

## 5 Male Cults Revisited: The Politics of Blood versus Semen

IN 1957, as a fourth-year honours undergraduate at Sydney University, I carried out a library-based study of male initiations in Melanesia, the results of which were subsequently published in 1967 in a small book entitled *Male Cults and Secret Initiations in Melanesia*.<sup>1</sup> Though at that time I was unaware of Lévi-Strauss's (1969) comparative study of what he termed the 'elementary structures of kinship', I nevertheless developed an argument in which I contended that the most elaborate compulsory male initiations were consistently found in societies that Lévi-Strauss referred to as harmonic, that is to say, in societies in which the same unilineal principle, whether patrilineal or matrilineal, prevailed both in descent and in post-marital residence, as distinct from the disharmonic variety, where there was a disjunction between the descent and residence rules.

What I want to do here is to explore some major differences between male initiations that emerged from the flood of additional ethnography that has been published since my 1957 study. However,

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<sup>1</sup> In two subsequent publications (Allen 1984a and 1988, reprinted as Chapters 3 and 4 in this volume) I explored features of male initiations in north Vanuatu in greater detail.

unlike Lévi-Strauss, whom as we all know attributed so much of the minutiae of cultural variation to the wondrous workings of the deep structures of the human mind, I will instead seek to link ritual variations with differences in social system, most especially as regards marriage, gender relations, leadership, exchange and production. Whereas in 1957 I argued for a simple one to one correlation between 'harmonic' social systems and compulsory male rites of initiation, I would now like to argue for a series of more specific correlations that I believe to obtain between different kinds of male initiations and different kinds of socio-political systems.

### **Male initiation: blood-letting versus semen-ingestion**

When I first formulated my Lévi-Strauss type hypothesis I noted with some interest but little understanding that in a few areas of Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu what we now refer to rather ponderously as RHS, i.e. ritualized male homosexuality, occurred between initiators and initiates—the best recorded examples then being Wirz (1922-25), Haddon (1927, 1936), Landtmann (1917, 1927, 1954) and Williams (1936a, 1936b, 1939) on the Trans-Fly and neighbouring south coast regions of Papua New Guinea, and Deacon (1934), Layard (1942, 1955, 1959) and Guiart (1952, 1953) on north Malekula in Vanuatu. I did not, however, discuss the possible significance of this feature of the rites, partly because the extant reports were rather thin, though mainly because at that time I simply regarded the homosexual theme to be no more than a somewhat exotic and extreme form of the kind of macho-culture distinctive of all Melanesian male initiations. The possible significance of the fact that semen-transfer was of far greater importance in these cults than the usual stress on penis-or nose-bleeding failed to dawn on me.

But in the intervening years the picture has changed in important ways. We now know that RHS was by no means a rare or unusual feature in Melanesia—on the contrary, recent research has clearly established its importance in a number of different regions. Most notable amongst post-1950s reports have been Van Baal's classic work on the Marind-anim, evidence from which, in conjunction with the earlier work on the Trans-Fly, strongly suggested that RHS is, or was until fairly recently, widely practised in the south-coast region

of Papua New Guinea (Van Baal 1963, 1966, 1984). Indeed, a number of authors, most notably Herdt (1991, 1984), Feil (1987:Ch.7) and Lindenbaum (1984) have gone so far as to depict the whole south-coast region as characterized by widespread ritual homosexuality. However, Knauff (1993), in his recent and detailed comparative study, has quite rightly pointed out that though ritual homosexuality was indeed practised in at least four major communities (the Keraki of the Trans-Fly, the Kolopom, the Marind-anim and the Casuarina Asmat) it was absent in many others (for example, the Purari, Elema, most of the Asmat and probably the Kiwai).

Then, more recently, especially during the 1970s and 1980s, we have had a whole crop of reports from two additional Papuan regions—the great Papuan plateau, where we have Kelly (1976, 1977) on the Etoro, Schieffelin (1976, 1982) on the Kaluli, Sørum (1982, 1984) on the Bedamini, Wood (1982) on the Kamula, Ernst (1991) and brief references in Kelly (1976) on the Onabasulu and Knauff (1986, 1987) on the nearby Gebusi, and the eastern cordillera just south of the eastern Highlands proper where we have reports from Godelier (1986) on the Baruya, Mimica (1981) on the Ikwaye and most notably Herdt's numerous publications (Herdt 1981, 1982a, 1982b, 1984) on the Sambia. The following were some common features that were shared by all of these cults:

1. The homosexual relationship occurred predominantly and in many cases exclusively between senior initiator and junior initiate in the context of entry into the male cult. In all such cases the relationship was as compulsory or as stipulated as were the rites themselves and heterosexual marriage followed not long after the completion of initiation.

