilities and limitations that 'biological reality' imposes on Hua. Ironically, and despite her claims to the contrary, Meigs' analysis reduces the Hua concept of nu to 'native belief'.

The specific problems identified in Meigs' study can be traced to a general misreading of the nature of gender construction in Melanesia. Meigs' failure to analytically discern and articulate the cosmological basis of nu and its role in the development of Hua social persons is a failure to fully appreciate how gender constructs (in Hua society as well as in Melanesian societies in general) are part of indigenous formulations of the progress of human life.

The discussion in this chapter was organized around a dual purpose. Part of the intent was to explore an alternative to feminist perspectives in anthropology. The chapter began by arguing that cultural theories of gender are the conceptual key to understanding the place women hold in society. Ethnographic data from Melanesia was drawn upon to illustrate the point that there are more fundamental questions concerning native worldview that must be asked prior to trying to assess the behavioral evidence for women's power or powerlessness. One must first look to the ideological constructs which give shape and meaning to cultural notions of personhood and gender (and hence give

meaning to social roles and behavior).

Continuing with the critique of feminist perspectives, an equally important purpose of this chapter was to show how, despite widespread contemporary interest in the study of gender, feminist studies continue to invoke the same analytic assumptions that characterized the more singularly-focused studies of women. Indeed, the problems identified for feminist analyses come into sharp relief when juxtoposed against recent studies of gender construction in Melanesian societies. Meigs' study of gender in Hua society illustrates how the thematic premises identified earlier continue to inform and structure feminist interpretation of male/female relations.

NOTES TO CHAPTER FIVE

1. A recent volume of essays on cultural conceptions of gender and sexuality (see Ortner and Whitehead 1981) is a case in point. The following examples, drawn from this volume, illustrate how little feminist perspectives on 'gender' differ from the earlier focus on 'women'.

   In their introduction to the volume, Ortner and Whitehead acknowledge a direct link between earlier feminist research and current interest in gender. The shift in focus from 'women' to 'gender' is represented as part of a natural evolution in feminist research.

   > We felt it was time for some of the analytic
   > sophistication applied in the last decade to
   > unraveling women's status historically and
   > cross-culturally, to carry over into the
   > entire realm of gender and gender-related
   > matters.
   >
   > (1981:25)

   In a separate article (same volume) Cucchiari credits the feminist movement with forcing anthropology to look at gender.

   > Under the social and political impact of the
   > feminist movement, recent anthropology has
   > been forced to reexamine the question of gen-
   > der. This challenge to generations of male
   > bias in the theory and practice of the subject
   > has been constructive, creative, and productive
   > of exciting and useful ideas. One result of
   > these efforts is the important concept of the
   > gender system.
   >
   > (1981:32)

   Similar to earlier feminist interest in 'origins' questions, Cucchiari attempts to ascertain the origins of gender. He postulates the existence of a non-gender stage in human cultural evolution because, as he states, :

   > I found that until I did so I could not begin
   > to explain another cultural universal --
   > gender hierarchy or universal male dominance...
   > (1981:31)

Somewhat remarkably he construct a model for a pre-gender, pre-kin, bisexual horde in which "proto-men" and "proto-women" share the two primary social classifications : "Foragers" and "Child-Tenders".

The final example is drawn from Collier and Rosaldo's discussion of politics and gender in simple societies. Stating that sexual intercourse constitutes a "core metaphor" for social relations in bride-service societies, the authors move from a discussion of the "politics of sex" to an interpretation of "sexual politics". The logic of this transition resides in a feminist perspective.

> The feminist insight that sex is ultimately
> a political and therefore a social fact holds
> true not only for the Western world (where
> women are, we think, oppressed) but also for
> the qualitatively different world of hunters.
> ... And so, having come to recognize hitherto
> slighted facts about th lot of women and the
> organization of their lives, our need is now
> for models that help us to characterize the
> relationships between women and men, descrim-
> inating among various forms of "sexual politics".
> (1981:318)

2. See in particular the discussions of Berndt 1962, Langness 1974, 1977, Meggitt 1964, and Read 1965.

3. The occurrence of ritualized male homosexuality in Melanesia is not directly discussed in this chapter. However, because of its thematic link to other (Melanesian) forms of male-focused ritual behaviors, and because of our own culturally formulated knowledge about homosexuality, there is a need for some brief ethnographic clarification.

In Melanesia, ritualized male homosexuality involves the ingestion of semen through fellatio or anal inter-course and is depicted as essential to the growth of boys and their successful transformation into men. The cultural focus here is on the transfer of semen and the incorporation of attributes deemed necessary and vital to the proper development, both physically and socially, of male identity. In the course of this discussion, references to these practices use the term "ritualized male homosexuality" instead of "homosexuality" for the reasons outlined by Herdt (1984) :

> Ritualized as a modifier applies best
> to the Melanesian situation because :
> 1) homosexual practices are implemented
> usually through male initiation rites,
> having 2) religious overtones, as well as
> being 3) constrained by broader cultural
> rules and social roles, for which the
> full moral and jural force of a society,
> or a secret men's society, not only con-
> dones but often prescribes sexual inter-
> course among certain categories of males;
> and 4) various age-related and kinship
> taboos define and restrict the nature of
> this male/male sexual behavior. Ritual-
> ized homosexuality is thus a Melanesian
> type of institutionalized homosexual
> activity in the broader sense than found
> elsewhere in the world.
>
> (1984:6)

