a historical reconsideration of female dominance among the Chambri of Papua New Guinea

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During 1974–75 I did fieldwork among the Chambri (Tchambuli) people of Papua New Guinea's East Sepik Province (see Figure 1). I was interested at the time in trade and exchange and chose to work among the Chambri because they had been traditional purveyors of stone tools and mosquito bags[1] and were important participants in an extensive system of fish-for-sago barter. I was also aware that (in the literature of women's studies) Chambri women had achieved the status of icons because of their significant and dominant roles within their villages (Mead 1963:237–309). During my fieldwork, however, I became convinced that to study any organized modes of human interaction—including intersexual relations—we must abandon the ontological concept of role and adopt a more systemic approach. By this I specifically mean that patterns of male-female relations may be transformed, or constrained, by various other mutually influencing variables. Thus, instead of labeling Chambri women as dominant, or submissive, we must study their interactions within a variety of sociocultural contexts and perhaps discover an underlying pattern of relationships that persists through time and in a range of social situations. I suggest that to ignore the variety of contexts in a historical framework is to prevent an adequate interpretation of sexual meanings in Chambri culture. My focus is the sociohistorical referents of a transformation that occurred in intersexual relations between the time Mead studied the Chambri in 1933 and my own field research there. I argue that certain historical events—specifically the nearly 20-year exile of the Chambri in the Sepik Hills—created contradictions within the socioeconomic system which were resolved through a temporary decrease in inter-male competition.

My focus is the sociohistorical referents of a transformation that occurred in intersexual relations between the time the late Margaret Mead studied the Chambri (Tchambuli) in 1933 and my own field research there. The Tchambuli people of Papua New Guinea are famous in the literature of women's studies because Mead describes them as having significant and dominant roles within their villages. During my fieldwork with the Chambri, I decided to eschew the ontological concept of role and adopt a more systemic approach. Instead of labeling Chambri women as dominant, or submissive, I seek an underlying pattern of relationships that persists through time in a range of social situations.

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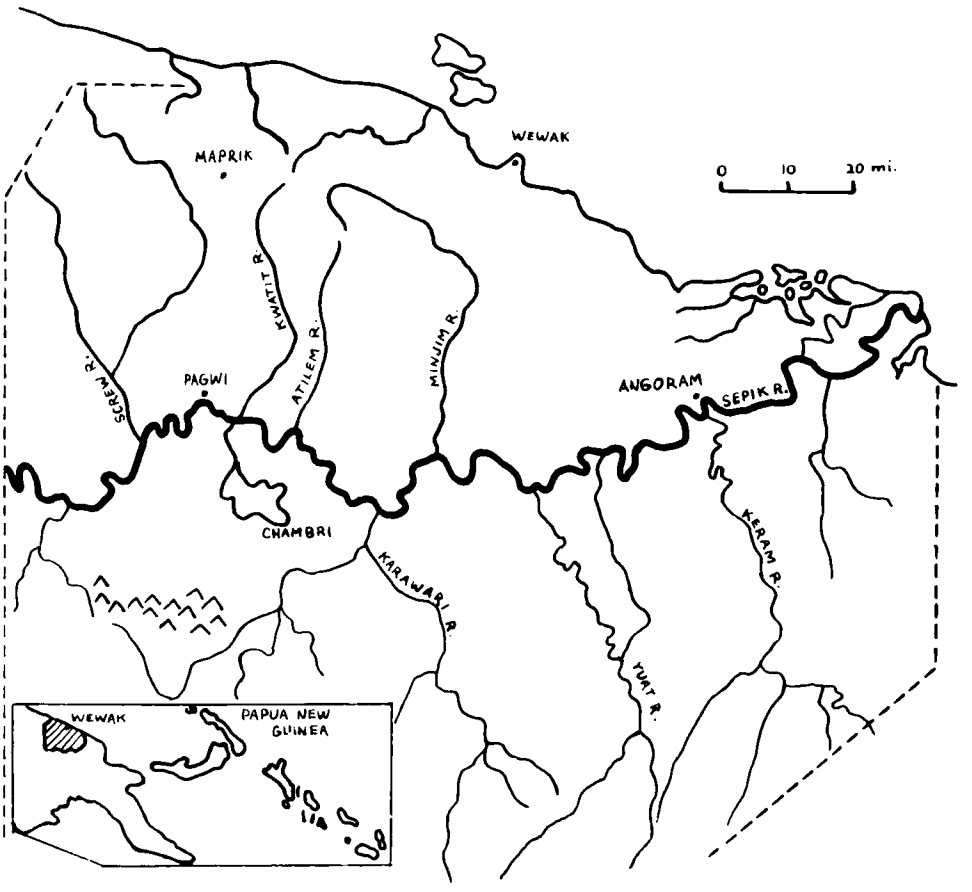

Fig. 1. The East Sepik Province.

the Chambri

The Chambri people numbered approximately 1,300 in 1974. They live on an island-mountain about 152 m. in height. Their three villages, Indingai, Kilimbit, and Wombun, are located at the base of Chambri Mountain, south of the Sepik River, in the middle of Chambri Lake.

