

## 4 The 'Hidden' Power of Male Ritual: The North Vanuatu Evidence

### Hidden Power

Slowly the moon climbs  
along its silvery path  
over Kumbu mountain.  
Palm trees cast the shadows  
of their rough bodies  
across my path,  
their wombs heavy with sago.  
Avoiding the wind,  
coconut trees bend low.  
Leleki baskets  
hang from the roof of the men's  
house  
pregnant with secrets  
and power.

But I,  
the 'modern man',  
complete with suit,  
dispatch case and transistor set,  
shall never know  
what hidden happiness or strength  
is tied up in these baskets.  
My age and learning notwithstanding,  
I am excluded.  
Uninitiated,  
condemned to sleep with women,  
unfit to carry shield and spear.

*Herman Talingapua* (Dousset, R.  
and Taillemite, E.1980:277)

THE CENTRAL theme of this paper is expressed with enviable clarity and simplicity in the above short poem. Written by Herman Talingapua, a young Papua New Guinea man on his return home after acquiring Western knowledge abroad, it describes, in a manner strikingly in accord with those anthropological interpretations of

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male initiations which stress the male gender ambiguity theme, his perception of himself as, lacking access to the secret power within manhood, 'condemned to sleep with women, unfit to carry shield and spear'. But what is perhaps even more striking is the depiction of male power, and hence the key to the attainment of a satisfactory manhood, as located in the female-manufactured and pregnant baskets. In other words, Talingapua, the 'modern' young man, has produced yet another and most poignant version of the type of 'matriarchal' myth with which I am concerned in this chapter.

Hays (1988:98-120) provides conclusive evidence for the widespread occurrence in the Papua New Guinea Highlands of myths which exhibit features similar to those described by Bamberger (1974) for South America. Furthermore, in both areas the myths commonly occur in association with elaborate male cults that are themselves strikingly similar in numerous respects; the strict exclusion of women from cult activities, the performance of elaborate rites of initiation, the deception of women concerning the men's 'secrets,' especially the men's possession of stolen power objects, and the radical residential opposition between the sexes with the men spending much of their time in exclusive communal cult houses and the women and children in smaller family dwellings. Indeed, so striking are the many similarities, even as regards minor cultural details, that it might not seem too far fetched to postulate a necessary connection between the cults and the myths. However, an immediate obstacle to any such simple hypothesis is that both in Melanesia and in South America there are numerous examples of secret male cults that exhibit most of the features listed above, yet are without the accompanying matriarchal-type myth. Nevertheless in the present paper I wish to defend the hypothesis that there is indeed a connection, though I propose to do so in a seemingly paradoxical way by examining two negative instances, both from north Vanuatu.

In the first example (Lombaha district in east Ambae) there are neither male cults nor myths of the kind referred to above, while in the second (Vao island off the coast of Malekula) there is a modified version of the cult, but again no male appropriative myth. The possibility that some understanding of the more classic cult/myth

complex may be gained by examining these marginal cases flows from my first major point; that so-called 'matriarchal' myths must be recognized as but one major form of a more general category of cultural representation of certain 'feminine' or female-derived magical powers that men believe they can acquire as a result of incorporation into an adult cult group. From this broad perspective the myths may therefore be best understood as occupying a middle position between, on the one hand, such openly expressed, and sometimes ideologically dominant, cultural representations of the female principle as matrilineal descent or the worship of female deities, and on the other those covert, more disguised representations that commonly occur in ritual performances—such as the many dominant ritual symbols that are overtly male, yet covertly female. If I can succeed in pointing to those factors that may be relevant in determining why the female principle is made openly manifest in cultural form in Lombaha, while in Vao it is confined to covert symbolic representation, I may be able to help explain why elsewhere, most notably in the Papua New Guinea Highlands and in parts of South America, it takes the intermediary form of male appropriative myth.

### **Bisexuality and the power of ritual**

My aim is, then, to comprehend why men so frequently represent to themselves the idea that they possess a transformative power that is either of a feminine kind (as in ritual), or derived from women (as in myth). But because in north Vanuatu the feminine is made manifest primarily in the context of ritual, I will initially confine my comments to this mode of representation. For the purposes of the present discussion ritual may be provisionally defined as a highly distinctive form of symbolic action believed capable of magically effecting desired transformations. That is, a genuine ritualist truly believes that by performing the prescribed sequence of actions certain consequences will normally follow—the enemy will drop dead, the crops will ripen, the young couple will become husband and wife etc. It is, so I would contend, the transformative power of belief that sets ritual apart from games, dramas, sports, ceremonies and other elaborate and highly stylized cultural performances. In seeking for an explanation of whence comes this remarkable power

belief a few anthropologists, notably some of the earlier greats, such as Tylor (1871), Frazer (1911-15), van Gennep (1960) and Durkheim (1915), and such later figures as Douglas (1966 and 1970) Turner (1967), have provided answers that may be described as either intellectualist or sociological. Put in very simple terms, while the intellectualists attribute such beliefs to a supposed need to understand and control the natural environment, the sociologists appeal instead to the individual's experience of the coercive power of the social order. Though important and useful insights are contained in such formulations, in every instance their general positions are marred by the naivety of their psychological premises. However, in contrast to those referred to above, the great majority of contemporary anthropologists substantially ignore the power dimension of ritual,<sup>1</sup> and instead concentrate their efforts on analysing what they see as its key feature—its supposed capacity, through symbolic representation, to communicate ideas, meanings, messages, or knowledge of social import. This approach, which Sperber (1975), in an excellent critique, dubbed as the cryptological, employs various analytical methods, mostly derived from structural linguistics and cybernetics, though also sometimes nervously borrowing both from cognitive psychology and psychoanalytic theory, in an attempt to unravel the supposed meanings or messages conveyed in the ritual context. Like Sperber, I find this semiotic view of ritual to be seriously misleading. Ritual symbols are not super signs; they are not commonly paired with their interpretations in code structures, and their referents but rarely take the cognitive form of meanings.' Ritual, I would contend, differs in most fundamental ways not only from language, but also from science and logic—so much so that it is quite misleading to regard ritual as a quasi-linguistic mode of communication. The kinds of verbal utterances that figure most prominently in ritual performances do so primarily as representational symbols and only secondarily as meaningful signs.

At this point I need to elaborate a little on my use of such terms as symbol and sign. First, developing distinctions used by Leach

<sup>1</sup> A notable exception is the collection of essays entitled *The Power of Ritual*, edited by Bruce Kapferer (1979).

