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## Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies: The Malleability of Gender Roles

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The Pacific Islands are an area where groups of men separated from each other by sea and mountain range, and lacking those political forms which bind men together into kingdoms, have developed strikingly different ways of life. . . .

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### *The Mountain Arapesh*

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The mountain Arapesh are a mild, undernourished people who live in the steep, unproduc-

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From *Male and Female: A Study of the Sexes in a Changing World* (New York: William Morrow, 1949), pp. 51, 53, 54, 65-74, 98-102; copyright © 1949, 1967 Margaret Mead; and *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (New York: William Morrow, 1935), pp. 279-281, 288-289, 311; copyright © 1935, 1950, 1963 Margaret Mead. Reprinted with permission of William Morrow & Company, Inc. Certain passages have been rearranged to unify references to each tribe.

ive Torricelli Mountains of New Guinea, poor themselves, and always struggling to save enough to buy music and dance-steps and new fashions from the trading peoples of the sea-coast, and to buy off the sorcerers among the fiercer people of the interior plains. Responsive and cooperative, they have developed a society in which, while there is never enough to eat, each man spends most of his time helping his neighbor, and committed to his neighbor's purposes. The greatest interest of both men and women is in growing things—children, pigs, coconut-trees—and their greatest fear that each generation will reach maturity shorter in stature than their forebears, until finally there will be no people under the palm-trees.

The Arapesh treat a baby as a soft, vulnerable, precious little object, to be protected, fed, cherished. Not only the mother, but the father also, must play this overall protective role. After birth the father abstains from work and sleeps beside the mother, and he must abstain

from intercourse while the child is young, even with his other wife. . . .

The Arapesh system . . . [places] emphasis on the maternal, parental aspects of both men and women. Arapesh men and women are both snugly at home in their small mountain huts, caring together for their children. They have no use for a men's house except for ceremonials, and large houses are hard to build. Labour is always scarce and might better be put into feeding children. All the rites have been rephrased as protective, and the men keep the fierce impersonations of the supernatural guardian of the men's cult from showing his fierceness towards the women, and if possible, towards the initiates.

In such a society, small boys and girls grow up together, with parents of both sexes always before their eyes as models. Boys know that they are boys by their bodies, their names, and the skills they learn. Girls know they are girls by their bodies, their names, and the little carrying-bags that their mothers place on their heads. Both sexes sit happily around the fires on chill mornings and bubble their lips. Little girls see their mothers carry loads in net bags, and little boys see their fathers carry them on carrying-poles. . . . Both boys and girls have to guard their growth so that they will both be good parents. They will both be depleted by parenthood, a man no less than a woman. "You should have seen what a fine-looking man he was before he had all those children."

But what happens to the Arapesh male? What kind of preparation is it for living in the rough mountain country of New Guinea, surrounded by tribes who are fierce head-hunters and blackmailing sorcerers, to have learned that the major relationship to other people is either one of passive receptivity or one of provision of food and drink? He does not, within his own society, become a homosexual, although there is great ease and warmth and much giggling puppyishness among boys. But

the reverse attitude—the desire to dominate, to intrude, which would provide a basis for active homosexuality—is too slightly cultivated, nor is there enough development of assertive resentment of passivity to fit into a type of homosexuality where active and passive roles are interchanged. The men in adulthood develop into heterosexual males. . . . They engage very little in warfare, they permit themselves to be blackmailed and bullied and intimidated and bribed by their more aggressive neighbors; they admire so deeply the artistic products of others that they have developed practically no art of their own. . . .

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#### *The Cannibal Mundugumor of the Yuat River*

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These robust, restive people live on the banks of a swiftly flowing river, but with no river lore. They trade with and prey upon the miserable, underfed bush-peoples who live on poorer land, devote their time to quarrelling and head-hunting, and have developed a form of social organization in which every man's hand is against every other man. The women are as assertive and vigorous as the men; they detest bearing and rearing children, and provide most of the food, leaving the men free to plot and fight.

The Mundugumor women actively dislike child-bearing, and they dislike children. Children are carried in harsh opaque baskets that scratch their skins, later, high on their mother's shoulders, well away from the breast. Mothers nurse their children standing up, pushing them away as soon as they are the least bit satisfied. The occasional adopted newborn child is kept sharply hungry, so as to suck vigorously on a woman's breast until milk comes in. Here we find a character developing that stresses angry,

eager avidity. In later life love-making is conducted like the first round of a prize-fight, and biting and scratching are important parts of foreplay. When the Mundugumor captured an enemy they ate him, and laughed as they told of it afterwards. When a Mundugumor became so angry that his anger turned even against himself, he got into a canoe and drifted down the river to be eaten by the next tribe. . . .

Boys and girls alike grow up in a world that is hostile and divided against itself. Boys are taught their place in society, their kinship terms, and elaborate sets of kinship prohibitions by their mothers, girls by their fathers. Both sexes are independent, hostile, vigorous, and both boys and girls come out with very similar personalities. There is no men's house in which all the men gather, for no two men sit down comfortably together. The unit of society is the compound, where a man's wives maintain an uneasy cooperation and his daughters a certain degree of solidarity, while each mother turns her son into an enemy both of his father and of his half-brothers. [The] initiation [rite into adulthood] is no longer a collective act in which males are welded together, but a display given by an important man, in which those who have not been initiated, whatever their age, can be cut and bullied by the already initiated. Girls are permitted to be initiated merely by observing taboos.

