The people of Vanatinai occupy a large island 225 miles southeast of mainland New Guinea. As Maria Lepowsky describes the culture of this previously unstudied group, a markedly egalitarian ethos is evident. Beginning at birth, when girl and boy infants are welcomed equally, by both men and women, and continuing throughout the life cycle, the Islanders exhibit a respect for individuals regardless of age or sex.

Among these people there is no ethic of male dominance. The activities of women and men are held to be equally valuable, and there is considerable overlap in what they do. This holds true not only in the ordinary details of daily life but for the most important arena where personal prestige and influence over others is acquired, namely, in traditional exchange relationships and in the mortuary ritual context.

Other aspects of the culture are consonant with this overriding egalitarian ethos. Both men and women have access to supernatural power through communication with ancestor spirits, for example, and both are privy to the same magical lore. There is no ideology requiring male separatism or initiation rites, or one of female pollution. If they earn the respect of others, women as well as men may be referred to as strong, wise, or generous.

Lepowsky describes in some detail the social system, the elaborate exchange system, and the child-rearing practices that mesh with this overall ethic of egalitarianism. In doing so she presents a picture that challenges the concept of the universality of male dominance and the idea that the subjugation of women is inevitable in human societies. A final section of the chapter deals with the impact of recent contacts, including missionary activity, pacification, and central governance on the egalitarian ethos of these people.

*Maria Lepowsky*

# 7 Gender in an Egalitarian Society: A Case Study from the Coral Sea

Male dominance has been described as universal in human societies by many influential writers on gender, sex roles, and the status of women in cross-cultural perspective (for example, Beauvoir 1953; Rosaldo 1974, 1980; Ortner 1974; Ortner and Whitehead 1981). Such a universality implies that female subordination either results directly from human biology or is inherent in human cultures due to the constraints of human biology, and therefore perhaps unchangeable.

The independent nation of Papua New Guinea, the eastern half of the island of New Guinea, contains over 700 different linguistic and cultural groups. They, and other Melanesian societies, have frequently been described by anthropologists as egalitarian because almost all lack chiefs, nobles, or systems of ascribed rank, unlike the societies of the Polynesian culture area to the east. But, without specifying that they were writing about only half the society being observed, most anthropologists have described egalitarian social relations among men and not between men and women. Many of the cultures in the interior of New Guinea are well known for their strong ideologies of male dominance and beliefs in the polluting qualities of women (for example, Meggitt 1964; Brown and Buchbinder 1976; Poole 1981; Meigs, this volume). Yet New Guinea is also known for the great diversity of gender role patterns found in its many distinctive cultures (for example, Mead 1935).

Vanatinai, a small, remote island southeast of the main island of New Guinea, has its own language and culture and had never previously been studied by an anthropologist. Vanatinai is a sexually egalitarian society. There is no ethic of male dominance, the roles and activities of women and men overlap considerably, and the actions of both sexes are considered equally valuable. This overlap extends to the most important arena for the acquisition of personal prestige and influence over others, the traditional exchange and the mortuary ritual complex, in which both women and men

participate. Both sexes have access to supernatural power through communication with ancestor spirits, who are believed to be the basis of all human prosperity, good fortune, and health. The prominent position of women in the island's social life is reflected in local gender ideology and myth.

This chapter focuses on the relationship between gender roles and cultural ideology in a sexually egalitarian society, placing both in the context of overall social relations. I will examine the roles and activities of women and men on Vanatinai in various aspects of social life, comparing them with local gender ideology and symbolism and with constructions of gender in island mythology. I will apply a variety of arguments and hypotheses about male dominance and gender equality to Vanatinai to see if, by their specific criteria, the island is an ethnographic example of an egalitarian, or a non–male-dominant, society and whether their predictions about gender roles and ideology hold for the Vanatinai case. I will also discuss the implications of the existence of egalitarian societies for the study of gender roles and ideology in cross-cultural perspective and for change in gender relations in societies that are not egalitarian.

Schlegel (this volume) distinguishes between a culture's "general," abstract gender ideology and its multiplicity of "specific" gender meanings defined through their location within social structure or "field of action." She points out that in human societies general versus specific meanings of maleness and femaleness, as well as different situationally distinct specific gender definitions, frequently seem to contradict each other. On Vanatinai both the general, most abstract forms of gender ideology and the great majority of specific gender meanings derived from everyday and ritual life are congruent, reflecting an ethic of egalitarian relations between women and men and among all individuals.

The Vanatinai case challenges the concept of the universality of male dominance and the idea that the subjugation of women is inevitable in human societies. Definitions of male dominance vary greatly, and assessments of its universality sometimes vary according to which criteria are used to define it (for example, Sanday 1981:163–79). Some authors refer primarily to the differential access of men versus women to prestigious activities and therefore to power over others (for example, Friedl 1975:164; Ortner and Whitehead 1981). Others focus on control of key resources or means of production (for example, Sacks 1974; Leacock 1978:252). Rosaldo (1980) discusses the universality of "sexual asymmetry." Divale and Harris (1976) highlight social structural asymmetries in kinship, marriage, and

residence systems, the sexual division of labor, and leadership roles. They see institutionalized warfare and a corollary cultural emphasis on male aggression as the primary cause of the "male supremacist complex." Similarly, Meigs (this volume) relates the "chauvinistic" ideology of Hua men to the male role as warriors. Sanday's (1981:164) definition of male dominance stresses "exclusion of women from political and economic decision making" and male aggression against women, measured by expectations of male aggressive personality traits, men's houses, wife abuse, institutionalized or regular occurrence of rape, and raiding other groups for wives. Ortner (1974) suggests that women are associated with nature and men with "the high ground of culture" in the gender symbolism of all human societies and that women are therefore universally devalued (compare Beauvoir 1953; Lévi-Strauss 1969a). Rosaldo and Atkinson (1975) see as a cultural universal the symbolic opposition of woman the life-giver and man the life-taker, related to the woman/nature to man/culture opposition, which in all cultures indicates asymmetry in the status of women versus men.

Vanatinai women have access to economically and ritually essential and prestigious activities and thus to power over others, equal access to resources, the advantages of matriliny and bilocal residence, a largely overlapping sexual division of labor, and access to the society's most significant "leadership role," that of *gia,* literally "giver," or "big man/big woman." There are no men's houses, respect for the warrior is focused on his ability to defend the community rather than to attack others, and rape and wife abuse are extremely rare and strongly disapproved. Gender ideology and mythology associate women as well as men with key domains of culture. Women are explicitly said to give life while men kill, which is the rationale for why women do not kill enemies in war, practice sorcery, or hunt with spears. Life-giving is also explicitly said in this context to be "more important" than killing. But women actually participated in decisions to make war or seek peace, accompanied brothers onto the field of battle, and knew important war magic. They also do occasionally learn and practice sorcery and are sometimes said to possess the destructive power of witchcraft. Finally, women do hunt: they just do not hunt with spears. Different levels of Vanatinai gender ideology and practice are here contradictory, but the overlap of male and female domains and the high value placed on female powers and activities are clear.

Few anthropologists have attempted to define or characterize sexual equality (compare Atkinson 1982; Strathern 1987). Leacock (1978:247) sees

women as "autonomous in egalitarian society" because they hold "decision-making power over their own lives and activities to the same extent that men did over theirs." Lamphere (1977:613) focuses on control of others, stating that in a "situation of sexual equality . . . all men and women . . . could and actually did make decisions over the same range of partners and people, that is, exercise the same kinds of control." She also cites and criticizes what she calls the "complementary but equal" argument suggested by Schlegel for the Hopi and Briggs for the Inuit, where males and females control different, but not larger, spheres consisting of "their persons, property, or activities" (Lamphere 1977:616). Sanday (1981: 170) points out that these definitions of equality may refer to either "sameness" or "interdependence and balance" and suggests using the term sexual symmetry. Her definition of sexual equality is the converse of her definition of male dominance: it is when "males do not display aggression against women and women exercise political and economic authority or power" (Sanday 1981:165). Etienne and Leacock (1980:9) discuss societies with "egalitarian relations of production," where the division of labor is entirely by sex, the sexes reciprocally exchange goods and services, and all adults participate directly and equally in production, distribution, and consumption, having equal access to resources. The Vanatinai case meets the criteria of all of these definitions of an egalitarian society.

There are significant differences in status and prestige among individuals on Vanatinai, despite the island's egalitarian ideology. These are mutable, and they fluctuate over the lifetime of the individual. But Vanatinai society is egalitarian in that at specific stages in the life cycle, females and males have equivalent autonomy and control over their own actions, equal opportunity to achieve both publicly and privately acknowledged influence and power over the actions of others, and equivalent access to valued goods, wealth, and prestige. Its gender ideology stresses that both women and men should strive to be strong, wise, and generous, and the highly valued quality of generosity is explicitly modeled after parental nurture. Women are not viewed as polluting or dangerous to themselves or others in their persons, bodily fluids, or sexuality.

Vanatinai, which means both "motherland" and "mainland," is the indigenous name for the island which is usually called Sudest or Tagula on maps and charts. At 50 miles long by about 8 to 15 miles wide, it is the largest piece of land for over 200 miles and the largest island in the Louisiade Archipelago, a chain of islands that separates the Solomon Sea from the Coral Sea. Vanatinai belongs to what scholars since the late nineteenth

century have referred to as the Massim culture area (for example, Hamy 1888; Haddon 1894; Seligman 1909, 1910). The most famous portion of the Massim to the outside world is the Trobriand Islands, whose culture was described as it appeared seventy years ago in the extensive writings of Bronislaw Malinowski, probably the single most influential individual in shaping modern anthropology. Vanatinai lies about 300 miles southeast of the Trobriand Islands and about 225 miles southeast of the New Guinea mainland.

A "high status of women" has been described as a diagnostic feature of the Massim culture area by Malinowski (1929:28), Fortune (1963:257), and other writers (Haddon 1894:255; Armstrong 1928:100; Young 1971:54; Chowning 1973:30). But before the 1970s and the restudy by Annette Weiner (1976) of the Trobriand Islands, no ethnographer had offered any systematic description of what this "high status" consists of or an analysis of the relative positions of men and women in any Massim society as related to other significant aspects of social organization. Malinowski himself, who once issued a criticism of ethnographers who repeat without documentation "generalities and stock phrases such as that . . . 'the status of the wife is high'" (1962:18), is the only partial exception. In *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia,* he includes a brief chapter titled "The Status of Women in Native Society," in which he discusses the position of women in the descent group, the customs applying to women of rank, and "women's share in magic" and in ceremonial activities among the Trobriand Islanders of the northern Massim (1929:28–49).

The research on which this chapter is based was designed to determine the range of roles and behavior deemed culturally appropriate for women and men throughout the life cycle of the individual on an island in the southern Massim region whose culture had never before been described. The research also was intended to relate local notions of gender-appropriate behavior to cultural ideology and to economic, political, and religious life, particularly to traditional interisland exchanges of ceremonial valuables and other goods.

During my residence on Vanatinai in 1978–79, I learned not only that women figure prominently in traditional exchange activities but that they also participate in the same arena of exchange as men, exchange with both men and women, and compete with men to acquire the same ceremonial valuables. In the Trobriands and on other Massim islands such as Panaeati (Berde 1974), women have their own separate domain of exchange, in both cases a major part of the essential series of mortuary ritual events following

the death of each individual, and women have their own valuables—skirts and yams, respectively—which they generate by their own labor. On Vanatinai the exchange activities of women are largely integrated with those of men. Women participate alongside men in all of the many types of intra- and interisland exchanges practiced on Vanatinai. Individual women as well as men may gain area-wide prestige and renown for their success in accumulating valuables such as shell-disk necklaces, greenstone axeblades, shell currency pieces, and pigs, and in giving them away to other men and women in public acts of ritual generosity (Lepowsky 1981, 1983, 1989a).