The three villages contain 34 exogamous, patrivirilocal clans, which are landowning, residential, and ceremonial groups. The men of each clan build contiguous women's houses and generally reside in one spirit house. They assume the bride-price and affinal debts incurred by a comember and together receive the affinal prestations owed the clan.

The Chambri are linguistically related to the Murik Lakes people on the coast, but have long resided in the Middle Sepik area. They are neighbors to the Iatmul, whom Bateson (1958) describes in *Naven,* and have adopted many aspects of Iatmul culture. Both peoples are sedentary hunters and gatherers whose chief means of support is fishing.

The ecological heterogeneity of the Middle Sepik area has stimulated a system of marketing in which villages exchange local products. Throughout the area horticulture is unimportant. The Sawos, Sepik Hills, and Yerkai speakers process sago from their natural reserves, and they supplement the pigs, bandicoots, and cassowaries they kill with fish acquired from Sepik River and Chambri Lake villages (see Figure 2). The Iatmul and Chambri,

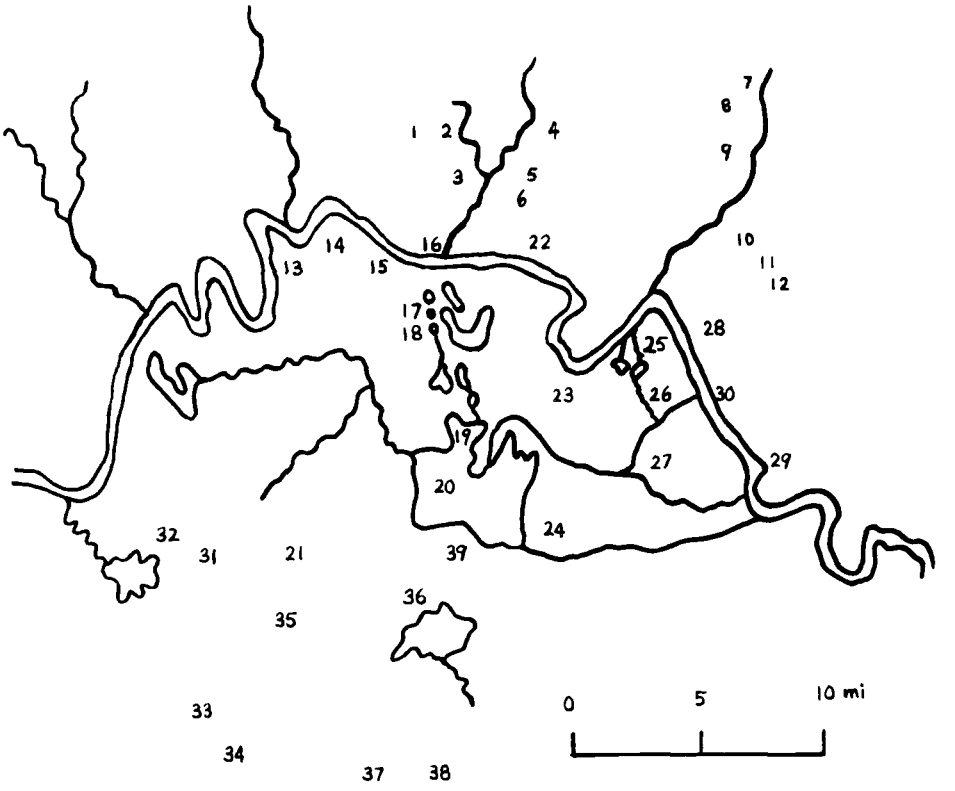

Fig. 2. The languages spoken at particular villages in the Middle Sepik: Sawos 1) Wereman, 2) Yangit, 3) Batbi, 4) Nemangwi, 5) Torembi, 6) Slei, 7) Makanbu, 8) Pangeambit, 9) Yakap, 10) Marap, 11) Nogosop, 12) Gaikerobi. Iatmul (Nyaula dialect) 13) Japandai, 14) Yamanumbu, 15) Japanaut, 16) Yentchamangua, 17) Nyaurengai, 18) Kandingai, 19) Luk Luk, 20) Arinjone, 21) Timbunmeri, 22) Korogo. Iatmul (Parambei dialect) 23) Suapmeri, 24) Aibom, 25) Indabu, 26) Parambei, 27) Malingai, 28) Yentchan, 29) Tegowi, 30) Kanganaman. Yerakai 31) Garamambu, 32) Yerakai. Sepik Hills (Mali dialect) 33) Milae, 34) Mali, 35) Kurapio. Sepik Hills (Bisis dialect) 36) Peliagwi, 37) Changriman, 38) Mensuat. Chambri 39) Chambri: Indingai, Kilimbit, and Wombun.

on the other hand, trade fish with the bush dwellers for sago. In these villages the women do the fishing, retain control of the catch, and are solely responsible for the marketing. Both women and men plant gardens during the dry season, but the immature crops are frequently destroyed by the rising waters of the lake and river. The yams, taro, sweet potatoes, and pumpkin that are harvested are enjoyed, but the people consider them superfluous to the basic diet of fish and sago.

Chambri women have received prominence in women's studies primarily because of their reported "dominance" of their men. Mead's (1963) description of male-female relations among the Chambri, upon which this simplification is based, suggests greater complexity, however, and I quote from *Sex and Temperament* to establish this.

> For although Tchambuli is patrilineal in organization, although there is polygyny and a man pays for his wife—two institutions that have been popularly supposed to degrade women—it is the women in Tchambuli who have the real position and power in the society (1963:253).

> For food, the people depend upon the fishing of women. Men never fish unless a sudden school of fish appears in the lake, when they may leap in canoes in a frolicsome spirit and spear a few fish. . . . But the real business of fishing is controlled entirely by women. For traded fish they obtain sago, taro and areca nut (1963:254).

> The whole emphasis [within Tchambuli women's houses] is upon comradeship, efficient, happy work enlivened by continuous brisk banter and chatter. But, in a group of men, there is always strain, watchfulness, a catty remark here, a double entendre there . . . (1963:252–253).