Drawing from Herdt's survey of the occurrence and
patterns of ritualized male homosexuality throughout the
Melanesian culture area, several additional points should
be emphasized. First, not all ritual in Melanesia in-
volves homosexual or homoerotic activity, nor do all
males experience ritualized homosexuality at some point
in their lives. Second, cases of ritualized male homo-
sexuality have been documented for only a relatively
small portion of Melanesian societies -- Herdt estimates
"perhaps 10 - 20 percent of all Melanesian groups that
have been studied", (general estimates given for the
number of different cultures in Melanesia are between
700 and 1000). Third, in all known cases, the males in-
volved in homosexual or homoerotic contacts are later
expected to marry and father children. In other words,
their psycho-sexual involvement in ritualized homo-
sexuality does not convert or transform them into
'homosexuals' in the sense meant in Western culture --
"life-long habitualized sexual preference for members of
the same sex" (Herdt 1984:7-8). Rather than ignore the
occurence of homosexual practices or treat them as a
"tangential curiosity", Herdt suggests that exploring
the distribution and cultural meanings associated
with these practices can help us to sort out cross-
cultural variation in sexual behavior and gender
ideologies of these groups. As he states :

> What matters is not the gross numbers of
> these societies or their total populations,
> but rather their psychosocial and symbolic
> meaning when viewed against broader trends
> of sexual polarity and gender ideology in
> Melanesia.
>
> (1984:8)

4. Allen 1967, 1984, Berndt 1962, Langness 1974, 1977, Read 1952.

5. In this discussion 'cosmology' refers to the totality of a culture's knowledge and understanding of the world in which they live and their place and role in it. Cosmology incorporates and reflects cultural conceptions "of the most fundamental forces operant in reality" (Newman and Boyd 1982:240). Viewed in this manner, cosmology conceptually encompasses the subjective and inter-subjective worlds in which individuals continually move back and forth, and provides a culturally con-moral framework which guides how the self relates to the other, and how both self and other collectively relate to the world external to them.

6. While similar to other Highlands societies on a general level, it is widely noted by anthropologists that the Eastern Highlands societies occupy a somewhat unique position vis-a-vis other regions in New Guinea in that cultural features found exclusively among lowland and coastal groups (such as male initiation, male blood-letting, or ritualized male homosexuality) are often combined with cultural features specific to Highlands societies (such as large-scale pig-raising, major cere-monial exchange events, and concern for the development of 'big-men'), though in Eastern Highlands societies these latter features do not approach the level of elaboration found elsewhere in the Highlands, for instance, among the Melpa (A. Strathern 1971, 1972) and Enga (Meggitt 1974). This combination of what appear to be regionally exclusive traits has led some anthropologists to suggest that the Eastern Highlands represent a transitional point (culturally, historically, and geo-graphically) between lowland and coastal New Guinea societies and those in the Highlands (see in particular Lindenbaum 1984).

7. It should be mentioned that anthropological writing on male blood-letting practices and 'male menstruation' in Melanesian societies has been, and continues to be, strongly influenced by the earlier work of Bettelheim. The idea that male blood-letting constitutes an imitation of menstruation is presented in Bettelheim's classic study Symbolic Wounds (1955) in which he inter-prets the occurence of penis-bleeding during male initiation among the Murngin and the Arunta (Australia)

as an expression of male envy of the female procreative role. See Herdt (1982:82-83) for comments on the significance of Bettelheim's work for the development of anthropological perspectives on the psychosocial dimensions of gender differentiation in Melanesian societies.

8. For examples see Berndt 1962, Herdt 1981, 1982, Hogbin 1970, Lindenbaum 1976, Mead 1938, Read 1965, Whiting 1941.

9. For discussion of various forms of penis-bleeding performed by other societies in the Sepik and coastal areas of Papua New Guinea, see : Forge 1972 (Abelam), Hogbin 1970 (Wogeo), Mead 1938 (Mountain Arapesh), Tuzin 1980, 1982 (Ilahita Arapesh). Penis-bleeding in the Eastern Highlands region is discussed by Newman and Boyd 1982 (Awa).

Nose-bleeding occurs most prominently among Eastern Highlands societies. See for examples : Berndt 1962, Hays and Hays 1982 (Ndumba), Herdt 1982 (Sambia), Langness 1967 (Bena Bena), Newman and Boyd 19822 (Awa), Read 1954, 1965 (Gahuku-Gama).

Drawing blood from the tongue or gums seems to occur less frequently and generally in conjunction with other blood-letting practices. See discussions of Hogbin 1970 (Wogeo), Whiting 1941 (Kwoma), Bateson 1958 (Iatmul), Hays and Hays 1982 (Ndumba).

In addition to these froms of male blood-letting, scarification (of males during puberty rites) is described by Bateson 1958 (Iatmul), and Lewis 1980 (Gnau). (As Lewis notes for the Gnau, scarification and nose-bleeding are also performed on girls.)