The exchange activities in which both sexes participate on Vanatinai are the local equivalent of *kula,* the famous form of traditional exchange where shell-disk necklaces circulate clockwise among island groups while armshells circulate counterclockwise, documented by Malinowski (1922) based upon his residence in the Trobriand Islands. The *kula* in the Trobriands is described by Malinowski and by Weiner (1976) as an exclusively male activity, although the participation by women in *kula* exchanges has been reported for Kitava Island in the northern Massim (Damon 1980: 275) and for Normanby Island (Roheim 1950:184) and Tubetube Island (Macintyre 1987:210) in the southern Massim. Young women from Gawa Island in the northern Massim sometimes accompany their fathers on *kula* voyages without participating directly in exchanges (Munn 1986).

Exchanges on Vanatinai that involve the same shell-disk necklaces and greenstone axeblades that circulate in the *kula* region to the northwest as well as other valuables (armshells are not used in the Vanatinai region) are the island's most important means of acquiring prestige and influence over others. Women's freedom to enter into these most important and prestigious areas of public life on the island is a significant indicator of the sexually egalitarian nature of Vanatinai society.

The participation of women in traditional exchange activities has rarely been stressed in the ethnographic literature, but the Trobriand example suggests that women's exchange activities may in some cases have been underreported by anthropologists. Furthermore, the ethnographic evidence for women's exchange activities that does exist has been largely overlooked in analyses of social organization.[1] The traditional exchange activities performed by women in many societies clearly belong to the "public" rather than the "domestic" domain. Various authors have suggested either that there is a universal sexual asymmetry in the tendency for men to be prominent in the public domain while women's roles are largely domestic, or that the exclusion of women from public activities and their

restriction to the domestic domain is strongly correlated with women's lower status relative to men in specific societies (Rosaldo 1974; Sanday 1973, 1974; Hammond and Jablow 1973; Sacks 1974; Bacdayan 1977; Leacock 1978).

Ortner and Whitehead (1981) argue that the significance of the public domain for understanding the cultural construction of gender is that it is dominated by men and that it is the locus of a culture's prestige structures. They suggest that "cultural notions of the genders and sexuality will vary from culture to culture in accordance with the way in which women, the woman-dominated domestic sphere, and cross-sex relations in general are organized into the base that supports the larger (male) prestige system" (Ortner and Whitehead 1981:19). The principal Vanatinai prestige system is the traditional exchange and mortuary ritual complex, but it is not restricted to men. Participation of island women in this and other arenas of prestige such as ritual expertise, production of garden surpluses, and the rearing of healthy and hard-working young matrilineage members (a primary concern of both men and women) shapes and is shaped by egalitarian Vanatinai gender constructions, as Ortner and Whitehead predict. The prominent positions of women in Vanatinai exchange and other extradomestic activities then should reflect generally egalitarian relations between women and men in Vanatinai culture according to the argument that women's exclusion from the public domain, a culture's locus of power and prestige, is related to women's lower status relative to men.

## *Gender and Social Structure*

I suggest that societies that are sexually egalitarian tend to place little emphasis on other forms of social stratification such as class, rank, or age-grading (compare Leacock 1978; Etienne and Leacock 1980). Holding regional cultural ideologies of interpersonal relations constant, non–gender-based forms of stratification are more likely to arise in societies with dense populations. Thus some, but not all, small-scale foraging and horticultural societies are among the most socially and sexually egalitarian societies in the world. Vanatinai has only four persons per square mile of territory. Unlike the densely settled Trobriand Islands, also part of the Massim culture area, Vanatinai has no chiefs or other categories of ascribed rank and no division of lineages into noble and commoner.

Vanatinai and the rest of the Massim are unusual in Melanesia in having

no men's houses, no male cult activities, and no initiation ceremonies for either males or females (compare Allen 1967). The institution of the men's house, where adult men either sleep apart from their wives and children or congregate regularly, limits women's participation in political, economic, and ritual life in much of Melanesia. The men's house, male initiation, and male cult activities concentrate both power over others and social prestige in the hands of adult males, and they group women, boys, and young children in a subordinate social position.

Characterizing Vanatinai society as egalitarian does not imply that there are no status differences among individuals on the island. Some islanders hold more rights to land, food trees, and reef areas than others, and some inherit more ceremonial valuables, pigs, and potential exchange partners from maternal kin or fathers. Some have more kin and more affines who can potentially offer aid, while others are disadvantaged in accruing prestige by chronic poor health. Morauta (1981) correctly points out that status inequalities in lowland Papua New Guinea societies have often been underreported by ethnographers.

Nevertheless, Vanatinai society has an egalitarian ethic. It offers every adult, regardless of sex or kin group, the opportunity of excelling at prestigious activities such as participation in traditional exchange or ritual functions essential to health and prosperity. With hard work and the appropriate magical knowledge, anyone may achieve the gender-blind title of *gia,* or "giver," and this status is not limited to one individual per hamlet or even per household. The result is a continuous competition for status and influence involving a large number of men and women who choose to make the extra effort necessary to acquire prestige among a wide group of peers. This state of competition and flux is inevitable precisely because Vanatinai society is egalitarian and without ascribed positions of status.

The low population density of Vanatinai largely negates the advantage that people with rights to more land hold over others, since the right to garden, hunt, fish, and make sago on particular tracts of land is always granted by the owners to their neighbors within the same district of the island. If population density were to reach the same alarming level as on Kiriwina in the Trobriand Islands, rights of ownership and usufruct of fertile garden lands, the fundamental basis of wealth and surplus on the high islands of the Massim, would probably be far more tightly controlled, with owners receiving formal tribute and perhaps even evolving into a chiefly or "noble" class.[2]

A low population density probably also contributes to an ethic of respect

for the individual, since if a serious conflict arises, one party has the option of moving to another location. This describes the Vanatinai situation. Since a hamlet will dissolve if its population drops, due to conflict, sorcery accusations, and resulting migration, below a certain minimum necessary to carry out subsistence tasks (which has happened on Vanatinai), individuals must learn to tolerate each other's idiosyncrasies of behavior and outlook or go their separate ways. The notion of individual autonomy, along with the idea that individuals vary greatly in their personalities and temperaments, is a key aspect of Vanatinai cultural ideology. The most common explanation for markedly unusual behavior is a flat and nonjudgmental statement, "She or he wants to/doesn't want to," or, "It is her or his way." There is a wide latitude of normal or acceptable behavior. The most significant means for regulating individual behavior, the fear of arousing anger or jealousy in a sorcerer or witch or of violating a taboo attached to a particular place by its guardian spirit, is based on an ideology of individual supernatural power rather than on a social body such as a council of elders.

Sanday (1973) suggests that the status of women is higher in societies where the domestic and the public spheres of activity are overlapping, and Schlegel (1977:9) proposes that "if the household is a central institution (women's) impact on major societal decisions may be very great" (compare Leacock 1978:147). Small-scale societies, where the community is composed largely of people related by ties of kinship and affinity, are likely to be centered around the household, and the distinction between domestic and public action will be blurred. This is the situation in the hamlets of Vanatinai.

In a small population where kin and fictive kin groups largely overlap the community of coresidents, as on Vanatinai, the opinions of women and young people are voiced in public debate. Key decisions affecting the lives and well-being of community members are made locally and as needed. Political authority is not delegated to a restricted number of adult male representatives who convene formally in a distant place for efficiency of communication and social control as in a large-scale society. Children, old people, and women are all more likely to be respected as individuals in a small-scale society, even though the predominant ideologies of social relations may hold women and children inferior to men and elders.

Descent on Vanatinai is matrilineal. A society that traces descent through women does not necessarily accord women a high status (compare Richards 1950; Schneider and Gough 1961; Schlegel 1972). But societies where women own and inherit land, may live with their own kin after marriage, and not

only produce but allocate culturally valued resources, controlling their distribution beyond the household, tend to treat men and women more equally (Brown 1970a; Hammond and Jablow 1973; Sanday 1974; Friedl 1975). These conditions, more likely in a matrilineal society due to its typical structures of inheritance, residence, and economic organization, characterize Vanatinai society and ensure the prominence of women in all aspects of island life.

Vanatinai women inherit land, pigs, and ceremonial valuables from their mothers, their mothers' brothers, and sometimes from their fathers equally with men. They control the land and valuables they inherit or possess just as men do. They, along with men, produce staple garden foods, such as yams, sweet potato, and taro, and raise pigs. They have ultimate jurisdiction over the distribution of the fruits of their labors. Women are said to be the "owners" or "bosses" (*tanuwagaji*) of the gardens, although men, too, spend much of their time working in gardens. It is the women of the hamlet who must decide whether in a particular year there is a sufficient surplus of garden produce to exchange with outsiders for other goods, such as clay cooking pots or pandanus-leaf sleeping mats, or to host a major feast to commemorate a death.

"Wife-centered" postmarital residence has been suggested as a key variable that positively affects the status of women (Richards 1950; Ember and Ember 1971; Schlegel 1972; Divale and Harris 1976). The postmarital rule on Vanatinai is bilocal residence. A similar pattern was reported by Fortune (1963) for Dobu Island, also part of the Massim culture area, where couples reside in alternate years with the lineage mates of each spouse. The ideal arrangement on Vanatinai is for a married couple to reside alternately during the year in the natal hamlet of the wife and that of the husband, making gardens on the matrilineage lands of both spouses and assisting the kin of each with subsistence tasks. Each spouse has equivalent rights and obligations when living with affines. A newly married couple resides with the wife's parents for at least several months, and the husband is supposed to "work for his mother-in-law."[3] Some longer-married couples may choose to reside permanently or most of the time with the kin of either spouse depending on their personal preference, but even so active ties are maintained with the hamlet of the other spouse through visits for subsistence and social purposes.

The shift between residing with the kin of the wife and the kin of the husband allows each spouse the security of living with relatives for at least part of every year. Neither one is expected to give up the opportunity to

participate in the important decisions of the natal kin group, and neither spouse, by virtue of absence, loses the right to use garden land, food trees, and territory belonging to the matrilineage. By living alternately with kin and affine, each spouse is in a good position to cultivate or maintain personal exchange ties with individuals belonging to both groups.

Vanatinai social structure is egalitarian overall in having no chiefs, no system of ranking, no delegation of political authority, and no fixed role specialization beyond the sexual division of labor. Its small scale and low population density promote respect for individual autonomy. Matrilineal descent and inheritance and bilocal postmarital residence provide both women and men with access to and control over land and goods and with the opportunity to activate equivalent ties of kinship and affinity. Vanatinai women and men both see women as autonomous beings who perform a constellation of culturally valued activities.

## *The Sexual Division of Labor*

The sexual division of labor on Vanatinai features a marked overlap between the tasks considered appropriate for men and for women. Sanday (1974) hypothesizes that where men and women contribute equally to subsistence, women's status will be higher, and she suggests that the mingling of the sexes in the tasks of daily life works against the rise of male dominance (1981). Similarly, Bacdayan (1977) sees "task interchangeability" between the sexes as an important correlate of a high status of women in a particular society. Both Vanatinai women and men tend and harvest yams (the most highly valued cultigen), sweet potato, taro, manioc, banana, and other garden crops, and individuals of both sexes know various forms of garden magic, including the magic used in the annual yam-planting ritual. By contrast the analogous magic for growing yams is known only to men in the Trobriand Islands (Malinowski 1935).[4]

Vanatinai men cut tall forest trees to clear land for new gardens, but the work party is comprised of men and women, and the women cut the smaller trees and shrubs and supervise the burning of the forest cover. Men normally loosen the soil to form mounds for planting yams using eight-foot digging sticks, but I have observed women performing this task. Women generally do the actual preparation and planting of seed yams. Men cut sago palms and do most of the pounding of the sago pith to extract the starch, which is a major dietary staple, but again the work party is usually mixed,

and women supervise the drying of cakes of sago starch over a low fire. Both women and men forage for a wide variety of wild nuts, legumes, tubers, fruits, and leaves in the rainforest, although women generally spend more time at this task than most men.