> But the actual dominance of women is far more real than the structural position of men, and the majority of Tchambuli young men adjust themselves to it, become accustomed to wait upon the words and desires of women (1963:271).

In these passages Mead describes four different aspects of the concept of dominance. In the first she discusses its formal aspect and correctly suggests that the Chambri vest authority in their males through their patrilineal social system and their male-centered values (see Sternberger's (1968) discussion of legitimacy; Weber's (1957) analysis of *Herrschaft;* and Dahrendorf's (1968) distinction between legitimate and illegitimate power).

Clearly, Mead feels this formal aspect to be irrelevant to an understanding of Chambri sexual meanings, and she places far more emphasis upon the second aspect of the dominance concept, the division of labor she describes in the second passage (e.g., Durkheim 1934). Here she states that Chambri women are the sole economic producers within their society, thus implying that men, cross-culturally, are not invariably in control of the means of production.

The third aspect of the dominance concept, found in the third passage, concerns behavioral style (e.g., Benedict 1934). Chambri women appear to have been more self-assured and less self-conscious than were their men. Nevertheless, a self-assured demeanor does not necessarily indicate the possession of actual political power—the capacity to command the behavior of others (see Weber's (1957) analysis of *Macht* and Dahl's (1968) discussion of power). Chambri women have no share in this fourth aspect of dominance, for while they have always controlled the means of production—the fishing and marketing that Mead discusses—they do not control the products of their own labor and have had little access to the political arena in which their products are used to enhance the status and power of their husbands and fathers.

Moreover, the Chambri women I observed were not aggressive toward their men. Their behavior with regard to males resembled the behavior of Iatmul women whom Bateson (1958) describes in *Naven.* Simply put, Bateson's work among the Iatmul led him to characterize their male-female relations as complementary, with men acting aggressively and thus stimulating[2] their women to reply submissively. He characterized inter-male relations, on the other hand, as symmetrical because they involved competition, rivalry, and the like. Bateson emphasizes inter-systemic rather than interpersonal relations. He recognizes a regularity in male-female interactions, but denies that this regularity is invariable.

> Thus, in our study of the women's ethos, we find a double emphasis. For the most part, the women exhibit a system of emotional attitudes which contrasts sharply with that of the men. While the latter behave almost consistently as though life were a splendid theatrical performance—almost a melodrama—with themselves in the centre of the stage, the women behave most of the time as though life were a cheerful cooperative routine in which the occupations of food-getting and child-rearing are enlivened by the dramatic and exciting activities of the men. *But this jolly co-operative attitude is not consistently adopted in all contexts, and . . . women occasionally adopt something approaching the male ethos* . . . (Bateson 1958:148; emphasis added).

