

Review: STEPHEN LEAVITT
UNION COLLEGE

In *Masculinity, Motherhood, and Mockery*, Eric Kline Silverman presents a nuanced and breathtakingly comprehensive symbolic study of the famous naven ritual of the middle Sepik region in Papua New Guinea. His study is based on ethnographic field research in 1988–1990 in Tambunum village. In the tradition of the very best symbolic studies—a certain cockfight comes to mind—Silverman manages to use a single ritual event to provide a penetrating look at an entire way of life. At issue is the famously multifaceted expression of gender in societies that carefully cultivate masculine warriors while at the same time allowing for derision from women and imitation of women. The naven ceremony epitomizes that complicated pattern: older women—or men dressed up as older women—celebrate young men’s achievements by casting insults and innuendos upon them.

Silverman’s analysis breaks sharply from most others on the topic. Instead of seeing a carefully framed symbolism aimed at reinforcing gender dichotomies or local structural patterns, he argues that the ritual provides a “reprimand of culture herself” (136), offering “an endless conversation between antithetical visions of social order, self, and desire” (2). He advocates a study of symbolic forms that insists on their ultimately dialogical character as a *commentary* on life where “the colloquy of culture engenders profound emotional ambivalence” (2). Ritual is not about coherence, resolution, and closure; instead, it allows for the expression of conflicting and ultimately deeply psychological impulses. His study makes a compelling case for the postmodern critique of all functional analyses of ritual that seek to provide closure and resolve contradiction.

Naven is a ceremony that celebrates accomplishments of young men through ritual acts initiated by strategic relatives. It can be performed informally by senior women from a youth’s father’s mother’s clan. They “thrash, spit on, and degrade the honorees” (140) as a kind of backhanded celebration. Silverman himself was subjected to such treatment twice, once upon spearing his first fish and again when learning to paddle a canoe while standing. Alternatively, maternal uncles may initiate a naven when young men undergo certain cult activities for the first time. A more formal occasion occurs when mother’s brothers and women from the father’s mother’s clan together initiate a large-scale celebration to commemorate significant accomplishments. Historically, the paradigmatic achievement was the first taking of the head of an enemy. The ceremonies typically concluded with the famous *nggariik* gesture, a humiliating pantomime by a mother’s brother who, dressed as a woman, rubbed his buttocks up and down the leg of

the celebrant, utterly shaming him. Such large-scale ceremonies required compensation through the exchange of valuables.

Echoing Gregory Bateson's famous threefold interpretation of naven, Silverman states at the outset that his study employs three analytical frameworks—the dialogical, the psychoanalytic, and the gendered—to shed light on naven's remaining puzzles. He had no plans to study naven when he entered the field, but once there he could not ignore features of the ritual that seemed to contravene Bateson's functionalist interpretations. The tone and drama of naven events did not appear to offer any "psychological, emotional, or sociological closure—just the opposite" (4). The so-called celebration seemed mortifying to participants, provoking tears of shame rather than pride or joy. And all of this initiated by mother figures, directed at men. He states that a full understanding of naven would require "a framework that would interpret the bodily semiotics of masculinity and motherhood" (5).

Silverman's dialogical analysis derives from Mikhail Bakhtin's view of culture as consisting of "contrary discourses," a moral body of coherence and authority juxtaposed with the "grotesque" carnivalesque body "dominated by an insatiable, devouring and egesting, carnal maw" (6). The key is that these two valences do not involve negations or reversals of a dominant cultural theme; rather, there is a continuing dialog of themes that together capture the "contradictory, double-faced fullness of life" (6). Such an approach seems well-suited to the intricate and contradictory themes of Melanesian ritual culture, especially on the topic of gender, and Silverman's painstaking exploration of all the dimensions of gender symbolism leads to a sense that finally one can begin to understand what middle Sepik gender is all about.

The source of such a sense of insight comes, ultimately, from Silverman's psychoanalytic focus on the cultural significance of motherhood. It is here that we see the most compelling justification for reassessing the meaning of naven. With the singular insight that masculinity, in all its bravado, remains tied to the powerful safety and potential oedipal sexual allure of motherhood, Silverman offers a wholly new take on the apparently self-justifying, compensatory, womb-envying character of Melanesian masculinity. The naven ritual, he argues, gives explicit recognition to the ultimate inadequacy of manhood; it casts "masculinity as a failed figuration of motherhood," where men "camouflage yet express" a desire for fertility. Even the masculine boasts invoke "a tragedy of manhood" (37). Researchers in Melanesia have documented over and over the way men appropriate feminine fertility imagery to assert their superiority as males, and some have argued that such acts imply a deep psychological sense of inferiority in relation to women. While Silverman supports such interpretations, he argues that something else is going on here—the cultural forms promote *explicitly* the contradictions of masculinity. They reveal an ultimately dialogical character to culture, and men's womb-envy

takes on a whole new feel. Rather than being a byproduct of masculine bravado, it now becomes an essential part of what masculinity is: “masculinity is defined as much in terms of motherhood as it is defined in opposition to her” (57). Hence the ultimate tragedy of manhood.