Hunting with spears for wild pigs and crocodiles is a male monopoly, as is using spears to hunt dugongs or to fish. But Vanatinai women hunt game such as possum and fruit bats by climbing forest trees or tall coconut trees to sneak up on the slow-moving nocturnal creatures. They also hunt monitor lizards, which grow to four feet in length, by climbing tall mangrove trees or by setting traps for them. Female hunting is relatively rare, but it has been reported among foragers and horticulturalists in various parts of the world, such as Australian aborigines of the Kimberleys and of Melville Island (Kaberry 1939; Goodale 1971), the Agta of the Philippines (Estioko-Griffin and Griffin 1981, 1985), and the Ojibwa, Montagnais-Naskapi, and Rock Cree of Canada (Landes 1938; Leacock 1978; Brightman n.d.).

In many parts of the Pacific, women are not supposed to climb trees, but on Vanatinai women climb not only to hunt but to obtain coconuts or betel nuts. Women fish using a fishing line or derris root, a fish poison. Formerly both sexes fished using nets woven by men of the fibrous aerial root of the wild pandanus palm. Both women and men gather shellfish in streams and along the fringing reef. Both dive in the lagoon for giant Tridacna clams. More rarely women dive for the blacklip or goldlip pearlshell, which may be sold to traders, or for the red-rimmed oyster-like shells, which are made by both men and women into the shell-disk necklaces that circulate throughout the Louisiade Archipelago and the *kula* ring as far as the Trobriand Islands.

Killing human beings with spears or greenstone axes was a former monopoly of men as well. But Vanatinai mothers and sisters accompanied the warriors, carrying spears and retrieving the wounded from the field of battle. They also gave the signal both to begin an attack and to make peace, which in both cases was to remove their outer coconut-leaf skirt and wave it or put it on the ground. It is said, for example, that if a sister wished to stop her brother from killing someone, she took off her outer skirt and threw it before him. If he then threw his spear at his enemy, he would symbolically be committing an act of incest and would therefore be "ashamed" to attack. This explanation also reveals the phallic association of the spear, another reason why women should not use it.

Men do most of the work of building houses. Women participate by

collecting sago leaves for roofing and by weaving sago leaves for one type of wall. They must also provide the builders with cooked food. Men make outrigger paddling canoes and, more rarely, sailing canoes, but both men and women paddle and sail them. Although men more frequently crew sailing canoes, some women are expert sailors.

Men carve ceremonial axehandles and limesticks of wood and delicate tortoiseshell limesticks. Both men and women may manufacture shell-disk necklaces. Women weave pandanus sleeping mats, fine coconut-leaf betel-nut baskets, and coconut-leaf skirts. All these items circulate in interisland exchange and during mortuary feasts.

Daily cooking, washing, fetching water and firewood, and sweeping are primarily female tasks, but men occasionally perform each of them. Men and women both fetch water and firewood and cook during feasts and other communal occasions, such as roofing or yam planting. Men butcher and boil pork, scrape coconut meat, and prepare the boiled sago and green coconut pudding. Women prepare the stone oven for roasting vegetable food.

The care of young children is primarily the responsibility of women. But men are frequently seen carrying around their offspring or maternal nieces or nephews and take older boys and girls with them to the garden for the day. People say that the reason why a father's matrilineal kin must be compensated with valuables when one dies is that the deceased excreted on the father as an infant and the father cleaned it up uncomplainingly.[5]

One man active in exchange activities was almost always accompanied by his nine-year-old daughter, who had already sailed around Vanatinai three times with him to look for valuables or attend feasts. Many adults have never seen the opposite end of the island.

In 1978–79 less than half of island children, boys and girls in equal number, attended the small, mission-run primary boarding schools, and most of these left school after a few years. Boys as well as girls are drafted as babysitters of younger siblings, although girls spend more time at this task.

Either a man or a woman may be a hamlet leader (*tanokau* if male and *yola* if female), an informal position of authority on matters of subsistence or custom. This person is usually the one who leads the hamlet's yam-planting ritual.

Both men and women learn and practice most forms of magic, which are based upon communication with ancestor spirits and other supernatural beings, upon whose goodwill all human prosperity, good fortune, and health are believed dependent. Magical practice in many cases might better

be described as a religious act consisting of a prayer or petition to the ancestors. Both sexes know garden magic and the magic for finding wild food in the forest or an abundance of sago starch in a particular palm. Both know healing magic and a vast array of plant substances used in curing, the magic of exchange, war, fishing, and hunting, although a few types of hunting magic are restricted to men. Weather magic, the ability to make rain or wind or to end them, is restricted to a few men. Both women and men know love magic and the magic said to make one invisible. Sorcery is almost always practiced by men. A few women have been adept, but they dressed in the male traditional dress, an incised strip of woven pandanus leaf drawn between the legs and held up by a cord around the hips, when they practiced their nefarious trade. The islanders say that sorcery became more prevalent after the cessation of warfare, stating that, "Before we killed with spears, but now we kill with sorcery." The association with warfare may explain why sorcery is virtually a male monopoly. Witchcraft, on the other hand, is usually practiced by women, although some men too have learned it (see below). Women and men both know the magic of counter-sorcery.[6]

The sexual division of labor on Vanatinai meets criteria predicted for an egalitarian society by featuring a large degree of overlap and of complementarity between the roles and activities of women versus men, female control of valued commodities, and participation by women in prestigious activities in the public domain. It enables women to participate in publicly recognized ways in political, economic, and ritual decision making. In combination with an ethic of respect for individual autonomy, it also facilitates differences in people's activities. Individual women and men vary in the kinds of work they find congenial or distasteful and are therefore likely to do on a daily or seasonal basis.

## *Women and Traditional Exchange on Vanatinai*

I once asked an elderly woman, then in poor health and spending her days sitting by the fire in her son's house, if she had ever been on a trading expedition, or *ghiva,* in quest of ceremonial valuables. She drew herself up proudly and answered, "Yes, I have traded" (*Aghiva*). Her father had died when she was a young married woman with children, she explained. She had dressed herself in the long mourning skirt of coarsely cut, dried coconut leaves and covered her face and body with the black mourning

pigment of burnt coconut husk. Then she had set off by outrigger sailing canoe around the island of Vanatinai to the north coast to ask her trading partners for the shell-disk necklaces, axeblades of polished greenstone, huge tusked pigs, and other forms of wealth that are necessary for holding the great feast that commemorates a death and releases survivors from their mourning taboos. She had returned with large quantities of valuables. "Did your husband come with you?" I asked. "*Imuyai,*" she replied, "He accompanied me," or literally, "He followed me."

Every adult on Vanatinai, both male and female, is expected to contribute valuables to the series of elaborate feasts that are held after the death of each individual. The pressure to host a feast, or to contribute extensively to a feast, is greatest at the death of a kinsperson, a father, or a close affine. The bulk of the wealth contributed is given in a public ritual, the *mwagumwagu,* to the matrilineal heir of the deceased's father, the patrilateral cross-cousin of the deceased (Lepowsky 1989a). This heir may be a woman or a man and is someone who has had a special exchange relationship with the deceased during life. The gender of the deceased's heir and mortuary feast hosts bears no relation to whether the dead individual was male or female.

In order to hold a feast, the hosts must accumulate large quantities of yams, sago starch and other vegetable foods, pigs, and ceremonial valuables such as shell-disk necklaces (*bagi*), greenstone axeblades (*tobotobo*), orange shell currency pieces (*daveri*), and ceremonial lime spatulas of carved tortoiseshell and tropical hardwood (*wonamo jilevia* and *ghenaga*). These ceremonial valuables are known collectively as *ghune,* a cognate of the term *kula,* made famous by Malinowski (1922) as the system of exchange linking the Trobriand Islands with other islands stretching to the south and east as far as the northern Louisiade Archipelago. Many of the same types of valuables and, in fact, the same individual necklaces and greenstone axeblades, circulate from Vanatinai to the Trobriand Islands, three hundred miles to the northwest. The shell-disk necklaces are manufactured, by both sexes, on Vanatinai and the neighboring islands of the East Calvados Chain to the northwest and by men only on the non-Massim island of Rossel to the northeast. They travel by traditional exchange links from these southeastern islands to the "Kula Ring" islands to the northwest.

But the rules of exchange differ on Vanatinai and the neighboring East Calvados region. In the "Kula Ring," shell-disk necklaces are passed by individual trading partners in a clockwise direction among the islands, while armlets of decorated Conus shell are circulated in a counterclockwise direction. Armshells are not exchanged on Vanatinai and neighboring

islands, and there is no "ring" pattern to the exchange of valuables in the Louisiade Archipelago. Instead, both women and men have large numbers of overlapping personal exchange networks composed of men and women, kin, affines, and unrelated exchange partners.

The primary stimulus to an exchange journey is the obligation to provide valuables to an upcoming mortuary feast and thereby increase one's own personal prestige and reputation for generosity as well as that of one's matrilineage. On Vanatinai both women and men who have many exchange partners, possess substantial amounts of ceremonial valuables, and have hosted or contributed generously to many feasts are known as *giagia*, or "givers."

A person who is active in exchange activities or known to have accumulated ceremonial valuables will receive a large number of requests for contributions of valuables so that an exchange partner may satisfy a personal or ceremonial obligation. The persistent pressure to redistribute valuables is a leveling mechanism that keeps a class of especially wealthy individuals from arising. The giver is rewarded by her or his growing reputation for generosity, by having a large network of individuals indebted to her or him to be asked for labor or goods as needed in future, and by a reputation for wisdom and influence over the lives of others.

The degree to which an individual chooses to exceed the minimum demands of custom in hosting or contributing food and valuables at feasts and thereby increase her or his reputation for wealth and generosity is dependent upon individual personality rather than gender. There are more men than women who are extremely active in exchange, as women in early and middle adulthood tend to be more focused on child care and garden supervision. But there are some women who own more ceremonial valuables and more pigs and who give them away at memorial feasts far more than the majority of men. This difference among individuals is ascribed by Vanatinai people to differences in individual personality and desires. Both men and women are most likely to leave home in search of valuables after the death of father or affine or to assist a close associate with exchange obligations resulting from a death.

Hosting mortuary feasts is normally the responsibility of the surviving spouse. Women as well as men may host memorial feasts, receive large quantities of ceremonial valuables as the deceased's heir (the person who "eats" the feast), or make major contributions to assist the feast host. By giving away valuables, an individual places the recipient in his or her debt. He or she may call on the recipient at any later time in order to request the

return of an equivalent valuable when it is needed. Through building a network of exchange debts and obligations an individual becomes wealthy and influential, able to satisfy not only personal ritual obligations but also those of close associates.

Both women and men may leave children, spouses, and subsistence tasks behind and lead an expedition by sailing canoe to the far side of Vanatinai or to distant islands in quest of ceremonial valuables, pigs, and foodstuffs. In addition to mortuary feasts, valuables are used to purchase garden land and pay a nonobligatory tribute or rent to the owners of garden or village land that one is using, pay a builder of a house or sailing or paddling canoe, or contribute bridewealth or "childwealth" to a kinsperson (see Lepowsky 1983, n.d.b). Some exchange journeys to destinations on Vanatinai are made on foot by women, men, or mixed groups, with each individual visiting personal exchange partners. Exchange partners are of both the same sex and the opposite sex. Success in obtaining valuables is believed to be impossible without knowledge of the proper magic that, drawing on the power of ancestor spirits, affects the mind of the exchange partner, making him or her *negenege,* or dizzy with desire, and anxious to give away precious and carefully hoarded valuables. Exchange magic is taught to both women and men, usually by matrilineal kin or fathers. The idiom of seduction is used regardless of whether the exchange partner is the same or the opposite sex.

