

Gilbert H. Herdt, *Guardians of the Flutes: Idioms of Masculinity: A Study of Ritualized Homosexual Behavior.* New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1981. Pp. xviii, 325, appendices, indexes. \$17.95.

Anthropologists have observed that in New Guinea the practice of male initiation, which is seen as making boys into men, is a means of establishing the cultural form of sexual differentiation and gender identity as well as the reinforcement of male group bonding. Reports of purifactory practices to remove a boy's pollution due to his birth and childhood association with women involved vomiting, bloodletting, penis cutting, and often deprivations and pain. Many such rites were abandoned, and some

field workers of the 1950s and 1960s believed that initiation rituals in their traditional forms might never be witnessed and recorded. As ethnographers have conducted research in remote areas only recently contacted, ritual practices and myths of initiation have been studied by several anthropologists.<sup>1</sup> The book reviewed here is concerned with the masculinization of youths through the stages of male initiation. The homosexual and ritual practices may be unique to the group Herdt refers to under the pseudonym of Sambia, but similar activities have been reported of other groups.

The study is remarkable in many ways. In fieldwork 1974-1976, Herdt gained access to the initiation ritual, including the secret myths and rites, men's idioms, interpretations and exegesis of the practices. His analysis and discussion is informed by contemporary anthropological and psychoanalytic theory and symbolic analysis: he discusses cultural, social, symbolic and psychological dimensions of these myths and rituals.

The culture, community, and social organization of this group of 2,000 people in the eastern highlands of Papua New Guinea are briefly described. Sweet potatoes and taro are cultivated, and hunting is an important male activity, providing most of the meat. In addition, wild vegetable food is gathered. They raise few domestic pigs and do not hold typically highlands ceremonial exchanges. Local and kinship groups are patrilineal and patrilocal, with the largest groups, phratries, claiming descent from a set of ancestral brothers. Settlements are hamlets; post-marital residence is in family houses, rather than separate men's and women's houses.

Boys reside in the men's house from about the age of seven; it is this separate life of youths during the long period of initiation, through adolescence to adulthood, that is the focus of Herdt's interest in the development of masculine idiom. From the largest political unit, a cluster of hamlets forming a confederacy, to the localized hamlets, the chief ritual activity which binds together this group of men is the initiation sequence. It makes the male age-mates an association with common experiences in the ritual and secret practices. The hamlet's ritual centers in the men's house which is the locale of male communal activities, myth telling, political and military affairs. Each men's house is a fortress, a defense against male enemies outside the community and pollution from women (who may not approach it) and children. Boys undergoing initiation are separated from younger boys and all women. Masculine values are developed here: the youth must identify with men whose ideal is a virile, strong and brave warrior. To become a man, to emulate the war leader and eventually the ritual elder, a boy must be rid of weakening elements which de-

rive from women; he must not become a "rubbish" man. This masculinization is achieved by initiation into the men's secret society through a series of stages. Only a few of these are publicly marked.

Herdt makes masculinization by means of ritual initiation of males the central problem of his study. Around this theme he presents background information on the community, myth, and belief. One long chapter discusses the pandanus tree and its role as a feminine symbol. Game animals, especially possum and cassowary, have supernatural and sexual associations. The book discusses men's views of male-female relations and attitudes in childhood and adult life.

The men's idioms embody supernatural forces and beings which transcend the phenomenal world. Sambia distinguishes zones of garden, hamlet, and forest. In the division of labor, women grow tubers; men with penis cannot. Men's activities center upon the forest and hunting. Men hunt marsupials to get meat for initiations. Birds and their plumes are used for male ornaments in ritual. The gender associations of birds, animals, and wild plants are a rich source of symbols and materials in initiation rituals. Thus, such associations as milk, semen and tree sap are explored and interpreted.

Herdt outlines the six initiation stages as marked by collective rites, individual rites, and progress towards full adult male-status as husband and father. Since infancy and early childhood (for boys as well as girls) centers upon the mother and family house, the removal of boys to the men's house and initiation is crucial to masculinization. Initiation and residence in the men's house is long, punctuated by rituals, defined by phases, elaborated with taboos. Forest substances, foods, and pigments, contribute to the growth and strength of initiates. The boys are subjected to ordeals such as blood-letting and made to ingest masculinizing substances of which the most important is the semen of their initiators. These homosexual practices are always private, between an unrelated man or bachelor youth and the initiate in the isolated forest lodge. Regular, frequent fellatio is essential to the attainment of manhood. The first two initiation stages when boys are seven to thirteen years old require the boy to ingest semen. When adolescence is attained at 14-16, in the next stage, the initiate's semen is ingested by a younger youth. Infant betrothal is common. Bachelor youths of sixteen or so are married to preadolescent brides, in a group of two or more. Following marriage, the phases of initiation are individual. Then the newlywed man gives semen to his bride, first by fellatio. After she reaches menarche, the couple begins to cohabit in a family house, heterosexual intercourse is regularly practiced, and homosexual activities cease. Contamination by women continues to be dan-

gerous to men. They must avoid polluting contact with female fluids, especially menstrual blood. Menstrual and birth huts are used by women and avoided by men. Men force nosebleeds to purify themselves. In the myth of parthenogenesis, Herdt provides the key to understanding the origin of sexual differences and of sexuality. In this myth, a transsexual is made both male and female and gives birth.