(1976:9-16) and others, I locate symbolism as intermediary between signalling and signification. In signalling, as in a great variety of bodily gestures and displays, such as smiles, snarls, screams, clenched fists, etc., the message-bearing entity and the message are but two aspects of the same phenomenon. Hence, in signalling the message is transferred with the minimum of ambiguity and the maximum of certitude—but also with a very limited capacity for complexity. Typically, in the signalling context communication is directly expressive of messages themselves predominantly derived either from instinctive or emotional sources.

Signification, in its purest form, as in mathematical, algebraic and alphabetical sign sets, is totally unlike signalling in that the relationship between the sign and the thing signified is wholly arbitrary, and the messages transmitted derive exclusively from cultural and cognitive rather than instinctive and emotional sources. Whereas in signalling, as is also the case with symptoms, internal physical or psychological states of the individual are directly made manifest or expressed in external form, in signification the cognitive functions of the mind have achieved a high level of autonomous detachment from the individual. Signs and signals, however, are alike in that both convey information of a precise kind and with the minimum of ambiguity—a feature that, more than any other, sets both apart from symbols. Central to the many difficulties in understanding the symbolic process is the fact that though it differs from both signalling and signification, it nevertheless shares some fundamental features with both. Though symbols, like signs, fall quite clearly within the cultural and arbitrary domain, in the case of symbols the relationship is very much less arbitrary than in the case of signification. That this is so is evident in the universal conviction that while some symbols are especially appropriate or effective, others are less so. Though the details of the logic that link a symbol to its referent may well elude us, the judgement that it is a good or bad symbol may nevertheless be both strong and instantaneous.

Returning to my central concern, the diacritical importance of extraordinary power notions in the ritual context, I now want to stress not only that ritual in general is that segment of culture in which the symbolic is perhaps at its most elaborate, but also that the key or dominant symbols are those most fully representative of the

relevant transformative powers. It is, so I would contend, above all else the attribution of such power beliefs to key ritual symbols that most clearly differentiates them from signs—for such symbols do not arbitrarily signify the operative power—on the contrary, they are commonly believed to literally participate in and make physically manifest the power that they also represent. To this extent then, dominant ritual symbols are like signals and symptoms.

The key question can now be reformulated in more precise terms: What set of circumstances is likely to give rise to and sustain the attribution of unusual transformative powers to key ritual symbols? There are two levels of productive response to this question. The first, and possibly the least important, flows from Turner's (1967:29, 33, 50) now widely accepted view of such symbols as multivalent in their referents—the more dominant the symbol, the wider the fan or spectrum of referents. When a dominant symbol acquires a multiplicity of referents, especially when such referents include the Durkheimian kind of shared values, such as Ndembu culture in toto, then the greater the probability that it will, through both emotional and cognitive intensification, come to be literally imbued with intrinsic powers of a mystical or non-natural kind. In short, I am suggesting that the process of symbol condensation can itself directly contribute to the formation of power beliefs.

I do not, however, want to exaggerate the importance of the condensation process for, as Turner himself was aware, it places too much weight on meaning and cognition. Ritual symbols, especially dominant ritual symbols, in addition to their capacity to represent a variety of ideas, also provide a direct way to express less cognitive and more emotional modes of awareness. In other words, key ritual symbols simultaneously combine the signifying function of signs and the expressive function of signals and symptoms. My proposed view of ritual symbols might be described as an onion-ring view. While the outer rings represent consciously articulated ideas, the inner take one progressively deeper into the more general, diffuse, inarticulate, unconscious and instinctive dimensions of awareness and feeling.<sup>2</sup> To illustrate: while in one context a clenched fist may

<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately I have no space here to explore this fascinating field of enquiry, but it is perhaps worth noting that the various distinctions that I am here pointing to substantially overlap not only with one another, but also with three other

directly express aggressive anger and nothing more, in another context a hundred men may simultaneously raise their clenched fists as a required cultural representation of their solidarity as exploited workers in opposition to the bosses. In the latter case we have an idea, that of worker solidarity, made efficacious or powerful through the use of a symbolic gesture that has the capacity to make manifest aggressive feelings. In other words, the symbol here incorporates a signalling component.

My preliminary answer to the problem of whence comes the belief in the transformative power of key ritual symbols should by now be fairly obvious. In addition to the undoubted psychological impact of cognitive multivocality, capped perhaps by a little of the supposed Durkheimian awe of collective representations, there is the important transformation, through the use of key symbols, of predominantly inarticulate and unconscious forms of power awareness into conscious and articulate representations. In other words, the ideas represented by ritual symbols differ from those represented by signs through their capacity to express the predominantly emotional input that originates in the centre of the

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influential formulations that have emerged from divergent fields of intellectual enquiry. They are, firstly, Lévi Strauss's (1962:1-33) distinction between the science of the concrete (as in mythic thought) and the science of the abstract (as in logic, mathematics and science), the psychoanalytic distinction between primary and secondary thought processes (Rycroft 1968 and Hook 1979), and the psychological distinction between the differential mental functions associated with the left and right-brain hemispheres respectively. To the extent that ritual symbols share features with signs, they also have the capacity to represent the predominantly articulate, logical, abstract, temporal and reflective products of the left hemisphere, but to the extent that they also share features with signals and symptoms, they share the additional, and perhaps more important, capacity to directly express the predominantly inarticulate, analogical, concrete, spatial and impulsive products of the right hemisphere. For early accounts of the dramatic results of split-brain research see especially Bogen (1969), Marsh (1971), TenHouten et al. (1973), and Ornstein (1972). For an interesting range of anthropological reactions see Paredes and Hepburn's (1976) *Current Anthropology* article and subsequent correspondence in *CA* 17(2):318-26; 17(3):503-11; 17(4):739-42. See also Thomson's (1984) trenchant critique of over-simplistic attempts to wed cultural to hemispheric differences.

metaphoric onion—that is to say, from instinctive or unconscious sources.

Before making a brief excursion into this at present murky arena I need to comment briefly on what I mean when I refer to ritual powers as fantastical, magical or even preposterous.<sup>3</sup> First, I mean simply to indicate that such powers are regarded by the actors themselves as quite unique and available only to humans through the performance of ritual. Secondly, and more importantly, from the outsider's perspective, such power beliefs must be judged to be seriously detached from reality; that is, they are not subject to rational or logical testing procedures. Thirdly, they almost certainly originate in unconscious mental activity. I should also stress that ritual powers, even if consciously represented as originating in external sources, such as gods, spirits or even nature, are also internalized and personally identified with by the ritualist. At the simplest level such powers are not entirely unlike those directly expressed, without any accompanying ritual at all, in a baby's cry for maternal attention. The nineteenth-century Hindu religious reformer Vivekananda vividly depicted the exaggerated egotism of that supreme ritualist, the Hindu Tantric, in the following words, 'The man who has learned to manipulate the internal forces will get the whole of nature under his control... The Yogi proposes to himself to master the whole universe, to control the whole of nature' (Vivekananda 1963:96). It is precisely fantastical powers such as these that I would attribute to ritualists universally, though but rarely expressed in such excessive and grandiose terms. At their clearest, ritual powers are those we commonly refer to as magical, religious, witchcraft or pollution powers; at their weakest they extend to the kind of powers attributed to pop and sports stars, charismatic leaders, heirlooms, historic relics and art objects.