Vanatinai is remarkable for the degree to which women are physically mobile. Ardener (1975:6) has suggested that the generally greater physical mobility of men in human societies is a significant factor in their higher status relative to women, as they negotiate and regulate relationships with outside groups. On Vanatinai women travel with their families to live with their own kin and then the kin of their spouse, make journeys in quest of valuables and to act as healers or as food or garden magicians, and attend memorial feasts in other districts and on other islands. Women's mobility is not generally restricted by cultural ideology or taboo, unlike on nearby Rossel Island, which is culturally and linguistically distinct, and where the status of women and young men is lower.[7] Vanatinai women build their own far-ranging personal networks of social relationships that may be activated as needed by the woman for the benefit of her kin or hamlet group.

The Vanatinai case is also remarkable for the extent of female participation in the public, ritually, economically, and politically significant prestige-generating activities, the same activities in which men are involved. In this society with no chiefs or indigenous system of formal political authority,

the means of gaining personal renown and influence over the actions of others are visible success in accumulating foodstuffs and ceremonial valuables through one's own labor and through activating a personal network of exchange links, then giving away goods in acts of public generosity. This avenue to prestige and influence is used by both women and men.

## *Gender and the Life Cycle*

It is impossible to gauge the degree of personal autonomy and of social influence deemed culturally appropriate for women in a particular group without examining the institutions and beliefs that shape the life course of the individual. It is also essential to contrast the ideologies, roles, and customs that shape the lives of females with those affecting males of the same age. This contrast of a society's gender constructs has been largely absent from the anthropology of gender literature since the pioneering work of Margaret Mead (1935).

Consideration of sex roles requires the understanding of age roles as well (compare Linton 1940, 1942). Local ideology concerning the transitions to biological and social adulthood and to old age are especially revealing of attitudes about gender. Focusing on the life cycle illustrates the restrictions and the opportunities facing individuals of both sexes.

Vanatinai society lacks a permanent political leader and has a strong egalitarian ethic that disapproves of the accumulation of wealth without redistribution of goods to those who request it. While cooperation among individuals is extolled and indeed is necessary for continued existence in a small-scale subsistence society, the culture's egalitarian outlook is revealed by the emphasis on personal autonomy and an ethic of respect for the will and the idiosyncrasies of the individual. This respect extends from the treatment of infants to the treatment of the aged and enjoins tolerance of a wide range of character traits and behaviors by women and men of all ages. Respect for others is enforced by the need to cooperate in daily life or suffer the sanction of having neighbors choose to live elsewhere on the island, but it also is enforced by strong beliefs in the destructive powers of others manifested in sorcery and witchcraft (see below).

People say that an infant must never be left crying or else he or she "might become angry and leave us" or, in other words, might die. Child treatment on Vanatinai is extremely permissive, and girls and boys receive equivalent treatment. Infants and young children are nursed on demand

until about three years of age and allowed to explore their environment with minimal interference from adult or child caretakers, even manipulating sharp knives and firebrands as they wish. Both men and women welcome the birth of a girl as well as that of a boy and sometimes openly wish for a girl, who will give birth to future matrilineage members (compare Schlegel, this volume, for the matrilineal Hopi). Fathers, mothers, and their close kin are loving and indulgent to children, carrying them proudly around the hamlet and taking them along on subsistence tasks when older. Boys may accompany their mothers and girls their fathers to the garden or the shore, but children are not taken on hunting trips. By the age of about six, many children have learned to build a fire and boil tubers or roast sago cakes. Accompanying adults and older children on foraging expeditions into nearby forests, they have begun to learn to gather wild fruits and nuts and to gather shellfish and fish with lines from shore. Children cook fish on the shore and share it with each other. If they have more than enough fish or gathered foods, they graciously offer the surplus to adult kin and neighbors, emulating the adult pattern of sharing and generosity.

Toddlers are sometimes left in the hamlet in the care of older siblings while mothers go to their gardens, which may be one to three miles away. The children are patient and indulgent caretakers, stoking the fire and cooking food when the little one is hungry and then inducing her or him to sleep on a mat afterward while they play quietly nearby. Mothers may also take a young child to the garden, leaving an older sibling to watch the toddler in the garden shelter and returning to nurse the toddler on demand. Boys and girls spend approximately the same amount of time assisting their families with household and subsistence tasks until the approach of adolescence.

Adolescents are expected to work hard at gardening, gathering, fishing, and domestic chores in order to demonstrate their industriousness. Women and men alike say that the most important quality to look for in a potential spouse is willingness to work hard. Some adolescent boys work diligently at gardening and sago-making, but others do not. Parties of youths may roam the forest looking for signs of wild pig. Their success in hunting is appreciated by the entire hamlet both because the taste of wild pig is highly prized and because pigs often raid gardens and dig up tubers.

Certain youths may be criticized for not helping their families. After one incident where a respected thirty-five-year-old woman had publicly admonished a group of youths and young unmarried men for having a "spear"-throwing contest in the forest with shafts of tough grass, instead of work-

ing in the gardens, one of their leaders argued that throwing "spears" was important practice for hunting valued game, an argument with which the woman was unimpressed. Later that evening, an old man told me privately, in a nostalgic tone and laughing at the memory, that when he was a youth he and his friends had been similarly criticized by adults for holding "spear"-throwing contests.

Children from birth to about puberty are described by the gender-blind term *gama* (child). An adolescent girl is called *gamaina,* and an adolescent boy is called *zeva*. All kin terms for adults are sex-specific except the term for grandparent.

There are no ceremonies that formally mark puberty or physical maturation for either sex. Menstruation, called *wakinie,* which is also the adverb meaning "behind" or "in back," subjects a woman to few taboos. A menstruating woman should not work in or go near a food garden because, it is said, wild pigs and birds will eat the crop. Unlike on nearby Rossel Island (Armstrong 1928), there is no menstrual hut or period of seclusion at menstruation and childbirth. A woman may spend days of her menstrual period gathering in the forest or looking for shellfish on the reef, or she may choose to remain in the hamlet, wearing many layers of her oldest coconut-leaf skirts, weaving a basket or mat or merely relaxing and chewing betel nut.

Women consider their menstrual periods a pleasant interlude when they are free from garden work. They continue to cook food for their husbands and children, and there is no belief that they are polluting or dangerous to others. They also may have sex with men. When I asked whether it was all right to sleep with a man while menstruating, my female friends said, "Of course! Why do you ask?" I answered weakly that I had heard that in the New Guinea Highlands women could not sleep with their husbands while menstruating because they would make the men sick. The women laughed, and one asked, jokingly, "What kind of 'sickness' do they get? The same kind we have [that is, menstruation]?"

Neither a menstruating woman nor a person of either sex who has had sexual intercourse within the last two or three days should participate in the communal planting of a new yam garden, or else the yams will not grow properly. In this case the bodily fluids of both women and men are inimical to the growth of yams.

Adolescence is regarded by young and old alike as a time of relative freedom from domestic responsibilities and as a time to indulge in love affairs. Sexual activity on Vanatinai is regarded as a pleasurable activity

appropriate for men and women from adolescence to old age. It is not believed to be dangerous or depleting of vital essence for either men or women, unlike in many other parts of Melanesia. Young people vary in the age at which they become sexually active, but it is usually in the mid-teens. Parents may tell their daughters that they are "too young" to have sex, as did the mother of one fifteen-year-old when she began to be courted by a young man of whom the mother disapproved because he was an orphan "with no parents to help him." On the other hand, some parents feel concerned if their daughters are not receiving lovers by the time they are in their late teens. Either sex may take the initiative in arranging a rendezvous either by speaking privately with the object of affection or by sending a verbal message through a third party, often a cross-cousin or a younger sibling. Couples may meet in isolated places in the forest, or the man may creep into the family home after everyone is asleep and quietly awaken the woman. If she is not interested, she may send him away either in silence or by rousing her parents with her loud, indignant protests, an incident that will lead to amused gossip the following day. Success is believed due to the strength of the love magic used by either party. The couple may be politely ignored by the rest of the family, and the man will slip away before dawn. Rape and other forms of sexual assault are completely unknown on the island.

Young girls say that two or more acts of intercourse with the same man are necessary for conception. In order to avoid pregnancy, they say that it is prudent to sleep with a number of different men rather than one. The child of an unmarried mother is enthusiastically welcomed as a new member of her matrilineage and is not stigmatized, but people feel sorry for the child because he or she has no father.

Men and boys may give gifts of tobacco, betel nut, or shell valuables directly to their lovers. If a couple is discovered sleeping inside a house, the mother or mother's brother may place a basket filled with ceremonial valuables and other goods near the man's head and then retreat. When the man awakens, before dawn, he must take this basket with its goods, called *buwa,* with him. He is not supposed to keep the valuables but must return them to the woman's mother and mother's brother along with equivalent valuables that he must request from his own kin. This presentation of valuables may be public and dramatic if, for example, the rendezvous has taken place during a feast. Afterward, the man is free to sleep with the woman for as long as is mutually agreeable. People stress that *buwa* is not a marriage payment. It goes to a woman's kin because they "worked hard to

feed her." Lovers of prominent older divorced or widowed women may also give *buwa* to the woman's kin or to the woman herself, sometimes a shell-disk necklace, a valuable gift that is a source of pride to the woman. *Buwa* "is paid to the house" and may not be demanded if a couple meets in the forest, a strategy that is therefore favored by many young men.

The people in the three settlements that comprise the central dialect area of Vanatinai encourage their children to court and marry one another. They have therefore agreed not to "put out the basket" when their young men come to sleep with the young women of the region. The people of the small islands of the East Calvados Chain northwest of Vanatinai speak a different language and are culturally distinct from Vanatinai people, whom they frequently visit by sailing canoe for purposes of traditional exchange. These people have no custom of *buwa,* and their young men explain that they are afraid to sleep with Vanatinai women during their visits because they might have to ask their families to help them pay *buwa.* If they do not pay they risk attack by sorcery. The custom of *buwa* therefore helps to promote district and island-wide endogamy.[8]

There is no ritual or institutional homosexuality on Vanatinai. When after a long period of residence on Vanatinai and adjacent islands I had heard nothing about individual acts of or dispositions toward homosexuality (although I had heard of rare cases of other unconventional sex such as incest), I asked some trusted friends if there were any men or women who slept with members of their own sex. They seemed sincerely puzzled and amused at the idea and asked me why anyone would bother when intercourse with the opposite sex was so enjoyable. By contrast, homosexuality is institutionalized for young males in some Papua New Guinea societies with an ethic of male dominance where it seems to be a concomitant of an extreme ideology of female pollution and the resulting danger of heterosexual activity (for example, Herdt 1981, 1982; Schieffelin 1976).

Women and men are free to choose their own marriage partners. Kinfolk may express approval or disapproval of an individual or ask for (or not ask for) *buwa,* but no marriage will endure unless the couple is personally compatible. The act of marriage consists of the new husband's staying in the house with his wife after dawn and cooking the breakfast his bride prepares. Unmarried couples do not eat together. Afterward the husband goes to work in the garden of his wife's kin under the supervision of his mother-in-law. If he is lazy, his in-laws will lobby to have him leave. Name avoidance is practiced by affines. A man is usually addressed by his wife's kin as "*X*'s husband" (literally "*X*'s man"). A woman is usually called "*Y*'s

wife" (literally, "*Y*'s woman"). Both may later be called "*Z*'s mother" or "*Z*'s father." Thus, both sexes are referred to symmetrically in terms of their relationship to one another.

Bridewealth, which normally consists of a shell-disk necklace and one or several greenstone axeblades, is not paid to the wife's kin unless it seems clear that the marriage will last. Often the wife is pregnant or has already borne children. The wife's kin give garden produce to the kin of the husband and may kill a pig to distribute when the bridewealth, or *vazavó,* is paid. Some men never pay bridewealth, and this may be a source of friction in marital quarrels. One woman, when she was angry with her husband, used to shout for the whole hamlet to hear, "You never gave my parents any *tobotobo* (greenstone axeblades) for me!" This woman seems to agree with John Ogbu's (1978) argument that bridewealth enhances female status by legitimizing marriage.

