
BOOK REVIEW FORUM

Eric Kline Silverman. *Masculinity, Motherhood, and Mockery: Psychoanalyzing Culture and the Iatmul Naven Rite in New Guinea*. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2001. Pp. 264. 2 drawings, 10 photographs, 1 map. ISBN 978-0-472-09757-9 (cloth), US\$70.00; ISBN 978-0-472-06757-2 (paper), US\$27.95.

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THIS EXTRAORDINARY WORK REVISITS perhaps the most provocative ceremony in the history of anthropology—the Iatmul naven rite first described by Bateson in 1936. Some seven decades later our knowledge of the Sepik River region has been greatly enhanced, and different theoretical approaches can now be called upon to interpret aspects of the rite not revealed by Bateson’s challenging analysis.

Masculinity, Motherhood, and Mockery offers an equally stimulating interpretation of naven and the symbolism of what Silverman calls “the great predicament of Eastern Iatmul masculinity” (11). His analysis of the equivocal relationship between men and the maternal body draws upon Bakhtin’s notion of two countervailing images of the body, the moral and the grotesque. Iatmul men in the fishing and horticultural village of Tambunum hold a moral image of motherhood that is “nurturing, sheltering, cleansing, fertile and chaste,” and at the same time an equally compelling grotesque image that is “defiling, dangerous, orifical, aggressive, and carnal” (2). Silverman’s discussion extends the earlier adoption of Bakhtin (1984) by Lipset (1997) to unravel the intricacies of the “maternal schema” in another Sepik River culture in which men similarly hold a split image of the maternal body.

Psychoanalysis provides a second frame for Silverman's interpretation of the bodily semiotics of Tambunum masculinity and motherhood. Anthropology and psychoanalysis have long had an on-again, off-again embrace. Silverman argues forcefully here for its adoption, offering four propositions. First, that the preoedipal mother-child bond holds a central place in the cultural imagination of men and, to a lesser extent, women. The attainment of manhood thus requires traumatic repudiation of the preoedipal attachment through displays of hypermasculinity and male solidarity in the aggressive exclusion of women from the male cult. Second, that the central dramas of manhood define masculinity in the absence of women, but they also express a desire to return to the ideal nurturing mother. Third, that men define themselves through oedipal desires and anxieties expressed not in relation to a punitive father, but in the oedipal imbroglios around marriage and inheritance that involve motherhood. And finally, that men exhibit contorted expressions of male envy of female parturition and fertility. Women are barred from the male cult house, for example, but the building is itself a mother in whose belly men store ritual items stolen from ancestresses, to compensate, they say, for their inability to give birth. Men may mirror the female body, but they also scorn the female reproductive tract, displacing women's procreative potential with idioms of anal birth, as in the startling naven gesture in which the uncle slides his buttocks down a youth's leg, a parturient fiction that men fear women may recognize. During naven, women respond to men's posturings with drubbings, ribald jokes, and the hurling of defiling substances, lending the event its carnivalesque tenor.

Gender provides the third framework for interpreting men's cultural conversation with the maternal body. This dimension will be recognized by anthropologists familiar with recent discussions of the person in Melanesia in which gender is said to be dual, fluid, and transactional, rather than fixed, bounded, or inherent. Men and women transact substances, personified objects, and body parts normally coded as male and female. Iatmul gender is androgynous, although the male is more androgynous than the female. Men model their identity after motherhood, but women rarely aspire to be fathers. "Finding a genuine identity in this dialogue of contrary values and virtues is the great predicament of Eastern Iatmul masculinity" (11).

Silverman adapts Bakhtin's notion of culture for his own ends. Bakhtin understood culture to consist of contrary discourses, authoritative and dissonant, expressed in two antithetical forms. The "moral" body offers the official view of social order, and the "grotesque" (its carnivalesque counterpart) trespasses across boundaries of hierarchy, taste, and gender. Culture, saturated with multiple discourses, presents a contrapuntal unity. Using Bakhtin's idea of hidden dialogue, Silverman reveals two contending voices in expressions,

gestures, and in the polyphony of local thought and experience. The symbols of culture that Sepik men deploy in validating themselves are thus said to be found in the dialogical relationship between masculinity and motherhood, as well as in the cultural elaboration of motherhood as double-bodied, moral and grotesque, two images that remain unresolved and ambivalent.

The ethnography is divided into three segments. In part one we are introduced to the myth of an ancestress who transformed the foul sores on her aging body into the palm trees that, when mixed with coital fluids, resulted in edible sago, the essential staple prepared by women, a culinary idiom of nurturing motherhood. The myth of an ancestress who lived alone on the periphery of society, dangerous yet sustaining, represents one answer to the central predicament of masculinity, how to reproduce without directly acknowledging the role of women, heterosexuality, and female parturition.