Most blood-letting practices seem to be associated either with the social recognition of the onset of a boy's puberty (in the absence of organized ceremonies) or with the actual performance of male puberty rites, and as such tend to occur once (or during one stage) in the male life-cycle. Exceptions do exist, however, as Hogbin (1970) writing about the Wogeo, Newman and Boyd (1982) writing about the Awa, and Lewis (1980) writing about the Gnau, note that in each of these societies men may perform penis-bleeding periodically throughout their adult lives, often in response to sickness, but also to promote general well-being, to combat lethergy and to remove harmful female substances. Similarly,

drawing blood from other parts of the body (the arms, legs, lower back or abdomen) for the purpose of re-leasing impurities and polluting agents, is practised on a periodic basis throughout the adult lives of Hua men (Meigs 1976, 1984).

10. Hua men do, on infrequent occasion, (and in male com-pany only), eat possum and suffer no ill-effects. But, as the next part of this discussion will show, this has to do with the incorporation (through the ingestion of certain foods) of positive attributes of the opposite sex. Hua women also, on occasion, eat 'male' foods.

11. See also Hayano 1974 for discussion of 'male pregnancy' among the neighboring Tauna Awa.

12. For Melanesia,the most obvious examples of such objects would be pigs and pearlshells among Highlands societies in Papua New Guinea, and the kula necklaces and arm-bands exchanged among Trobriand Islanders. Further discussion of these objects is outside the scope of this chapter. However, it should be stated that there is nothing intrinsically valuable about these objects. Rather, the value associated with them results from processes wherein they are transformed (or re-created into cultural objects of special significance.

13. Interestingly, the domesticated pig (a highly prized cultural object throughout Melanesia) seems to receive a kind of dual classification here. The live pig is considered korogo -- raised by women, and feeding off of garden produce cultivated by women, pigs incorporate some of the nu of their female caretakers. Pig meat, however, is designated hakeri'a -- men kill pigs and prepare the meat for cooking. Unlike other foods classified as either korogo or hakeri'a, there is no indication (from Meigs' study) that comparable restric-tions on consumption of pork exist.

14. It should be noted that although Meigs does provide a general description of Hua food rules pertaining to both sexes, her discussion of food prohibitions is focused almost entirely on those that apply to males, and in particular, males undergoing initiation.

CHAPTER SIX

CONCLUSIONS

The purpose of this study has been to present a critique of feminist perspectives in anthropology. While focusing specifically on the topical issue of women and power, the critique also addressed the more general efforts to construct an 'anthropology of women'. The discussion began with the argument that feminist research on women limits us to a very superficial and simplistic view of women and women's lives. Prompted by efforts to redress a perceived historic neglect and misrepresentation of women in sociological analysis, feminist perspectives in anthropology are based on Western feminist thinking rather than on anthropological understanding. It was further argued that from an anthropological perspective, feminist analysis misreads the integrity of indigenous structures of knowledge and what we know, as anthropologists, to be the complexity of social relations cross-culturally.

To facilitate the examination of the assumptions underlying feminist anthropology, three general themes were identified. In the course of the preceding discussion it was shown how ech of these themes overlap and combine to

create a general picture of 'women' that can accomodate intellectual commitments to Western feminist ideology but cannot at the same time accomodate the ethnographic problematics of cultural differences with which anthropology must deal.

The first theme that was discussed concerned the feminist association of female status with female biology, and the idea that women's 'biological superiority' is everywhere recognized and translated into social inferiority. Chapter Two showed how arguments attempting to explain male dominance and female subordination take as their starting point the assumption that the 'secondary status of women' is a cultural universal derived from an association (deemed equally universal) of women with nature and men with culture. Based on the idea that biology is the primary determining factor in cultural perceptions of 'femaleness', the male/female culture/nature association forms the basis of a range of logically equivalent analytic dichotomies employed by anthropologists to ascertain the status, position, power, and ultimately, the cultural value of women.

In this part of the discussion it was argued that much of the writing on the status of women reflects Western feminists' ambivalence about, and preoccupation with, the biological process of childbirth and the changing structure

of female roles in Western society. One of the more prob-
lematic examples of how this ambivalence works itself into
the literature is the way in which the physiological facts
of female reproductive capabilities are used to explain
both how women are powerless and how they are powerful. To
some researchers the constraints imposed by childbearing and
childraising, which are seen to prevent women from partici-
pating in the political and economic spheres of social
life, are overshadowed by the 'intrinsic' power women have
as mothers -- as 'creators' of new generations. To others,
however, these same constraints are viewed as the ultimate
basis of women's secondary status and the institutionaliza-
tion of female subordination. Despite the apparent
difference, these two perspectives arrive at the same con-
clusions : first, women do have power, and this power is
defined by and derived from their biological identity as
females; second, the subordination of women is a product of
what are assumed to be male efforts to control, through
social and political domination, the 'natural' powers of
women. Both views in effect establish the existence of
'female power' without denying the categorical subordina-
tion of women in social life. Directly tied to aspects of
'femaleness' and 'reproductive superiority', women's power
is thus different and distinct from men's power (which is
assumed to be anchored in the material base of social
life). In this sense, the feminist emphasis on female
biology -- as a source of both power and powerlessness for

women -- creates the illusion that the status, position, or cultural roles women hold in society can be understood only by focusing on women. Here the male/female culture/nature dichotomy begins to take on an analytic life of its own, generating additional gendered dichotomies that reinforce, on an analytic level, the distinctive qualities of 'female-ness'. And it is here that we begin to see the construction of 'women' as a separate analytic category.

