Shirley Ardener

Introduction

The title selected for this volume has a certain ambiguity. The choice was deliberate, for it was hoped that the alternative readings would draw attention to two major concerns of the papers collected here: how groups of women perceive themselves and the world around them, and how we as observers (whether male or female) are to perceive them. 'Perceiving women' seemed to be appropriate to describe both the subject-matter of the volume and the activity of those who, like the social anthropologists whose studies are offered here, have made the effort to attempt to understand them. The title refers both to substance and to methodology. It might even be thought to describe the activity of any readers who are kind enough to open these pages.

All the writers here share a common interest in these two themes, and we have all, whether bravely or foolhardily others must decide, presented tentative theoretical speculations and interpretations in order to stimulate discussion which might break new ground. Those who do not find such analyses helpful but who welcome new data will, we hope, find the information which is set out interesting of itself. It illustrates well the extraordinary differences between the various ideas about women which communities generate, and under the influence of which women live their lives. Although each paper presented here is focused on different material, differently analysed, there are many points of contact between the contributions which give unity to the volume. It will become clear that the papers have had some influence one upon another. Before discussing them it will be helpful to give some brief historical details of how they came to be written.

THE PAPERS

In 1968 Edwin Ardener was invited by Jean La Fontaine to contribute towards a book in honour of his former teacher Dr Audrey Richards on her formal retirement (although, happily, not from social anthropology altogether). As his tribute to her work on female puberty rites among the Bemba of Uganda, he chose to consider some rituals performed by Bakweri women, living in Cameroon. He prefaced his contribution with some general remarks on the study of women. First read in 1968, the paper appeared in the festschrift in 1972. Since it has influenced other

contributions submitted here, we felt that it would be helpful to reprint it in the present volume, and we are grateful to him and others concerned for agreeing.[1] He has also added a new commentary here.

My own paper, originally read in February 1971 at a seminar convened by John Beattie and Peter Lienhardt at the Oxford Institute of Social Anthropology, also discusses some patterns of behaviour of Cameroon women, but links these with certain manifestations of the modern women's liberation movements in the West. Soon after this was given, an informal seminar of women social anthropologists began to meet regularly at Oxford in order to concentrate attention on issues of mutual concern. Among the papers specially prepared for the seminar were those of Drid Williams on nuns and Judith Okely on Gypsies, revised versions of which are now made available here. Subsequently, the Decennial Conference of the Association of Social Anthropologists held in Oxford in 1973 offered an opportunity for some social anthropologists from different academic institutions at home and abroad who were interested in studies of women to meet for informal discussions. At the suggestion of Caroline Ifeka a seminar was arranged outside the official programme of the Conference at which the papers by Drid Williams and myself, and a preliminary version of the one by Caroline Ifeka on Nigerian women published here, were read. It was hoped that a contribution being prepared by another Oxford-trained social anthropologist currently working overseas, Hilary Callan, would be presented *in absentia*, but unfortunately it did not arrive in time; it was subsequently read at the Oxford women's seminar and is now included in this volume. My own paper eventually appeared in *Man* (September 1973). I was persuaded that it might be helpful if it were also made more widely accessible by inclusion in this collection. Having established this sequence of events, an attempt can now be made to outline some of the issues raised, although this brief discussion can by no means do full justice to the papers which, of course, can best speak for themselves.

Edwin Ardener suggested that, with notable exceptions, generally social anthropologists had not studied women with the kind of attention which, as half or more of most populations, they should command. By this statement he hoped to stimulate increased interest in and respect for the study of the female component of society, for at the time this field was relatively neglected and had not everywhere benefited from the current resurgence of interest which has been stimulated by the recent women's social and political movements. He went on to suggest that the inadequate treatment might in part have been due to the fact that in their own societies, and as subjects of research, women are often more 'inarticulate' than men, and thus pose special technical problems for the inquirer. It might be appropriate here to stress that he did not deny that women do 'utter or give tongue'. He was drawing attention to the fact that because the arena of public discourse tends to be characteristically male-dominated and the appropriate language registers often seem to

have been 'encoded' by males, women may be at a disadvantage when wishing to express matters of peculiar concern to them. Unless their views are presented in a form acceptable to men, and to women brought up in the male idiom, they will not be given a proper hearing. If this is so, it is possible to speculate further and wonder whether, because of the absence of a suitable code and because of a necessary indirectness rather than spontaneity of expression, women, more often than may be the case with men, might sometimes lack the facility to raise to conscious level their unconscious thoughts. Edwin Ardener suggested that women's ideas or models of the world around them might nevertheless find a way of expression in forms other than direct expository speech, possibly through symbolism in art, myth, ritual, special speech registers, and the like. Following his preliminary theoretical discussion, he drew upon the ethnography of the Bakweri people of Cameroon, in West Africa, in order to extend his argument. He took the Bakweri story of how four friends parted company, to become Water Spirit, Ape, Mouse, and Man, and he set out some implications which can be drawn from this myth. He then described the mermaid cult of the Bakweri women, the various rites performed, and the secret language, and he attempted to interpret the symbolism in the light of his general thesis.

My own paper considers the problem of why Bakweri women, in certain recognizable circumstances, were prepared to act in a manner not usually expected of them. The women, including those who were highly respected in their communities, participated in behaviour which they would normally consider 'shocking', and which we might call 'vulgar' or 'obscene'. It was clear that their participation did not bring them into disgrace as one might expect, but on the contrary, it reinforced their dignity. It is well known, of course, that in some societies behaviour which is normally forbidden may be 'licensed' or prescribed for special occasions (when, for instance, sexual 'liberties' are permitted), but such behaviour could be regarded as having been specially sanctioned or redefined for the occasion by general public opinion as 'permissible' or 'non-obscene'. The difference in the Bakweri case was that the behaviour retained some implication of impropriety—indeed, this was an essential implication—but nevertheless it received the support of otherwise polite and conforming women. Some related material was available from the nearby Balong people, and from a very different group, the Kom, living some hundreds of miles away to the north. Additional information scattered in the social-anthropological literature came to light which also supported the conclusion that the Bakweri women were not as unusual in this respect as might be supposed. On further consideration it also became apparent that certain of these features not only recurred in groups of different African women, they were also exemplified in the words and deeds of certain members of the modern women's liberation movement, in one of its phases, in the West, which I therefore set out.

Judith Okely's paper is based on her experience of living in a caravan alongside Gypsy families. She accompanied the women when they went out calling on houses, selling their handiwork, and on their visits to cafés and public houses. She has taken advantage also of some literature written by them and about them. Quotations are selected which illustrate the ideas which non-Gypsies have had of Gypsies, and these are compared with the notions Gypsies have about themselves and about the host group, the English, among whom live the group which was studied. Of particular interest are her descriptions of the purity rituals which rule the lives of the women.

Although all of us contributing to this volume have had the advantage and the pleasure of living alongside the women described (or, in Caroline Ifeka's case, among their descendants), none has been quite so directly involved in her field as Hilary Callan, who has tackled the difficult task of analysing a group of which she is herself a member. She attempts here to make explicit the implicit and uncodified assumptions of the rights and duties of wives of diplomats. We learn how these wives form part of the diplomatic Mission, and yet at the same time they do not, according to the way in which they are perceived. Their characters, temperaments, and qualifications are supposedly of no concern to the Diplomatic Service because they are private citizens, present in the Mission at the request of their husbands. Yet they are expected to exercise their talents, do their duties, almost as if they were a recognized part of the Service. The delicate subject of the internal organization of the wives' group is also considered. Her study will be of particular value to those who are interested in women who have been brought into association with each other primarily because of a formal, structural relationship between their husbands (wives of dons, or of business or 'company' colleagues, are obvious parallels), but it may also throw light on some features inherent in the situation of all wives.

If most people know little of the expectations of women in far places, or of the thoughts of the Gypsies met on the doorstep, probably even less is known of the preoccupations of those of our countrywomen who live behind the walls of a closed community. Drid Williams introduces us into this world by her study based on fieldwork in a Carmelite Order. We read of the founding of the Order by St Teresa, and of the pattern of the daily life of the nuns. Such is the fascination of the model which she has begun to reveal to us that her paper inspires requests for more data. She has, however, had to resist the temptation to include partial answers to complicated questions (such as those concerning the place given to the body in the life of the nuns, how they come to terms with their sexual identities, and other questions which would also be of particular interest to us in our study of women) since she will be better able to deal with these and other matters more fully in future publications. In the space available here she devotes particular attention to an examination of those intellectual aspects of the nuns' cosmology, or model of the world,

which relate to their faith and govern their Rule, matters which are of central concern to them, and which determine the shape of their lives.

Caroline Ifeka's study returns us to West Africa, to the Igbo and Ibibio women of Nigeria. Much of the action of her paper takes place on ground recently fought over in the so-called Biafran War. She takes us back in time to an earlier and less well-known situation of conflict, the women's uprising of the nineteen-twenties. The precolonial system of agricultural production, and certain aspects of the belief system, are recalled, and the changes which took place as a result of the altered circumstances of the colonial period are described. The dramatic events of the women's uprising are sketched, and the various theories which have been put forward to explain the occurrences are reviewed. Caroline Ifeka has brought into the analysis and matched up different sets of information and from this complex material draws her own interpretation of the reasons for the actions of the women and the causes of the war. Although her exposition is centred on one historically documented event, her propositions are of general theoretical interest.