It appears, then, that women, within certain contexts, may act as men. This statement has significant conceptual and methodological implications, for it contradicts the notion that people are enculturated to perform strictly defined and unchanging sexual roles. Bateson's findings suggest that people learn culturally determined interactional patterns that are relevant within certain contexts. He describes two such interactional patterns—symmetry and complementarity—which appear to structure the behavior of many Middle Sepik peoples (Forge 1972; Gewertz 1977c, 1978).

> A relationship between two individuals (or two groups) is said to be symmetrical if each responds

to the other with the same kind of behaviour, e.g., if each meets the other with assertiveness (Bateson 1958:311).

A relationship between two individuals (or two groups) is said to be chiefly complementary if most of the behaviour of one individual is culturally regarded as of one sort (e.g., assertive) while most of the behaviour of the other, when he replies, is culturally regarded as of a sort complementary to this (e.g., submissive) (Bateson 1958:308).

It can be argued that the interactional patterns together comprise a system which is of a higher logical type than the contexts within which the patterns are expressed. I shall argue that the system of interactional patterns learned by the Chambri has remained unchanged between 1850 (perhaps earlier) and 1974, and that the relative "dominance" ascribed to Chambri women in 1933 was a historical adjustment of variables to maintain the parameters of the larger cultural system. Before I can proceed, however, I must describe certain of the social contexts in which these interactional patterns are relevant. These are inter-clan competition, affinal transactions, and subsistence transactions.

Inter-clan competition and affinal transactions

All Chambri clans are potentially politically equal, except those which are currently linked by marriage.

In egalitarian New Guinea society it is only the men who are equal in the sense of at least potentially the same or identical. Women are different . . . the differences are those of complementarity. . . . From the point of view of the equal men, women are a source of inequality . . . an inequality not between men and women where the equal/unequal distinction has no meaning but the source of inequality between men. Basically men related to each other through women cannot be equal to each other and they cannot therefore carry on equal exchange (Forge 1972:536).

Although ethnographers of the Papua New Guinea Highlands have reported that marriage ties are often used as the foundations for equal exchange (see A. Strathern 1971:156–157), the situation is more complicated among the Chambri where clans and their leaders indirectly compete with other clans and their leaders through their separate affinal prestations. The symmetrical exchange of comparable items rarely occurs among Chambri. When it does, the size of the gifts does little to increase the prestige of their donors, for return gifts must never exceed initiatory gifts. Prestige for both the clan and its leader is achieved primarily through a leader's ability to pay his affines (i.e., his wife's kin) large bride-prices, to overcompensate his brothers-in-law for their contribution of foodstuffs during rites of passage celebrated for his sons.[3] His sisters' husbands, in turn, attempt to match the affinal payments he has made to his wife's brothers, and so the system ramifies, each clan indirectly competing with all others.[4]

Enterprising Big Men achieve status and power on behalf of their patriclans by assisting unrelated clans to meet their affinal debts. When an individual and his clan comembers cannot amass sufficient valuables to compensate their wife-givers, they will seek assistance from an unrelated clan. The unrelated clan, by giving assistance, gains power over its clients; thus status differentials are established and maintained (see Gewertz 1977b).

Frequently, particularly during initiation ceremonies when several sisters' sons from unrelated clans are scarified together, fathers, brothers, and unrelated patrons display their affinal reimbursements side by side. Australian currency was the appropriate form of repayment when I was in the field. Fathers and brothers made "money trees" by individually attaching low-denomination bills, often numbering in the hundreds, to small sticks which were then thrust into the fibrous spine of a sago palm frond. The money trees occupied a spot close to the spirit house in which the scarification was taking place, and interested

bystanders could assess the relative "strengths" of the participant clans by counting the number of branches on each tree. Marriage, therefore, not only initiates a relationship of unequal exchange but also provides the field on which the game of prestige is played out.