The second theme concerned the use of male bias both as a form of explanation for anthropology's lack of attention to women, and as a premise guiding women-focused research. It is the pervasive acceptance of the existence of male bias (in Western society, in the field of anthropology, and in the societies that anthropologists study) that defines the discourse on the 'anthropology of women' and provides both intellectual (academic) and ideological legitimation.

As Chapter Three showed, feminist arguments about male bias suggest that women's perspectives on their social world are not only different from men's, but are organized and expressed differently as well; and that the ethnographic authenticity of research on women derives from a common bond of womanhood shared by female researchers and their female subjects. Here we can see how popular assumptions about the universality of male dominance, and

about the prevalence of male bias, combine with the equally popular assumption that intrinsic qualities of 'femaleness' render women (as a category) not only biologically distinct from men, but psychologically (cognitively) and culturally distinct as well. Indeed, the notion that female biology is at once a source of 'natural' female power and a source of women's secondary status takes on an added dimension. Biology becomes a measure of ethnographic competence as feminist discussion of male bias asserts that studies of women by women are somehow more authentic.

As this part of the discussion pointed out, continued interest in the accumulation of 'evidence' of male bias among anthropologists (male and female) too easily leads to the dismissal of earlier ethnographic accounts and suggests that what constitutes a 'new interpretation' need only be a singular focus on women. But while previously studies may be male-biased, it was noted that they may also be theoretically inadequate as well. Anthropological studies of women and power were used to illustrate how feminist emphasis on establishing the existence of male bias circumvents some of the tougher theoretical issues concerning anthropological analysis, while at the same time enabling the construction of an ideologically appealing perspective on women's lives.

The third theme centered on the idea that manifestations of women's power and their social value as individuals are to be found in specifically female domains of social life; in what is frequently referred to as 'women's culture'. Chapter Four examined the influence of the political action model on feminist approaches to the study of women and power.

The political action model is an analytic framework based on the convergence of three related ideas. First, with the increased emphasis (within anthropology) on the individual as the focal point of social analysis comes the idea that self-interest and competition are the primary motivational forces guiding individual action. Second, there is the idea that politics permeates all facets of social relations and the study of politics can be co-extensive with the study of all society. And third, the idea that power, as an aspect of politics, is therefore accessible in varying degrees to all members of society.

Despite strong criticism by anthropologists -- criticism aimed in particular at its ethnocentric orientation -- the political action model has been prominently employed in studies of women and power. Rather than addressing theoretical questions raised by other critics, feminist critique of the model centers on the issue of male bias and the assumption that power and politics are

exclusively male pursuits. As the discussion tried to show, it is, in fact, the very features that prompted others to characterize this framework as ethnocentric that seem to make it attractive to feminist researchers.

In order to understand the popularity of this model for studies of women we must look to the themes underlying feminist anthropology. This model supports contentions about male bias and the belief that female ethnographers have a special insight into their (female) subjects. With its extensive notion of politics and a rather open-ended, individual-oriented definition of power, the model accomo-dates assumptions that 'women's power' exists and, because it derives in part from the unique qualities of 'femaleness', it is best understood by focusing on women as a separate analytic category. In effect, it was argued, the political action model provides an ideologically appealing framework for the 'anthropology of women' because it facilitates the (feminist) depiction of women as individuals and social actors in their own right. In the process it ethnographically grants a degree of social and cognitive autonomy to women in societies which appear to structurally deny them both of these qualities.

In discussing its application to studies of women it was pointed out that one of the major problems with the political action model is that, embedded in our own

cultural consciousness, it defines the type of analytic attention given the 'domains' of social activity culturally attributed to men and women. The assumption that political behavior is exclusively male behavior, which feminist writers have argued so strongly against, derives from the assumption that politics occurs in the 'public' (non-familial) domain of social life which, in turn, is assumed to be exclusively, or primarily, a male domain. Despite feminist contentions about the impact of male bias, what appears to be the real problem is an over-reliance on the domestic/public distinction and the analytic segregation of these domains in the examination of social activities which appear to be exclusive to one or the other. As it was noted, this analytic segregation also constitutes a form of sexual segregation (in terms of the analysis) in the domestic/public distinction is a fundamentally gendered dichotomy. Feminist argument concerning male bias is actually poised on what amounts to the most superficial level of this problem, for in shifting the focus to women, the rejection of politics as exclusively male behavior is nonetheless combined with the retention of the domestic/public dichotomy which now forms the basis for identifying distinctly gendered styles of social action.

And it is here that we begin to see a convergence of the three themes underlying feminist analysis. The association of female status with female biology, and the

further characterization of this association through the use of a nature(female)/culture(male) dichotomy implicitly identifies the domestic domain as a 'female domain'. At the same time, however, there exists a great deal of feminist critique concerning the use of the domestic/public dichotomy in social analysis. A rather common feminist argument suggests that we have been unable to locate 'women's power', or fully comprehend women's social value as persons because male-generated models ethnographically confine women to the domestic domain and thus assume that the activities of women are not as culturally important or significant as those of men. Earlier parts of this discussion havenoted that the apparent feminist preoccupation with the biological basis of 'femaleness' stems from a more general feminist ambivalence about the role of female biology in the structure of social life in Western society. Again we see an illustration of this ambivalence. On the one hand, feminist perspectives reinforce the implicit association of women with the domestic domain by locating 'femaleness' in biology and reproductive capabilities. On the other hand, effort is made to dispute the analytic relevance of the domestic/public distinction by seeking evidence showing that women's social value is found outside their role as mothers and domestic caretakers.