In seeking to understand such power notions I turn, for fairly obvious reasons, to psychoanalytic theory.<sup>4</sup> A central contention of

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent discussion of the relationship between fantasy and symbol see Hook (1979:267-291).

<sup>4</sup> In writing the account that follows I have been primarily influenced by Freud (1925 and 1928), Layard (1955), Bettelheim (1954), Whiting, Kluckhohn and Anthony (1958), Burton and Whiting (1961), Stephens (1962), Rycroft (1968), Mitchell (1974), Chodorow (1974 and 1978), Chasseguet-Smirgel (1981), and Spiro (1982).

this discipline states that at the greatest depths of the unconscious a turbulent pool of emotions has accumulated since early infancy, and perhaps even earlier, through the repression of instinctive drives, especially those relating to sex and aggression. Psychoanalysts refer to this pool of repressed emotional energy as libido, and I find it of exceptional interest that their clinical experiences have led them to describe libido not just as psychic energy, but as goal-directed energy. At this point I need to repeat what I previously stressed as distinctive of the ritualist's orientation towards the world; the strength of the belief that ritual enactments are highly effective in achieving quite specific goals—that the crops will grow or the recently deceased's ghost will become an ancestral spirit, etc. What I now want to suggest is that the deep-seated and highly subjective awareness of libidinous energy is, through cathexis, given objective form in the attribution of fantastical transformative powers to dominant ritual symbols.

Through active participation in the ritual performance, which commonly involves such features as the elaborate and highly stylized movement of persons and objects in a precisely demarcated spatial arena, the use of predominantly metaphoric and non-conceptual verbal utterances, an aesthetic, rhythmical and percussive bombardment of the senses, and sometimes even the taking of drugs that directly alter the mode of consciousness, the principal actors may succeed in breaking through some of their ego-defence mechanisms, and in so doing attain a heightened awareness of libido. By reference to split-brain theory it would seem reasonable to infer that ritual, by means of the above features, has the capacity to heighten right hemisphere forms of awareness while dulling those transmitted through the left.

One final and most important step must now be taken. From the orthodox Freudian perspective the supposedly universal childhood conditions that culminate in first the creation and then the resolution of the Oedipus complex have a massive potential for the creation of libido. Central to this complex is, for boys, the emotional impact of the father as a threatening and powerful figure, while the resolution is achieved through successful identification. That is to say, the maturing youth, through the threat of castration, ceases to desire his

mother and instead objectifies his repressed libido in the form of ritual power symbols of a specifically male kind. However, as numerous post-Freudian analysts came to realize, the pre-Oedipal phase is of equal a not greater importance in understanding subsequent patterns of ego development—and this applies equally to the analysis of abnormal symptoms and normative symbolic representations. It is, indeed, most especially in the context of the development of normative power fantasies that one might expect the initial, and sometimes exclusive, mother-child relationship to be of the utmost importance. It would, furthermore, seem reasonable to hypothesize that the longer, the more intimate and the more exclusive the early mother-child relationship, the greater the probability that the child, regardless of sex, will incorporate a major feminine and maternal component in his or her power fantasies.<sup>5</sup>

To the extent that such formulations are valid, it must necessarily follow that adults, especially those who have experienced exceptionally strong versions of both the pre-Oedipal and Oedipal patterns of ego development, have internalized both female and male, or maternal and paternal, power images. Furthermore, since the child's experience of maternal power predates the paternal in extreme cases by as much as six to ten years, it must necessarily follow that the maternal power images are located closer to the centre of the metaphoric onion than are the paternal. This would, of course, be all the more likely in the case of a boy, who, in order to become a man, has been obliged to deeply repress his early identification with, and dependence on, his mother (Chodorow

<sup>5</sup> Bettelheim's classic *Symbolic Wounds* (1954), was the first to explore the possible cultural consequences of the young boy's early attachment to and identification with his mother. Though Bettelheim's emphasis on male envy met with little favour, the importance of the mother-son link, especially in societies in which fathers are largely excluded from the domestic arena, was subsequently elaborated on in the work of Whiting and his various disciples (1958, 1961 and 1975). That male initiations are often centrally concerned with the attempted resolution of male gender ambiguities is now widely recognized in the anthropological literature—see especially Young (1965), Allen (1967), Lidz and Lidz (1977), Strathern (1970 and 1978), Herdt (1981 and 1982), and Keesing (1982). It is, however, Chodorow (1974 and 1978) who has most fully and insightfully explored the social and psychological dimensions of mothering, and its implications for an understanding of gender identity, both male and female.

1974:50). It therefore follows that the more purely male elements in symbolic power representations are more likely to be located close to the conscious/unconscious interface, while the female elements lie more deeply buried in the unconscious. It is precisely this feature that has assuredly led to the relatively prolific literature concerned with the documentation and analysis of ritual symbols that are seemingly of a wholly male, paternal and perhaps phallic kind. It is, however, my contention that in case after case a closer analysis brings to light a less articulate and less conscious female and maternal dimension. In support of this argument I have elsewhere (Allen n.d.) documented the bisexuality or hermaphroditism of a wide range of dominant ritual symbols—including the Ndembu *mudyi* tree, the Hindu *lingam*, Sikh hair coiffure, the flutes, bullroarers and stones of much of Papua New Guinea, (see Hays 1988 for ample confirmation) and what is most relevant in this paper, the sacred pigs of north Vanuatu.

But it is altogether too gross and simplistic to terminate this introductory analysis with an unqualified contrast between articulate male power and inarticulate female. In a substantial minority of societies, including the matrilineal areas of east Ambae, many of the dominant power symbols and focal cultural principles are quite explicitly and consciously conceived of in feminine terms. Furthermore, even within the relatively restricted category of specifically male ritual powers, there is a wide range of variation in the manner, context and degree to which the less conscious female component is made manifest. In some instances repression of the female is so extreme that any argument for its presence must necessarily remain highly speculative—that is to say, there is in such a hypothetical culture no place at all for any kind of recognition of transformative female power, whether positive or negative. In yet other societies, once again of a strongly patriarchal kind, while the positive feminine component of male ritual potency remains unrecognized, negative or destructive female powers, as in witchcraft or menstrual beliefs, may be both consciously recognized and highly elaborate.