I diagram the relationships described thus far:

1. Men = Men
2. Men > Women
3. Men via women ≠ Men.

Relationship 3 indicates that appropriate behavior is contextually determined. Men do not interact symmetrically within the affinal relationship, for wife-givers hold an axiomatic authority over their brothers-in-law. The formal dominance of wife-givers is institutionalized in asymmetrical affinal exchange and can only be altered through the breaking of marriage ties. This is not to imply that powerful men are controlled by their wives' brothers. The power of village leaders is irrelevant within the affinal relationship, for village organization incorporates a variety of affinal relationships. Wives' brothers will always receive valuables from their sisters' husbands in return for the foodstuffs they have provided, regardless of the power and status of their sisters' husbands. And powerful sisters' husbands will always avoid asserting their prowess when interacting with their wives' brothers. Affines do not compete because they are already involved in formal relations of dominance and submission, and it is the stability of affinal inequality that makes the affinal exchange relationship the perfect, nonrepercussive arena for extravagant display. I will return to this point later, but now it is necessary to describe another contextual transformation, this time among Chambri women as the providers of foodstuffs.

women and wives and marketers

To reiterate an earlier point, the kind of complementarity that Bateson attributes to male-female relations among the Iatmul, with men acting assertively and women replying submissively, also characterizes male-female interaction among the Chambri. Moreover, as I have suggested elsewhere (Gewertz 1977c, 1978), this interactional complementarity had economic and political referents, specifically that:

men : women ::
aggression : submission

and,

economic dependence : economic independence ::
political invulnerability : political vulnerability.

Chambri men are economically dependent upon their wives, who control the means of production. Traditionally, every six days Chambri women took the fish they caught in Chambri Lake to barter markets in the Sepik Hills. There they exchanged fish for sago with women from Sepik Hills villages. The sustenance of their families depended upon this barter, for the Chambri have always relied upon Sepik Hills sago as their major source of carbohydrate.

Women, however, have never controlled the relations of production, for they have had

little access to the political arena in which more significant transactional decisions are made. Although the fish and sago they acquire are used by their husbands, fathers, and brothers in affinal exchanges, women have never been free to determine to whom or in what circumstances their produce will be given. They can challenge male power "in assertions of independence over marriage choices, sabotage of the exchange system through divorce; both in claims to be treated as quasi transactors and manipulation of political subordination to their own advantage" (M. Strathern 1972:314). These challenges, however, are meaningful only within the constraints of the extant sociopolitical organization. They are the challenges of subversives who have no direct access to political decision making.

Moreover, women are politically vulnerable in the sense that they are continually subject to claims on their allegiance from their natal clans and those of their husbands. A woman frequently finds that both her husband and her father demand the right to use her produce, and violence is the ultimate recourse of the demanding husband or father.

The interaction between Chambri women and their sago-supplying counterparts at traditional barter markets duplicated male-female interaction within Chambri villages. Both Chambri men and women viewed all sago-producing bush people as weak, submissive, and dirty. At barter markets it was Chambri women who acted like "men."[5] Specifically, they would remain seated while the bushwomen marched in front of them in single file, holding small chunks of sago shoulder-high. The bushwomen would obsequiously offer their wares to the fishwives, who remained haughtily indifferent to them. Even when the fishwives accepted a piece of sago in exchange for a fish, they did so contemptuously. In one transaction that I witnessed, a fishwife, having previously exchanged fish for sago with a bushwoman, changed her mind upon seeing another woman with larger, fresher chunks. She waited until her original partner came around again and thrust the sago at her yelling: "You think I want this pig-feed sago. You must be crazy!" The bushwoman took back her sago and returned the fish without a word.

The aggressive condescension of the fishwives related to the same congeries of political and economic referents that remain applicable to intravillage male-female relations. Specifically, the Chambri were economically dependent upon their sago suppliers, while the latter have always had considerable access to the rich fish resource of Chambri Lake. The small, scattered, mobile populations of the Hills people could easily adjust "to changes in the productive capacity and needs of the members" (Townsend 1968:179). In fact, the relationship between bush and lake populations resembles that described by Schwartz (1963:61) between the Usuai and the Manus of the Admiralty Islands where the Usuai

> might have been as self-sufficient as many of the interior peoples of Melanesia and New Guinea; but with the availability of fish, they seemed as committed as the Manus to trade. They were much more heterogeneous than the Manus culturally and linguistically. Their villages were smaller, usually fewer than 100 persons, located in hilltop clearings in the rugged and heavily forested interior.

The Chambri, on the other hand, live in large villages with complex social and ceremonial organizations. Their dependence on their sago suppliers is evident from the lengths to which they have been driven when the supply of sago has been cut off. The histories of both the Chambri and Iatmul are filled with large-scale village migrations which were undertaken when access to sago markets was curtailed during warfare with other fish-supplying villages, and even today the Chambri fear curtailed access. In fact, they claim physical weakness when they temporarily run out of sago for as brief a time as one day.

Chambri dependence did not, however, provide the Sepik Hills people with immunity from aggression. Prior to the European intrusion, the Hills people were subject to raids by Chambri and Iatmul headhunting parties. In fact, their inaccessible mountain hamlets were intended to reduce the likelihood of unexpected attack.