MUTED GROUPS AND DIFFERING ORDERS OF PERCEPTION

Having briefly delineated the ground covered in this volume, some possible theoretical implications of the papers can be drawn out with the aim of providing a tentative general analytical framework in which to view them. Although I have mainly restricted my attention to the material in the volume, I have also made use of some of the ideas on the perception of events developed by Edwin Ardener.[2] His hypothesis is being published elsewhere, so I shall not discuss it in full nor evaluate it here, as I can leave him and others to enter any dialogue which is required. I have, however, applied the theory to the specific data provided in this volume. In so doing I have had to restate it partially, and I must, of course, take responsibility for any distortion which I may have introduced in the process and also for any malformed assumptions which I may have drawn from my consideration of the studies of the other contributors to this volume. These would, of course, be matters for regret.

It might be helpful to note my use of the term 'model' below. By the expression 'model of women', for instance, I mean the set of ideas which together represent women in the minds of those who have 'generated' the model. When the expression 'women's models' is used the reference is to the concepts which women themselves generate in their minds (which will, of course, include 'models of women'). Everyone probably perceives the world in a unique way, but nevertheless people are not so independent that some do not hold some very close ideas, and therefore it is not unreasonable to talk sometimes of a group sharing or generating a common model of society or common models of its components.[3]

As we have noted, Edwin Ardener's paper suggests that women may not have been given the kind of attention by anthropologists which is their due as half of most populations partly because their own societies, and also the world of academic social anthropology, have viewed them under the influence of dominant male systems of perception. The implications are that a society may be dominated or overdetermined by the model (or models) generated by one dominant group within the system. This dominant model may impede the free expression of alternative models of their world which subdominant groups may possess, and perhaps may even inhibit the very generation of such models. Groups dominated in this sense find it necessary to structure their world through the model (or models) of the dominant group, transforming their own models as best they can in terms of the received ones. Individual members of the dominant group will vary, of course, in their competence to express verbally and in other ways the articulation of their model, but there may be presumed to be a considerable degree of 'fit' between the dominant model and their structural position in society. This gives them a great advantage over those in the subdominant groups for whom the 'fit' might be very imperfect. As a result, the latter might be relatively more 'inarticulate' when expressing themselves through the idiom of the dominant group, and silent on matters of special concern to them for which no accommodation has been made in it. Although he has suggested that women characteristically form such a relatively 'inarticulate' group in any situation where the interests of the group are at variance with those of men, he also identifies other groups in society, defined by criteria other than sexual, which may also be effectively 'mute'. His views have received considerable support, particularly from younger female social anthropologists, one of whom, Charlotte Hardman, proposed the useful term 'muted group' to describe the kind of conformation in mind, and the term 'counterpart model' for any alternative model such a group may generate.[4]

Judith Okely's paper is of particular relevance in this wider context. In Great Britain the Gypsy population (male and female) is a subdominant group, and *prima facie* 'muted' in relation to the dominant structure. Often thought of as 'underprivileged' and to be ripe for 'retraining' and 'resocialization' by some well-meaning Britons (an idea sometimes appearing to gain support from the Gypsies when they adopt 'a subservient and humble posture' in compliance with the expectations of the dominant model) the Gypsies are seen to possess a private view of the world, a counterpart model, in which members of the dominant group are not only *not* ideals to be respected or emulated, but, on the contrary, are seen as polluting. Inside those littered Gypsy encampments are found notions of purity and cleanliness which would be completely perplexing to the typical house-proud member of the surrounding dominant group who might consider the Gypsies to be 'dirty'.

Judith Okely's example introduces another complication, for we see that a subdominant structure which is muted and must operate only in terms acknowledged in the dominant structure may itself overdetermine its own internal substructures, which are thereby made muted. Thus, Gypsy women may be seen to compose a group which is relatively muted within Gypsy society, which in turn is itself relatively muted in a universe which includes the surrounding housedwelling society.[5] An interesting feature, just to complicate matters further, is that seen from the standpoint of the dominant male Gypsy model, non-Gypsies (both men and women) and Gypsy women are, in certain respects, all seen as potentially destructive of or dangerous to the dominant Gypsy structure. Gypsy women, while openly subscribing to the dominant Gypsy model, are able to exploit this feature and other ambiguities in their placing in the structures, as Judith Okely's paper will show. They conduct their lives with an independence for which no recognition is allowed in the dominant Gypsy model, having themselves generated a counterpart model of possible behaviour, not admitted to the general public domain and therefore 'muted', all of their own. Judith Okely's paper also illustrates the fact that counterpart models (whether generated by women or by ethnically or otherwise defined groups) are not generated independently of those of the dominant structure, but are to some extent shaped by them, a point also made by Caroline Ifeka.

In a number of papers [6] Edwin Ardener has suggested that we should not imagine that the models which any group generates should all be thought of as of the same theoretical order. He envisages that most of the models which quickly come to mind are built up from the ingredients which daily life provides (*à la* 'bricolage' of Lévi-Strauss) from whatever resources are available at any given time. Our ideas thus depend on what the context of the moment produces. We arrange what we perceive into some sort of order, pattern, or model. For instance, we identify a number of conjoined pieces of wood as a 'table', we interpret a series of actions and collection of artifacts as a 'hijack', an assembly of bricks and mortar once classified as a slum we may perceive to be a 'bijou residence', and so forth. The process of making order out of those selected elements of which we make ourselves aware is continuous. We can see that if this is so it must also be circular because we tend to register most easily those 'bits' of perception which we recognize to be potentially capable of being related to each other.

Although today's events are always unique, nevertheless there seem to be some underlying continuities, which may be summed up by the common tag *plus ça change, plus c'est la même chose*. To explain this Edwin Ardener suggests in his theory of structures of thought that we should envisage the human perceptual process to be of more than one order. The changing categories of society at the surface of events, which he terms the 's-structures' (from 'syntagmatic'—the terminology need not detain us here), are themselves shaped by other more fundamental,

more persistent structures, which he calls 'p-structures' (from 'paradigmatic'), which are located in the programmatic aspects of the particular society. These may be regarded as frameworks, or models, or sets of ground rules, which are linked in certain ways to those categories and ideas which we generate to help us order our experience of daily life. So-called 'stereotypes' belong to the class of 's-structures': by definition the term implies specific form. The underlying continuities or 'p-structures' are more general, usually unconscious, ideas which are realized in life only in various guises which depend for their specificity on the context of the moment, that is, in the form of 's-structures' which change with the fashions, circumstances, and times.

If we accept the proposed distinction between dominant and muted groups as a basis for discussion, it may well be that while both groups generate ideas of social reality at the deepest ('p-structural') level, muted groups find that, unlike dominant groups, they must inhibit the generation of ideas close to or at the level of the surface of events ('s-structures'), since the conceptual space in which they would lie is overrun by the dominant model of events generated by the dominant group. It has been suggested by Ardener that in an autonomous (dominant) system the two orders of structures (dominant 'p' and dominant 's') are linked by certain transformational rules. If this is so we should expect a muted system composed of the 'p-structures' of a muted group and the imposed 's-structures' of a dominant group to be held together by more complex logical relationships. If such a system is to be envisaged without a collapse, some adequate binding relationships must nevertheless obtain, so perhaps we must assume that generally muted groups manage to forge rickety or cumbersome links between the two orders of structures.

It might help to understand this if we imagine a dominant system in which recognition is given to an 's-structure' which we shall label '4', which is a transformation of a given 'p-structure' labelled, say, '2 + 2', with which it is considered to be in an equal relationship. Let us summarize this and say the dominant system is: '2 + 2' (equals) '4'. Then suppose that the 'p-structure' which an associated muted group generates is not '2 + 2' but '3 + 3'. In order to come to terms with the required 's-structure' '4', this group must adjust its perceptual process so that instead of the simple '2 + 2' (equals) '4' it must generate the system '3 + 3' (if 2 is taken away equals) '4', or the like. Thus the dominant and the muted groups may each generate different structural premisses, and still come to accept a common statement of perception.

In such systems, of course, only the dominant concept '4' is normally perceived. This might have a number of alternative realizations (for instance '6 − 2', or '2 × 2' or '10 − 7 + 1') according to circumstances. We could further imagine that the dominant group might never generate, and recognition might never be given to '6', nor its alternatives '5 + 1', '3 × 2', etc. (that is: to those statements which the

subdominant group might most economically generate), and the group is thereby 'muted'.