This book will be of interest to anthropologists, psychologists and psychiatrists for the study of psychosexual development. Homosexual practices are prescribed and forced upon boys and youths as an essential preparation for heterosexual adulthood. Among this people, this sexual development is normal. They believe that semen ingested by a young wife practicing fellatio makes her strong. The semen is stored and later converted to milk. Thus, according to the men, life-giving and infant feeding capacities are both derived from male semen which is ingested by pre-pubescent youths of both sexes. Fellatio insemination, like mother's milk, induces growth. These practices are neither rare nor deviant here, and not expected to become sexual preferences beyond the growth period: adult heterosexuality is the norm. This has an important implication for the general theory of psychosexual development which claims that sexual orientations are formed early in life and are permanent.

In a good many New Guinea societies, anthropologists have recorded myths in which men, women, and their sexual differences, as we know them, did not exist. The ancestors are said to have been sexually unformed, incomplete, or possessing characteristics now exclusive to the other sex. Through the actions of an heroic ancestor, cutting, or forming sexual organs, and theft of sexual symbols, prohibited knowledge was gained and a transformation effected. Bamboo flutes in New Guinea are both secret instruments and sexual symbols. Secrecy now protects men's possession of knowledge and power. In Sambia, the cult practices themselves reinforce this exclusive male control.

We also know from many ethnographic studies that New Guinea male cults have been greatly modified--the painful and bizarre is often reduced to mimicking, or initiations are eliminated altogether. In some cases, there may have been an effort to conceal the practices believed to be condemned by Europeans; but the male cult was also devalued by the people--it did not fit into their pacified and modernizing mode. Recent events have sometimes revived such discarded initiation rites. Certainly warfare demands men who are warriors; if initiation prepares them, it may again be vital to society's continuity. By the same analysis, cannibalism in some New Guinea societies was a vital part of ritual life, warfare, mortuary, or other practices. When these practices are abandoned or con-

cealed from inquiring outsiders ethnographic studies are unable to describe them. Thus, we have only a few ethnographic studies that discuss these beliefs and practices. Herdt's study is the most complete so far on male masculinization development.

This fascinating book tells us a great deal about its subject, yet in the full elaboration of its theme it is often repetitious. But it does not provide all of the information that might elucidate some aspects of initiation and masculine identity. We are not given examples of initiation instruction; this is planned for another book. The connection between spirit familiars--acquired in youth--masculinity, hunting, and war success are not fully discussed. The link between masculinization, group relations and warfare is intriguing because a non-relative member of a potentially hostile, marriageable group is a boy's homosexual initiating partner. Semen, the prime masculine substance, is given to boys by potential enemies in order to make them strong male warriors; semen is similarly given by husbands to wives from these groups who will bear their offspring. The boys, made men, use their masculine substance to create sons who are potential enemies of the initiators. Yet the particular or continuing relations between these sexual partners and their implication for inter-community relations are not discussed.

Herdt calls the people "prudish," which I take to mean sexually modest, conducting sexual activity in private, and speaking little of sexual matters. His accomplishment in the field is highly exceptional. However, he could not work closely with women and presents essentially men's views. Anthropological method in New Guinea has usually involved a fieldworker in long-term community residence, close involvement with local group and observation--if not participation--in local affairs. Even after a year or more, language acquisition and facility have varied from fair fluency to almost total reliance on Neo-Melanesian and interpreters. Herdt attained the former, and his field technique seems to have concentrated upon discussion and recording statements and responses to his questions. In the book he provides quotations in English, with traces of Neo-Melanesian and words of "Sambia," but the original language and context of these statements is rarely provided. While providing fictional group, local and personal names, Herdt uses many vernacular words, which would surely make a linguistic identification of Sambia possible.

The book contains little descriptive and observed material. Every section after the introductory chapters contains many statements quoted from informants, and Herdt's exegesis of metaphor, idiom, belief, and fantasy. We are not, however, given much information about his field procedure. Were these private or public conversations? Because of the secre-

cy, prudishness, and nature of the subject, we are forced to rely upon Herdt's interpretation.