Thus it appears that, for the Chambri, the previously given set of analogies holds, and for Chambri *women* it is exactly replicated once the necessary change in production mode has been made, as follows.

Chambri fish suppliers	:	Sepik Hills sago producers	::
aggression	:	submission	

and,

economic dependence	:	economic independence	::
political invulnerability	:	political vulnerability.	

Both the relationships between Chambri men and women and between fish suppliers and sago producers seem to indicate that the vulnerable groups could maintain an economic advantage by paying for their independence with a show of deference.[6] However, I believe that neither the submissive behavior of the Chambri women toward their men, nor that of the sago suppliers toward the fishwives, can be explained exclusively as a function of vulnerability or economic independence. It is rather that the three traits are inextricably linked within the interactional and cognitive patterns of the dominant polity. Chambri society defines women as unequal; hence, they cannot compete in the arena of masculine politics. Between the Chambri and their sago suppliers no competition occurs; hence, the sago suppliers are defined as unequal. If the Chambri were in competition with their sago suppliers, then the latter would be, by definition, their equals. And if the sago suppliers were defined as equals, then the marketing system would cease to operate and would be replaced by intertribal competition (see Gewertz 1977c).[7]

Symmetry and complementarity are thus not the exclusive properties of inter-male or male-female relations, but are characteristic of female-female relations as well. Therefore, having demonstrated the variety of patterns of interaction within traditional social contexts, I can return to the question of why Chambri women appeared to "dominate" their men in 1933.

historical determinants

I think the key to an understanding of the relative "dominance" ascribed to the Chambri women of 1933 lies in the following statement by Mead (1963:244):

> Beneath the Pax Britannica Tchambuli culture is undergoing a renaissance, and the lake-shore rings to the sound of axes hollowing out canoes. Every man's hand is occupied etching a pattern on a lime-gourd, plaiting a bird or a piece of mask, brocading a house-blind, or fashioning a cassowary-bone into the semblance of a parrot or a hornbill.

Indeed, the Pax Britannica had a tremendous effect upon the Chambri; toward the end of the 19th century they had suffered a devastating defeat by the Iatmul village of Parambei and had been exiled from their island until the colonial government guaranteed their safe return just a few years before Mead's arrival. The circumstances surrounding this episode, as well as its effects upon Chambri male-female relations, are as follows.[8]

A man named Simbuksaun emigrated from the Iatmul village of Parambei to the Chambri village of Indingai around 1860. His emigration seems to have been motivated by an argument in his original village, but whether that argument was over a woman, a banana tree, or a plot of garden land has by this time become a matter of debate. In any case, shortly after settling among the Chambri, Simbuksaun, apparently in order to distinguish himself

among his adopted people as well as to prove his loyalty to them, killed a man from his former village and took the head back with him to Indingai.

Simbuksaun's act stimulated a series of "paybacks" between Indingai and Parambei, and these escalated into a full-scale war in 1905. Parambei won, and the residents of the three Chambri villages fled and took refuge with their sago suppliers, the people of the Sepik Hills. In the mid 1920s, members of the Australian colonial government assured the Chambri that the Parambei would cause them no further trouble. The Chambri, convinced of Australian good will, returned to their island by 1927.

When Mead worked among the Chambri, they were busy rebuilding their villages. All of their ceremonial houses, containing most of their ceremonial accoutrements, had been gutted by fire during the Parambei wars. It is likely, therefore, that "every [male was] an artist and most men [were] skilled not in one art alone, but in many" (Mead 1963:245) because there was so much restoration to be done.

Thus, Chambri men's preoccupation with artistic activity appears to have a simple historical explanation. A further examination of the circumstances surrounding their exile and return may reveal that the strained and watchful character that Mead (1963:253) observed in their behavior has historical determinants as well.