As the discussion showed, the problem here is more than an over-reliance on what appears to be an analytically useful distinction. The domestic/public dichotomy carries with it a myriad of cultural meanings derived from Western industrial society. What M. Strathern has recently referred to as Western society's "denigration of domesticity" clearly plays an influential role in the analytical ambivalence apparent in feminist treatment of the domestic/public dichotomy.

Within anthropology, feminist objections to the association of women with the domestic domain take two directions. One is to accept the association but show how, despite the limitations of this sphere of activity, women's actions in the domestic domain have important political consequences that extend beyond it. The other approach is to disassociate women from the domestic domain by showing how, in fact, women make important contributions outside, in, for example, the economic sphere. In a sense the former approach is really an attempt to upgrade the (Western) value associated with the domestic domain, while the latter tends to accept the devaluation of domesticity by situating womens' cultural value in the things they do outside of it. Yet despite the differences, both approaches are dependent upon the domestic/public distinction -- even efforts to dispute its relevance by showing how women are not confined to the domestic domain

require this dichotomy as a starting point. Thus, feminist criticism of the usefulness of the domestic/public dichotomy never amounts to an actual rejection of it. Rather, new and essentially equivalent analytic dichotomies emerge to take its place. The equivalence between the domestic/public dichotomy and those developed to replace it, such as Weiner's cosmological(ahistoric) / material (historic) distinction, rests on their common derivation from the male/female dyad. They are all fundamentally gendered dichotomies analytically employed to designate gendered boundaries of social life. As the discussion argued, feminist preoccupation with gendered dichotomies reflects a preoccupation with the biological basis of sexual differences and the assumption that physiological 'facts' are universally recognized and transformed into cultural structures of inequality. Anthropologists looking at the cultural world of women, at women's power, at female styles of action, or at female domains, are dependent upon the dichotomies emanating from the male/female dyad because it is this dyad that defines the discourse on women. Gendered dichotomies are essential to feminist analysis because, on the surface, they seem to provide evidence for a universal cultural translation of biological distinctions into social distinctions represented by gendered domains of activity. Such 'evidence' in turn lends credibility to the analytic separation of men and women.

While it is the male/female dyad that structures and guides feminist analysis, it is the acceptance of the historical impact of male bias that constitutes the linchpin for the 'anthropology of women'. In order to demonstrate the importance and impact of male bias, one must show how different the analysis might be without it. Although feminist writers seem to accomplish this, they do so by drawing analytic lines of distinction between men and women that are much bolder than those attributed to male-biased studies. Whereas women might have been neglected in previous studies, the structure of feminist research suggests that men are peripheral or non-essential to studies of women. In other words, compensation for the perceived exclusion of women from anthropological analysis comes in the form of research that excluded men. That this can be done without the attribution of 'female bias' is somewhat surprising but can be partially explained in terms of the linkage of feminist anthropology with Western feminist ideology, and the wide-spread academic commitment to the general principles this ideology represents. For women-focused anthropology this linkage constitutes a sufficient buffer against charges of ethnocentrism, or reductionism, even sexism.

One of the purposes of this critique has been to explore and question the theoretical and ideological basis of feminist perspectives in anthropology. Guided by the

progammatic objectives of the Western feminist movement, women-focused anthropology incorporates evaluative sentiments about our own culture's assessments of 'women's place' and 'women's work' and feminist objectives to alter the boundaries of both. In so doing it provides an analytical perspective that is fundamentally ethnocentric. Combining personal commitment with professional interest, feminist anthropologists are often compelled to include in their analyses recommendations for improving present-day conditions for women and the societies in which they live. Although criticism does exist concerning the programmatic intent of feminist research, few writers draw attention to the implicit ironies of this genre. Male ethnographers are called to task for describing women only as mothers, yet the focus of much of the work on women's status and female subordination invokes female biology as a partial (though prominent) explanation. Those who object to analyses which emphasize women's biological role contend that the gauge for assessing women's power or powerlessness should be the degree of their involvement in other (non-domestic, non-familial) areas of social life, with the implication that 'what women do' somehow defines them as social persons. Thus, women's power is measured in terms of the degree of participation women may or may not have in the economic, political, and 'public' arenas of their society. In other words, the degree to which women participate in what are, in a great many societies, culturally defined as 'male'

arenas.

What is consistently left unacknowledged by critics is that, ultimately, the gauge used to assess women's power and cultural value is men and what men do. That women might be culturally restricted from doing what men do -- orchestrating public events, cultivating economic ties, making political decisions, conducting major ritual events -- is frequently taken as evidence of their lack of control over social life, and their de facto exploitation and oppression by men. The alternative offered is to look at 'what women do'. But 'what women do' often turns out to resemble those things that men do. And this is perhaps the most troubling bit of irony that emerges from feminist perspectives in anthropology : that somehow the most credible (or authentic) depiction of women as social persons depends on showing how women possess the same attributes and skills -- though manifested in uniquely 'female' ways and exercized in female domains -- as men.