It is difficult to give apt illustrations from life without overconcretization ('p-structures', as I understand them, are not easily describable since once we clothe them in words they tend to take the form of 's-structures' and thus our purpose is defeated). We have to rely upon imperfect analogies, such as the one just given. But we might, nevertheless, venture to express the problem with which Hilary Callan's paper grapples in these terms. The prime importance of the furtherance of the interests of the Embassy is a concept presented to the wives by the dominant group. For the wives to generate other overriding objectives is not acceptable in the ideology of the Mission. A wife who wishes to establish an independent career must therefore 'encode' or 'transform' her objective in terms of its value to the Mission. Her clear perception of purpose may be clouded or overdetermined in this way by the dominant ideology; the process of generation of her ideas is thus made more complicated. The 'premiss of dedication' which concerns Hilary Callan may be analogous to an adjustment in the system of members of a muted group which transforms their own unconscious perceptions into such conscious ideas as will accord with those generated by the dominant group. The 'premiss of dedication' is like that part of the transformation or mode of specification which effects the stifling of unacceptable statements in the discourse of a muted group. Most of the wives of diplomats seem to accept this situation without stress, although as Hilary Callan's paper hints, there are inconsistencies and incompatibilities which still trouble some.

But if, to continue our speculations, we may imagine that, generally, muted groups do manage to establish transformational links between their own perceptual structures and those of the world of events presented to them by the dominant ideology, perhaps there are times when they cannot, and then various repercussions are made manifest. Caroline Ifeka's case study of the Igbo women's war may possibly be understood as an example where such links became so overstrained that orderly conduct became impossible. Thus, if one were to put her argument in terms of structures or models of different orders of generation, one might see her paper as an attempt to explain the effects of a disjuncture between the underlying 'p-structures' of women's model of women (which persisted from the time when traditional Igbo patterns of production existed at the surface of events) and the new ephemeral models encountered in a changing system of production. Perhaps the two could not be satisfactorily related one to another, the links could not be forged. Caroline Ifeka's paper demonstrates that the introduction of taxation for women, supposedly one of the main causes of the militancy, is to be seen as a contingent event only. In terms of our discussion, it acted as a trigger on the tensions created by the disjuncture.

The data set out by Caroline Ifeka suggest that the traditional system

of subsistence agriculture, which was a major preoccupation in the women's lives, offered them an analogy with themselves. It sustained the physical continuity of the group, and it thus exemplified their *raison d'être*. Their identities were therefore closely linked in their minds to the land and its fertility. But when women entered large-scale cash-crop production, processing, and distribution, their activities did not merely ensure the health and continuity of the group. They produced surpluses which could be transformed into power, prestige, and the like, thus involving them with factors of quite a different kind. Igbo men and women had traditionally operated in different political conceptual spaces. Unlike men, women could move about freely in times of conflict between villages: a very important distinction and advantage. In the different political space in which men operated, power and prestige could change hands, concessions could be extorted and conceded; political advantage was balanced by political loss in the overall male system. Women were not directly concerned with either; they operated in another 'space'.

When taxation was introduced for men, although disliked it did not fundamentally challenge the underlying male political system, the gains and losses in the colonial confrontation were compatible with it. But when women were suddenly thought to be about to be taxed, the integrity of the women's model of women was threatened, their distinctive space was intruded upon. Dragged out of it, the women felt their separate identity to be challenged. It seems that it was not merely that they objected to the 'cost' of taxation (as Caroline Ifeka suggests, they may even have been contributing towards the taxes paid by the men anyway) although this may well have been an irritant. More important seems to have been the fact that they were to be defined as persons liable for tax. One witness used the telling phrase that the conviction that women were to be taxed 'stirred them to the depths of their being' (see below p. 150). The taxation issue, therefore, while being, as Caroline Ifeka suggests, a trigger able to fire an already potentially explosive situation, was a singularly apposite one. It reminded women that the new circumstances gave them an identity which placed them in the male system, depriving them of some female advantages while putting them at a disadvantage compared to men. As Caroline Ifeka points out, they were turned into men as far as the penalties went without appearing to get any equivalent political gains. If the taxation or another catalytic issue had not arisen, the Igbo women might or might not have been able to forge a bridge across the disjuncture between their own deep models of women and the new models generated at the surface of events until the models could be mutually reconciled. Caroline Ifeka's paper is valuable in focusing our attention beyond contingent events, beyond economic considerations of real importance in themselves, to the underlying perceptual and symbolic systems which give them significance.[7]

We could envisage, perhaps, that the construction and maintenance

of any coherent conceptual system conjoining the deep models of a muted group with the surface models of the dominant group would require from the members of the muted group the investment of a great deal of disciplined mental energy. This investment may be one reason why they are often seen to be more conservative than members of dominant groups, even clinging to models which seem to disadvantage them. It is often the most insecure and underprivileged sections of societies (so defined according to classifications drawn from the dominant system) which seem to resist change most strongly. But after lifetimes of adapting in order to achieve a precarious accommodation, should we be surprised if the prospect of beginning again should be resisted? For some muted groups whose members seem to exhibit an acceptance of, even apparent contentment with, their lot in situations which those outside the system, or even sometimes those within the dominant structure, imagine would be intolerable, another explanation is possible. While professing to support the values and codes of behaviour embodied in the dominant system, perhaps their own sense of value derives from a muted counterpart system, of which they may not themselves even be completely aware. For instance, the principal measure for social success or for other satisfactions in the counterpart model may differ from that of the model of the dominant group, and therefore their acquiescence at being placed low down on the latter's scale for success may occur because the placing seems unimportant or irrelevant to them, since they may not necessarily be 'unsuccessful' or 'unsatisfied' according to the logic of their own muted model.[8]

SPECIALIZED OR 'UN-NATURAL' FEMALE GROUPS AND FEMALE UNIVERSALS

Some of the studies here concern groups whose membership is ascribed by birth. Hilary Callan's group of wives, and the community of nuns described by Drid Williams, are not biologically self-reproducing. They are groups which must be joined, to which recruits must come from outside. Membership is not the automatic outcome of the line of least resistance: a conscious choice must be made. While they share this characteristic, there is a major difference between the two cases in their attitudes to recruitment. Not all the women who become wives of diplomats can be assumed to do so primarily because they want to be diplomats' wives as such (although this might possibly be a consideration for some, others may even dislike conforming): the determining model for most is probably associated with the marriage union. In the case of the nuns we may more confidently presume that recruitment is determined primarily by the desire of the would-be novices to become nuns, and to conform to their model and expectations of a nun.

Whatever logical necessity is envisaged by the nuns themselves, to outsiders the group seems essentially artificial or 'un-natural'. The

group exists as a creation generated by the thoughts and the consequential actions of the nuns. The nuns could make void their Order whenever they wish. It endures because the nuns think it should; it is essentially a creation of the intellect; it exists because of the ideal model in the minds of the nuns. If the Order of nuns may seem in one sense artificial (that is, it is not found in 'nature'), the nuns themselves are certainly not 'unnatural' in their model-making process, and in the way they order their world according to their own system; on the contrary, they apply themselves with more conscious dedication and precision than is usual for most of us to processes which with varying degrees of unawareness we all implement continuously.

Since Drid Williams's study has so powerfully reminded us of the primacy of the model in the case of the nuns, we may wonder whether our category 'women' might not also be entirely an intellectual creation which one day may disappear. At the least its realization on the surface of events may change in due course so radically that it would be almost unrecognizable to many alive today. As it is now, since there is so much variation in our present-day models of women, we may well wonder whether they have anything in common which makes them distinctly female. If there is so much variation, wherein lies their womanhood? It would be very easy to conclude that, since models of women are so very different in detail one from another, there are no specific common characteristics.

Clearly there are some biological bases used for the definitions of women in society, but the extent and influence of the biological differentiations between men and women are matters on which as yet we know very little. We do not really understand how supposedly measurable biological differences are related to those we cannot yet easily analyse, such as emotional and intellectual processes. There may or may not be social correlates which vary, in some regular way that we cannot yet perceive, with measurable physical characteristics. Of course, even when discussing the biological bases that have been used for defining women in society, we still come up against problems because various societies may not allocate the same physical properties to women, and in any case 'measurement' itself is determined by an arbitrary set of distinctions. It may also be possible that physical differentiations (whether 'real' or 'socially perceived') are merely arbitrary markers which have been found useful for setting up *social* oppositions, and it is the opposition to men that is the basis of womanhood, however characterized in the world of events. Because of this opposition, women *experience* the world differently from men, regardless of whether or not innate differences are significant. There is no space here to enter the wide debate on the relationship between the categories identified as 'sex' and 'gender'.[9] It is enough to note that our present ideas about women seem to require the accommodation of both concepts.

The scale of the task of understanding 'women' (or any other defined

group in society) is daunting, but it should not prevent us from taking such steps as we can in the hope that surer ways forward can be found in the future. By open-minded examination of as many women's models as we are able, we may not only locate interesting differences between them, but may also stumble upon possible points of congruence. We should not be disappointed if, should women's models of the world (or those of any other muted group) be elicited, they were found to resemble in the main those of the dominant structures with which they are associated. It is the small deviations from any norm which may be crucial. Just as the pinch of caraway seed may transform a basic recipe, or a drop of dye may alter a hue, so any small unique differences in world-views may make 'all the difference'.