2. The transfer of semen, by whatever means, was regarded as indispensable for the growth of the initiates into mature adult males. Though overall physical growth and maturation was everywhere stressed, in some instances special emphasis was also placed on the growth of the initiate's penis. In such cases initiated men were required to conceal their penis heads in elaborate wrappers or gourds. There was also a widespread belief that it was only by thus ingesting the semen of senior males that the youths could acquire male reproductive capability.

3. There were three main methods whereby semen was transferred—the most common was by anal intercourse, but fellatio occurred amongst the Sambia, while masturbation in conjunction with rubbing the collected semen on the novices' bodies, occurred amongst the Etoro and Onabasulu. However, the aim appeared to be the same everywhere—to induce body growth and to develop specifically male attributes and characteristics.

The following were some of the more recurrent and striking features of societies with these RHS type male cults. Firstly, and most importantly, they all displayed some of the key features of what Lévi-Strauss regarded as the most elementary of elementary kinship systems. By that I mean that they were societies in which marriage was predominantly of the prescriptive variety with little or no bride-price and in which sister-exchange was also widely practised (Godelier 1982:271; Herdt 1984:70; Lindenbaum 1984:345; Weiner 1982:29 n.9; Bonnemère 1990:114). Secondly, and equally importantly, they were societies of a kind that I would describe as centripetal in orientation—that is to say, they were characterized by social relations that tended to turn inwards rather than outwards, to have had a high incidence of direct rather than generalized exchange and whose leaders were of a predominantly ascribed and conservative rather than achieved and risk-taking variety. A third important feature of RHS societies was that the men, though they conceived of themselves as the principal producers of all that they most highly valued—most notably the next generation of adult males, but also commonly including their most valued items of exchange, such as crops or pigs—were in fact reliant on a high degree of both female reproductive and female labour cooperation.

Other recurrent features included the sporadic and highly admired hunting by adult men of somewhat dangerous wild animals, especially cassowaries and/or wild boar, both of which were also likely to be regarded as sexually ambiguous; a high level of inter-community aggression with homicide commonly countered by homicide, rather than compensatory payment of valuables; institutionalized head-hunting, especially in the south-coast region; and finally, political systems that exhibited many of the features of those characterized by Godelier (1986, 1991) as of the 'great-man' variety.

I would now like to briefly contrast these RHS type initiations with the much more common type of male initiation that instead focused on blood-letting, sweating, vomiting, flagellating, etc. and which was found at its most elaborate in the eastern Highlands and Sepik river regions of Papua New Guinea and in such central Vanuatu islands as Malekula, the Small Islands, Ambrym and south Pentecost. In both ritual complexes the primary articulated aim of the ritual procedure was the same—the ritual transformation of previously mother-attached boys into strong and effective adult males. But whereas the blood-letting variety did so primarily in the negative form of getting rid of female components or substances that were acquired by the boys during their long female, and especially mother-dominated infancy and early childhood, the semen-ingesting rites instead stressed the positive acquisition of a seemingly specifically male form of potency—i.e. the ingesting of the semen of previously initiated males.<sup>2</sup>

Though the two processes were, in the great majority of male initiations, mutually exclusive features, both were present, though with differing emphases, in a few instances. Thus, in the eastern Highlands the Sambia (Herdt 1981:223-7) and Anga peoples (Herdt 1984:67) both practised nose-bleeding as cleansing rites in the preliminary stages of complex male initiations that culminated in ritual insemination. Amongst the Big Nambas of north Malekula in Vanuatu circum-incision was performed on boy initiates some time after they had entered into ritually prescribed homosexual relations with older men. The operation was performed as a means of exposing the glans-penis, the principal locus of male power or potency, and not as a means of releasing female polluting substances. So far as I am aware there are no recorded instances of purificatory penis-bleeding rites performed in societies where ritual homosexuality was a feature of male initiation.