As the discussion pointed out, feminist efforts to depict women as persons in their own right draws heavily on Western notions about the social value of the individual and 'individualism'. The perceived social autonomy of the individual combines with notions of self-interest, competition, and personal gain. And the motivating force guiding social action is situated in personal choices and pragmatic

concerns relating to the individual's place in the material world. But the assumption that by showing women acting as individuals we gain insight into cultural perceptions of women as social persons, indicates how the 'individual' is frequently confused with 'individualism' in feminist analytic frameworks. In effect what we see in such analyses are not indigenous notions concerning the individual or the social person, but a reflection of what are assumed to unversally recognized and valued personal attributes (independence, autonomy, assertiveness, etc.) which are then interpreted as expressing indigenous conceptualizations of social personhood.

Though somewhat tangential to the rest of the discussion, the confusion that exists in the literature between cultural perceptions of the individual and our own notions of individualism is an important issue. The search for women's power is in many ways less a search for social personhood (in the anthropological sense) as it is a search for a kind of categorical individualism (in the Western sense). In anthropology the political action model represents an example of how this is achieved and how, in the process, the 'culture of women' takes on somewhat mythic proportions.

Throughout this discussion it has been argued that the depth of our understanding of women's place in society is a

direct reflection of the depth of our understanding of cultural diversity and variation in the way different societies comprehend and reckon with their own worlds. In other words, if we are to understand the 'position' of women we must do so by first understanding the culture of which they are a part. It was further argued that the topic of 'women' or 'women's power' is not a particularly relevant starting point for accomplishing this. The lack of relevance stems from an inability of feminist models to accomodate cultural context in a manner that would allow for an understanding of native meanings as these pertain to men and women alike. While feminist writers might argue that an anthropological understanding of women can only be achieved by focusing on women, by presenting a female perspective, or by looking at women's productive activities, the discussion here suggested that a different perspective is needed, one which takes into account the fundamental importance of cultural context and cultural theories of maleness and femaleness. To this end, the latter part of the discussion looked to the anthropological examination of cultural notions of gender as providing a substantive alternative to feminist perspectives. Chapter Five presented the view that cultural theories of gender are the conceptual key to understanding the social organization of relations between the sexes, and that this must be the starting point for examining the position, status, or power of women. In other words, if women's power is a

relevant issue, it is so only in the wider context of culturally constructed theories about gender identity and gender relations.

Over the last several years 'gender' has become an increasingly popular topical focus within anthropology in general and feminist anthropology in particular. For feminist anthropology this interest in gender suggests a shift in orientation away from women-focused research toward a more balanced examination of the cultural configurations of male/female relations. But this shift in focus is somewhat deceptive insofar as feminist research tends to view 'gender systems' as the ideological basis supporting structural arrangements that define women as inferior. As this chapter argued, the assumptions embedded in feminist perspectives -- about male dominance, about the secondary status of women, and about the biological basis of cultural perceptions of 'femaleness' -- remain essentially intact, and examining gender becomes a contemporary approach to verifying them. Gender and sexual identity are treated as synonomous, and 'gender constructs' (which frame a culture's ideas about what constitutes male and female) are viewed as the cultural translation of biological differences rather than the cultural construc-tion of differences that transcend the biological facts. In this sense, it was argued, feminist analyses of gender represent a continuation of the thematic premises

characterizing earlier 'women-focused' frameworks.

Chapter five continued the critique of feminist perspectives by examining feminist approaches to the study of gender in light of other anthropological discussions of gender construction in the culture area of Melanesia. In contrast to the feminist association of gender with sexual identity, these studies illustrate how gender constructs are not merely definitions of 'maleness' and 'femaleness', they are part and parcel of a worldview which, among other things, does provide definitions of male and female. Recent anthropological discussions of gender ideologies in Melanesian societies -- particularly those that address the prominence of male-focused ritual practices (such as blood-letting, purging, and ritualized male homosexuality) -- indicate how the cultural construction of gender is an integral part of the construction of social persons. In other words, the formation of gender identity is one facet of a larger unified culture theory on the workings of the social and physical world.

While the earlier chapters explore why feminist perspectives in anthropology fail, this chapter illustrated how they fail by re-examining Meigs' analysis of gender in Hua society. Meigs argued that, anchored in biological facts of sexual differences, gender constructs among the Hua are restrictive and are culturally perceived as

restrictive by the Hua themselves. Both sexes feel constrained by limitations of gender roles and both sexes, at different times and in different ways, 'imitate' the opposite sex. Although men do so more frequently than women, Meigs contends that all such imitative behaviors constitute conscious efforts to break through or 'blur' the cultural boundaries of gender.

As the discussion noted, the imitative behaviors Meigs cites are not unique to Hua but occur (with varying frequency and elaboration) elsewhere in Melanesia. Drawing on discussions of similar practices in the region, it was argued that rather than fighting against the rigidity of gender boundaries, Hua are collectively involved in creating and re-creating these boundaries; that the feelings of constraint Meigs attributes to Hua (and in particular Hua males) are more appropriately viewed as expressions of ambivalence about their control over processes through which social identity is forged. In the course of the discussion it was shown how the data Meigs presents actually supports this re-interpretation, but the analytic framework she employs prevents her from situating the cultural behavior she describes within the larger context of Hua cosmology.