Given the welter of differing social manifestations, how, it may be asked, can we hope to identify any underlying structures? The possibility of eliciting a common model from phenomena which do not exactly match in all details appeared credible after having considered certain selected patterns of activity and modes of expression exhibited by several culturally distinct groups of women, as described in my paper below. Although none of the sets of information on the different groups were exactly the same, there were enough common elements to make me suspect that there might be some possible underlying common pattern, which would be available to us if we could but elicit it. At the level of the surface of events, there were differences in the way these features were made manifest, of course, due to the differences in circumstances, but these isolated groups of women seemed nevertheless to share some responses. The patterns of behaviour, although not one was exactly like another, each seemed to display parts of a model which they possessed in common. To understand this one may imagine a set of screens in which gaps appear in different places. Through one screen an eye and an ear can be discerned, through another a different ear and a nose, and through another an eye, a nose and mouth, and so forth. Each glimpse is different in detail, but given enough evidence we can construct the structure of a face lying behind each screen. No two screens are alike, no two mouths are alike, and yet a hidden model of a face is common to all. So, in trying to discern common underlying features in patterns of thought and behaviour in society, we must reconstruct a model from a series of partial manifestations. In the end we have to risk an imaginative leap, to make a guess at the underlying structure, making adjustments as more 'screens' become available for study, more insights are gained or better logic prevails. Sometimes, as seems to have happened to me since some of my propositions were first outlined, there is the pleasure of coming across the generation of new statements of thought, or of events, which provide further examples of what has already been seen, or, more excitingly, give examples of features whose possible forms have been deduced; sometimes one must abandon cherished hypotheses altogether or make crucial realignments. It is by these

methods that we attempt to elicit those underlying continuities termed 'p-structures'. They cannot be directly perceived and have no independent existence since they can only take form when 'clothed' in models at the surface of events (the 's-structures'), and it is by the study of the latter that we reveal the former. The one is inherent in the other.[10]

Of course, the process is a little more complex than just described, because we are not provided with discrete screens each displaying manifestations from only one model. Our perceptual experience is continuous. It is as if elements from innumerable conceptual models are presented to us, as each instance dissolves into the next. We sort out our perceptual experience and arrange it into manageable orderings or models as best we can and as best serves our purposes. The 'models' which anthropologists put forward in order to share their analyses are themselves only deliberate attempts to do this.

In my own study of militant women I have described certain patterns of behaviour and techniques of communication which have been employed at certain times by different groups of women. I have made certain analytical distinctions in order to sort out the mass of material available and to focus attention on particular aspects. I make a distinction between 'women's rights' and 'women's liberation', for instance. This might not seem controversial to some now, but, despite my having said that militant women are usually concerned with both aspects, some have assumed that I intended the dichotomy to be a rigid one. Of course, women, both in Africa and elsewhere, pursue what they see as their 'rights', not only through the institutions available to them, but also, when these fail, by attacking them. The position taken here in isolating certain special features does not conflict with the present-day militancy. Rather it should illuminate it while remaining to some degree able to detach itself from the particular demands of any single conflict. Some of the manifestations on which I concentrate in my paper seem to appear with less frequency, or in other guises, in England at least, at the present time; others seem more prevalent. The manner in which women communicate changes according to circumstances. My general appreciation of the literature of the modern movement will be evident in my paper. It is not my purpose to review all the recent work here. Many of the approaches are very interesting (e.g. Sheila Rowbotham, 1973, among others), and are often in harmony with some of the discussions in this volume. When my paper was first conceived, the introduction of the new literature into it was intended to place these writings more evidently on the academic map, as academic data, as social phenomena worthy of dispassionate study. They seemed hardly to be taken seriously in some intellectual circles at the time. In a further work now in hand I hope to show correspondences between the modes of expression of hostility employed by the women described and those used by other groups in society, defined by religious and other criteria.

CONCLUSION

The general theoretical approaches in this volume seem to offer possible ways forward in our particular field of research. The 'position of women' type of study often documents how women are placed in an 'inferior' position in the received system of such-and-such a society *vis-à-vis* men. These studies can be very valuable and further research along these lines will continue to be fruitful. Nevertheless, after we have located the model of women in the overall ideological framework of a dominant structure we are still left with many features requiring analysis, and not least of them is, as has been stressed, the often little defined and seemingly vague, possibly repressed, alternative ideas which women may have about the world, including those about themselves, which may easily be overlooked. We need to examine carefully the models of both the dominant and the muted groups in any society in order that we may learn more about the relationship between them and how this became established.[11] It is important to remember that the relationship will not necessarily be a constant one. Neither may we assume that the relationship between any particular members of the groups will necessarily be direct images of the relationship between the groups to which they are assigned.

We might note that the present way of distinguishing a 'dominant' from a 'muted' or ill-articulated model, does not impose upon us an obligation to talk in terms of 'domination by men' or 'the oppression of women' where this is taken to be a purposeful male activity, although of course such interpretations might well be appropriate in many situations. Clearly, the bee crushed by the passing elephant is at a relative, indeed a fatal, disadvantage compared to the larger beast, but merely to say that it has been 'oppressed' by the elephant seems to be missing some essential points. The same would, of course, be true if similar statements were made about a bee which fatally stung an elephant. We should note that a dominant group may not necessarily be demographically more populous than a muted group, which may provide the majority of a population. It should also be possible to discuss the relationship between models in terms of dominance, without any necessary implication that the group generating the dominant model has been able to do so only through a monopoly of sin (or, for that matter, by possessing special virtue).

We should beware of assuming, as some might have done in the past, that greater theoretical interest must lie in a dominant model than in one generated by a muted group: a society could be envisaged (and such may well exist) where knowledge of the dominant model would be less helpful in understanding what is happening at any given time than would a knowledge of the less well-articulated models of the muted groups in that world, were this information accessible to us. A study of muted groups is certainly not a subordinate kind of social anthropology,

although we may concede that it may be a difficult one. At a time when it is being proclaimed that many assumptions and values which have dominated our own lives in recent years are being challenged, the study of other values and assumptions present in obscured models will, it is hoped, find a responsive reception. This is a task, which is only at the beginning, for to perceive beyond the reflective screens of a dominant structure is a difficult challenge.

Notes

The contributors to this volume would especially like to thank Diana Burfield for help in seeing this volume through the press, and Malcolm Crick for preparing the index.

1 To Audrey Richards herself, to the editor Jean La Fontaine, and to Tavistock Publications.

2 Within the limited aims of this introduction I have confined my remarks to the works of contributors to this symposium. The approaches presented here are intended to increase the number of possible ways of considering women in society, not to impose further constraints. Our field of research has been, as it were, momentarily held still to allow possible significant patterns to be discerned, one or two at a time. That societies are more complicated than can be expressed in any single short paper should be evident. Other writers have done work which is pertinent to our chosen field; because it has not been reviewed here, does not mean that it is considered to be irrelevant.

3 The use of the term 'model' is not entirely satisfactory, and I make no attempt here to define the term. It is intended to refer not only to our ideas about so-called 'real' 'things' and 'people' as discrete entities, but also ideas about such abstract categories as 'greed', or 'pride', or 'nationhood', and so forth. Others may prefer and have used different terminology when considering this field of study, and some may apply the term 'model' differently. There is a considerable body of literature which discusses the term, but this does not seem to be the place to enter into the discussion. Readers may make their own substitutions should they wish to translate into terminology more to their approval.

4 In Ardener's terms, the *dominant group* and the *dominant model* together form the *dominant structure*. It follows that the *muted group* and the *counterpart model* together form a *muted* or *subdominant structure*. It should be noted that one dominant structure may overdetermine a number of muted structures. He gives attention on pages 19–27 below to some critical comments which were recently published and clarifies certain misinterpretations and other matters.

5 Just as Gypsy men may be 'muted' in one context and 'dominant' in another, women who tend to be 'muted' relative to men may be 'dominant' in certain circumstances. Their opportunities for generating a dominant ideology of their own, seem, however, generally to be more infrequent than is the case for men. Women may sometimes be in a dominant position, to find that the only ideology which they have acquired any competence in handling has not been generated independently by themselves, but is one acquired from the group most commonly dominant.

6 Ardener (1970, 1971, 1973).

7 Ifeka places greater emphasis on the symbolic weight of the female powers of reproduction in women's identity than I do in my paper. In the Igbo case, this is shown to be a result of male control. Some of the material I present illustrates women asserting their claim to an honour which does not depend solely on their reproductive capacity, and I lay particular stress upon certain 'non-functional' aspects of the feminine sense of self.

8 For members socialized in terms of the dominant model to force recognition of the values of the dominant group in such a way as further to obscure their muted counterpart model, even if done with the best intention of helping individuals to improve their placing in the dominant structure, might sometimes be a disservice. This would be especially true if after the muted group has accepted the value system of the dominant group, the latter abandons it and generates another one similar to that from which the muted group has just been weaned!

9 See, for instance, Anne Oakley (1972).

10 They are 'simultaneities' (Ardener 1973).

11 Some interesting biographical and other work has begun in the field of English social history which concentrates on sections of the population previously largely neglected in the mainstream of historical writings. Members of the women's anthropology group seminar at Oxford, like those in other comparable groups, have also produced a substantial number of new analyses recently. Besides those of us represented in this volume, Juliet Blair, Helen Callaway, Kirsten Hastrup and Harriet Sibisi, for instance, have papers in the *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*. Further publications by members of the seminar are forthcoming.