The two initiatory syndromes, that is, the blood-letting and the semen-ingesting, had then the same ontological objective—the transformation, by ritual means, of previously mother-attached boys

<sup>2</sup> For an insightful discussion of the complex manner in which blood and semen symbolism intertwine in a variety of different ways in Melanesian cultures see Bonnemère 1990.

into strong adult alpha-males. Furthermore, in both initiatory syndromes the transformation was effected through the seemingly paradoxical procedure of feminizing the initiates (Dundes 1976). But, and this is the point I especially want to stress here, the feminizing process was achieved in quite distinct ways. In many of the blood-letting rites the boys were identified with women by equating, either explicitly or implicitly, penile incision and consequent loss of blood with women's menstruation, while the male initiators were identified with women as reproductive mothers through having made the novices rebirth as mature men possible. The frequency with which the mother's brother in particular and senior male matrilineal kin in general assumed the work of initiation in such rites highlights the identification of men as initiators with women as mothers. In the semen-ingesting rites, by contrast, the novices were identified with women as sexual partners through their passive intake of semen, while the male initiators were equated with breast-feeding nurturant mothers through their capacity to induce growth in their junior partners through the provision of semen. Herdt (1981:235) in particular reported for the Sambia that the men quite explicitly compared the oral consumption of semen from men's penes by novices with the drinking of breast milk by babies.

Such a major difference was, I would suggest, directly associated with parallel differences in male/female relations, which were themselves yet further linked to broader differences in politico-economic structure and process. In the blood-letting syndrome the power of women that the men seemed most concerned to appropriate focused on menstruation for the novices and childbirth for the initiators. Put in slightly different terms, the female roles that men here seemed to identify with were typically those of dangerous menstruating sexual partner and powerful reproductive mother. Just as menstrual blood was positively valued as leading to the formation of the foetus in the mother's womb, so too was it feared as a potent and dangerous substance when discharged during menses. Perhaps predictably enough, those Melanesian societies that had full-scale blood-letting type initiations were also those in which men took elaborate precautions to protect themselves from menstrual blood—generally more so than was the case in the RHS type set-up. The societies with blood-letting rites were also very commonly those in

which small co-resident groups of male agnates took their wives from outside, and often also hostile, communities—a feature that was itself commonly linked with the readiness with which men as husbands feared that their wives might kill them by witchcraft, sorcery or even poison. Furthermore, in such societies it was also usual to find that women were exchanged in marriage not for other women, a feature that we will shortly find associated with the RHS syndrome, but rather for pigs, mats or other valuable exchange items. However, it is also worth noting that though marriage was indeed then based on bride-price, the price paid was far less than was normally the case in those centrifugal societies with elaborate ceremonial exchange systems, no male initiations and full-blown big-man type leadership systems.

To summarize thus far. In the case of the blood-letting rites men seemingly sought both to appropriate to themselves the positively valued capacity of women to give birth to children and to protect themselves from women's negative ability to cause either death or destruction. Whilst the positively valued attributes of women infused much of the symbolism of cults that focused on the celebration of fertility and reproductivity, the negative destructive attributes found expression primarily in the proliferation of menstrual, copulatory and at times sorcery/witchcraft fears and tabus.

By contrast, in the semen-ingesting homosexual syndrome the properties of women that the men seemed concerned to appropriate focused rather on their capacities to receive semen in the act of sexual intercourse and to give milk in the nurturant context. Rather than seek to identify with dangerous menstrual wife and powerful reproductive mother, the men in these rites seemingly sought to identify with passive receptive wife and nurturant mother. However, despite a somewhat less threatening female image embodied in such a formulation, men in such societies had not entirely freed themselves from apprehensions regarding their womenfolk. The dark side in the RHS syndrome was perhaps most apparent in the propensity for men to develop doubts concerning their wives' willingness to continue indefinitely to provide them with desired goods and services, most notably in respect to food and reproductivity. For a particularly good account of the strength of

such apprehensions see Herdt's *Sambia* ethnography. According to Herdt (1981:198, 207) the *Sambia* men were especially fearful that their wives may secretly practice male infanticide. In *Malekula* the male fear took the form of a belief in a devouring female monster who consumes the souls of dead men who failed during their lives to keep their ancestors happy with the smell of sacrificed pigs (Layard 1942:219-20 and 1955:384-7).