In light of the points raised throughout this critique, Meigs work is interesting becaue while framing

her analysis around feminist assumptions, (first, that
physiological differences between men and women are the
determinants of cultural perceptions of gender, and second,
that the apparent male dominance in Hua society derives
from male recognition and envy of female reproductive
superiority), she nonetheless claims to be looking at the
cultural construction of gender. This raises a serious
question : how does one analytically maintain the basic
tenets of a feminist perspective and at the same time
acknowledge the independent integrity of indigenous
worldviews? In a sense this critique has already answered
this question by showing how feminist perspectives
incorporate an interpretive formula (based on Western
ideology) that precludes the analytic accomodation of
indigenous worldviews. In Meigs' case the primary
assumptions of male dominance and male envy of female
biological 'superiority' have already established the
interpretive direction and limits of the analysis. Here
the cultural construction of gender can mean little more
than how a society ideologically supports the structure of
male dominance and how cultural behavior expresses efforts
(according to Meigs, "desires") to somehow cloud or offset
what are presumed to be the strictures imposed by biologi-
cal reality. Given the assumptions already in place,
gender among the Hua can only be interpreted as restrictive
and constraining; and the interpretive emphasis placed on
imitation of the opposite sex reinforces the idea that

cultural interventions in processes of gender construction
amount to acts of imitation.

One of the general points this critique has tried to
make is that feminist anthropology involves an intellectual
trade-off. On the one hand, feminist perspectives promote
a cross-cultural image of women that is ideologically
appealing in terms of Western women's struggles for social
equality and personal identity. On the other hand, this
anthropological picture of women as persons 'in their own
right' is constructed at the expense of ethnographic con-
text and indigenously formulated worldviews. Meigs' work
illustrates this point and shows how, even when embracing
the concept of gender (as opposed to analytically isolating
women), feminist perspectives are still unable to
theoretically situate cultural definitions of gender within
the larger framework of indigenous culture theory.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A
MAP OF MELANESIA