Myths in which the men are represented as taking power objects from the women, but without any justifying reference to supposed prior female inadequacies, clearly imply more than a weakly

disguised incorporation of female transformative powers into the male world of politicized ritual. The usual acquisitive act of trickery or violent appropriation suggests that the men not only want to represent their ritual powers as having originated with women, but that such women would not otherwise easily or voluntarily relinquish their powers. I am, then, suggesting that such myths do not simply validate or give legitimacy to extreme forms of male hegemony, but rather that they provide a rationale for those relatively weakly articulated patriarchal social systems in which the principal male power symbols not only incorporate a less than fully articulate female component, but in which the men precariously attempt to assert dominance over women who are in fact the possessors of substantial power. I will return to this major theme in my conclusion, but in the meanwhile I will use the north Vanuatu data in order to develop the important though preliminary contrast between articulate and inarticulate representations of the female or maternal principle.

### **Sacred pigs and male gender ambiguity**

The starting point for this ethnographic section of the paper is a problem first noted by Layard in his classic ethnography of Vao Island. In discussing the mythology of Vao, Layard paid considerable attention to a spirit-being known as Lehevhev whom he described as the 'Guardian Ghost'; or, as a Vao informant put it 'that which draws us to it so that it may devour us' (Layard 1942:218). On Vao, as on all the islands of north Vanuatu, men believe that after death en route to the spirit world they encounter the Guardian Ghost, and that unless they have a pig to offer it will devour them. The problem that drew Layard's attention was the Guardian Ghost's sex.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> On Vao, where the language does not differentiate between genders, Lehevhev is in fact, grammatically neither male nor female. However 'the first syllable of the name, Le-, is the present day feminine prefix with which every woman's name in all the Small Islands begins' (Layard 1942:218). Furthermore, in the neighbouring Small Island of Atchin 'the name for the corresponding figure is Le-saw-saw, where it is definitely regarded as a woman' (1942:218). It would therefore seem reasonable to conclude that on Vao Lehevhev is also female, but at a more deeply repressed level of awareness than in neighbouring communities.

The question of the sex of this Being is of the greatest interest. In the Northern New Hebrides, where the kinship system is matrilineal, the Guardian Ghost *Supwe* is said to be male: in all parts of Malekula and the Small Islands, however, where kinship is overtly patrilineal, this same being (known by variants of the same name already cited) is, except in Vao, regarded as female. To this the writer can see no possible explanation other than a psychological one, namely, that in those areas in which conscious attention is directed chiefly towards the female line of descent, the unconscious which gives rise to the myth, compensates for this undue emphasis on the female side by envisaging the Guardian Ghost as male; while in those areas in which conscious attention is concentrated on the male line, the unconscious compensates by envisaging this figure as female. (1942:219-20)

In the succeeding pages I will attempt to further develop and explore the comparative implications of Layard's remarkable flash of insight—one that is, quite evidently, a by-product of his long involvement with psychoanalytic theory, especially the basic presupposition that the conscious and the unconscious are likely to manifest themselves as the inverse of one another. I will do so by comparing some of the more important domains of gender identification in two communities—on the one hand, the overtly patrilineal community of Vao, and on the other, the overtly matrilineal community of Lombaha. The contrast between the two can be simply put: in Vao, a culture in which the male principle is given both conscious primacy and positive evaluation in all contexts where gender differentiation is relevant, the female principle is nevertheless also pervasively present, though in less articulate and more threatening forms. In Lombaha, by contrast, though once again both male and female principles are interwoven in all gender relevant contexts, there is, by comparison with Vao, far less ambiguity, especially in relation to adult males. The two principles stand here in balanced inter-relationship, an arrangement which contrasts sharply with the conscious dominance of the male principle on Vao.

### **Vao (Malekula)**

When Layard began fieldwork on Vao in 1914 the 400 or so inhabitants resided in three double-villages, the male residents of

each counting themselves as members of a single exogamous patrilineal clan. Each village was, as it still is today, divided into a number of sections whose male members form the basis of agnatic lineages. Thus, at all levels of Vao local organization, patrilineal descent, patrivirilocal residence and local-group exogamy together provide a firm structural base both for male-agnatic co-residence and the dispersal of adult females. Put in slightly different terms, the socially, economically and politically all-important Vao local groups are unambiguously structured in conformity with an explicitly male principle of descent, inheritance, succession and post-marital co-residence. But turning to the other, less articulate and female side of the social organization equation, cutting across this arrangement of patrilineal local groups is another kinship grouping of considerable importance—a division of the population into un-named moieties which are referred to as 'sides.' Though these moieties may be best described as agnatically-related categories of alternate generation sets, kinship terminology and marriage regulations are such that they also group together as members of the same 'side' such key matrilineally-related kin as siblings, mothers and their children, mothers' brothers and their sisters' children, and mothers' mothers' brothers and their sisters' daughters' children. In other words, cutting across the localized agnatic groups are, as Layard long ago recognized (Layard 1942:97), *de facto* matrilineal moieties which though un-named nevertheless are of vital importance in the conduct of male rites—rites which, as we shall shortly see, focus on the seemingly difficult task of transforming mother-dependent boys into autonomous adult men.

In common with most other Melanesian societies with an overt social organization predicated on male agnatic co-residence, a clear line of demarcation separates adult men and women in a wide range of contexts—especially residence, eating, ritual, work, child-rearing, and even paths to walk on. Each walled household compound is divided into two courtyards, an inner, and an outer. The inner is where the husband has his house, accompanied at times by a young son of about six or seven years preparing for his first boar sacrifice, and where he may also have a high-grade tusker, too holy for his wife to attend, tethered in a pen near his house entrance. The outer house and courtyard is occupied by his wife together with her young

sons and unmarried daughters, and most likely a number of low-grade boars and perhaps a breeding sow.

I should stress here the long and intimate relationship that obtains between mothers and sons up to the age of six or seven—that is, up to the time when the boy kills his first boar and from henceforth eats and sleeps exclusively with his father or other male kinsmen. It does not seem too speculative to suggest that Vao boys must develop exceptionally strong emotional ties with their powerful mothers. Yet such ties, which also seem likely to result in the boys incorporating within their emerging identities a significant feminine component, must be formally severed at an early age in order to permit ultimately the emergence of an unambiguously male identity. This is clearly no easy task—and in fact requires massive and sustained ritual effort in the form of a lifetime commitment to tusked-boar sacrifice.

But to return to the domestic and commensal arrangements: husband and wife maintain separate fires in their respective houses. If the husband should eat at home his wife will cook for him, but she must do so on his fire in his house and he must then eat the food apart from her. After serving her husband the wife must then return to her own house where she prepares separate food on her own fire for herself and her household residents, including those pigs that are in her charge. In addition to these divided dwelling compounds with their separate fires there are communal men's clubs or lodges associated both with village quarters and double-villages. In the case of double-villages the club-houses are located beside the large ceremonial grounds on which men sacrifice tusked boars, perform initiation rites, stage spectacular dances, erect stone monuments as memorials of pig sacrifices, and exhibit pigs' tusks on long display racks. Within each lodge men of the same grade eat together at their own exclusive ovens.

