



Review

Reviewed Work(s): Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia by Gilbert H. Herdt

Review by: Walter L. Williams

Source: *Journal of Anthropological Research*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Autumn, 1985), pp. 351-354

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3630601>

Accessed: 18-09-2016 14:55 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>



The University of Chicago Press is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to
Journal of Anthropological Research

Ritualized Homosexuality in Melanesia. *Gilbert H. Herdt*, ed. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984, xvii + 409 pp., maps, bibliography, index. \$24.95, cloth.

This volume contains essays by eight leading ethnographers about male homosexual behavior in New Guinea and neighboring islands. Just getting this book written and published is itself an accomplishment, because anthropology as a discipline has practically ignored this aspect of human behavior. This is the first published collection of ethnographic studies specifically about homosexual behavior in non-Western cultures.

This book does more than talk about sex. The authors place the homosexual behavior in the context of gender roles so effectively that one wonders how previous anthropologists wrote about relations between Melanesian women and men without considering this important aspect of behavior. In his preface, Herdt challenges that Western stereotype of "a homosexual" or "a heterosexual" as distinct categories of persons. He points out that neither category makes sense in Melanesia, that we cannot properly speak of them in terms of the Western norms of "gay" or "straight."

What is instead found, in many areas of southern lowlands New Guinea and on smaller islands, is a strong cultural belief that there are two bodily fluids which bring about human life and growth: female breast milk and male semen. Infants need milk to grow, but in the Melanesian view boys cannot grow to become men without ingesting semen from adult males. Melanesian societies which have this belief institutionalize male homosexual behavior; it is obligatory for all boys as part of their socialization into manhood. Though the authors show the variations of specific beliefs and practices, this pattern usually exists in societies which have a fairly strict separation of the sexes.

Between the ages of about seven and thirteen, boys are taken from the maternal household and placed in a separate boys' house away from the village. For a period of several months to several years, depending on the culture, boys avoid all contact with females as they are prepared for manhood in elaborate initiations. It is the social duty of men to plant sperm in boys in order for them to grow. In some societies this is done by the boy performing oral sex upon the man, in others by him receiving anal intercourse, or in others by having the sperm rubbed on his body. The sexual act must *always* be with the boy receiving the older male's semen. To reverse roles is considered damaging to the boy's growth.

The most important homosexual relationship of a boy is with his mentor, assigned by his father and ideally his mother's brother. This mentor is responsible for educating the boy and seeing that he is raised into proper manhood. They work and sleep together until the boy has matured. This overlay of ritual and male duty makes Melanesian notions of homoeroticism seem quite different from ours. Yet, as Herdt points out, these ritual acts *are* sexual, with erections and orgasms and close erotic bonding between individuals. It is this male bonding, in fact, which is the book's major concern.

These are egalitarian societies with no strong leadership roles but with almost constant warfare. What is crucial for the society is that a strong common bond be created that cements the men together into a close warriorhood. Just as heterosexual intercourse cements a marriage, in Melanesia, homosexual acts cement a warriorhood. Both heterosexual marriage and homosexual relationships are integral to Melanesian social harmony in that they help to widen the network of individuals to whom one is tied by close emotional bonds.

This information has enormous implications for our own society. In the first place, the contemporary American military establishment discriminates against those armed forces personnel who are discovered to have engaged in homosexual acts, claiming that homosexuality is incompatible with military functioning. The Melanesian data, as well as comparable data from other world areas like ancient Greece, the Sudan, and medieval Japan, demonstrate that a warriorhood in fact can be strengthened by the bonds of homosexuality. Second, these data show that homosexual involvement is not inherently harmful for even young boys and that it can be an integral part of the mentor relationship that aids a boy's education into adulthood. The notion that boys are "recruited" into lifelong homosexual preference by early same-sex experiences is also shown to be false. In Melanesia, just as every boy is expected to be sexual only with other males, at a later time he is expected to be involved with both sexes; and then finally he is expected to marry a woman. In some groups he even is expected to give up sex with boys altogether after his first or second child is born.

All of this shows the extreme plasticity of human sexual behavior, with cultural norms shaping people in widely divergent ways. Herdt's book challenges the Western notion that homosexual behavior is somehow "unnatural," "deviant," or "abnormal." And Melanesian homosexuality certainly is not associated with effeminacy or gender mixing. Rather than somehow threatening masculinity, male homosexual behavior ensures it.

Concerning female relationships in Melanesia, several of the authors point out the lack of comparable ethnographic data. Women anthropologists need to carry out fieldwork within the women's sphere that will complement the picture of men's ideology and roles compiled by male ethnographers.