PACIFIC OCEAN

FIJI
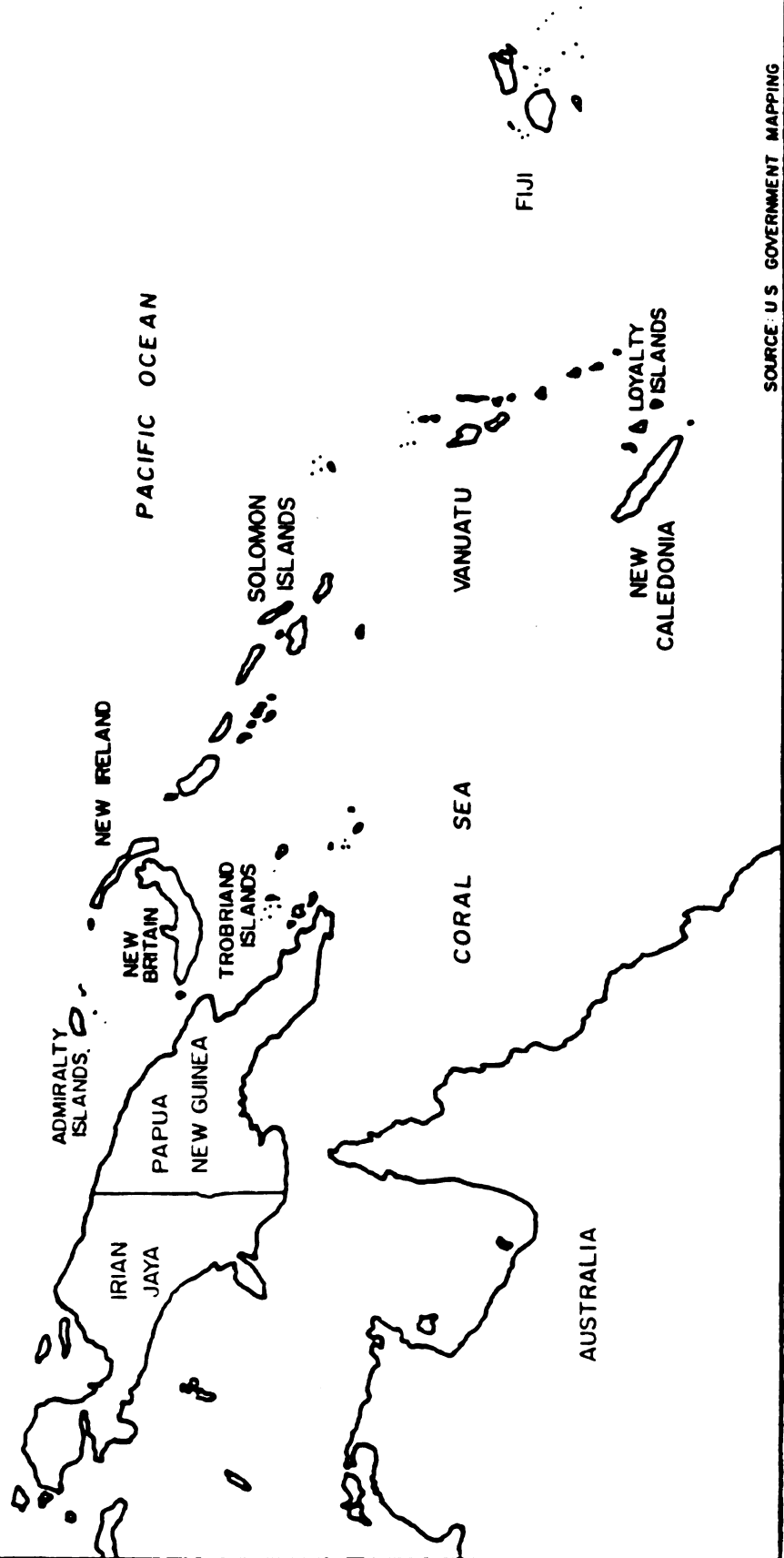
SOURCE: U S GOVERNMENT MAPPING

SOLOMON ISLANDS

VANUATU

LOYALTY ISLANDS

NEW RELAND

NEW CALEDONIA

NEW BRITAIN

TROBRIAND ISLANDS

ADMIRALTY ISLANDS

CORAL SEA

PAPUA NEW GUINEA

IRIAN JAYA

AUSTRALIA

APPENDIX B
MAP OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

LEGEND

(1) WEST SEPIK REGION
(2) EAST SEPIK REGION
(3) WESTERN HIGHLANDS
(4) SOUTHERN HIGHLANDS
(5) EASTERN HIGHLANDS

SOURCE: NATIONAL MAPPING BUREAU, PAPUA NEW GUINEA
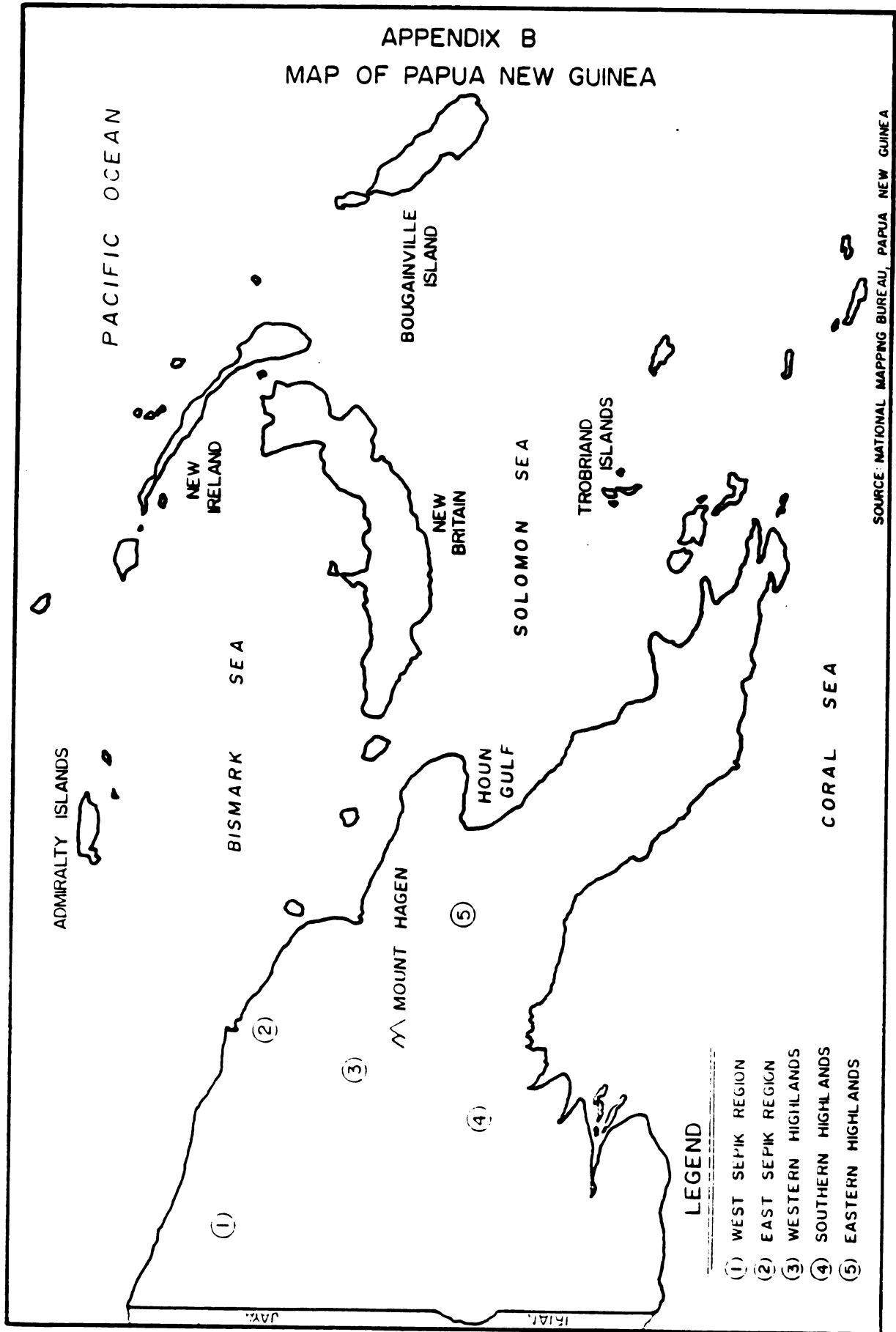
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