Bridewealth on Vanatinai is merely the opening round in a series of reciprocal affinal exchanges, which continues even beyond the deaths of the married couple, ending only with the completion of the mortuary ritual sequence at the deaths of a couple's children (see Lepowsky 1981, 1989a). At the birth of a firstborn child, the wife's kin are supposed to make a small feast and give ceremonial valuables to the kin of the husband in gratitude for his having sired a new member of their matrilineage. This "childwealth" payment flows in the opposite direction from the bridewealth and consists of the same types of valuables. Affines of either sex and their kin bear an equal obligation to assist the spouse and kin on request with gifts of labor, food, and valuables. Affines are normally one's most important exchange partners. People say that this is why polygyny is rare: a man with two or more wives has two or more sets of affines, and he must assist them as requested or face their potentially deadly wrath as they take revenge through sorcery or witchcraft.

Divorce may be initiated by either husband or wife. Bridewealth is supposed to be returned by the wife's kin to the husband no matter who initiated the divorce or who had offended the other spouse, because it is said that the husband will need the bridewealth again when he remarries. According to gossip, the wife's kin in certain cases will argue for reconciliation because they do not want to return the bridewealth, which was usually given long ago to other exchange partners to satisfy other exchange obligations. If a man and woman live separately but still call themselves husband and wife and still assist their affines as requested, they are still considered to be married, and any children borne by the woman are considered the

offspring of the husband. This describes the living arrangement of at least one couple during my residence on Vanatinai. Adultery is disapproved of, but if discovered, the offender may be forgiven by the spouse, although sometimes an angry quarrel ensues. There is no disparity in cultural ideology or actual practice in treatment of male versus female adulterers. Gossip attributes acts of adultery to both sexes in approximately equal numbers.

Sanday's (1981:164–65) definitions of male dominance and gender equality include the presence or absence, respectively, of male violence against women. In Schlegel's (1972) cross-cultural study of matrilineal societies, "matrilocal residence," "positions held outside the home," and "absence of punishment of the wife" are found to be strongly correlated with "High Female Autonomy." The presence on Vanatinai of bilocal residence and of women's prominence in public political, economic, and ritual affairs has already been discussed. I heard of no cases, past or present, of rape. Wife-beating is rare and is strongly disapproved. In one case, about two generations ago, when a man assaulted his wife and seriously injured her head, her kinsmen in retribution killed almost every single member of the husband's lineage, which today consists of only a few people. In 1978–79 one husband hit his wife in the face and broke her jaw after accusing her of infidelity. His action was considered reprehensible. Husband abuse is also rare but also takes place. During the same year a jealous young wife broke her husband's wrist and burned his chest with a firebrand. In both of these cases village gossip held that the violent spouse had in fact been committing adultery and that the injured spouses were innocent. Both spouse abuse victims remained married for several more years, during which there were no further acts of violence, but both couples were divorced when I returned to the island in 1987.

All but a few adults marry. Most of these few have some kind of physical deformity but may still be sexually active. Adult women and men alike may gain a reputation as an individual who is a proficient gardener, food collector, hunter or fisher, or they may become known as healers or garden ritual experts. Most young adults become involved in traditional exchange activities by obtaining ceremonial valuables from their parents' exchange partners and other kin and then presenting them at memorial feasts as appropriate for members of their kin group. People have personal exchange partners of both the same and the opposite sex. It is up to the individual man or woman to decide whether the reward of area-wide renown and influence is worth the danger to oneself and one's family from retaliatory sorcery or witchcraft if he or she becomes exceptionally active and visible in exchange activities.

People in their thirties to early sixties tend to be most widely known for their wealth, skill, and knowledge about traditional exchange. Not only the mothers but the fathers of young children are inhibited by the fear that envious sorcerers or witches may take revenge by injuring or killing their children. Parents of young children may also refrain from extensive exchange activities because of their extra subsistence and child-care obligations.

The men and women of Vanatinai exhibit a wide range of temperaments and personality traits. Individual personality rather than gender determines whether a person chooses to exert extra effort to become known as an excellent gardener, a healer, a ritual expert, or a *gia* who has many exchange partners and ceremonial valuables and has hosted or contributed generously to many feasts. Experts in exchange, healing, or gardening must be "strong," whether they are male or female, because they must be willing to engage in persistent hard work beyond the demands of subsistence. They must seek out and learn the magic or ritual knowledge without which they will not succeed. They must also expose themselves and their families to the risk of illness or death through the sorcery or witchcraft of envious competitors.

In an egalitarian society like Vanatinai, there is no cultural discontinuity between the position of the premenopausal and postmenopausal woman (Lepowsky 1985a). There is no marked rise for some or all women to a higher or more "man-like" status once a woman has passed the age of childbearing the way there is in societies that emphasize the danger of female sexuality to the social order or the polluting qualities of the premenopausal female (compare Simmons 1945:63–5; Meigs 1976; Poole 1981; Brown 1982). The treatment of elderly women on Vanatinai parallels the treatment of elderly men. The terms *laisali* and *mankwesi,* which are synonymous and mean "old woman," are terms of respect that are used to address important women who are as young as twenty-five or thirty.

Both women and men may remain active in subsistence tasks until extreme old age, walking miles over rough terrain to gardens and maintaining ties with kin in other parts of the island. The needs of the elderly for food, water, and firewood are provided without complaint by kin and neighbors. Old people are respected for their knowledge and wisdom and for being close to ancestorhood. They may also be feared for their potential retaliation through knowledge of witchcraft or sorcery if their needs are not met and because of the possibility that after they die and join the other ancestor spirits they might refuse to aid their living descendants who treated them badly in their last years. Widows and widowers must undergo

an equally onerous period of mourning that ends after the final memorial feast in honor of the deceased spouse, usually several years later. The deaths of a man and a woman receive equal ritual attention (Lepowsky 1989a).

As predicted for an egalitarian society, the degree of personal autonomy and influence over others is remarkably parallel for Vanatinai women and men at specific points in the life cycle. Individuals generally gain in power and prestige as they age. Differences in behavior, activities, and personal wealth are attributed to individual personality and knowledge, practical and magical.

## *Gender Ideology*

There is no publicly or privately voiced ideology of male dominance on Vanatinai. Women are not characterized as weak, inferior, polluting, or dangerous. Men speak admiringly of female associates as "strong," "wise," and "generous." Significantly, these same qualities are also most highly valued in men. Generosity, or giving to others, is the most highly valued personal characteristic in Vanatinai culture. It is explicitly likened to parental nurture.

In some societies of the New Guinea Highlands and Highlands fringe, where gender opposition is marked, gender constructions are conceptualized as changeable or transitional, dependent in part upon human actions (for example, Meigs 1976; Kelly 1976; Poole 1981; Herdt 1981, 1982). On Vanatinai gender is ascribed at birth and remains immutable. Each sex follows its own developmental path and its prescribed part in begetting and giving birth to new people. The life cycle is not punctuated by critical periods such as puberty, marriage, or menopause when ritual action may be taken to change or validate male or female status. Passage through the life cycle from one age-sex category (Linton 1940, 1942) to the next is a gradual process across blurred boundaries.

Vanatinai also differs from societies of New Guinea and elsewhere with marked gender opposition in not sharing their tendency to project a dualistic symbolism upon the environment. When the domains and activities of males and females show considerable overlap, there is less cultural logic in categorizing the world into objects and actions with male versus female qualities. Although some in fact are so categorized on Vanatinai, such dualistic symbolism is much less pervasive than in many other Melanesian societies.

Ortner (1974) has suggested that an association of women with nature and men with culture is universal in human gender ideologies, the "male" domain of culture being more highly valued and thus male dominance itself universal. This dichotomy does not manifest itself in Vanatinai gender ideology. An association of femaleness with key domains of culture is revealed by Vanatinai mythology.

Sanday (1981) argues that gender ideology is shaped by the relationship of males and females to "sacred symbols of creative power" in a culture's mythology or sacred writings. She sees origin myths and the sex of the creator as being particularly significant in describing and validating concepts of power and gender relations, stating that "when the female creative principle dominates or works in conjunction with the male principle, the sexes are either integrated and equal in everyday life . . . or they are separate and equal" (Sanday 1981:33).

On Vanatinai the creator spirit is believed to be a male being named Rodyo who sometimes takes the form of a snake. He lives on Mt. Rio, the highest peak on Vanatinai, with his two wives and with the spirits of all the island's dead. Rodyo is said to have created the world simply by thinking of it and to have assigned clan names and animal and plant totems to the first people. Rodyo thus conforms to Sanday's (1981:58) prediction that male creators will be associated with the sky (in this case a cloud-shrouded mountain peak) and create through magic, while female or couple creators create from the body or from other natural substances. But if Sanday is correct in stating that origin myths are significant reflections of a culture's "sex-role plan," then why does an egalitarian society like Vanatinai have a male creator? The existence of a male creator on Vanatinai does not seem to reflect the influence of Christian missionaries who have worked intermittently on the island since 1947; an early white resident, a goldminer and pearlshell trader, wrote in 1892 that the "Great Chief" named "Rodes" lives on Mt. "Reo" with his wives and gardens and appears "like mist" to the human eye (White 1893). But the Vanatinai creation myth is culturally unelaborated, contains few details, and is rarely recounted by the islanders and not, apparently, because it is a particularly sacred myth. When it is told, the narrator usually launches immediately afterward into the story of Alagh, a supernatural who left Rodyo's community taking with him all the valuable goods that now belong to Europeans. Often narrated alone, this "cargoistic" explanatory myth is obviously more compelling to present-day islanders than the story of Rodyo's creation of the world (Lepowsky 1989b). The myth I was most frequently told concerns the origin of the

most important aspect of Vanatinai culture, the exchange of valuables. This first exchange takes place between two female beings (see below).

In Sanday's cross-cultural analysis of 112 creation stories, she finds 50 percent allude to masculine symbolism, 32 percent to mixed male and female, and 18 percent to feminine symbolism. She notes that the largest percentage of "feminine tales" is found in the Insular Pacific region, where there are very few "masculine tales," and comments that the finding of "many feminine origin tales" is consistent with the "ritual focus on female reproductive functions" in this region (1981:60). However, most of the Pacific societies whose rituals are concerned with female reproduction are societies with an explicit ideology of male dominance and female pollution where "ritual emulation by men of female reproductive functions," as Sanday phrases it, seems to symbolize male efforts to control or appropriate female reproductive power. Couple or feminine origin myths in these Pacific societies may therefore symbolize not an egalitarian ideology of gender but male preoccupation with female power and the ritual means through which it may be assimilated by men, who thereby become ideologically dominant over women and children.

Although Sanday sees couple creators in mythology as being generally found in more sexually egalitarian societies, as the female creates by giving birth or shaping people, animals or natural objects, many New Guinea Highlands societies with couple creators also feature sexual segregation, concern with female pollution, and an ethic of male dominance (for example, Glasse 1965:33; Berndt 1965:80; Meggitt 1965:107; Meigs, personal communication 1983).

On the other hand, in the generally sexually egalitarian Massim culture area, there are a variety of origin myths. On Vanatinai there is a male creator, and the world comes into existence through his magical thought. People emerge from a hole in the ground, symbolically analogous to the act of birth, in the matrilineal Trobriand Islands (Malinowski 1922:305) as well as on nearby patrilineal Goodenough Island (Young 1971:12–13). An androgynous creator named Enak gives birth to "the first mortal ancestor," creating birth, death, and human artifacts on Sabarl Island (Battaglia 1983:294), one of the Calvados Chain Islands just to the northwest of Vanatinai. The Bimin Kuskusmin of the Highlands fringe, with a strong ideology of female pollution, also have an androgynous creator (Poole 1981:159). We must therefore be cautious in asserting that a culture's origin mythology directly reflects its gender ideology.

Origin myths can illuminate cultural constructions of gender if we

examine them in relation to other significant myths in the same culture and focus on the complexity and the possibly contradictory nature of their relationships to other aspects of gender-related thought and action. Even within the same myth, particular motifs may be emphasized by different tellers in different versions. Indigenous exegeses may vary among individuals and over time, providing ideological foundations for explaining or validating quite different aspects of the environment or the behavior of humans, animals, or supernatural beings.