Silverman’s thesis allows him to explain the symbolism of a wide array of cultural forms, from men’s fears of feminine essences to their construction of maternal homes with jagged teeth surrounding their entrances. Men seek masculine autonomy but recognize that social life requires reciprocity and dependence. They pursue “maximal male personhood” while at the same time they “retain a lifelong wish to return to maternal safety” (69). The preferred marriage system is thought of explicitly as a way for a man to “get his mother back” by having his son take a wife from the same clan his own mother came from (107). In all of this the allures of maternal care, maternal sexuality, and maternal fertility work to help define masculinity. Masculinity, then, is neither a denial of maternal femininity nor a compensatory reaction against it; instead, it defines itself ultimately in maternal terms.

The naven ceremony, Silverman argues, is a celebration of that contradictory quality of masculinity. He states that the “the rite is a reprimand of culture herself,” if by culture one means the unambiguous “ideals of masculinity and motherhood” (136). To explain the symbolism of the ceremony he draws on a psychoanalytic analysis of naven by Bernard Juillerat, who argued that naven “dramatizes the indissoluble bond between mother and son” (137), with all of its alluring and terrifying dimensions. There is a recognizable theme of regression to mother just at the moment of a young man’s masculine achievement. Silverman argues that the implications for definitions of gender are unmistakable: (1) gender in ritual is ultimately mixed, (2) gender is partible, and (3) masculinity is defined on a maternal, uterine schema (139).

He points out that Bateson’s and subsequent interpretations of naven as working to resolve contradictions or temper schismogenesis fail ultimately to capture “the experiential dimensions” (140) of naven. Here he refers primarily to the fact that the participants, at the final climactic gesture of the ceremony when a maternal relative, dressed as a woman, taunts the young celebrant by rubbing his buttocks up and down his leg, both react with profound shame and tears. There is “an emotional slide from sheer elation to ineffable despair” (161). The audience, meanwhile, feels “an acute sense of pity (*miwi*) for the mother’s brother and the sister’s son” (160). Silverman argues that underlying these emotional reactions is a situation where men feel “deeply ashamed of their masculinity” (161).

Silverman’s claim to have explained the experiential dimension to naven is, for me, one of the more intriguing dimensions to his analysis. Men’s explicit recognition of the tragic dimensions of masculinity in their personal

experience is extraordinary, so much so in fact that I would have liked to see some better documentation of the experience of naven from those who actually participated. Silverman says that the men feel ashamed of their masculinity, but he offers no corroboration from informants for those feelings. Once one moves from the topic of cultural symbolism to the topic of personal experience, the actual accounts of informants become essential, and Silverman's book includes no accounts from Eastern Iatmul individuals about what it is actually like to perform naven. My suspicion is that an accurate account of the experiential dimension of naven would have to foreground a distinction between public drama and personal emotional expression. Naven as a public drama entails a cathartic reaction, and the intensity of the emotions expressed imply that the symbolic forms have a deep psychic resonance. But tears, even tears of shame, can be provoked in public drama without implying any deep personal significance. The tears may express an appreciation for the sheer beauty and poignancy of the dramatic performance without implying that one is actually ashamed of one's own masculinity. The proof would come from actual accounts by individuals.

Review: DIANE LOSCHE
UNIVERSITY OF NEW SOUTH WALES

Naven—The Opera

Just like all tribes, anthropologists seem to find some stories good to think with. The *naven* rite of the Iatmul people of the Sepik River, Niugini, is one such yummy morsel, probably because, as your Aunt Fanny says, it is very, very naughty—full of transvestites, and lewd and lascivious behavior by the most unlikely of people, all right out in the open. In short it lets us all have a jolly good time while we're working.

The origin story of the first anthropological account of naven is itself quite naughty, and operatic, too. Once upon a time three anthropologists came together on the Sepik River, Margaret Mead, Gregory Bateson, and Reo Fortune. Out of this fortuitous meeting, fortunes were won and lost. One man was cuckolded, right in front of his eyes, apparently. Bateson gained a wife, as well as a book. The lady in question left one man for another—the stuff of Hollywood was here: sex, swamps, and crocodiles. Anthropological fortunes were made and lost too. Fortune had written *Sorcerers of Dobu* (1963) before this meeting but was seldom heard from writing about New Guinea again. And no wonder, one thinks, after that sad tale. The other two, of course, went on to illustrious careers. Bateson's study of naven could claim to be the pièce de résistance of that meeting of minds in the hys/tropics