I have no space here even to begin to outline the exceedingly complex and dramatic rituals performed at Vao grade-taking ceremonies—known here as *maki* rites. Suffice to note that the diacritical act is the same as that found throughout north Vanuatu—the slaughter of pigs on a sacred ground accompanied by the acquisition of titles, insignia and privileges, and succeeded by the

eating of sacred food cooked in a tabu oven located in the men's house.

As a man advances through the grades he becomes progressively 'holier,' that is to say, charged with a specifically male kind of ritual potency, until finally old men of very high rank are regarded as having attained a spiritual condition that locates them closer to the male ancestral spirits (*te-mat*) than to ordinary mortals. On Vao men become holy (*kon*) by performing rituals that centre on the sacrifice of tusked boars that are themselves *kon*. But male pigs are not by nature *kon*; it is only by the owner's performance of ritual acts and many years of intense emotional investment that the pig itself gradually becomes *kon*—first by tooth-evulsion and then by the development of tusk curvature. As the boar becomes increasingly *kon*, it is believed to acquire more and more soul stuff (*te-mats*), which is to say that it is becoming more and more like the male ancestral spirits. When the caretaker-owner finally kills his boar he himself acquires all of that animal's soul stuff—he is now highly *kon* and as such is deemed to be charged with a potentially dangerous magical or fantastical power. Thus, if others should come too close they must not only show respect by crouching or even crawling, but may also fear headaches, stomach trouble or even death. Hence the strictness of the rule that separates adult men and women.

On Vao, as throughout Malekula, the only pigs that can become *kon*, and hence also fit for sacrifice, are tusked boars. Though gelded pigs are also killed at *maki* ceremonies, they are not regarded as *kon*, and are only used for the purely secular purpose of feeding low-ranking onlookers. Sows, other than those few that are kept and valued for reproductive purposes, are of such low repute that they are neither sacrificed nor eaten. Should a sow by chance die it is either thrown whole into the sea, or cut up by young men to use as shark bait. But, as is evident by the refusal of the Small Islanders to eat sows, they are not just ordinary animals. On the contrary, they are the direct antithesis of tusked boars and as such have a potency, known as *hat*, which is also the direct antithesis of *kon*. Throughout Malekula and its offshore islands, *hat* is a kind of power that is primarily associated with things classed as female or feminine and is deemed especially dangerous for everything that is *kon*. But in

matrilineal Lombaha, though *hat* is again primarily associated with women or things female, as in menstrual blood and everything supposed to be contaminated by it, so too are sharks, sorcerers, faeces, cannibals, those guilty of incest and participants in male secret society rites. In both communities *kon* is unambiguously regarded as good or desirable, while *hat* is bad in the sense that its power is always dangerous and destructive.

The chief measure of a boar's sanctity is the degree and excellence of its tusk development and curvature. As a result of the early knocking out of the upper incisors the tusks, with nothing to bite against, continue their circular growth until they pierce the cheeks and re-enter the jawbone. A boar with fully developed circle-tusks is extremely *kon*, so much so that its owner would neither sell nor exchange it at any price. Very rarely the tusk may produce a second or even a third circle, by which time the animal must be at least thirty years old. The fortunate owner may expect those who wish to even look at such a sacred creature to pay him a good tusker.

These details clearly indicate the high level of identification that must surely have taken place between a man and his circle-tusker. For many years, decades even, he alone has tended, fed, comforted and cleaned the animal. From the day that the young boar first became *kon* by having its upper incisors knocked out it is, as Layard graphically recorded:

... for its owner, the object of a semi-religious respect; at all events he treats it as his equal. He feeds it with the remains of his meals and builds for it a small hut... When they are moved, these 'lord pigs' are treated with the greatest respect, never hit or insulted in any way. When they are at rest their movements are followed, their looks observed ... a meaning is found for their grunts and sighs. With what loving attention their wellbeing and comfort is cared for. (Layard 1942:259)

When the time comes for him to sacrifice his boar the owner's identification with the animal is made especially clear in the ritual action. An assistant lifts the boar up so that it stands like a human on its back legs, with its front legs on the shoulders of the man about to kill it. The latter suddenly steps back and kills the animal with a blow of a heavy club on its skull (Layard 1942:393 and 1955b:

23-4). Identification, whether at the conceptual or emotional level, is undoubtedly an exceedingly complex matter. Perhaps the greatest difficulty is in determining just what qualities or attributes of the dead boar the sacrificer believes he is identifying with. At the level of native exegesis the men assert that by killing these seemingly ultra-male boars, these tusked and uncastrated animals full of male ancestral soul-stuff, they themselves acquire that soul-stuff, which is to say, as Layard repeatedly stressed, that they become ever-increasingly psychically male. When Layard sought for a native explanation as to why they performed *maki*, one old man after long and intense cogitation, made the marvellously illuminating comment 'when at last we sacrifice our boars we must do something "strong", and the "strong" thing we do is not to eat with our women-folk' (Layard 1955:376). In other words, he clearly intended to convey to Layard a view of pig-killing as a means of transferring from the animal to the boy sufficient male ancestral power to enable him to do his 'strong thing'—to break with his powerful mother and sisters, and in so doing to begin the long and arduous task of ultimately acquiring an unambiguously male identity.

A few years later a further major step is taken at an initiation ceremony that centres on penile incision, the donning of an outside penis-wrapper, and the threat of buggery by male ancestral spirits represented by frighteningly disguised men (Layard 1942:495-528). But even after such a seemingly powerful rite, a rite which in many other Melanesian communities is alone deemed sufficient to turn boys into men, the Vao boy's identification with his father is still precarious, so much so that he must continue throughout his life to sacrifice tusked boars. It is, indeed, only at death that old men of high rank finally achieve their goal, and they do so in the symbolic form of full identification with their tusked boars. That this is so is particularly evident in those parts of south Malekula, where the men's club houses are full of realistic and life-size clay effigies of deceased club members. The bodies of these male ancestral figures (*rambaran*) are covered with boar insignia, most notably circle tusks. In addition, to quote Layard, 'boar's faces furnished with tusks are modelled on the shoulders; and all four joints, the elbows and the knees, have yet further boars' faces modelled on them' (Layard 1955:388).