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Edwin Ardener

Belief and the Problem of Women

THE PROBLEM

The problem of women has not been solved by social anthropologists. Indeed the problem itself has been often examined only to be put aside again for want of a solution, for its intractability is genuine. The problem of women is not the problem of 'the position of women', although valuable attention has been paid to this subject by Professor Evans-Pritchard (1965). I refer to the problem that women present to social anthropologists. It falls into (1) a technical and (2) an analytical part. Here is a human group that forms about half of any population and is even in a majority at certain ages: particularly at those which for so many societies are the 'ruling' ages—the years after forty. Yet however apparently competently the female population has been studied in any particular society, the results in understanding are surprisingly slight, and even tedious. With rare exceptions, women anthropologists, of whom so much was hoped, have been among the first to retire from the problem. Dr Richards was one of the few to return to it at the height of her powers. In *Chisungu* (1956) she produced a study of a girls' rite that raised and anticipated many of the problems with which this paper will deal.[1] While I shall illustrate my central point by reference to a parallel set of rites among the Bakweri of Cameroon, through which women and girls join the world of the mermaid spirits, this paper is less about ethnography than about the interpretation of such rites through the symbolism of the relations between men and women.

The methods of social anthropology as generally illustrated in the classical monographs of the last forty years have purported to 'crack the code' of a vast range of societies, without any direct reference to the female group. At the level of 'observation' in fieldwork, the behaviour of women has, of course, like that of men, been exhaustively plotted: their marriages, their economic activity, their rites, and the rest. When we come to that second or 'meta' level of fieldwork, the vast body of debate, discussion, question and answer, that social anthropologists really depend upon to give conviction to their interpretations, there is a real imbalance. We are, for practical purposes, in a male world. The study of women is on a level little higher than the study of the ducks and fowls they commonly own—a mere bird-

watching indeed. It is equally revealing and ironical that Lévi-Strauss (1963: 61) should write: 'For words do not speak, while women do.' For the truth is that women rarely speak in social anthropology in any but that male sense so well exemplified by Lévi-Strauss's own remark: in the sense of merely uttering or giving tongue. It is the very inarticulateness of women that is the technical part of the problem they present. In most societies the ethnographer shares this problem with its male members. The brave failure (with rare exceptions) of even women anthropologists to surmount it really convincingly (and their evident relief when they leave the subject of women) suggests an obvious conclusion. Those trained in ethnography evidently have a bias towards the kinds of model that men are ready to provide (or to concur in) rather than towards any that women might provide. If the men appear 'articulate' compared with the women, it is a case of like speaking to like. To pursue the logic where it leads us: if ethnographers (male and female) want only what the men can give, I suggest it is because the men consistently tend, when pressed, to give a bounded model of society such as ethnographers are attracted to. But the awareness that women appear as lay figures in the men's drama (or like the photographic cut-outs in filmed crowd-scenes) is always dimly present in the ethnographer's mind. Lévi-Strauss, with his perennial ability to experience ethnographic models, thus expressed no more than the truth of all those models when he saw women as items of exchange inexplicably and inappropriately giving tongue.

The technical treatment of the problem is as follows. It is commonly said, with truth, that ethnographers with linguistic difficulties of any kind will find that the men of a society are generally more experienced in bridging this kind of gap than are the women. Thus, as a matter of ordinary experience, interpreters, partial bilinguals, or speakers of a vehicular language are more likely to be found among men than among women. For an explanation of this we are referred to statements about the political dominance of men, and their greater mobility. These statements, in their turn, are referred ultimately to the different biological roles of the two sexes. The cumulative effect of these explanations is then: to the degree that communication between ethnographer and people is imperfect, that imperfection drives the ethnographer in greater measure towards men.

This argument while stressing the technical aspect does not dispose of the problem even in its own terms, although we may agree that much ethnography (more than is generally admitted) is affected by factors of this type. It is, however, a common experience that women still 'do not speak' even when linguistic aspects are constant. Ethnographers report that women cannot be reached so easily as men: they giggle when young, snort when old, reject the question, laugh at the topic, and the like. The male members of a society frequently see the ethnographer's difficulties as simply a caricature of their own daily case. The technical argument

about the incidence of interpreters and so on is therefore really only a confirmation of the importance of the analytical part of the problem. The 'articulateness' of men and of ethnographers is alike, it would appear, in more ways than one. In the same way we may regard as inadequate the more refined explanation that ethnographers 'feed' their own models to their male informants, who are more susceptible for the same technical reasons, and who then feed them back to the ethnographer. That something of this sort does happen is again not to be doubted, but once again the susceptibility of the men is precisely the point. Nor is it an answer to the problem to discuss what might happen if biological facts were different; arguments like 'women through concern with the realities of childbirth and child-rearing have less time for or less propensity towards the making of models of society, for each other, for men, or for ethnographers' (the 'Hot Stove' argument) are again only an expression of the situation they try to explain.

We have here, then, what looked like a technical problem: the difficulty of dealing ethnographically with women. We have, rather, an analytical problem of this sort: if the models of a society made by most ethnographers tend to be models derived from the male portion of that society, how does the symbolic weight of that other mass of persons—half or more of a normal human population, as we have accepted—express itself? Some will maintain that the problem as it is stated here is exaggerated, although only an extremist will deny its existence completely. It may be that individual ethnographers have received from women a picture of a society very similar to the picture given by men. This possibility is conceded, but the female evidence provides in such cases confirmation of a male model which requires no confirmation of this type. The fact is that no one could come back from an ethnographic study of 'the X', having talked only *to* women, and *about* men, without professional comment and some self-doubt. The reverse can and does happen constantly. It is not enough to see this merely as another example of 'injustice to women'. I prefer to suggest that the models of society that women can provide are not of the kind acceptable at first sight to men or to ethnographers, and specifically that, unlike either of these sets of professionals, they do not so readily see society bounded from nature. They lack the metalanguage for its discussion. To put it more simply: they will not necessarily provide a model for society as a unit that will contain both men and themselves. They may indeed provide a model in which women and nature are outside men and society.

I have now deliberately exaggerated, in order to close the gap in a different way. The dominance of men's models of a society in traditional ethnography I take to be accepted. However, men and women do communicate with each other, and are at least aware of each other's models. It has been furthermore the study by ethnographers of myth and belief, collected no doubt, as formerly, largely from men, that has provided the kinds of insights that now make it possible to reopen the

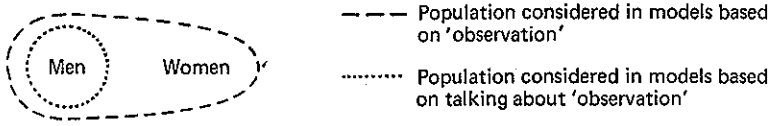
problem of women. Much of this material still discusses women from a male viewpoint. Women are classed as inauspicious, dangerous, and the like. But models of society as a symbolic system made from this kind of data are (it is no surprise to note) of a rather different type from the ethnographic (male) models deriving from the older type of fieldwork (e.g. Needham 1958, 1960, 1967). So much so that many social anthropologists are unable to accept them as 'true' models, that is 'true to reality', where 'reality' is a term of art for what fieldwork reveals. I suggest, on the contrary, that a fieldwork problem of the first magnitude is illuminated. Indeed the astounding deficiency of a method, supposedly objective, is starkly revealed: the failure to include half the people in the total analysis.

STATEMENT AND OBSERVATION

At the risk of labouring the obvious, but to avoid being buried in a righteous avalanche of fieldnotes, I say this yet again with a diagram (*Figure 1*).

Because of an interesting failing in the functionalist observational model, statements *about* observation were always added to the ethnographer's own observations. To take a simple case:

Figure 1



typically an ethnographer 'observed' a number of marriages and divorces, and heard a number of statements about the frequency of divorce, and then cumulated these quasi-quantitatively into a general statement about divorce frequency. So he did in other less easily detectable ways, and in some of those ways he may still do so today. This confusion had many serious consequences; in particular the difficulty of dealing with statements that were not about 'observation' at all (relegated to 'belief' or the like). For our purposes here, it is enough to note that statements made by the male segment were *about* both males and females. The functionalist confusion of the two levels at any time obscured the inadequacy of the total analysis as far as women were concerned. Since the analysis was always thought to represent observation, or to be checked by observation, it was hard for anyone with fieldnotes on women to see that they were effectively missing in the total analysis or, more precisely, they were there in the same way as were the Nuer's cows, who were observed but also did not speak.

The students of symbolism cannot be accused of any functionalist bias towards the primacy of observation. Functionalist fieldwork was

unhappy with myths precisely because they made statements that conflicted with, could not be cumulated to, objective measures of economic or political status. Not being faced with this mistaken necessity, the symbolists, almost incidentally, rediscovered women, who loom rather large in their material. In view of the absence of conscient women from the older models, this gains further significance, and suggests a further step, which is taken here. The study of symbolism uncovers certain valuations of women—some of which make more sense if women, not men, had made them (they conflict with the social models of men). Old women ('old wives' tales') or mothers (we may extend this analysis even to the lore and language of children) acquire in the world of symbolism something more like their demographic conspicuity. Furthermore, in a field situation poor communication with women in this area is not so often complained of. I here contend that much of this symbolism in fact enacts that female model of the world which has been lacking, and which is different from the models of men in a particular dimension: the placing of the boundary between society and nature.