It is not simply that the forced exile of Chambri among Sepik Hills bush people damaged the collective Chambri male ego. During their exile the Chambri began marrying their former sago suppliers[9] and thus mingling the affinal exchange and bartering systems. Although the Chambri may not have found this concatenation problematic during their exile, upon returning to their island they undoubtedly found it difficult to maintain the autonomy of the barter system, for marriages linked them to their sago suppliers. It had become possible, in effect, for competitive Chambri men to gain status and prestige by assisting other, unrelated Chambri to fulfill the affinal debts they had incurred with sago suppliers. But how could this be? Could status and prestige be achieved by maintaining affinal connections with sago producers—with "the children of dogs and bush spirits"? Did the Chambri dominate these children of dogs as fish suppliers, or did the bush people hold authority over the Chambri as wife-givers? And would the economically independent sago suppliers continue to pay for their autonomy by showing deference to their wife-takers who were no longer politically invulnerable? Chambri men could only wait to find the answers to these questions, and it is no wonder that their behavior was strained and watchful (Mead 1963:253).[10]

Women's work, including fishing and bartering, not only provided sustenance but also reaffirmed the dominant position of Chambri as fish suppliers to the submissive sago producers of the Sepik Hills. The Chambri had been exiled among their sago producers. For nearly 20 years they had lived like bush people. Only by reestablishing their dominance over their sago producers could they eventually reaffirm equality as fish suppliers, as men among men. Herein lies the significance of the role of Chambri women during the first half of the 20th century: once again they began to exchange their fish for sago from the Sepik Hills, and their aggressive behavior at barter markets allowed their men to reorganize their self-perceptions through cooperative competition.[11] Implied in the complementary relationship is this set of relations:

female fish suppliers : female sago producers :: aggressive : submissive.

This produces the symmetrical relationship

fish-supplying villages = fish-supplying villages.

As members of a fish-supplying village, Chambri men were once again equal to their counterparts from Parambei, and it was largely through the efforts of their women, reestablishing the old bartering relationships, that the men regained their former status.

The barter system persisted for some 30 years after Mead studied the Chambri. During the early 1960s, however, the bush villages began moving from their hill hamlets to the shores of Chambri Lake. Sepik Hills women began to charge money for their sago, and Chambri women were forced to earn money to buy it. The fishwives began traveling to money markets to sell their catch to government employees and other town dwellers, and with the proceeds they bought sago from their former barter partners. By 1964, with the growth in significance of the Australian-imposed local government council system, Chambri men found it convenient to accept their sago suppliers as political equals, for they needed to create a power base within their council (Gewertz 1978). Thus, sago producers have been transformed from bush spirits into political allies and entrepreneurs. Chambri men have achieved a dominant position within their local government council, and Chambri women sell their fish to buy sago, thereby utilizing town resources to maintain their traditional life-style. Here, again, we find another indication that interaction is contextually determined, for when the Chambri needed the children of dogs to compete within the council as men among men, both groups managed to negotiate the necessary transition.

recapitulation: de facto transactions within a system of relationships

Let me recapitulate the relationships described thus far. Clans are divided into equal competitors and unequal affines by women who are the source of inequality. Prior to the transformation of the bartering system (see above), these same women articulated intertribal marketing relationships. The women were transformed, within the marketing system, from being the source of inequality to becoming the proponents of aggressive supremacy for the fish-supplying villages. The women were involved in asymmetrical exchange within both the affinal exchange and the marketing systems, but, in transforming their mode of interaction from being the item of transaction to being the active transactors, they insulated one system from the other.

The de facto transactions of Chambri men and women are meaningful only with reference to the framework I have just described. Thus, the formalized complementary interaction of women at barter markets defined the separation of the bush and water villages from each other. So long as bush and water villages maintained a social or cultural distance, the competitive interaction of equals was prevented and the marketing system remained viable. The alternative to complementarity, given the interactional possibilities of Sepik peoples, is symmetrial competitiveness. And the fine balance between the economic dependence of the water villages, on the one hand, and the vulnerability of the bush villages, on the other, could not have been maintained through symmetrical interaction.

A similar switch in mode of interaction insulates the asymmetrical affinal exchange system from competitive, symmetrical competition. Here, wife-givers hold a de facto dominance over their brothers-in-law, and the stability of affinal inequality cannot be disturbed by competition between equal men of equal clans.

I believe, however, that transformations in interactional modes indicate more than the existence of boundaries between systems. They also signal necessary connections—mutual relevancies—between systems. Thus, to repeat an earlier point, the stability of affinal inequality provides the perfect, nonrepercussive arena for extravagant display. It is by assisting unrelated clans to meet their affinal debts that Chambri men maintain status differentials, and without the affinal exchange relationship symmetrical intravillage competition would

find no expression. Similarly, the asymmetrical relationship between fish suppliers and sago producers was necessary to the definition of fish suppliers as equals to each other.

conclusion: roles versus interaction

If I were to have described the sexual roles of Chambri men and women during 1974 without considering the sociohistorical contexts of interaction, I would have been forced to conclude that either Mead had portrayed the Chambri incorrectly or that there had been a drastic change in child-rearing practices within the last 40 years. Both conclusions are unwarranted. Such errors are, I believe, the direct result of freezing interaction within the concrete and atemporal concept of sexual roles.