Rodyo, the Vanatinai creator spirit, is primarily associated by Vanatinai people today not with his ancient act of creation but with the spirits of the dead, for he sends his canoe to pick up the spirits of the newly dead and takes them to live in his hamlet on the summit of Mt. Rio, where he is usually in the form of a snake. Rodyo is also one of the two supernatural patrons of sorcery. The other, Tamudurere, who lives at an unspecified place in the sea, is also male. Sorcery is virtually a male monopoly, replacing killing through warfare as a male activity. All of this is consistent with the Vanatinai belief that women are the givers of life, discussed below.

Vanatinai has a large number of myths that explain the origins of particular features of the landscape and of various cultural institutions. The myth of the origin of exchange is the most frequently told on the island and is one of the most detailed. To summarize it briefly, a female snake named Bambagho decided to leave Goodenough Island (Mwalatau) where it had been living. After a long journey it finally took refuge in a cave on Vanatinai. There it was discovered by an old woman, who fed it secretly. Every morning she would bring it a big platter of sago and green coconut pudding (a delicacy usually served at mortuary feasts). Every morning the snake would in gratitude give the old woman a piece of its excrement. The snake's excrement was *daveri,* or orange shell currency. This was the first time that any kind of ceremonial valuable had ever been seen on Vanatinai. The snake also taught the old woman the first magic of exchange, called *une* or *ghune,* cognates to the Tubetube *kune* and Trobriand *kula.* But the old woman had two grandsons who could not understand why the bundles of sago starch they had made kept disappearing. They spied on the old woman, followed her to the cave, and saw her give the snake sago pudding and receive excrement/shell currency in exchange. Furious, they drove the snake off the island using branches of two trees that bear edible nuts. Angry and hurt, the snake fled to nearby Rossel Island (Rova or Yela), where it lives today on a mountain peak.[9]

The islanders who tell the myth today usually comment at its conclusion

about the foolish action of the young men in driving away the snake who gave shell currency for sago pudding in the prototypical first exchange. They hold as a moral exemplar the wise old woman whose generosity with a valued food was rewarded by her acquiring not only the first shell valuables but the knowledge of how to obtain more from human beings through the use of exchange magic. Because the snake now lives on Rossel, they say, that island now has thousands of shell currency pieces in circulation.[10]

In this myth a female being teaches another female the peaceful exchange with off-islanders of surplus food for ceremonial valuables. Similar exchanges are the most important and valued aspect of Vanatinai culture. The myth not only indicates the association of females with the domain of culture but provides a mythological charter (Malinowski 1922) for the exchange activities of island women, their right to learn the magic of exchange, to own valuables, and to dispose of the surplus production of both men and women. It emphasizes that generosity is rewarded, perhaps in unexpected ways, portraying the unselfish action of the old woman, initially ignorant of the value of shell currency, in nurturing the stranger. The old woman takes the sago produced by her kinsmen, a semen-like substance, and feeds it to the snake, who "gives birth" through excretion to wealth and then generously gives away its excrement. Perceived by the young, selfish males as the ultimate worthless object, this excrement is supernaturally revealed to the old woman as the ultimate token of value, and symbol of culture, shell currency. This element of the myth echoes the Freudian equation of money or wealth with excrement. Similarly, Róheim (1950:195) recounts two myths from Normanby Island in the southern Massim in which *kula* shell-disk necklaces and armshells are found in a sow's belly in place of excrement, and Dundes (1979:401) documents "the association of wealth, in the form of copper, with feces" in the potlatches of the Indians of the Pacific Northwest.

The motif of the wise woman is common in Vanatinai myths. A female supernatural named Emuga (*mumuga* means "custom") is at first the only being to know the secret of fire and how to cook food, another example of the association of females with the "cooked" domain of culture as opposed to the "raw" domain of nature (contrast Lévi-Strauss 1969b). In other myths, mothers and sisters assist their kinsmen by giving them magical—and cultural—knowledge of how to slay tyrannical beasts and giants that menace the islanders.

There is no explicit or implicit opposition of "natural woman" to "cultural man" in Vanatinai gender ideology (compare MacCormack and Strat-

hern 1980). Ortner (1974:73–74) does not argue that men are perceived as exclusively cultural and women exclusively natural but that women are universally seen as "closer to nature than men." In Vanatinai gender ideology both sexes simultaneously embody natural and cultural attributes to the same degree. In myth both females and males bring key aspects of culture. In ritual, the aspect of human activity that Ortner (1974:72) perceives as quintessentially cultural in portraying human action on "the givens of natural existence," women participate equally with men. In fact, as discussed below, one woman must represent her matrilineage in the climactic moment of the final mortuary feast in order to ensure the reestablishment of social order following the disintegration induced by death. Thus Vanatinai ideology holds women responsible for both cultural and biological reproduction (compare Weiner 1982).

The people of Vanatinai say explicitly that women give life while men kill, offering this statement as an explanation for why killing in war and sorcery are specializations of men. But death as well as birth belongs to the domain of nature as opposed to culture (compare Sanday 1981:5). Associations of the female with life and the male with death have been suggested as universal in the gender symbolism of human societies (for example, Beauvoir 1953; Rosaldo and Atkinson 1975). They are extremely widespread cross-culturally (for example, Sanday 1981:5; Schlegel, this volume). It is hard to imagine a society that would not give symbolic weight to women's biologically ordained role as the sex that gives birth and lactates. In all known human societies men are the primary, if not the exclusive, defenders of the group and killers of game (compare Brown 1970a; Brightman n.d.). The opposition of female/life to male/death, however, is not universal at every level of gender ideology in a given society. For example, Strathern (1980:204, 206) notes that the people of the Mt. Hagen area of the New Guinea Highlands associate the male with life and with the cults that assure the continuity of life and the female with death and pollution: "Through the perpetuity of the clan, ancestor worship and their spirit cults, males represent social continuity, whereas females are said to have brought death into the world."

On Misima, Panaeati, and the Calvados Chain Islands, the Misima and Saisai language areas that lie to the northwest of Vanatinai, people say that witches, the destroyers of life, are usually women, and healers, who counteract the power of witchcraft, are usually men, a reversal of the Vanatinai concept of the usual supernatural division of labor by sex. The Vanatinai ideal that women are life-givers fails to take into account the fact that even

on that island many deaths are attributed to the witchcraft of women from both Vanatinai itself and the islands to the northwest. Similarly, there are many widely known, powerful male witches in the Misima and Saisai language areas. Both men and women in the Vanatinai region have the power to destroy (Lepowsky 1981:423–68, 1989b).

The association of maleness on Vanatinai with death, war, and sorcery is reflected in the fact that the supernatural patrons ("owners") of sorcery, witchcraft, and warfare are male. The "owner" of healing, Egoregore, is a female being who lives on Mt. Rio, but on the other hand, the "owner" of illness is her sister Ediriwo. There is one male and one female owner of hunting, an activity sometimes carried out by women (without spears). The female owner is a pigeon, the totem bird of a local matrilineage. Totem birds are sometimes addressed respectfully as "my mother" when seen in the forest. Two owners of garden fertility, the sisters Jinrubi and Eurubi, are female, and the third, Mwaoni, is male. Mwaoni is also one of several male owners of exchange. A female owner, the snake Bambagho, migrated to Rossel Island. Human women and men may both learn the magic pertaining to all of these aspects of island life, usually from their mother or mother's brother, less often from father, spouse, or an unrelated person who is paid in ceremonial valuables. Women are usually not taught certain types of weather and hunting magic, although they do know some powerful hunting magic and formerly could acquire war magic. Men and women each teach individuals of the opposite sex. Possession of magical knowledge, which depends primarily for its efficacy on spells that communicate with ancestor spirits, of both sexes, and supernatural beings such as those mentioned here is a primary means, in local belief, of obtaining prosperity, success, and power over others.

The Vanatinai gender ideology that associates women with life and men with death is contradicted by indigenous beliefs in the destructive power of female witches and the few female sorcerers and by the reality that women do hunt; they just do not hunt wild pigs, dugongs, or crocodiles with spears. Beliefs about the supernatural patrons of death and illness on the one hand and healing, fertility, and abundance on the other show no clear-cut sexual division of labor among supernatural beings. These aspects of Vanatinai sexual meanings are ambiguous and contradictory, and thus perhaps islanders may interpret and use them differently for their own ideological reasons. Yet there is no overall division of kinds of positive and negative supernatural power into male and female domains.

Collier and Rosaldo (1981:275–76) express surprise at the lack of ritual

emphasis on female fertility and maternity in the anthropological literature on hunter-gatherer and hunter-horticulturalist societies, finding that women's rituals "have much less to do with the creation of life than with health and sexual pleasure." In the two instances on Vanatinai when women are singled out for special ritual treatment, the value of female fertility and of women as mothers of present or future matrilineage members is emphasized. The occasions are the birth of a firstborn child and the death of a spouse or affine. Both associate woman with the "natural" domain, but in both cases the natural event requires cultural elaboration to ensure human continuity.

Birth is not seen as polluting: husbands, fathers, and kinsmen as well as kinswomen may be present and may perform magical spells to ease the birth. After a first child of either sex is born, the mother remains in seclusion in the house where she gave birth for up to several months, leaving only to eliminate and then covering her head and shoulders with a coconut-leaf skirt. This seclusion is supposed to protect her child and herself from the destructive gaze of jealous sorcerers that might otherwise cause illness or death. The period of seclusion probably does protect the mother and child from greater exposure to various infectious diseases.

The new father too is supposed to remain close to the hamlet and to provide food for his wife and child. Both he and his wife are to observe the same set of food taboos in order to protect the health of their infant (Lepowsky 1985b). The mother emerges from seclusion at a feast that her kin organize where ceremonial valuables are given to her husband's kin to show gratitude at his having sired a new member of the mother's matrilineage. After subsequent births, the mother only remains in seclusion for up to a few weeks.

At the death of a spouse or a person related by marriage, a woman of the affinal matrilineage must represent her kin group and their mourning by undergoing a form of temporary social death. Like the new mother of a first-born, she remains in the house, leaving only to eliminate and then covering her head and shoulders with a coconut-leaf skirt. She also wears the ankle-length mourning skirt and blackens her body with charcoal. She is not allowed to touch her hands to her lips and must be fed by the kin of the deceased until the first mortuary feast is made, when she is also released from this strict seclusion. When a husband dies, his wife is the principal mourner who represents the affinal matrilineage. When a wife dies, her husband undergoes this same form and period of mourning, but he is joined in mourning by one designated kinswoman.

Undertaking this mourning is regarded as an honor and a means of accruing prestige for one's matrilineage. The mourners and their exchange partners accumulate ceremonial valuables, pigs, and foodstuffs to present to the kin of the deceased and to the person who represents the matrilineage of the deceased's father in order to "clear" their mourning taboos at the final mortuary feast several years after the death. On this occasion when mourners are socially reborn, the representatives of the matrilineage of the deceased or of his or her father bathe, oil, dress, and decorate the erstwhile mourners and send them to dance publicly for the first time since the death. The mourning spouse is then free to remarry (Lepowsky 1981, 1989a).

Birth and death are both events when there is a threat to the continuity and fertility of the matrilineage. The islanders have observed that firstborn infants have a higher mortality rate than others. The new mother is therefore expected to sacrifice temporarily her freedom and mobility to protect her child from harm. Not only sorcerers of unknown identity but her husband's kin may be jealous because she has given birth to a child whom their kinsman will help to grow but who does not belong to them. Her kin therefore compensate her husband's kin with valuables. This childwealth is also perceived as being part of the ongoing exchange between affines initiated by bridewealth. Bridewealth therefore does not lead to a permanent asymmetry between affinal lineages that might lead to an asymmetry in the status of husband and wife (compare Divale and Harris 1976:523–24). The wife is then socially reborn in her new status as mother and returns to normal life. The mother is acting for the social good: the survival of the infant represents the future of the matrilineage.