Now, in seeking for clues as to what sort of factors might lead to such divergent views amongst men as to the properties of women that they seek to identify with and even to appropriate to themselves in the context of their exclusive and secret male cults, I turn to a consideration of, firstly, kinship and marriage, secondly, generalized features of social relations, thirdly aspects of politics and leadership and fourthly, gender relations.

### **Kinship and marriage**

A number of anthropologists, most notably Layard (1942:491, 1959:107-15), Herdt (1984:28-9, 70), Lindenbaum (1984:354-5), Feil (1987:178) and most recently Bonnemère (1990:114), have noted the frequency with which male cults of the semen-ingesting variety were associated with prescriptive marriage systems in general and with sister-exchange systems in particular. It is worth pondering on why this should be so. Layard (1942:491), who was by many decades the first to note this high correlation, argued that both phenomena constitute overt cultural manifestations of the strength of incest desire, especially between siblings, in such societies. Strongly influenced by psychoanalytic theory, especially that of the Jungian variety, Layard (1959) was convinced that kinship systems of the kind subsequently referred to by Lévi-Strauss as 'elementary' systems, that is to say, systems characterized by both prescriptive cross-cousin marriage and sister-exchange, were a direct product of the most elementary form of transcendence of incestuous desire through the imposition of the incest tabu. In such societies, so his argument goes, men, unconsciously desirous of sex with their mothers and sisters, resolved the conflict between private desire and the good of society by instead marrying their female cross-cousins—that is to say, instead of siblings marrying one another they married their offspring to one another. Furthermore, the

sublimation of the incest tabu was carried one step further by associating cross-cousin marriage with sister-exchange marriage. That is to say, a man doubly sublimated, or perhaps better, satisfied his sexual desire for his sister, by firstly giving her to another man in exchange for that man's sister and secondly by arranging that their respective offspring marry one another. Layard then went on to argue that there is a high correlation between such elementary systems of kinship and marriage and ritualized male homosexuality precisely because the repressed incest desire between siblings of opposite sex is of such strength, or, to put it slightly differently, so weakly repressed, that men, frustrated in their desire for their sisters, seek at least partial erotic satisfaction by establishing homosexual relations with men whom they call their sister's husbands. Hence yet again, because men, through observance of the incest tabu, were frustrated in their sexual desire for their sisters, instead instituted homosexual relations with those men who in fact do marry their sisters.

The psychoanalytic argument, based on supposedly unconscious desires and their sublimation in symbolic form, is, of course, highly speculative and controversial—and it is certainly not my intent to defend it here. What interests me in Layard's approach is rather that it directly addresses the most interesting fact that RHS is frequently found in societies with both prescriptive cross-cousin and sister-exchange marriage. Furthermore, it is also the case, as Layard long ago noted, that the homosexual couple frequently refer to one another as brothers-in-law.

### **Centrifugal versus centripetal social systems**

It is, however, yet another feature of elementary systems of kinship and marriage to which I now wish to draw attention, a feature that was most especially stressed by Lévi-Strauss. Though Lévi-Strauss (1969:12-51), like Layard, attached enormous importance to the incest tabu, it was not so much by reference to its supposed contribution to the development or maturation of the individual psyche, but rather as laying the foundations for the development of complex forms of social life that had the capacity to transcend the narrow or constrained world of kinship. In other words, as the incest tabu becomes increasingly comprehensive and

removed from its initial and narrowly defined familial moorings to apply to ever more remote relatives, so too do all forms of sociality become increasingly complex and removed from the closed world of personal kinship values and inter-relatedness. For Lévi-Strauss then, elementary kinship systems were first and foremost those systems in which the selection of spouses was determined solely in accordance with social values that were deeply rooted in the idiom of kinship and marriage, and only in a secondary way, if at all, influenced by such supra-kinship considerations as rank, wealth, status or economic productivity, etc. Since the most elementary of all such systems were, as we have seen, those in which the incest taboo was extremely narrowly defined, with the preferred or prescribed form of marriage taking the form of sister-exchange combined with cross-cousin marriage, it is evident that such social systems were not only deeply rooted in the domain of kinship, but were also characterized by a high degree of social closure or boundedness. They were systems that by definition tended to turn in on themselves rather than to proliferate social relations outward—they were systems that sought to reproduce themselves by replication rather than by addition and transformation. In short, there were good grounds for characterizing such systems as inherently conservative in outlook. In those small-scale societies in which all or most social relations were coterminous with relations of kinship and affinity, there was a correspondingly strong tendency for the circles to turn in upon themselves and in so doing to seek continuity and replication. In other words, such systems displayed what I would describe as strongly centripetal characteristics.