Rather, I believe that the relative "dominance" of Chambri women during 1933—or, perhaps more accurately, the reduction of symmetrical competition between Chambri men—reflects a temporary shift in the balance between affinal exchange and bartering to accommodate systemic constraints imposed by historical conditions. After the Chambri returned from exile in the Sepik Hills, the barter system between fish suppliers and sago producers had to be reestablished before symmetrical competition between Chambri men could recur. Once Chambri women, acting in their renewed capacity as both transactors and items of exchange, again delimited the affinal exchange sphere from the marketing sphere, their husbands, fathers, and brothers could compete without endangering the supply of foodstuffs necessary to both subsistence and affinal exchange. Thus, the strategies applied by Chambri men and women managed to negotiate the transition from exile to return while they maintained, intact, the matrix of systemic relations.

notes

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[1] Chambri women wove mosquito bags from reeds and rattan. They were used throughout the Middle Sepik before mosquito nets were introduced by Europeans.

[2] I use the word "stimulating" purposely because Bateson believes that the predictability of response to culturally preferred behavior acts as a positive reinforcement for behavior of the same sort. In symmetrical interactions, the response is an augmentation of the stimulus and in complementary interaction the response is the opposite of the stimulus (see Bateson 1958:175).

[3] Mothers' brothers and their clans provide the food that is consumed at these rites of passage. Feast food differs from everyday fare chiefly in that it includes meat. Pork and poultry are nearly always present, but occasionally they are supplemented with beef or goat. In addition to foodstuffs, mothers' brothers also provide their sisters' sons with items of clothing and decorative accessories. Traditionally, these included a genital covering made of a bat's skin or woven reeds, bamboo and wooden spears, and incised lime gourds. Today, store-bought shorts, singlets, and underclothes have replaced the traditional genital covering, although lime gourds and spears are still given (see Gewertz 1977a, 1977b for detailed discussion of affinal exchange).

[4] Fortune (1933:3) described mother's brother's daughter's marriage among the Chambri:

> The most interesting social consequence of this system is that it is impossible for a man to marry a woman without his creating a lien in perpetuity upon the male line she comes from in favor of his male descendants. The women who are sisters of a male line are in entail, so to speak, to a vis-à-vis male line.

Obviously, the advantages of maintaining a lien in perpetuity upon a wife-taking group, when that group cannot fulfill its affinal debts, are nil. It is therefore understandable why expanding clans marry off their "sisters" to maximize the receipts of their liens. It is only among those clans which have sufficient but not excessive resources to meet their affinal obligations, in both the wife-giving and wife-

taking directions, that perpetual liens are advantageously maintained. But even among these clans, the contingencies of group realignment enormously alter the rate of mother's brother's daughter's marriage from one generation to the next (see Gewertz in press).

[5] Of course it would be equally accurate to say that Chambri men, within their villages, act as Chambri women, within the fish-for-sago barter situation.

[6] I doubt whether the Sepik Hills peoples subscribe to the Chambri conception of all bush people as weak and dirty "children of dogs." I am, however, certain that they are familiar enough with the Chambri symbol system to understand the meanings encoded within it. This is clearly indicated by the fact that at barter markets bushwomen allow Chambri fishwives to treat them as inferior sago suppliers. They understand that the Chambri view them as ineffectual because they are sago suppliers, regardless of how they rationalize this Chambri belief to themselves.

[7] Although I have described Chambri women as unequal to their men, I now recognize and accept Forge's (1972) contention that the concepts of equality and inequality are only relevant between Chambri men. This does not change the fact that Chambri men are to their women as fish suppliers were to their sago producers, a fact that should not surprise us, for as Bateson (1972:91) observes:

> It is, to me, inconceivable that two differing groups could exist side by side in a community without some sort of mutual relevance between the special characteristics of one group and those of the other. Such an occurrence would be contrary to the postulate that a community is an organized unit.

[8] I was told of the circumstances surrounding the Chambri exodus by many Chambri and Sepik Hills informants. They have also been described by Bragge (1973).

[9] Eight men took wives from the Sepik Hills during the Chambri exile.

[10] I unfortunately know very little about the Chambri during their exile among their sago suppliers. The Sepik Hills women who married Chambri men during this period have become well incorporated within their husbands' villages and do not visit their natal villages more frequently than do other Chambri women.

[11] Marketing did not continue during the Chambri exile in the Sepik Hills. My informants tell me that this is when Chambri women learned to scrub sago and Sepik Hills women learned to use canoes in order to fish.

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