Similarly, the principal female mourner undergoes a social death and is placed under the control of the deceased's kin for the social good. Vanatinai custom places suspicion on spouses and affines of having caused a death through sorcery or witchcraft or of benefiting from a death because at the close of the mortuary feast sequence, the affines will be free of their obligations to contribute valuables, food, and labor to the deceased's kin. Affinal relations are marked overtly by respect and covertly by tension and competition. The mourning spouse and/or principal female mourner are symbolically held hostage by the deceased's kin during the liminal period until the final feast in order to compensate the kin for the loss of a lineage member. At this final feast the kinswomen of the deceased, or his or her father's kinswomen, present the female affinal mourners with new coconut-leaf skirts, and the mourning women give new skirts to the kin of the deceased or of his or her father.

The cultural theme of skirt exchanges between affinal women during the mortuary ritual sequence is far more highly elaborated in the Trobriand Islands, as reported by Weiner (1976). On Vanatinai this skirt exchange represents the good wishes of each matrilineage for the future fertility of the other now that the crisis of death and the resulting threat of retaliatory sorcery and further deaths have been satisfactorily resolved through mortuary exchanges. The exchange of fine new skirts also symbolizes the willingness of matrilineages to continue in future the peaceful exchange of men in marriage (contrast Lévi-Strauss 1969a), which is necessary to produce new members of each kin group. Thus both at the birth of an infant and at the death of an affine a woman is regarded as acting unselfishly for the benefit of her matrilineage. Vanatinai gender ideology differs therefore from that of the Mt. Hagen region of the New Guinea Highlands, where Strathern (1981) reports a belief that males act for the good of the larger community, while females act out of self-interest.

Vanatinai gender ideology, as manifested in general statements, mythology, beliefs about the supernatural bases of power, and ritual practice, does not separate out female versus male domains of power or privilege one gender over the other. Females are as cultural, and as natural, as males and are just as essential to the construction and continuity of the human and supernatural worlds. The culture's gender ideology thus parallels its social structure and sexual division of labor in being egalitarian and valorizing the power and autonomy of individuals of both sexes.

## *Gender and Social Change*

Vanatinai has had six generations of intermittent contact with Europeans, but in many respects island life has changed little. Per capita income is still well under 20 dollars per year. The island was brought gradually under the control of first the British and then the Australian colonial governments, and since 1975 it has been part of the independent nation of Papua New Guinea. The major change that the islanders note is one with a likely impact on female status, the cessation of warfare and raiding. This was not fully accomplished until 1943, although the British colonial government had been under the impression that the region was completely "pacified" by the late 1880s, the time of a brief goldrush on the island. Peaceful conditions have meant an expansion of interdistrict and interisland trading and exchange and greater mobility for both men and women.

Vanatinai men were formerly admired for their prowess in warfare, but according to local belief the islanders fought primarily to defend themselves rather than to attack others or gain territory or goods. Population density on Vanatinai, an island consisting primarily of precipitous mountain slopes, malarial sago, and mangrove swamps, is very low and was probably low a hundred years ago, judging from the reports of early European visitors. There is and probably was ample land to make gardens and collect food, especially given that until about fifty years ago people relied far more heavily on sago-making and the collection of wild foods and less on cultivation than they have in recent years (Lepowsky 1985b).

It is worth noting that the people who were the most persistent raiders of Vanatinai came from small and infertile coral islands in the Calvados Chain and near the New Guinea mainland that even today find it difficult to support their dense populations. The raiders often appeared on Vanatinai after the annual yam harvest and carried off yams and other foodstuffs. Oral tradition asserts that there was an increase in raiding by off-islanders on Vanatinai hamlets and gardens in late precolonial times and that settlements were moved from the shore to steep, defensible ridge-tops along the central mountain range (Lepowsky 1983, n.d.b). Although people from the various districts on Vanatinai occasionally raided one another, these engagements are seen by their descendants as having been in retaliation for an offense such as fishing without permission on reefs belonging to another matrilineage or even assault on a wife, as described above.

Killing for revenge or defense was valued and celebrated by ritual cannibalism and an accompanying presentation of ceremonial valuables. A man with a reputation as a great fighter was known as *asiara,* or champion. Generally Vanatinai males were esteemed not for their aggressiveness but for their ability to defend the hamlets. Success in obtaining valuables from an exchange partner because of one's cleverness and magical knowledge was more highly valued, the islanders say, than obtaining similar goods through warfare and plunder. This relative lack of a cultural value of male aggressiveness for its own sake distinguishes Vanatinai from many societies of the New Guinea Highlands. In the latter, a high population density, a relative shortage of suitable garden land, a high value accorded to men for their prowess in warfare, and the segregation of males from females in order to protect males from the polluting and depleting females who might impair their ability to fight enforce a social emphasis on male solidary groups that dominate political, economic, and ritual life.[11]

On Vanatinai people say that male killing in warfare has been replaced by

male killing through sorcery, an analogous form of social control. But women may know counter-sorcery or witchcraft and in these fashions influence the lives and deaths of others.

The male specialization in defense in precolonial times meant that men were more likely to meet strangers visiting the island in case they planned to raid instead of trade, but the islanders say that even in early times women went on exchange voyages. The prominent position of women on Vanatinai is said to be part of *taubwaragha,* the customs of the ancestors. The earliest recorded visitors to the island, the men of the British survey ship H.M.S. *Rattlesnake,* who arrived in 1849, were at first only approached by canoes full of men until trade relations had been established, after which women also came alongside the vessel in canoes to engage in trade (Huxley 1935; Macgillivray 1852). Captain Owen Stanley observed women in canoes on Sudest Lagoon and noted in his diary, "Some of the Women in the Canoes seemed to have a certain amount of command; and some respect was shown to them, but those we have yet seen in Shore have been employed carrying Baskets on their heads" (Stanley 1849:18). The British had arrived in July, the peak of the present-day yam harvest, and soon arranged a trade of massive quantities of yams in exchange for pieces of iron and iron axes. The women carrying baskets were probably then, as now, regarded as the "owners" of the yams they brought and had decided to trade them to the strangers.

Changes during the colonial and national government periods have placed men in the position of relating to the administration and to outsiders with interests in the island. Although the island's migration rate is very low, about 3 percent, some men have left the island for a few years in search of work as crews of coastal vessels, on plantations or in towns and then returned, some speaking a bit of English. Under the Australian colonial government and, since 1975, the national government of Papua New Guinea, official local authority is supposed to belong to a local government councillor elected from each district of the island. Those from Vanatinai have all been male. Two prominent middle-aged women who were nominated, by men, on one occasion that I witnessed withdrew their names in embarrassment. People said it was because they, like almost all adult Vanatinai women, do not speak English. A few men have learned some English from migrating elsewhere in Papua New Guinea to work. The islanders explain that the local government councillor is expected to receive, organize meals for, and converse with the government officer-in-charge or other government officials on their rare visits to the island villages. These individ-

uals were formerly mostly Australians and are now almost all Papua New Guineans from other parts of the country. Since there are over 700 different languages in Papua New Guinea, these officials must try to communicate in English, one of the nation's three official languages, since the other two, Pidgin and Motu, are spoken by very few people in the Vanatinai region.

The yearly census throughout the country records a person's given name and then uses the father's name as a surname, even in matrilineal areas such as Vanatinai.

The Roman Catholic Mission of the Sacred Heart and the United Church (Methodist) Mission have both attempted to convert the islanders since 1947 with only partial success. Since then, Australian priests, along with Australian nuns, have lived on nearby Rossel and Nimowa Islands. The first Papua New Guinean priest, from a Calvados Chain island, was recently ordained. Nine women from the Calvados Chain, where Catholic influence is far stronger than on Vanatinai, became nuns, but all of them had quit by 1978. Catholic lay catechists are all male, as are United Church ministers and pastors, many from Misima Island, seventy miles to the northwest, who are posted temporarily to some of the Vanatinai settlements. During United Church services, men always sit on the right and women on the left, "so that they won't say bad things to each other during the service." Church and government officials, who are male, expect to deal with Vanatinai men. Women are supposed to form clubs (mostly inactive on Vanatinai) to weave mats for church and for government rest houses, to bake scones in a clay cooking pot over a fire to sell for money for club projects, to assist the elderly and ailing with their daily chores, and to assist on government works projects. The United Church also organizes Women's Fellowship chapters (again mostly inactive on Vanatinai), which are supposed to meet for prayers, good works, and laboring on the church, grounds, and pastor's house and garden.

Several recent writers on the anthropology of gender have stressed the changing nature of gender roles and ideology and the necessity of evaluating the historical context of gender relations in a particular society (for example, Etienne and Leacock 1980; Gewertz 1981, 1983). The evidence from Vanatinai seems to corroborate aspects of Leacock's (1978) hypothesis that women's position relative to men is eroded in small-scale societies that come under colonial domination. New, formalized systems of power have been imposed by government and mission, and their roles are filled exclusively by men, with Vanatinai village constables, local government councillors, pastors, and lay catechists themselves subordinate to outside author-

ity held exclusively by men, formerly whites and now mostly Papua New Guineans from societies with an ideology of male dominance. The autonomy of all individuals on Vanatinai, male and female, has declined with pacification and the hegemony of laws, courts, district officers, priests, and mission boards. Females are effectively shut out of new avenues to power and prestige in the public domain, and in this sense, Vanatinai society seems to be less egalitarian than it was in precolonial times.

It is too simplistic, however, to argue that colonization inevitably and in every aspect of social life has a negative impact on the social position of women; Leacock's stance is too monolithic. In one New Guinea case, Gewertz (1981, 1983) shows that for the Chambri (Tchambuli), Australian colonial hegemony in the 1920s and 1930s resulted in regional pacification, a return from exile, a new cash economy, men's departure as migrant laborers, attrition of male exchange partnerships, and intensified female control of subsistence production and of barter. These factors strengthened women's economic position and personal autonomy enough so that Margaret Mead (1935) could describe the Tchambuli as a society where women were dominant, and, according to Gewertz, their position was stronger around the time of Mead's 1933 visit than at any time before or since due to various historical factors.

In the Vanatinai case, warfare formerly was an avenue to prestige and influence for men, who could achieve the title of *asiara*. Institutionalized or frequent warfare and a consequent tendency to reward male aggression and prowess in killing are likely to reflect and reinforce a cultural ideology of male dominance and female inferiority. Divale and Harris (1976:521) "identify warfare as the most important cause" of "the male supremacist complex" (compare Sanday's [1981:164] definition of male dominance). Vanatinai women were prominent in warfare and diplomacy, participating publicly in decisions to wage war or make peace, entering the field of battle, and possessing knowledge of critical forms of war magic, both according to oral traditions and in island mythology. This prominence is quite unusual in the cross-cultural literature (but compare Macintyre [1987] on Tubetube, also a southern Massim society; and Brown [1970b] on the Iroquois, another matrilineal, horticultural society). Still, the domain of warfare on Vanatinai was one in which men could achieve renown in ways that were barred by custom to women, who were forbidden to use spears. This aspect of traditional life privileged men and may have contributed to some degree of sexual asymmetry in precolonial times. Pacification contributed to a greater mobility for both men and women and a greater volume of interis-

land exchange journeys without fear of attack. It is likely that Vanatinai women are more involved in long-distance ceremonial exchange than they were in the late precolonial period, during which warfare and raiding had intensified (Lepowsky 1983, n.d.b).[12]

Despite government and mission influence that promotes the roles of men in communicating with these bodies, Vanatinai women and men both continue to take part in public discussions on community matters and in private discussions on kin group matters. Women also operate in traditional systems of relationships between lineage groups such as exchange partnerships and take a prominent role in mortuary feasts. They may achieve area-wide renown as experts in healing or garden ritual. Although women are highly valued for their ability to give birth to new matrilineage members, they are not restricted by their biologically ordained tasks of bearing and nursing young to the domestic or inner sphere of social life while men monopolize the public or outer sphere, despite the traditional male role of community defense, formerly through warfare and now through sorcery and counter-sorcery.