Thus far, all the evidence would seem to indicate that we are here confronted with a clear example of men in a strongly patrilineal, patrivirilocal and patriarchal society performing a complex sacrificial rite with the aim of transforming mother-dependent boys into adults with unambiguously male identities. The tusked boars, as the key or dominant symbols, are imbued by the men with a specifically male kind of magical potency deemed capable of effecting the desired transformation.

But on closer inspection this neat and somewhat Freudian-cum-Durkheimian view begins to show serious weaknesses. First, the boar itself, though seemingly so unambiguously male, nevertheless is valued chiefly for having tusks that are not just abnormally large, but have been deliberately and painstakingly induced to depart from their naturally somewhat phallic shape in order to complete one or more perfect circles. Though I have no evidence that any north Malekulan consciously equates circle-tusks either with women or their reproductive organs, that such may be the case at either the pre-conscious or un-conscious level is given strong support from mythology. Layard (1949:234 ff and 1955:384) noted that in Malekulan mythology tusks, when they are detached from the slaughtered animal, are equated, according to degree of curvature, with the waxing and waning moon, which in turn is said to be a virginal mother figure. Furthermore, Ta-har, the creator god of light, supposedly engenders souls (*te-mats*) on the moon, which subsequently join children's bodies in the mother's womb (Layard 1942:173, 212). I should stress that it is precisely these mother-linked circle tusks that the Vao pig sacrificer especially identifies himself with, for it is they, not the body of the animal, that are believed to be imbued with the soul-stuff that he so much desires to appropriate for himself.

Layard (1955:384-87) also suggested that these same tusks when still attached to the live boar represent not the benevolent and child-producing virginal mother, but rather Lehevhev, the terrible female ghost who devours the soul bodies of recently deceased men who have failed to kill at least one tusker during their lives. By killing the boar the sacrificer thus simultaneously destroys or overcomes the destructive female component of his psyche and retains, in the form of the preserved tusks, the benevolent and reproductive. It

would therefore seem that in thus identifying himself with his tusked boar the sacrificer is as much concerned with the animal's partly concealed feminine character as he is with its overtly masculine. Such a view is further supported in that the first major ritual act performed on the future tusker is tooth evulsion. Though one might say that this act is a purely technical one in that it is the necessary means of inducing the desired tusk curvature, it should also be noted that throughout Malekula pubescent girls go through an initiation ceremony in which the key symbolic act is the knocking out of their upper incisors, an operation that is usually carried out either by the girl's mother or mother's brother (Deacon 1934:480-2). These superficially super-male tusked boars therefore take their first step towards ritual sanctity by undergoing a specifically female initiation rite. But even more importantly, the boar's male caretaker, the man who will ultimately kill it, might be said to act as the animal's mother through his contribution to its birth by controlled breeding, by tooth evulsion, and by many years of caring, tending and hand-feeding.

The bisexual paradox of both the man and his tusked boar is made especially clear in the assumption of titles that literally incorporate the word for mother by those few men of exceptional holiness who have killed double or triple-circle tuskers. Noting this most interesting fact Layard wrote as follows:

... internally, however, he has himself become the 'mother' too. In the end, and after many such successive sacrifices, he has the right to assume the title 'Lord Mother' or 'Mother of the Place'. He has become (theoretically and ritually) hermaphrodite, containing within himself all manner of perception, female as well as male. (Layard 1955:383)

In support of Layard's view of the internal or psychic hermaphroditism of the Vao high ranker I should remind the reader that ritualized male homosexuality is a major feature of north Malekula culture. On the mainland senior men enter into formalized homosexual relations with boys shortly prior to initiation. Such relationships, which centre on the transfer of semen from the older men to the younger, are deemed necessary to turn the quite exceptionally mother-attached youths into adult males. Though no

such homosexual relations occur in the context of Vao male initiation, the novices are nevertheless referred to by the initiators as 'wives,' and are threatened with buggery by male ancestral spirits frighteningly represented by the initiating men.

### **Lombaha<sup>7</sup>**

Let me turn now briefly to Lombaha district in north-east Ambae. Here, as elsewhere in east Ambae, the population is divided into a large number of named and exogamous matrilineal clans grouped into a pair of yet again named and exogamous matri-moieties. But because post-marital residence is predominantly and preferentially patrivirilocal, the male members of named localities constitute *de facto* agnatic lineages. Yet, in comparison to their counterparts on Vao such quasi-lineages are un-named, commonly include a number of male non-agnates, and are both less corporate and less cohesive in character. Indeed, throughout east Ambae there is a striking absence of nucleated and politically effective localized lineages of the kind found on Vao. Though homesteads tend to form small clusters, alliances between such clusters are constantly shifting, individuals frequently maintain two or more residences in different localities, and individual rights to property are more pronounced than in Vao or Malekula (Allen 1967:97-9). One may therefore say that while the female principle is given concrete cultural form in the highly articulated notion of matrilineal descent, the male principle is also made manifest, though in the somewhat less culturally elaborated form of preferential male agnatic co-residence. In other words, while on Vao the male principle is, in the context of social organization culturally articulate and the female made manifest only in a *de facto* manner, in Lombaha the relationship between the two principles is directly inverted.

<sup>7</sup> The data presented in this section is based on fieldwork carried out in various districts of Ambae, including Lombaha, in 1959 and 1961. For further ethnographic data see Codrington (1891) and Allen (1964). For a detailed account of the graded society in the nearby district of Longana see Rodman (1973). Blackwood (1981) provides a useful comparative analysis of the graded society in four north Vanuatu societies—Longana, Nduindui (west Ambae), Vao, and Seniang in south-west Malekula.

A similar pattern of gender inversion is also apparent in the context of supernatural beings. While on Vao both the creator deities and the ancestral spirits are exclusively male with the female principle made apparent only in the threatening figure of the guardian ghost, in Lombaha, though once again the creator deities are male, the benevolent ancestral spirits are mostly the female founders of the various clans, while the malevolent guardian spirit is, as noted earlier, male.

The contrast between the two communities is, however, most especially striking in their respective versions of the pig-killing ceremonial complex (Blackwood 1981:44-8, 63-5). Though the diacritical ritual act is the same—the ritual slaughter of pigs on a ceremonial ground, in Lombaha only one man kills the pigs, assumes the title and insignia and eats the sacred food, while on Vao half of the men of the locality, that is to say those who together constitute one of the *de facto* matrilineal moieties, enter the grade, with the men of the other moiety acting as sponsors. Furthermore, though the similar ritual acts in the two communities are performed for an ostensibly identical purpose—to acquire ritual powers deemed relevant both to political success and to achieving a desired goal after death—in Lombaha the political motivation seems pre-eminent, while in Vao the religious is given greater emphasis. The Lombaha version may therefore be described as more secular, competitive and individually focused than that on Vao. Indeed, I would go so far as to say that there is altogether less ritual and a correspondingly greater degree of predominantly secular ceremony in Lombaha. The Lombaha men kill pigs first and foremost as a political act in an open competitive market and only in a relatively minor way as a ritual act with magical power connotations. This is evident not only in the stress on the individual rather than on the group, but also in the preference for quantity rather than quality. Whereas on Vao a hundred men may each kill one high-grade boar on a single occasion, in Lombaha a single man may alone kill one hundred pigs, many of them of low grade. Other important indicators of the Lombaha secular bias include an emphasis on payments rather than on ritual propriety, on weak rather than strong tabus observed by participants, and on short rather long post-sacrifice periods of seclusion.