This book has many fascinating insights on gender questions. In his essay on the Marind-anim, J. Van Baal suggests that men are, in fact, not very useful to the society. Their hunting provides only one-third of the family's nutrition, but if they tried to increase hunting, they would deplete the land. Not only are women the ones producing life and breast-feeding children, but their gardening provides most of the food. Van Baal argues that warfare offers men a chance to provide an important "service" for society: "Even the protection they provide their women and children is a mere pretext: it is a protection against the unruliness of their own sex. The men need something to live for, such as the women have in their children. . . . [Warfare] is the expression of the men's deep dissatisfaction with the effect of their sexual role, the subconscious awareness of their failure in the fertility process, on which their lives depended for

meaning. Trying to achieve the unachievable, anger filled their hearts, and this anger drove them to acts of violence" (pp. 163-64). This idea may apply to the psychological roots of militarism in our own society as much as it does to New Guinea.

This book suggests that male superiority may be a function of male insecurity, covering men's envy of women and women's important economic roles. Melanesian men have created myths that semen is equivalent in importance to mother's milk. They also use their warfare, their rituals, and their control of semen distribution (it is believed to offer protection from disease as well as to induce growth) as means of gaining status. Peggy Sanday and other feminist anthropologists have shown a cross-cultural correlation between male dominance and emphasis on warfare. Male unity is stressed against enemy outsiders or against women. Initiation trauma prepares boys to accept the dangers of warfare by creating an intense bond of masculine bravado. Thus, the origins of both male violence and ritualized homosexuality (but not basic homosexual desire) may be found in men's insecurity over women's superior contributions to society.

But the book does not suggest that male homosexuality is associated with dominance over women. In their essays, Kenneth Read and Eric Schwimmer show that male dominance is emphasized more strongly in Melanesian societies which do not practice ritualized homosexuality. While there is much sexual competition in the homosexual societies, in actuality, women have a more equal status. The emphasis of the culture is on male bonding in ways that may not be greatly different from those of women bonding in our own male-dominant culture. In addition, the societies that do not practice ritualized homosexuality also tend to be more hierarchical, with an emphasis on the status of a few Big Men rather than on an egalitarian warriorhood of all men. Instead of the exchange of semen (which all men have equally), they stress the exchange of valuables (which some wealthy men can accumulate more easily than others). Perhaps this is why homosexuality is so threatening to many hierarchical societies.

This book illustrates clearly that there is quite a bit of difference between homosexual behavior and homosexual identity. However, little attention is given to those individuals who seem to show a distinct preference for same-sex eroticism (p. 95). Among the Sambia, Herdt tells us that men are expected to give up homosexuality after the birth of a child, "and most of them do so" (p. 40). What about those men who do not give it up? Herdt does not say. This book also shows that all males have the capacity to participate in homosexual acts. By making sexual acts with both sexes the norm, these Melanesian societies prevent the division of the population into "heterosexuals" and "homosexuals." They keep unity by making every man the same.

Despite some imperfections, such as instances of inconsistency and repetition between essays, this volume contains a wealth of data. It serves as an example of the kind of investigations that anthropologists can apply to data from other world areas. Herdt mentions some comparable behavior in Australia

and the Amazon Basin, but he strangely neglects the literature on intergenerational homosexual relationships in ancient Greece, the Middle East and Sudan, or medieval Japan. He should also have taken more account of a contrasting model of same-sex eroticism, involving gender mixing, which is so notable in American Indian, Polynesian, Arctic, and Asian cultures. This reviewer suspects that gender nonconformity may be more existent in Melanesia than Herdt indicates.

These criticisms are quibbles, however, when measured against the significance of this book as a pioneer in cross-cultural studies of sexual preference. With another volume in press edited by Stephen Murray and an upcoming special anthropology issue of the *Journal of Homosexuality*, the subject of same-sex behavior in non-Western cultures is at last coming out of the closet. The many variations in sexuality worldwide are exploding our notion that humans are neatly categorized into "homosexuals" or "heterosexuals."

Walter L. Williams

University of Southern California

The Symbolic Role of Women in Trobriand Gardening. *Marianne Brindley*. Pretoria: University of South Africa, 1984, viii + 123 pp. \$10.76 (S.A.), paper.

The cover of this book features a young, bare-breasted, grass-skirted Trobriand Islander holding a small child; in the foreground is a large platter of small yams (*taytu*). The cover aptly summarizes the content of this book—a short, but exhaustive, examination of the symbolic parallels “between the process of horticultural growth and that of human procreation” (p. 40). Using a symbolic structuralist approach, the author comprehensively documents the presence of a richly metaphorical oral tradition among the Trobriand Islanders. One of the shortcomings of the book is the exclusive reliance on published books, articles, and documentary sources. This study is essentially an interpretation of several anthropologists’ (primarily Malinowski’s) interpretations of the role of women in Trobriand society; assigning symbolic content to an act through the possibly distorted filter of an earlier observer can be risky business, at best. For instance, in attempting to substantiate an analogy between hoeing and sexual intercourse, the author draws on an interview Malinowski conducted with an all-male hoeing group. The men confirmed that hoeing was just like sexual intercourse: one wonders about the veracity of the informants.

In the first three chapters, the author outlines the gardening activities involved in the cultivation of *taytu* and chronicles the procreative, nurturant, and natal parallels between female physiology and gardening. Thus we are treated to a simile describing the pandanus tree as having “breast-like aerial roots” (p.