I suppose in Lévi-Strauss's terms this would place women in an ideologically more primitive position than men. It is not a necessary conclusion. It means something like this: the notion of themselves in society is imposed by its members upon a relatively unbounded continuum in ways which involve the setting up of a multitude of bounded categories, the bounds being marked by taboo, ridicule, pollution, category inversion and the rest, so ably documented of late by social anthropologists (Douglas 1966; Leach 1961, 1964). The tension between 'culture' and 'nature' (the 'wild') is to be understood as an outcome of this struggle, from which no human beings are free. The appreciation of the symbolic stress on the division between society and nature derives from Lévi-Strauss (1949), and lies behind much of his later work, including the three volumes of *Mythologiques* (1964, 1966, 1968). Lévi-Strauss now prefers the terminology 'nature' and 'culture' (1967: 3; trans. 1969: 3). Of late he has also been concerned to state that the distinction lacks objective criteria (1967: 12). This concern seems surprising since it is easily resolved as Lévi-Strauss himself shows:

> [T]he contrast of nature and culture would be neither a primeval fact, nor a concrete aspect of universal order. Rather it should be seen as an artificial creation of culture, a protective rampart thrown up around it because it only felt able to assert its existence and uniqueness by destroying all the links that led back to its original association with the other manifestations of life (1967: xvii; trans. 1969: xxix).

Within this wider task men have to bound themselves in relation both to women and to nature.

Since women are biologically not men, it would be surprising if they bounded themselves against nature in the same way as men do. Yet we have seen that the men's models are characteristically dominant in

ethnography. If men are the ones who become aware of 'other cultures' more frequently than do women, it may well be that they are likely to develop metalevels of categorization that enable them at least to consider the necessity to bound themselves-and-their-women from other-men-and-their-women. Thus all such ways of bounding society against society, including our own, may have an inherent maleness. The first level is still recognizable, however, in the tendency to slip back to it from the metalevel: that is, to class other men and their wives with nature; as the Germans say, as *Naturmensch* (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1967: xvi). If men, because of their political dominance, may tend purely pragmatically to 'need' total bounding models of either type, women may tend to take over men's models when they share the same definitional problems as men. But the models set up by women bounding themselves are not encompassed in those men's models. They still subsist, and both sexes through their common humanity are aware of the contradictions. In the social anthropologist's data the process can be more clearly viewed.

MAN, MOUSE, APE, AND WATER SPIRIT

According to a story of the Bakweri of Cameroon (in a male recension): 'Moto, Ewaki, Eto, and Mojili were always quarrelling and agreed to decide by a test which of them was to remain in the town and which should go into the bush. All were to light fires in their houses in the morning and the person whose fire was still burning on their return from the farms in the evening was to be the favoured one. Moto being more cunning than the others built a fire with big sticks properly arranged, whereas they only built with small dry sticks, and so his was the only fire that was still alight on their return in the evening. Thus Moto remained in the town and became Man. Ewaki and Eto went into the bush and became the Ape and the Mouse. Mojili was driven into the water and became a water spirit.' [2] *Moto* (Common Bantu **muntu*) is the ordinary Bakweri word for 'human being of either sex', and thus includes 'woman'. Ewaki, Eto, and Mojili, who are opposed to Moto by reason of his special skill with fire, lack of which relegates them to the bush, are in Bakweri belief all associated with women and their children, whom they attract into their domain. Mojili is responsible for young girls becoming mermaids (*liengu*, plural *maengu*) who are dangerous to men, and whose husbands are *eto* (pl. *veto*), the rats; while the attraction of human children to the apes of the forest is so great that the word *ewaki* must not be mentioned in front of children under seven, in case they fall sick and die. Mojili's name has the same effect. Rites exist to control these manifestations (E. Ardener 1956).[3]

The possible marginality of women when men are defining 'the wild' is evident. Thus the idea of the denizens of the wild, outside Moto's village, being a danger or attraction to women and their offspring is

comprehensible in a male model of the universe, in which female reproductive powers do not fall under male control. This is, however, inadequate. Bakweri women themselves bound their world as including the wild that Moto excluded. They go through rites by which they become *liengu* mermaid spirits, or spirits of the forest, generally in adolescence, and retain this feature of womanhood throughout their lives. The story of Moto gives the clue, for the three excluded 'animal' brothers all have the human gift of fire. Although the men bound off 'mankind' from nature, the women persist in overlapping into nature again. For men among the Bakweri this overlapping symbolic area is clearly related to women's reproductive powers. Since these powers are for women far from being marginal, but are of their essence as women, it would seem that a woman's model of the world would also treat them as central. When we speak of Bakweri belief we must therefore recognize a man's sector and a woman's sector, which have to be reconciled. Thus the myth of Moto states the problem of woman for Bakweri men: she insists on living in what is for them the wild.

MERMAIDS AND THE WILD

The wild for the male Bakweri is particularly well differentiated, because of the many striking forms in which it expresses itself. This people occupies the southeastern face of the 13,000 foot Cameroon Mountain, on the West African coast of Cameroon—an environment of romantic contrasts. The mountain rises straight from a rocky sea coast through zones of forest, grass, and bare lava to the active volcanic craters of the peak. The Bakweri proper occupy the forest, and hunt in the grass zones. A deity or hero, Efasamote, occupies the peak. Congeners of the Bakweri (Mboko, Isubu, and Wovea Islanders) occupy the rocky strand, and fish. The Bakweri proper are agriculturists; the staple crop was traditionally the male-cultivated plantain banana, although since the introduction of the Xanthosoma cocoyam in the last century, this female crop has become the staple (E. Ardener 1970). It should be added that the whole area is now greatly fragmented by plantations and a large migrant population now lives in the Bakweri area (Ardener, Ardener, and Warmington 1960). The mountain is an extremely wet place, and visibility is often reduced to a few yards because of the clouds that cover it for much of the time.

The villages are traditionally fenced—people and livestock living inside the fence, the farms being outside the fence. This way of looking at it is not inaccurate. In the light of the subject of this paper it is, however, just as true to say: the men live inside the fence with their livestock (goats, cows, and pigs) and most of their plaintains; the women go outside the fence for their two main activities—firewood-collecting and farming the Xanthosoma. The men and their livestock are so closely associated that the animals have characteristically lived in the houses

themselves. I have myself visited in his hut an elderly man on his bed, so hemmed in by dwarf cows (still the size of ponies) that it was difficult to reach him. The women are all day in the forest outside the fence, returning at evening with their back-breaking loads of wood and cocoyams, streaming with rain, odds and ends tied up with bark strips and fronds, and screaming with fatigue at their husbands, with the constant reiteration in their complaints of the word *wanga* 'bush', 'the forest'. The Bakweri men wait in their leaking huts for the evening meal. It is no wonder that the women seem to be forest creatures, who might vanish one day for ever.

At the coast, the 'wild' *par excellence* is the sea, and its symbolism is expressed through the *liengu* water-spirits. The Cameroon coast provides a kaleidoscope of beliefs about *liengu*. They are found among the Kole, the Duala, the Wovea, the Oli, the Tanga, the Yasa, and many other peoples. Ittmann (1957) gathers together material from numbers of such sources.[4] The common theme is, however, used in the different belief systems of the various peoples in different ways. As I have tried to demonstrate elsewhere (1970), from a consideration of the Bakweri zombie belief, the *content* of a belief system can be analysed as a specific problem, by methods of the type used by Lévi-Strauss in *Mythologiques* (1964, 1966, 1968), as well as through those of more humdrum ethnographic aim. Among the latter, it is possible to discuss the geographical distribution of parts of the content of the belief, and consider, in the *liengu* case, questions such as whether the mermaids 'are' manatees or dugongs, which will not concern us here. The *realien* of the belief for each people are the elements plundered by the *bricoleur*: dugongs, mermaids are all to hand, but what dictates the particular disposition of elements in each system, the 'template' of the belief?

The Bakweri incorporate the *liengu* mermaids into a damp tree-ridden environment in which the sea is not visible, or is seen only far off on clear days, and in which the forest is the dominant external embodiment of the wild. The *liengu* beliefs and rites are in detail marked as a result by the inconsistency of a marine iconography with a non-marine environment. We have various different combinations producing a patchwork of several women's rites all of which are linked by the name *liengu*, some of which have content that links them with certain other West African rites. They are all enacted, however, as a response to a fit or seizure that comes mainly upon adolescent girls but also upon older women. For those men who participate in the rites, the stress is laid upon the 'curing' of the women. For, as we shall see, the men have their own view of the rites. *Liengu la ndiva* (*ndiva*: 'deep water') appears to retain the closest connection with the water spirits.[5] The sickness attacks a girl or woman, characteristically, by causing her to faint over the fireplace, so that she knocks out one of the three stones that are used to support the cooking pots. A woman versed in this form of *liengu* then comes and addresses her in the secret *liengu* language. If she shows any

signs of comprehension, a *liengu* doctor (male or female) is called and given a black cock, on which he spits alligator pepper; he then kills it and sprinkles its blood in the hole made when the girl knocked out the hearth-stone, and replaces the stone. The patient then enters a period of seclusion. Drummers are called on a fixed evening, the girl herself staying in an inner room, dressed only in a skirt made of strips of bark of roots of the *iroko* tree, hung over a waist string. The doctor then makes her a medicine which she vomits, bringing up the black seeds of the wild banana; these are then threaded on a string and worn like a bandolier. The drummers stay all night and they and the doctor receive a fee. There are usually a number of visitors, especially *liengu* women, and these are given food.