But perhaps the most striking contrast between these two versions of the pig-killing complex is that whereas on Malekula the female principle is given only very partial and negative expression in covert aspects of tusked-boar symbolism, in matrilineal Lombaha it is given more concrete and positive form in the inclusion of high-ranking grades in which the required sacrificial animals are tusked pigs that are literally hermaphroditic. These remarkable animals, which have varying combinations of both male and female sexual characteristics, are most highly prized when both are most fully developed, including the presence of tusks that have been induced, as with boars, to complete full circles. Though some hermaphrodites occur naturally in all pig populations, generally at the rate of about one in a thousand, Baker (1929:118), a biologist who studied the animals in the 1920s in north Santo, estimated that on that island they occurred at the rate of about twenty per hundred normal males. Such figures clearly indicate some considerable degree of controlled breeding. My Lombaha informants told me that certain kinds of sows were more likely to produce hermaphrodites than others, and that any sow that produced one was likely to produce yet more. In common with most matrilineal communities in north Vanuatu, the people of Lombaha value tusked hermaphrodites more highly than equivalent grade tusked boars, and use them as sacrificial animals for the highest-ranking grades. Furthermore, in reference to the tusked boars themselves, the Lombaha attach far less value to the degree and excellence of tusk curvature than do their Vao neighbours—a fact evident in that they never attempt to keep such boars beyond the stage of one full circle, and are indeed content to include among the ten animals commonly required for higher grades a number of skulls preserved from animals that had previously died of ill-health or misadventure. Such a cavalier approach would be unthinkable on Malekula, as would also the Lombaha readiness to sacrifice boars reared and offered for the occasion by men other than the sacrificer himself. In other words, the Lombaha men only rarely kill pigs that they have themselves raised, and hence presumably the identification between man and animal must be significantly less than on Vao. It is also worth noting that in west Ambae, though not in the east, sows are the prescribed sacrificial animals for the important *hakwa* grades (Allen 1972:273-7).

Finally, and most importantly, in Lombaha, as again throughout the matrilineal areas of north Vanuatu for which we have adequate information, there is little to indicate that adult men experience what Layard described for Vao as 'an inner psychic hermaphroditism.' This is strongly indicated not only by the absence of any explicit notion of male spiritual transformation through boar sacrifice, but also in the absence of any form of male homosexuality, of male initiation into manhood, of penis mutilation and the subsequent use of penis-wrappers, and of male ritual focusing on yams. Instead of the extreme sex separation found in Vao and Malekula, a separation that is begun at a young boy's first boar sacrifice and rigorously maintained for the rest of his life, Lombaha men retire to eat in the men's house only for short periods during and after pig-killing ceremonies. At all other times they sleep in the family dwelling and mostly eat food cooked by their wives at a common family oven. My informants specifically commented in a negative way on the arrogance and aloofness of the Malekulan male. As might perhaps be expected in such circumstances, the Lombaha men figure more prominently in the early lives of their children, and hence one must presume that there is less scope for their sons to develop exaggerated maternal attachments. Furthermore, such fathers share not only many of the child-nurturant tasks with their wives, but are also the chief source of early discipline for their sons—a factor no doubt of some relevance in the depiction of the threatening guardian ghost as male.

### **Summary and discussion**

Of the many contrasts that may be made between Lombaha and Vao gender constructs, perhaps the most striking is that whereas in Lombaha, where the female principle is dominant at the level of conscious articulation, adult men are nevertheless seemingly secure in their perception of themselves as male persons, in Vao, where the male principle assumes conscious dominance, adult men nevertheless remain, in Layard's terms, psychically hermaphrodite throughout their lives. Furthermore, on patrilineal Vao the female principle is not only of secondary status by reference to degree of conscious articulation, but is also evaluated by men in a negative manner as imbued with dangerous properties. This is evident not

only in the threatening figure of the female guardian ghost, but also in the negative evaluation of sows, women and all those 'female' things classed as *hat*, in the depiction of an individual's matrilineal kin as constituting 'the side of ill-omen,' and in the fear and pain experienced by boy novices at the hands of their male initiators, men who are related to them as members of their mothers' implicit patri-moiety. It is then apparent that Vao culture is characterized by two dominant features—on the one hand, an exceptional cultural elaboration of the male principle in the highly institutionalized contexts of descent, inheritance, succession, post-marital residence, tusked-boar sacrifice, male initiation focusing on the acquisition of specifically 'male' powers, the mythological importance of male creator deities and male ancestral spirits, and, on the other hand, a somewhat less articulate, though nevertheless equally pervasive cultural recognition of the female principle as primarily, though not exclusively, a source of dangerous or threatening transformative powers. Perhaps not surprisingly, the strongly patriarchal Vao men go to considerable lengths in order to appropriate such powers to themselves.

In seeking for some understanding of this somewhat paradoxical gender pattern I should stress that the Vao emphasis is on male perceptions and male cultural constructs—in other words, it is Vao men who so stridently attempt to spell out their masculinity in the face of their own continuing internal fascination with and fear of the female or maternal principle. Vao women, by contrast, are seemingly in no doubt about their own gender identity and do not participate in those exclusively male rituals that are concerned with matters of gender ambiguity. In view of this difference I think that there can be little doubt that a major factor in generating and sustaining male gender ambiguity must be the exceptionally long and substantially father-exclusive relationship that obtains between the Vao mother and her sons up to the age of eight or nine years. Such an arrangement must surely be conducive not only to the development of a strong maternal element in the boy's emerging perception of himself, but also account for the recurrent emphasis on the element of female threat and danger. Though Vao mothers are highly indulgent towards their sons in the early years, as the boys get older they increasingly experience their mothers' reprimands and

punitive actions, especially when junior siblings have appeared on the scene as competitors for the mothers' time and attention. Yet by adulthood the Vao male must have achieved a reasonably stable perception of himself as a specifically male kind of human being imbued with specifically male kinds of powers, skills and knowledge. In order to achieve such a goal it is clearly imperative that he succeeds in relegating the female component of his psyche to a less than fully conscious level of awareness or recognition—most probably so repressing the negative or threatening component that it is made manifest only in disguised form in mythology or dreams, while the more benevolent component may attain partial recognition at the conscious or preconscious level—as in the use of high-ranking titles of a maternal kind, in the use of the term 'wife' to refer to male initiators, and perhaps also in the presence of ritually important implicit matrilineal-moieties.