In such a society women are handicapped by their womanly qualities. Pregnancy and nursing are hated and avoided if possible, and men detest their wives for being pregnant. Men see women as a kind of human being over whom they will have to fight and through whom they can be injured. If one has no sister to give in exchange one will have to pay a valuable flute for a wife, and so we come to the curious position that flutes, those excessively male symbols of the male cult, which elsewhere can never be seen by women without endangering the entire male society, are equated with

women, are nearly but not quite as valuable as women, and are something that women are permitted to see with less fuss than boys. The boys' whole concept of their identity is that of fighting males tied precariously through women to other fighting males. Women are masculinized to a point where every feminine feature is a drawback except their highly specific genital sexuality, men to a point where any aspect of their personalities that might hold an echo of the feminine or the maternal is a vulnerability and a liability.

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#### *The Lake-dwelling Tchambuli*

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The Tchambuli people, who number only six hundred in all, have built their houses along the edge of one of the loveliest of New Guinea lakes, which gleams like polished ebony, with a backdrop of the distant hills behind which the Arapesh live. In the lake are purple lotus and great pink and white water lilies, white osprey and blue heron. Here the Tchambuli women, brisk, unadorned, managing and industrious, fish and go to market; the men, decorative and adorned, carve and paint and practice dance steps, their head-hunting tradition replaced by the simpler practice of buying victims to validate their manhood.

Adult males in Tchambuli are skittish, wary of each other, interested in art, in the theater, in a thousand petty bits of insult and gossip. Hurt feelings are rampant, not [a] violent angry response . . . but the pettishness of those who feel themselves weak and isolated. The men wear lovely ornaments, they do the shopping, they carve and paint and dance. Before the coming of British control head-hunting had been reduced to the ritual killing of bought captives, and they put up no effective resistance against the depreciations of the neighbouring Iatmuls, but fled inland instead, only

to return when the Pax Britannica made it possible. Men whose hair was long enough wore curls, and the others made false curls out of rattan rings.

This is the only society in which I have worked where little girls of ten and eleven were more alertly intelligent and more enterprising than little boys. . . . in Tchambuli the minds of small males, teased, pampered, neglected, and isolated, had a fitful fleeting quality, an inability to come to grips with anything.

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#### *The Standardization of Sex-Temperament*

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We have now considered in detail the approved personalities of each sex among three primitive peoples. We found the Arapesh—both men and women—displaying a personality that, out of our historically limited preoccupations, we would call maternal in its parental aspects, and feminine in its sexual aspects. We found men, as well as women, trained to be cooperative, unaggressive, responsive to the needs and demands of others. We found no idea that sex was a powerful driving force either for men or for women. In marked contrast to these attitudes, we found among the Mundugumor that both men and women developed as ruthless, aggressive, positively sexed individuals, with the maternal cherishing aspects of personality at a minimum. Both men and women approximated to a personality type that we in our culture would find only in an undisciplined and very violent male. Neither the Arapesh nor the Mundugumor profit by a contrast between the sexes; the Arapesh ideal is the mild, responsive man married to the mild, responsive woman; the Mundugumor ideal is the violent aggressive man married to the violent aggressive woman. In the third, the Tchambuli, we found a genuine reversal of the

attitudes of our own culture, with the woman the dominant, personal, managing partner, the man the less responsible and the emotionally dependent person. These three situations suggest, then, a very definite conclusion. If those mental attitudes which we have traditionally regarded as feminine—such as passivity, responsiveness, and a willingness to cherish children—can so easily be set up as the masculine pattern in one tribe, and in another be outlawed for the majority of women as well as for the majority of men, we no longer have any basis for regarding such aspects of behaviour as sex-linked. And this conclusion becomes even stronger when we consider the actual reversal in Tchambuli of the position of dominance of the two sexes, in spite of the existence of formal patrilineal institutions.

The material suggests that we may say that many, if not all, of the personality traits which we have called masculine or feminine are as lightly linked to sex as are the clothing, the manners, and the form of head-dress that a society at a given period assigns to either sex. When we consider the behaviour of the typical Arapesh man or woman as contrasted with the behaviour of the typical Mundugumor man or woman, the evidence is overwhelmingly in favor of the strength of social conditioning. In no other way can we account for the almost complete uniformity with which Arapesh children develop into contented, passive, secure persons, while Mundugumor children develop characteristically into violent, aggressive, insecure persons. Only to the impact of the whole of the integrated culture upon the growing child can we lay the formation of the contrasting types. There is no other explanation of race, or diet, or selection that can be adduced to explain them. We are forced to conclude that human nature is almost unbelievably malleable, responding accurately and contrastingly to contrasting cultural conditions. The differences between individuals who are members of

different cultures, like the differences between individuals within a culture, are almost entirely to be laid to differences in conditioning, especially during early childhood, and the form of this conditioning is culturally determined. Standardized personality differences between the sexes are of this order, cultural creations to which each generation, male and female, is trained to conform. . . .

If we then accept this evidence drawn from these simple societies which through centuries of isolation from the main stream of human

history have been able to develop more extreme, more striking cultures than is possible under historical conditions of great intercommunication between peoples and the resulting heterogeneity, what are the implications of these results? What conclusions can we draw from a study of the way in which a culture can select a few traits from the wide gamut of human endowment and specialize these traits, either for one sex or for the entire community? . . . [M]ale and female personality are socially produced.