During the period of seclusion which then follows, the girl has a woman sponsor who teaches her the secret *liengu* language, and gives her a *liengu* name. She is subject to a number of conventions and taboos during this period, which will be summarized later. After several months, the *liengu* doctor is called again, and, in the darkness before dawn, she is picked up and carried in turn, one by one, by men chosen for their strength, until they reach the deep part of a stream where the doctor pushes her in. Women who accompany them sing *liengu* songs, and the company try to catch a crab, representing the water spirit. After this rite, the girl is regarded as being a familiar of the water spirits and one of the *liengu* women. On the return of the party, the *liengu* drummers play and food is provided for the guests. After the visit to the stream the girl stays in her house for a further period. On the occasion when she finally comes out the doctor and the drummers, and other women and visitors, come to the house, where she is dressed in new clothing. Traditionally she was rubbed with camwood. There is another feast, and she is regarded by the men as finally immune from any attack by the water spirits.

Liengu la mongbango differs from *ndiva* in several respects. For example, the first symptom is sometimes said to be the girl disappearing into the bush as if attracted by spirits. She is then sought by a group of female relatives singing to her in *liengu* language, and when she is found, is taken to the seclusion room. There the doctor makes the vomiting medicine as in *Liengu la ndiva*. Details of the seclusion show little difference, but in this case it does not last the whole period of the rite. After a few months, a feast is made which is traditionally all eaten on the ground, after which the girl is allowed to go out, although still subject to taboos. After a further period of about nine months, a sheep is killed and a similar feast made, the girl and her *liengu* woman sponsor being secluded in an enclosure in the bush. She is now dressed in fern-fronds (*senge* or *njombi*) rubbed with camwood, and led through the village tied to the middle of a long rope held by her companions in front and behind. Outside her house, both sets of people pull the rope, as in a tug of war, until the rope comes apart, when the girl falls down, as if dead.

She is revived by being called nine times in the *liengu* language, after which she gets up, and is dressed in new clothing. A few weeks later, she is washed in a stream by the doctor to show that she is free from the taboos she observed during the rites. Both with *ndiva* and *mongbango* the rites extend over about a year.

A third version of the rite, *liengu la vefea*, reduces the procedure essentially to the killing of a goat and a young cock, and the drinking of the vomiting medicine followed by food taboos. The medicine is the same in all three rites. Among the upper Bakweri who live furthest from the sea, an even more generalized *liengu* rite seems to have existed in which the simple *rite de passage* aspect is very noticeable. It is said that formerly every daughter was put through *liengu* at about 8 to 10 years of age so that she would be fertile. She would wear fern-fronds and be secluded for a period, apparently shorter than in the above examples. Other variations in detail appear to have existed in different places and at different times.[6]

The reduced rites were, at the time of my first acquaintance with the Bakweri (in 1953), the commonest. The people had, during the previous generation, been overwhelmed by their belief that they were 'dying out' —a belief not without some slight demographic justification. Their economy was stagnant. Public rites of all kinds had gone into decline. The people blamed the general conditions of their country on witchcraft. The decline of the *liengu* rites was further blamed by many for the fertility problems of Bakweri women. Nevertheless, a celebration of the *mongbango* ceremony occurred in that same year. In 1958 a Bakweri *liengu* girl was even brought, with a *liengu* mother, to grace a Cameroon Trade Fair. Since then there has been a revival of all kinds of *liengu* rites (I was asked to contribute to the expenses of one in 1970). However, the great rites of *mongbango* and *ndiva*, because of their expense, were probably always relatively rare, compared with *vefea* and other reduced rites. The latter are also common now, because so many *liengu* celebrations are 'remedial', for women who did not pass through them in their adolescence—during the long period of decline. Nevertheless, even such women are told the ideology of the great rites: the immersion (of *ndiva*), the tug-of-war (of *mongbango*), the seclusion, and the secret language. Since we are concerned here with the dimension of belief, it may be added that the image of the *liengu* is a powerful one even for the many Christian, educated, and urban Bakweri women. Scraps of the secret language are common currency. It is as if the *liengu* rites are always 'there' as a possibility of fulfilment; and also as if the rites are themselves less important than the vision of women's place in nature that appears in them: the template of the belief.

Despite the fact that *liengu* is a woman's rite, men are not immune to the precipitating sickness, especially if there are no women left in a man's extended family, and rare cases are cited in which men have gone through at least part of the rite. The fertility associations of the rite are

uppermost in such cases, and the *liengu* mermaids have had to work through a male in the absence of viable females. *Liengu* doctors may be men or women. As we shall see, the participation of men does not obscure the symbolism of the rites for women. It does assist their symbolism for men. Thus the men who carry the *ndiva* girl have to be strong. Although men from her matrilineage (in practice, perhaps, her full brothers) would be favoured, a man from her patrilineage, or just a fellow-villager would be acceptable. Men see themselves as helping out with the treatment of morbidity (social and physical) in women. The domination of men as doctors in Bakweri medical rites means that the specialization as *liengu* doctors by men presents few problems. The major rites (*ndiva* and *mongbango*) have a public aspect, because of their relative expense, and a male doctor is likely to be involved. The female *liengu* doctors are associated with the less expensive, reduced rites. The 'medical' aspects of the rite have thus a somewhat 'male' aspect.

The female significance of the rites lies in the girl's acceptance by her fellow *liengu* women. In the fuller *ndiva* and *mongbango* forms, as already noted, it is customary for her to have a sponsor (*nyangb'a liengu*, '*liengu* mother') to teach her the mysteries. For the periods of seclusion, in both rites, the girl is not allowed to plait her hair but must must let it grow uncontrolled, and rub it, as well as her whole body, with charcoal mixed with palm-kernel oil, so that she is completely black. This is supposed to make her resemble a spirit. She is forbidden to talk to visitors, but greets them with a rattle, of different types in *liengu la ndiva* (*njola*, made of wicker-work) and in *mongbango* (*lisonjo*, made of certain tree-seed shells). This is also used night and morning, when she has to recite certain formulae in the *liengu* language. While in the house, the *liengu*, as the girl herself is now called, treats rats (*veto*) with special respect as they are regarded as her husbands (compare the story of Moto above). If a rat is killed she must cry all day and wash it and bury it in a cloth; killing rats in her compound is forbidden. No man or boy can enter the *liengu* house wearing a hat or shoes, or carrying a book (all introduced by Europeans) or she will seize them, and return them only on the payment of a fine. If a person dies in the village the *liengu* must not eat all day. In *liengu la mongbango*, after her period of seclusion, and before the completion of the rite, the girl may go out only with her rattle, and should turn away if she sees any person not a Bakweri. If anyone wishes to stop her he has only to say the word *yowo* ('magical rite') and she must do whatever he says. However, the *liengu* has an effective retaliation if molested, as any male whom she knocks with her rattle is thought to become permanently impotent. The *liengu* may not go into any room but her own and dogs must not go near her. She should always be addressed by her special *liengu* name. Truncated forms of these requirements are also followed by women in the *vefea* rite. After all rites the participant is henceforth known by one of a standard series of *liengu* names.

SYMBOLISM OF THE MERMAID CULT

It has been the intention here merely to indicate those aspects of the symbolism that are peculiar to the *liengu* corpus. This is not the place for an extended analysis, which I hope to attempt elsewhere. The male interpretation is that the *liengu* rites cure a spiritual illness. That is why male doctors take part. The women nod at this sort of interpretation in male Bakweri company, but there is a heady excitement when the *liengu* subject is raised in the absence of Bakweri men. It is accepted that the *liengu* mermaid spirits do 'trouble' the women, and cause them physical symptoms. The trouble is solved when a woman becomes a *liengu*. The mermaid world is one of Alice through the looking-glass—no manmade objects, garments only of forest products; no imported goods, traded through men.[7] For the edible plantain banana, a male crop and consciously seen as clearly phallic, we find the inedible seed-filled, wild banana—a total symbolic reversal whose effect is a 'feminization' of the male symbol. The male doctor, who is perhaps only a half-aware participant in this, makes the medicine in an integument of (male) plantain leaves to hem in its harmful effects. The rites see the women as attracted away into the wild. The domestic hearth-stone (*lio*) is the popular symbol of the household (a unit in the essentially patrilineal residence pattern). It is dislodged. In *mongbango* food is eaten on the earth, and not on the customary (male) plantain leaves. The mermaid's rattle destroys the potency of males. The men are reduced to the scale of little rats, her 'husbands'. She returns to the world through the symbolic tug-of-war at which she is in the middle. She falls senseless. The men assume the world has won. Yet she is revived by nine calls in the *liengu* language. There is surely little reassuring to men in her final incorporation in the wild outside the fence of the village.[8]

The interpretation of the Bakweri *liengu* rites as 'nubility rites', because they often (but not always) precede marriage, is not exactly an error, since it does not say anything. It merely draws attention to the question 'what after all *is* a nubility rite?' Passage through *liengu* rites shows that a girl is a woman; her fellow-women vouch for it. The men feel a danger has been averted; she has been rescued from the wild and is fitted for marriage with men. But she still continues to bear a spirit name, and converses with fellow-women in the mermaid language. The term 'nubility rite' implies for some that the rites have a social 'function'; the girl takes her place in the system of relations between corporate kin-groups. The rites no doubt can be shown to 'validate' this and that aspect of the structure in the normal 'functionalist' manner. Alternatively they prepare the girl for the role of exchangeable unit in a system of alliance. These are good partial statements, but we are left asking questions like 'why did she vomit the seeds of the wild banana?' The terms 'puberty rite' and 'fertility rite' would be just as useful and just as partial. 'Puberty' stresses the biological basis that 'nubility'

obscures, but of course even when the rites are not delayed until after marriage, they may take place some years after the onset of puberty—the rigid association of puberty with the menarche is a result of our mania for precision. 'Fertility' at least takes account of the association of the rites with a whole period of the woman's life. They are also 'medical rites' because they 'cure' sickness, and share features in common with Bakweri medical rites for men and women. A set of overlapping analyses such as Richards makes for *Chisungu* (1956) would clearly be equally fruitful here.