In matrilineal Lombaha, by contrast, young boys, though no doubt also strongly influenced by their nurturant and affectionate mothers, have from an early age also had the opportunity to be influenced by and to model themselves on far less remote and much more personally relevant fathers and other adult males. Though this single factor cannot in itself explain why these people have opted for matriliney as the dominant articulating principle of their social organization, it is nevertheless clearly in accord with such a possibility once it has been so articulated. It is, in fact, my guess, and it can never be more than that, that a particular combination of historical and environmental circumstances have combined in east Ambae to favour the development of extended social networks rather than solidary and closed local groups. Instead of, as on Vao, a high cultural premium placed on group closure and inter-group hostility, on male solidarity and on male aggressive capability, in Lombaha the corresponding values are on open social horizons, extended personal networks, dispersed descent categories, a high level of individual autonomy and personal choice, and on extroverted rather than introverted adult male personalities. Put in slightly different terms, one may say that whereas the Vao man kills tusked boars in the hope of overcoming his enduring gender ambiguity by adding yet more male 'soul-stuff', his Lombaha counterpart kills similar though less valued and less exclusively

male pigs in the more secular hope of building up his personal network of supporters and followers.

In Vao the female, or to be more precise, the maternal principle, looms so dangerously large in the developing consciousness of young boys that in order to enable the latter ultimately to attain a reasonably firm perception of themselves as efficacious adult males it is incumbent that no more than minimal recognition be accorded to the female principle in the cultural construction of reality. In Lombaha, by contrast, the maternal principle, though as in all human societies of major importance in the individual's psycho-social development, is nevertheless balanced at an early stage by the boy's experience of his father and other adult men as significant sources of nurture, knowledge and discipline. Under such circumstances there is, as it were, no necessity for men to stridently assert their manhood both positively in the contexts of ritual and warfare, and negatively by relegating the female principle beyond the level of fully conscious articulation in cultural form. Given ecological and environmental conditions such as might favour centrifugal rather than centripetal social tendencies, then the scene is assuredly set for the conscious elaboration of the female principle in the form of matrilineal descent constructs, the recognition of female ancestral spirits, and the ceremonial slaughter of pigs that are either wholly or in part female. In such societies adult men can seemingly attain a stable male identity without having first to purge the female principle from the cultural arena.

I might add as a final comment that in Lombaha, as again throughout all of the matrilineal areas of north Vanuatu, trade and ceremonial exchange had traditionally developed to a far greater extent than in Vao or in Malekula. Such a development was in turn closely associated with a corresponding cultural devaluation of warfare, cannibalism and headhunting, all of such activities being accorded an exceptionally high valuation throughout Malekula.

## **Conclusion**

Let me briefly consider the implications of the north Vanuatu data for our understanding of the male appropriative myths. I have suggested that one important pre-condition for the emergence of such myths is a sufficiently prolonged and exclusive relationship

between mother and son to ensure that the maturing boy incorporates within his psyche a well-developed maternal power image. But if this were the sole and exclusive cause of the myth then clearly Vao, and other societies of a similar kind, should possess it—which in fact they do not. I would now like to suggest that one important reason for the absence of the myth is that it not only associates male transformative power with women, but it also typically depicts male/female relations in competitive and even hostile terms. In other words, such myths not only say that women were once the custodians or possessors of the desired power, but that men had to resort either to violence or trickery in order to appropriate the power for their own purpose—which was primarily to exercise control over potentially recalcitrant women.

In Vao, despite the pervasive importance of the sex division in residence, labour, ritual participation, etc., there is little or no evidence of any significant hostility, antagonism or competition between adult men and women. On the contrary, Vao gender relations might be better described as holistic and co-operative rather than competitive and opposed. Though men perform rites from which women are excluded, there are no deceptions, penalties or other markers of strained and hostile relations. In so far as gender relations may be described as unequal, such inequality is of the encompassing and hierarchical rather than the opposed and stratified kind. I am here deliberately using terms derived from Dumont's (1966:235-58) contrast between what he termed the pure form of hierarchy found in the Hindu caste system, and the competitive form of social stratification found in Western class systems. The term encompassing is especially apposite insofar as Vao men are not just deemed superior to women, but attain that superiority by integrating within their psyches specifically feminine attributes and powers. By contrast, in those Papua New Guinea societies in which the male appropriative type myth occurs, gender relations conform much more closely to the competitive form of social inequality typical of class rather than caste relations.

Let me briefly illustrate one important dimension of this contrast. In both types of society pigs are, as indeed they are everywhere in Melanesia, highly valued both as food and exchange items. But whereas in most areas of Papua New Guinea (and I suspect most

especially in those highland areas where the 'matriarchal' myth occurs in its most developed form), it is the women who do most of the work in pig-breeding, comforting and feeding, in north Vanuatu it is the men who not only monopolize the important work of cultural transformation (i.e. castration, knocking out of upper incisors and hermaphrodite breeding), but also the feeding, cleaning and other daily care of high-grade tusked boars. One may therefore say that whereas in Papua New Guinea the men, after appropriating the pigs from their female caretakers, use them as exchange valuables in order to elevate themselves in secular hierarchies, in north Vanuatu the men, after themselves producing the most highly-valued pigs, sacrifice them in order to elevate themselves in predominantly ritual hierarchies—hierarchies defined, as we have seen, by reference to the ever-increasing incorporation within the men of specifically female-type powers.

To slightly rephrase the contrast—whereas in Vao men produce their most valued objects with only minimal dependence on female labour, in Papua New Guinea they are wholly dependent on their ability to appropriate the products of female labour—and this clearly applies to children as well as to pigs. The myths therefore provide a rationale not only for men's conceptualization of their transformative powers in female terms, but also for their political dependence on their ability to appropriate the valued products of female labour.

It would seem then that the reality to which the myths allude is neither some supposed past period when women ruled society, nor an extreme form of contemporary patriarchy for which they perform a legitimating function, but is rather a dual manifestation of contemporary female power as experienced by men in the domestic and public arenas of weakly-articulated patriarchal social orders. At the domestic level, women as mothers are experienced by their dependent children as true matriarchs—that is to say, their power within the domestic context is substantially unconstrained by external power sources. At the public level, though men seemingly exercise power and authority in most contexts, such power is nevertheless a shaky edifice built on male appropriation of the products of female labour. The myths then indicate an exploitative

element in gender relations, a feature which most clearly aligns them with class relations.

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