Now, let me remind you of my starting point—that in pre-historic Melanesia there was a strikingly high correlation between, on the one hand, male cults of the semen-ingesting variety, and on the other hand, centripetal type social systems with both sister-exchange and cross-cousin marriage. I should also remind you that it was in cults of this type that men seemingly sought to identify with and appropriate to themselves firstly, a form of female sexuality that was both passive and cooperative, and, secondly, a form of mothering that was both caring and nurturing. It was, I would suggest, precisely because marriage was so conservatively circumscribed by narrowly defined rules of a prescriptive kind that men sought to

reproduce themselves by the transfer of their own semen—in the first instance to women who were also their cross-cousins, and in the second instance to their passive homosexual partners, men who were also either their real or classificatory sister's husbands. In such contexts men then sought to identify with women who, though not their sisters, were nevertheless like them. I would also suggest that in such cults the central importance accorded to the transfer of semen, both between spouses and between homosexual couples, was itself a direct manifestation of the elementary systems of kinship and marriage within which they were embedded. By this I mean simply that the high cultural evaluation given to semen as an especially potent substance, both in generating growth and in contributing to human reproduction, was a functional correlate of centripetal type social systems that were predicated on prescriptive marriage between cross-cousins. In such cults men, both in marriage and in their homosexual relations, sought to reproduce social life in a highly incestuous and androcentric manner. Men passed their semen on to passive women who in turn had the capacity to facilitate the growth and subsequent birth of the next generation of men, and then some years later the men yet again contributed to social reproduction by a further transfer of their magical and potent semen—this time by transforming previously mother-attached boys into adult men.

I am therefore suggesting that there was direct homology between, on the one hand, elementary kinship systems based on sister-exchange, and on the other hand, systems of social reproduction in which men both created babies by depositing their semen in cooperative women, and then transformed the resultant male progeny into macho adult males by means of yet further transfers of the magical semen. Or, to put it in slightly different terms, we are here dealing with social systems of a centripetal kind in which social reproduction was of a deeply conservative kind based on the notion that men, through their semen, could continuously reproduce themselves. By marrying their female cross-cousins the men sought security and replicative social reproduction—for cross-cousins were but one step removed from a wholly incestuous form of social reproduction. I do not think then that it is any accident that it is precisely in such centripetal social

systems that we also find a procreative theory that focused on the potency of male semen with women simply recognized as passive receptacles. Thus, instead of gratifying his incestuous desire by marrying his sister a man did the next best thing by first entering into a homosexual relationship with another man whom he refers to as his 'sister's husband', and then a short while later by marrying his female cross-cousin.

### **Conservative versus risk-taking type leaders**

But there is more at stake here than a simple correlation between male cult and elementary kinship structure. I previously noted that RHS type cults commonly occurred in societies in which male leaders were of the ascribed variety, usually the elders of small agnatic lineages though in some cases meriting Godelier's somewhat more grandiloquent designation as 'great men'. The common factor linking elders and great men is that both were inherently conservative leaders who attained such positions as a consequence of their claimed superior ontology. Such superiority was usually based on age plus genealogical seniority, though in some cases supplemented by successful progression through a series of ritual transformations. Thus, once again we are confronted by a marked preference for security, closure and prescription—rather than risk, openness and acquired attributes.

Such leaders differ markedly, as was perceptively noted and elaborated on by Godelier (1991), from the classic Melanesian 'big-man' type leader—that is to say, leaders of a highly entrepreneurial kind who typically build up their following through their success in one or a number of competitive and risky contexts. There was a period in Melanesian anthropology when virtually all leaders, though in varying degree, were deemed to be of the 'big-man' variety. Even those who in some respects qualified for an alternative designation, such as 'chief' or 'elder', were often said to share many of the diagnostic features of the ubiquitous 'big man'. But such ubiquity is no longer tenable—numerous commentators (Allen 1984b and Chapter 1, this volume, Chowning 1979, Douglas 1979, Feil 1987:92-102, Godelier 1991, Godelier and Strathern 1991 and Lindstrom 1981, 1984) have highlighted the frequency with which Melanesian leaders display features that do not conform to the 'big-

man' stereotype. On the contrary, true 'big-man' style leadership is today generally deemed to be found only in those Melanesian societies that occupy an extreme end of a continuum the other end of which is occupied by those societies I have characterized as centripetal and conservative, and which also commonly have both elementary kinship systems and RHS type male cults. By contrast, leaders of the big-man variety are most commonly found in centrifugal type social systems in which social relations typically proliferate outwards, the polity is expansive and aggressive, and there were but rarely any kind of male cults or initiations into manhood.