The book is very heavily footnoted (up to sixty notes per chapter), with additional observations, information, and often comparative material from other writings. It seems as though these addenda occurred to Herdt after the book was completed. Some of them explain or add new interpretations to the text; the result is almost an excess of material, rarely contradictory but frequently uncoordinated. On page 173, for example, the discussion of men's views about women's adolescence and sexual organs, includes parenthetical statements and a footnote, partly repeating and adding new information. A more coherent work would result from better organization and incorporation of this material.

Many elements, idioms, and other characteristics discussed by Herdt are also mentioned by other anthropologists discussing New Guinea peoples--especially where initiation ritual was practiced. Are the differences or the emphasis due to real cultural dissimilarities, the author's interests, concealment by people of certain practices, change since contact? This is the reader's dilemma. Although more and more books are published, some questions are even farther from being resolved. For example, the belief that conception and birth are primarily due to man's semen merging with woman's blood has very often been reported. Is the way that this is stated the result of the anthropologist's mode of inquiry, the particular informants consulted, the language used, or the final phrasing of the writer?

This study and others suggest that some interesting distributional complexes are beginning to emerge in the highlands, linking rituals, concepts of growth and sexual maturity and intersexual relations. In the central and western highlands where sweet potatoes dominate, large pig feasts and ceremonial exchange flourish, initiation is a small, single ceremony introducing boys to the secrecy of the flutes (as in Chimbu and Kuma) with minor ordeals. Some men's cults (in Enga and Hagen, for example) protect men against the contaminating dangers of contact with women. Pork fat is associated with semen and fecundity. It is applied to men's skin to make it glisten, a sign of health, the opposite of the depleted shriveled skin of a rubbish man who has spent too much time with women. There are important differences within the highlands as Meggitt (1964) pointed out. However, a great contrast is evident between these large groups and the small-scale communities of the highland "fringe" to the east, west and south of the large valleys. Among these peoples, subsistence is based upon a combination of cultivated tubers and wild food: men hunt, few pigs are kept, and the large feasts are absent. These societies have long, elaborate, graded male initiation sequences requiring game and special foods, which

stress male maturity. In this category I tentatively include with "Sambia" the Anga, Baruya, Bimin-Kuskusmin and Baktaman. Peoples of the Papua plateau, similar in some ways, evidently have less elaborate initiation cycles. The eastern highlands peoples apparently practice violent, harsh initiation and sexual antagonism (Read 1954). Yet their society seems in some ways intermediate, for they depend mainly upon cultivated sweet potatoes for sustenance and raise pigs for feasts although the scale of these feasts does not match that of the central and western highlanders. And neither do initiations occupy youths for long periods, or require extensive special game meat and food supplies.

In all of these societies, ritual and instruction prepare youths to become warriors and fathers. Men and women usually live in separate houses or quarters, and contact with childbearing and menstruating women is avoided by men. There is overall a sharp separation of the sexes in domestic and public activities, domination by men in ceremony and exchange, and occasionally ritualized expressions of sexual antagonism and anxiety by men over contamination or depletion through sexual contact with women,

There are surely important differences in initiation ceremonies, the most obvious being the phases and importance of male seclusion and secrecy as compared with the public phases where women and children observe or participate. Nevertheless, there is usually one tribe or community and one anthropologist to tell us about it. Very few studies tell of the views of both women and men. While convinced of the truth of the report, we can still never be sure that this is all there is to say, or if another observer might not show us other facets of the truth.

Is the homosexual practice the dominating experience and theme of initiation in Sambia or elsewhere? Time, place and ethnographer remain unique and untestable when such information contained in *Guardians of the Flutes* is the subject of study.

## NOTES

1. The connection between initiation and male bonding in Melanesian patrilineal societies was discussed by Allen (1967) when New Guinea highland societies were still little known. Following the well-known work of Read (1965) and Strathern's review (1970) there was until recently little observation of male initiation in New Guinea. However, Herdt is editing a group of papers on male initiation. Some recent studies of New Guinea in which male initiation is discussed are also listed below.

Allen, M., 1967, *Male Cults and Secret Initiations in Melanesia*.

Barth, F., 1975, *Ritual and Knowledge Among the Baktaman of New Guinea*.

- Cell, A., 1975, *Metamorphosis of the Cassowaries*.
- Herd, G., 1982 (ed.). *Rituals of Manhood* (forthcoming).
- Kelly, R., 1977, *Etoro Social Structure*.
- Lewis, G., 1980, *Day of Shining Red*.
- Meggitt, M. J., 1964, "Male-female Relationships in the Highlands of Australian New Guinea," in *New Guinea: the Central Highlands*. Edited by J. B. Watson. *American Anthropologist* 66:204-44.
- Read, K. E., 1954, "Cultures of the Central Highlands." *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* 10:1-43.
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- Schieffelin, E. L., 1976, *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*.
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- Tuzin, D., 1980, *The Voice of the Tambaran*.

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