The rest of the book elaborates this central theme of the moral and grotesque body, which occurs again and again in the analysis of cosmological, social, and ritual relationships. The idiom of motherhood that men grapple with is double-voiced, whether it be in the context of male initiation, in men's physiological conceptions of the human body, or in the forms of domestic architecture in which the house is explicitly envisioned as a nurturing, protective mother, yet the doorway symbolizing the mother's genitals is ornamented with crocodile teeth. As in a Beethoven sonata, Silverman's analysis of Iatmul cultural imaginings about the maternal body grows from a small kernel, the simplest and most condensed thought, announced early and with variations, repeated over and over again. The power derived from repetition underlies the effectiveness of the analysis, which in fact stems from men's unrelenting ideological and behavioral restatement of their predicament.

The analysis reaches a crescendo in part three, which focuses on the rituals of masculinity and provides new ethnographic material about the naven rite and a convincing interpretation of the enigmatic gesture in which the maternal uncle slides his buttocks down the youth's leg. The rite celebrates first-time achievements such as spearing fish, wearing spirit masks, and, formerly, bloodshed. Today the ceremony also honors such feats of modernity as airplane travel and the purchase of an outboard motor for a dugout canoe. At the end of the rite the nephew presents gifts to his matrilin and to other ritual participants for the feelings of shame they have experienced. During the ceremony, for example, the mother's brothers wear filthy skirts, carry women's mosquito fans, and parody birth and the protocols of motherhood. Female kin adorn themselves with male finery. Mother figures pelt women and especially men with mud, lewdly protruding their buttocks, and taunting men with erotic quips. Real mothers throw themselves to the ground so their children can walk over them. This "celebratory degradation"

is said to honor and defile masculinity with its contrary images of motherhood.

Bateson had described the naven gesture as a “sexual salute” and argued that the ceremony allowed men and women to transgress emotional norms, thereby achieving a degree of psychological integration. Mockery and transgression were seen to contribute in a functional manner to maintain normative behavior and to provide sociological integration for a potentially fractured community. Silverman views naven instead as a complex dramatization of parental androgyny and but one example of men’s contorted procreative assertions. The ritual pantomime between uncle and nephew combines images of excrement and birth, tabooed eroticism, male shame, the laughter of women, and the tears of men, exposing “the earnestness, folly and pathos of Eastern Iatmul manhood” (12).

Toward the end of the book Silverman suggests that his account of the cultural construction of manhood in the middle Sepik River region tells us about masculinity in general. Embedded in specific historical and cultural practices, the psychodynamic images of the Iatmul ceremonies, he suggests, can be found in localized masculinities elsewhere. Whether others will agree with this broad statement will depend on anthropologists coming to terms with the psychodynamic perspective used here persuasively, with verve and eloquence.

The study leads us to ponder a more modest notion posed by Mead in 1978 and taken up by several participants at the Sepik Heritage conference held in Basel in 1984 (see Lutkehaus 1990), that is, the degree to which Sepik River cultures can be considered in some way a culturally distinct area. Certainly the evidence suggests local communities connected through trade and warfare, many of them sharing key themes in myths, ceremonies, ideologies, and aesthetic representation. Conference participants came to the conclusion that in contrast to the wealth-based New Guinea Highlands societies, power in Sepik communities was invested more in esoteric knowledge. The fragility of such an edifice was illustrated recently in the account of Tuzin (1997) of the turmoil that resulted when one Sunday, during a church service, several men in Ilahita, a village in the East Sepik Province, confessed that the secret male cult had been based on a great deception. With its roots in fear and hostility, the cult had been created by initiated men, they said, with the help of imaginative tricks and clever devices such as flutes, trumpets, whistles, gongs, and bullroarers. Women’s reaction was perhaps what men feared the most—that women now found men ridiculous. The cult’s gender-inflected ideology and procreative imagery, which had bolstered a fragile sense of masculine self-esteem, had now eroded. Worse, with no deceptions and secrets to hide, wives no longer bent to their

husband's will, and women now began to experience high levels of domestic brutality. The loss of the cult had removed an institutional channel for sublimating aggressive impulses. "Ritual menace and rhetorical violence have gone, replaced with the real thing . . . the unsublimated savagery of men" (Tuzin 1997, 177).

In the New Guinea Highlands another revealing case shows gender politics taking a different turn (Sexton 1986). During the 1970s, women in the Daulo region formed a network of autonomous women's groups to save and invest money. Groups organized as "mothers" and "daughters," the mothers teaching neophytes the ideology, rituals, and financial practices of the institution. The encouragement and instruction of daughter groups were couched in metaphors of childbearing, gardening, and income-generating work, underlining women's reproductive and nurturing roles. Instructional meetings took the form of a symbolic marriage. The mothers/bride-givers presented a "girl," often in the form of a doll enclosed in a mesh bag filled with coins. In time as the daughter groups saved and invested their funds, they could "give birth" to new daughter groups. This salutary example of women "taking back" motherhood reminds us that the right to control the story of reproduction remains an ideological battle we can all recognize.

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