As might be expected from the general drift of my argument, compulsory male cults that had as their centrepiece one or a number of blood-letting rites were typically found in societies in which leadership was intermediary between full-blown big-manship and full-blown great-manship. In such societies most male leaders were likely to be fairly senior members of corporate kin groups, though some of them may also have succeeded, through their competitive superiority in various entrepreneurial-type activities, in at least partially transcending the limits or constraints embodied in the world of kinship, descent and marriage. However, by contrast with the centripetal type exchanges typically found in big-man type polities, competitive gift-giving was here most likely to be confined to direct exchanges within pre-defined limits, such as between linked lineages, village sections or localized phratries. The effect, of course, was to substantially reduce risk.

But, by contrast with the ultra-conservative centrifugal type social systems, instead of sister-exchange and cross-cousin marriage we typically find lineage and/or local exogamy in conjunction with low bride-price. That is to say, men gave women to other men in marriage in return not for the gift of such men's sisters as brides, but rather in exchange for pigs, mats, shells, money or other form of bride-price (the scale of such bride-price prestations was, however, generally less than in most full-blown big-man type polities). Men, in addition to valuing women as the producers of the next generation of male agnates, were also very much dependant on women's labour to enable them to compete successfully in gift-exchange systems. In such contexts, the negative act of blood-expulsion rather than the

positive intake of semen was the key symbol in cults that celebrated masculinity and male ritual potency.

A further and related feature of such social systems was the substantial elaboration outwards of the idiom of agnatic descent so that we now typically find substantial, solidary and exogamous agnatic lineages of the segmentary variety. Hence, by contrast with the RHS marriage set-up, where men preferentially married female cross-cousins who often resided in the same village and certainly not very far away, we now find lineage/village exogamy with men typically marrying previously unrelated women who were brought in from outside and often hostile communities. Instead of the closure inherent in the RHS type marital arrangements, in these blood-letting communities we had rather a substantial opening up of social horizons. Furthermore, men now relied, both in reproductive and in productive terms, on the cooperation of previously unrelated women from strange and often hostile communities. It is then no surprise that though men yet again sought to appropriate to themselves desirable female attributes, such attributes were neither exclusively those of a procreative/nurturant kind, as they were in the semen-ingesting rites, nor of a predominantly productive kind, as they were in the big-man type ceremonial exchange set-up, but were rather a combination of the two. Furthermore, whereas in the semen-ingesting cults men sought to appropriate to themselves both the erotic and the nurturant aspects of female sexuality and procreativity, in the blood-letting rites men sought rather to appropriate to themselves both the generative and destructive components of female reproductivity.

## **Conclusion**

I would like to conclude with a few reflections on the kind of correlations that I am here proposing—most especially to consider whether in seeking to understand why one male cult stressed blood-letting whereas another stressed semen-transfer, priority should be accorded to one set of factors rather than another. I have in fact linked these cult differences to three different sets of variables—in the first instance to matters pertaining to kinship and marriage, in the second to generalized qualities of social relations (centripetal versus centrifugal), and in the third to features of leadership and

polity. In my opinion, an additional and crucially important factor that underlies all three is the nature of male dependency on female cooperation in maintaining strongly patriarchal political systems.

I have already endorsed the broad validity of Godelier's contrast between big-men and great-men type political systems, and indeed used it as the basis of my own correlation between, on the one hand, the semen-ingesting rites and great-men type polities and on the other hand, the blood-letting rites and polities intermediary between the big-man and great-man polar types. I would now like to endorse both Feil's (1987) and Godelier's (1982 and 1986) additional and Marxist-inspired hypothesis in which they associated these two kinds of Melanesian polity with further differences in their economies. In brief, they contended that whereas the economies of the great-man type polities were predominantly of the low-intensity and home-production variety, the big-man type economies were rather oriented to high-intensity and production for exchange. For my purposes the crucial importance of this distinction is that throughout Melanesia production for exchange was firmly predicated on the ability of men, as the principal exchange transactors, to persuade women to produce the necessary surplus wealth in the form of pigs, mats, garden produce or whatever. Hence, in such societies men were not only dependant on women for the production and nurturance of the next generation of male agnates, but they were even more dependant on their economic productivity (Godelier 1986 and Feil 1987:180-232). By contrast, in societies with economies of the home-production variety the dependency of men on female cooperation focused predominantly on reproductivity with a correspondingly strong emphasis on male productive autonomy (Jorgensen 1991:256-71). It was this difference that over and above all other differences most directly accounted for the choice of either blood-letting or semen-ingesting.