The rites are open to analysis in the manner of Van Gennep as classical rites of passage. They fall like all such rites into stages of separation, transition, and incorporation, but the notion of passage is either self-evident (through the rite) or inadequately defined. An analysis in the manner of Turner (1967) could also be attempted, and it is evident that there is the material for such an analysis. The Turnerian method assumes that symbolism is generated by society as a whole. This is of course in a sense true: the very contradiction of symbolic systems, their 'multivalency', 'polysemy', 'condensation', and the like, derive from the totalitarian nature of symbolism. But as the Moto story shows, its surface structure may express the male view of the world, obscuring the existence at deeper levels of an autonomous female view. I feel also that Turner does not perceive the 'bounding' problem that male/female symbolism is about, and which introduces an element of ordering into the symbolic sets.

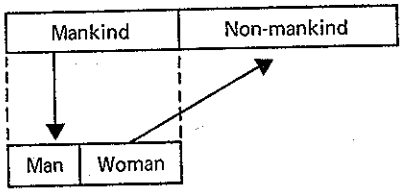
I have argued that Bakweri women define the boundary of their world in such a way that they live as women in the men's wild, as well as partly within the men's world inside the village fence. In modern times the world outside the fence has included the 'strangers', migrants who are allowed to settle there. Sometimes the strangers' quarter is larger than the Bakweri settlement. Bakweri women have long travelled from stranger-quarter to stranger-quarter, entering into casual liaisons, while the men have complained (Ardener *et al.* 1960: 294–308; E. Ardener 1962). This fortuitous overlap of the old wild with the new urban jungle may well account for the peculiar sense of defeat the Bakweri showed for so many years, which made them come to believe that zombies were killing them off (E. Ardener 1956 and 1970). For the women's part, it is possibly not sufficient to account for their notable conjugal freedom, as I have argued elsewhere (1962), merely on the grounds that there are nearly three males to every woman in the plantation area. The Bakweri system of double descent similarly expresses the basic dichotomy. The patrilineage controls residence (the village), the inheritance of land and cattle, succession to political office—the men's world. The matrilineage controls fertility, and its symbolic fertility bangle is found on a woman's farm outside the village fence (E. Ardener 1956).

MANKIND AND WOMANKIND

The Bakweri illustration can only briefly document my theme. Men's models of society are expressed at a metalevel which purports to define women. Only at the level of the analysis of belief can the voiceless masses be restored to speech. Not only women, but (a task to be attempted later) inarticulate classes of men, young people, and children. We are all lay figures in someone else's play.

The objective basis of the symbolic distinction between nature and society, which Lévi-Strauss recently prematurely retreated from, is a result of the problem of accommodating the two logical sets which classify human beings by different bodily structures: 'male'/'female'; with the two other sets: 'human'/'non-human'. It is, I have suggested, men who usually come to face this problem, and, because their model for *mankind* is based on that for *man*, their opposites, *women* and *non-mankind* (the wild), tend to be ambiguously placed. Hence, in Douglas's terms (1966), come their sacred and polluting aspects. Women accept the implied symbolic content, by equating *womankind* with the men's wild.

Figure 2



The topic of this paper is 'the problem of women'. Women, of course, have 'a problem of men', who may indeed live in a part of the wild that women bound off from themselves. With that world of hunting and war, both sexes are familiar. The men's wild is, of course, a threat to women. The *liengu* taboos of the Bakweri express some of this. The secluded mermaids hate European goods, which have increased male power. The tabooed 'male' animal, the dog (used in the chase), is an added danger because it can see the spirit world. Dogs walk purposefully on their own, although they have nowhere to go, and they frequently stare attentively into space. Bakweri men have their own symbolic zone of adventure and hunting beyond that of the women, on the mountain-top away from all villages and farms. This is ritually expressed in the men's elephant dance (E. Ardener 1959). Elephants sometimes emerge from the remote parts of the mountain and destroy the women's farms. Men and boys in many villages belong to an elephant society, a closed association that claims responsibility for the work of elephants, through the elephant-doubles (*naguals*) of its more powerful members. In their annual dance they enact their control over the elephant world. Women

on such occasions form the audience, who clap out the rhythm for the men's virtuoso dancer. Some women rather half-heartedly claim the role of bush-pigs, but like Dames in an order of chivalry or girls at Roedean, they are performing a male scenario.[9]

It is a tragedy of the male life-position that, in the modern age, the men's wild is not now so easily accessible to them. For modern Bakweri as for American males the hunting fantasy at least is no longer plausible. For if women still symbolically live in their wild, men have tried to ignore their own in the official symbolism of civilization. It will have emerged that the argument of this paper as it applies to women is a special but submerged case of the mode whereby self-identification is made. Obviously the different classes of men and of women, and individuals of all ages and both sexes contribute to that totality of symbolism—which merely appears a 'forest' when one fails to look at the trees.

To return, then, to the limited problem of my title, we need not doubt that the societies from which ethnographers come share the problem of all societies. If, as I suggest is the case, men's models of society accommodate women only by making certain assumptions that ignore or hold constant elements that would contradict these models, then the process may be traced further back into the ethnographer's own thinking and his own society. Our women ethnographers may then be expressing the 'maleness' of their subject when they approach the women of other societies.[10] It may well be, too, that their positive reluctance to deal with the problem of women is the greater because they sense that its consideration would split apart the very framework in which they conduct their studies.

Notes

1 This paper was read at Dr Kaberry's seminar in University College London in late 1968. In presenting it for Dr Audrey Richards's festschrift, I acknowledged my debt to her for the main part of my early anthropological training. Her astringent humour and basic open-mindedness are qualities that I have respected ever since. I also thanked Dr Jean La Fontaine for her appreciative remarks on the paper, and for entering into the spirit of the analysis in her comments as editor.

2 This version was given in 1929 by Charles Steane, a Bakweri scholar, to B. G. Stone (MS. 1929).

3 *Moto*, *eto*, and *ewaki* are the ordinary words for 'person', 'rat', and 'ape'. *Mojili* or *Mojele* is to the coastal Bakweri a spirit. For inland Bakweri his name is a euphemism for 'ape'. It is likely that the term belongs to the animal world, but is borrowed from the fishing peoples. Possibly it is the manatee.

4 When the term is used *in isolation* the spelling *liengu* will be used (not, that is, the 'Africa' alphabet spelling *liengu*, nor the occasional spelling with orthographic subscript *liengu*). The belief appears to be of coastal origin. There it is concerned with men, fishing, and the dangers of the deep. This paper is concerned with the

liengu belief as utilized by the Bakweri. Elements of content are differently combined even between the coast and the mountain. Ittmann's rich material (1957) is to be used with caution because it combines several different systems. The pidgin English translation for water spirit is 'mammy water'. The 'mammy water' myth has wide currency in West Africa in urban contexts. The ambiguity of the position of women in African towns makes this secondary elaboration of the belief very appropriate.

5 See also Ardener, E. (1956).

6 Various forms cited by myself (1956) and Ittmann (1957) are closer to 'fattening room' seclusion rites of the Cross River area in form and content. Their assimilation to the *liengu* belief is explicable because the latter belief most clearly organizes the women's world-view for the Bakweri.

7 Here is a subtle case of identical content yielding different meaning. The Duala mer-people hate European objects, but the *maengu* are often male. There they symbolize men's domination of the deep; they particularly detest paper (conceived of as the bible).

8 For the *liengu* language, see Ardener (1956) and Ittmann (1957). It is a code calqued upon Bakweri with vocabulary from various sources.

9 Dr La Fontaine commented on this paper that men plus wild = death, destruction; women plus wild = agriculture, fertility. She, a woman, thus expresses that faith in the female civilizing mission shared by so many reflective members of her sex!

10 For some unresolved puzzles of a new woman fieldworker see Bovin (1966). For a resolution through literature see Bowen (1954).

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