Let me briefly explain. When discussing the blood-letting rites I stressed the prominence accorded to the negative and destructive potencies of women in the context of both their reproductive and productive work. In such societies men seemingly had a very real and substantial fear of these negative powers of women. Furthermore, we now know from numerous ethnographies that women could in fact use this male fear to considerable advantage in

their dealings with their husbands and male kinsmen. In other words, I see a direct connection between the extension of men's dependency on women's collaboration from reproduction to production in the increased ritual potency attached to the letting of blood, especially when it is made to flow from the same organ that in other contexts ejaculates semen.

By contrast, in the semen-ingesting scenario what men most feared in connection with their women was that they might sabotage the reproductive rather than the productive process—that rather than jack-up on garden work or refuse to feed the pigs they might instead abort or kill infants, fail to feed them adequately, or through prolonged nurture render them unfit for the life of an effective adult male. In other words, what men then attempted to do in their cults was to minimize the importance of women's contribution to the perilous worlds of reproductivity and child nurture, and they did so by building the cults up around the wondrous notion that men were in fact the chief reproducers and nurturers of male children—hence the centrality of semen as the chief symbol of male reproductive potency.

As a final reflection, it is worth noting that cross-cultural comparative analyses of the kind that I have here undertaken are always perilous undertakings, for they inevitably invite criticism that their execution is dependent on (a), over-simplification of complex data, (b), typological categorizations that suggest a synchronic view of data that is in fact inherently processual and transformative, (c), an over-reliance on either causal or functional explanations of the various correlations put forward, with a corresponding under-evaluation of human agency as a determining force in social life, and (d), a propensity to invoke essentialist type explanations of both cultural difference and cultural similarity.

Over-simplification is, of course, a danger in all forms of analysis, though there can be little doubt that it took an extreme form in those early attempts at cross-cultural comparison that relied on excessive quantification and statistical analysis, as, for example, in Murdock's development and utilization of the Human Relations Area Files. The extent to which over-simplification continues to be a problem is in large measure a function of the scale and diversity of data dealt with—thus in applying the method to the study of

initiation rites the problem is compounded the greater the variety of types of initiation looked at, and even more so the range of social systems in which the rites occur. In other words, the greater the reduction in the variables dealt with the less the danger of oversimplification. Clearly, a study that focuses on Melanesia is less prone to this danger than a larger sample would be, though more so than one that restricted itself to a region within Melanesia, as for example, in Knauft's (1993) excellent comparative study of south-coast New Guinea cultures.

A fairly narrow regional focus also enables the analyst to minimize the danger of over-objectifying complex socio-cultural data in neat typological categories, very often presented as binary pairs, such as big-man/great-man, low intensity/high intensity, or, in my case, semen-ingestion/blood-letting, centripetal/centrifugal, conservative leader/entrepreneurial leader. The danger in the use of such categories is to mistake analytical model for ethnographic fact, and that danger again greatly compounds the greater the diversity of data analysed. By employing such ideal type models I do not wish to deny either the complexity of ethnographic data or its embodiment in historical process. Beyond doubt, Melanesian initiation rites are the product of a long history of human agency resulting in constant transformation, innovation and invention. However, it is my firm conviction that the distribution of the rites at any given moment, including major differences between them (such as an emphasis on blood-letting as against semen-ingestion), though at one level the outcome of contingent human choice in historic context, is at another level explicable by reference to the kind of socio-cultural variables discussed in this paper. In other words, the contingency of historically-embedded human agency is constrained by pre-existing social context, perhaps most especially in its politico-economic dimensions. The task for anthropology is to develop a theoretical paradigm that may enable us to integrate a dynamic and processual perspective on culture with a comparative method that has the potential to comprehend both similarities and differences.

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