## *Conclusion: Lessons from an Egalitarian Society*

Vanatinai is a matrilineal society where women are by definition central to the kin group, the most significant social unit on the island. They have equal rights to postmarital residence with their own kin, to inheritance, and to use and distribution of land and other valuable resources. This is a situation in which female autonomy and cultural ideals of the value of women are likely to be high (compare Schlegel 1972 and on the Hopi, this volume; Sanday on the Minangkabau, this volume; Nash 1987). In contrast, a patrilineal social structure inherently places women at a disadvantage in terms of rights, roles, and privileges and thus probably in terms of autonomy and control over their own actions and those of others (compare Divale and Harris 1976; Schlegel, this volume).

Vanatinai is also a small-scale, loosely structured and fluid society with a low population density where people have the option of removing themselves to another area where they have land rights if social conflicts arise. Its small scale, fluidity (compare Collier and Rosaldo 1981), and mobility, in combination with its matrilineal social structure, are conducive to egalitarian social relations between men and women and old and young. It promotes an ethic of respect for the individual that must be integrated with the ethic of cooperation essential for survival in a subsistence society. Conflict

must be worked out through face-to-face negotiation or else existing social ties will be broken by migration or by death through sorcery or witchcraft. Vanatinai society values the same qualities in both women and men: strength, wisdom, and generosity. If possessed of these qualities, an individual woman or man will act in ways that bring prestige not only to the actor but also to the kin and residence groups to which he or she belongs.

Current writings on the anthropology of women, in an effort to assess degrees of female power and influence, frequently focus on the disparity between the ideal sex role pattern of a culture, often based on an ideology of male dominance, and the real one, manifested by the actual behavior of individuals, in order to uncover female social participation in key events and decisions and to learn how women negotiate their social position (for example, Rogers 1975; Collier and Rosaldo 1981). This focus on social and individual "action" or "practice" is prominent in cultural anthropological theory of recent years (Ortner 1984). Schlegel (this volume) points out that there are multiple levels and social contexts of gender ideology in a given society and that different levels of ideology are often contradictory (compare Meigs, this volume; Sanday's chapter on Minangkabau gender constructions, this volume). In the Vanatinai case, gender ideology in its multiple levels and contexts emphasizes the value of women and provides a mythological charter for the degree of personal autonomy and freedom of choice manifested in the lives of individual women. Cultural ideal and real sex role patterns are largely congruent.

Current social science theory emphasizes "the centrality of domination" and the analysis of "asymmetrical social relations" as the key to understanding a particular social system (Ortner 1984). This focus on asymmetry and domination may distort analyses of male and female roles and of gender ideology in societies with a tradition of egalitarian social relations. There is no ideology of male dominance on Vanatinai. Unlike in many cultures where men stress women's innate inferiority, such as the Hua (Meigs, this volume) and the Mendi (Lederman, this volume) of New Guinea or the Mundurucú of Brazil (Murphy and Murphy 1974), gender relations on Vanatinai are not "contested," in Lederman's terms, or antagonistic, and there are no male-versus-female ideologies that vary markedly or directly contradict each other. Vanatinai mythological motifs, beliefs about supernatural power, cultural ideals of the sexual division of labor and of the qualities inherent to men and women, and the customary freedoms and restrictions upon each sex at different points in the life course all provide ideological underpinnings of sexual equality.

Vanatinai is not a perfectly egalitarian society, either in terms of a lack of

difference in the status and power of individuals or in the relations between men and women. More men than women are highly active in traditional exchange activities, even though some women surpass almost all men in their acquisition and distribution of ceremonial valuables. Women in young and middle adulthood are likely to spend more time on child care and supervision of gardens and less on building reputations as prominent transactors of ceremonial valuables. The average woman spends more of her time sweeping up the pig excrement that dots the hamlet due to the unfenced domestic pigs that wander through it. The average man spends more time hunting wild boar in the rainforest with his spear (although some men do not like to hunt). His hunting is more highly valued and accorded more prestige than her daily maintenance of hamlet cleanliness and household order. The ideal and real sexual division of labor on Vanatinai is slightly asymmetrical, despite the tremendous overlap in the roles of men and women and the freedom that an individual of either sex has to spend more time on particular activities—gardening, foraging, fishing, caring for children, traveling in quest of ceremonial valuables—and minimize others. Yet the average Vanatinai woman owns some of the pigs she cleans up after, and she presents them publicly during mortuary rituals and exchanges them with other men and women for *kula* shell-disk necklaces, long axeblades of polished greenstone, and other valuables. She thereby gains status, prestige, and influence over the affairs of others, just as men do and as any adult does who chooses to make the effort to raise pigs, grow large yam gardens, and acquire and distribute ceremonial valuables. Vanatinai is an equal opportunity society, and women who achieve prominence and wealth through the distribution of yams, pigs, and ceremonial valuables and thus the ability to mobilize the labor of others are highly respected by both sexes. An overview of the life course and the sexual division of labor on Vanatinai reveals the striking lack of cultural restrictions upon the autonomy of women as well as men and the openness of island society to a wide variety of life-styles.

Vanatinai gender ideology and sex role patterns must be placed into historical context. Key changes include increases and decreases in the frequency of warfare and raiding, the build-up of population (closely related to warfare patterns in the precolonial period), the resulting scarcity of key resources and the potential for increasing political hierarchy, the introduction of new forms of religious ideology with the advent of missionization, and the imposition of colonial and then national political authority on a previously autonomous island society. Vanatinai society has lost one source of sexual asymmetry, the male opportunity to obtain power and influence

through a reputation as a champion fighter, and women may have benefited even more than men from the increased mobility for everyone made possible by pacification. But the impact on women's authority and influence of the absorption of Vanatinai into colonial and national polities have probably been negative overall. The new political and religious systems emphasize hierarchical authority controlled by distant outsiders with a few local adult males chosen to exercise control over the rest of the population as local government councillors, policemen, and pastors. The new systems directly oppose the traditional ethic of egalitarian relations among autonomous individuals and exclude women from the new positions of authority.

Recently anthropologists have criticized the widespread practice of writing about "the status of women" as if it were a single, straightforward, and uncontradictory phenomenon unaffected by historical forces, social context, or multiple and conflicting forms of gender ideology (for example, Meigs, this volume). Strathern (1987:299) states, "No blanket classification of 'the relationship' between the sexes, and thus no summary conclusion about equality, can be offered" for a given society. She cautions against generalizing from individual actions and relationships and warns that "none of the single terms—complementarity, dominance, separation—will in the end do, because there is no single relationship." There is of course no single relationship between the sexes on Vanatinai. Power relations and relative influence vary with the individuals, sets of roles, situations, and historical moments involved. Gender ideologies embodied in myths, beliefs, prescriptions for role-appropriate behavior, and personal statements sometimes contradict each other or are contradicted by actual behavior of individuals. Nevertheless, I refer to Vanatinai as an egalitarian society because of its absence of an ideology of male dominance and the way its various levels of gender ideology and individual action are congruent in expressing gender equivalence, complementarity, and overlap.

What can people in other parts of the world learn from the example of a traditionally egalitarian island society? The fact that it is small in scale facilitates Vanatinai society's emphasis on face-to-face negotiations of interpersonal conflicts without the delegation of political authority to a small group of middle-aged male elites. It also leaves room for an ethic of respect for the will of the individual regardless of age or sex. A culture that is egalitarian and nonhierarchical overall is more likely to have egalitarian relations between men and women.

Vanatinai society exhibits a large amount of overlap between the roles and activities of women and men, with women occupying public, prestige-

generating roles. Women control the production and the distribution of valued goods and inherit property. Women's role as nurturing parent is highly valued and is the model for the generous men and women who gain renown and influence over others by accumulating and then giving away valuable goods.

These same social characteristics are also possible in large-scale industrial and agricultural societies. The Vanatinai example suggests that sexual equality must be accompanied by an overall ethic of respect for and equal treatment of all categories of individuals, the decentralization of political power, the inclusion of women and of ethnic minorities in public positions of authority and influence, greater role overlap through increased integration of the workforce, increased control by women and minorities of valued goods—property, income, and educational credentials—and increased recognition of the social value of parental care. The example of Vanatinai shows that the subjugation of women by men is not a human universal and is not inevitable, and that sex role patterns and gender ideology are closely related to overall social systems of power and prestige.

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## *Notes*

1. For example, for documentation of women's roles in exchange in the Pacific see Feil (1978) for the Enga of the New Guinea Highlands, Gewertz (1983) for the Middle Sepik of Papua New Guinea, Weiner (1986) for Samoa, and Parmentier (1984) and Margold and Bellorado (1985) for Belau. For Africa see Wiessner (1982:70) for the !Kung and Hoffer (1974:174) for the Mende. In Native North America see Reichard (1934:241, 1969:122–23) for the Navaho, and for women's participation in potlatch exchanges of the Pacific Northwest Coast see Barnett (1968:70–71) and Rosman and Rubel (1971:60–62) for the Haida, Barnett (1968:70) and Drucker and Heizer (1967:105–7) for the Kwakiutl, Rosman and Rubel (1971:94–100) for the Nootka, Barnett (1968:70) and Olson (1936:213) for the Tlingit, and Rosman and Rubel (1971:24–25) for the Tsimshian. See also Mintz (1971) for a comparative discussion of women and trade in nonsubsistence economies. For a fuller discussion of women, exchange, and trade in cross-cultural perspective see Lepowsky (n.d.a).

2. Population density is extremely high on the coralline islands of the Massim, as is true of such islands, when inhabited, in much of the Pacific. But low islanders in the Massim, who are generally not self-sufficient in cultivated or wild vegetable foods, have adapted culturally by intensive fishing and exploitation of marine resources, trading and, formerly, raiding high islands for food (Lepowsky n.d.b). Control of garden land therefore does not become the primary determinant of differential status.

3. Collier and Rosaldo (1981:278–79) argue that hunter-gatherer and horticulturalist societies may be divided into "brideservice" and "bridewealth" societies based on their customary marriage arrangements, with each type exhibiting a characteristic pattern of gender roles, politics, ritual, ideology, and social organization. But Vanatinai society has strong traditions of both brideservice and bridewealth. The Vanatinai case therefore suggests that such societies might better be conceptualized as forming a continuum ranging from those where only brideservice is found to those where only bridewealth is customary, with Vanatinai being in the middle and sharing some attributes of each ideal type.

4. On Vanatinai, which differs in soil type, topography, and climate as well as culture from the Trobriand Islands, the long yams, or *kuvi,* which are grown by Trobriand men particularly for display and exchange purposes (Malinowski 1935), are never grown. The smaller and better-tasting yams, called *taytu* in the Trobriands and *lailu* on Vanatinai, are the Vanatinai staple, and it is the magic for growing *lailu* that is known to some women as well as some men on the island.

5. The association of shell valuables with excrement is also found in the most frequently told myth on Vanatinai.

6. Following both indigenous Massim and anthropological traditions, I dis-

tinguish between sorcery, called *ribiroi* on Vanatinai, as a conscious, malevolent act involving the manipulation of objects, and witchcraft (*wadawada*), as resulting from "an inherent quality" (Evans-Pritchard's phrase, 1937:21, 387) of the witch, whose acts are unconscious or involuntary and do not involve the use of spells or magical objects. On Vanatinai, though, it is said that witchcraft may be learned as well as inherited (Lepowsky, in press).

7. The Rossel Islanders restrict women to special small houses during menstruation and during and after childbirth. Women were traditionally forbidden to travel in the type of canoes reserved for "chiefs" and could not visit offshore Loa Island and various other sacred sites (Armstrong 1928). During my own several weeks of residence on Rossel, I learned that women are still forbidden to visit various sites on and near the island such as, for example, a particular stretch of reef just off Jinjo Village on the north coast. Menstrual and childbirth restrictions are still followed.

8. Malinowski (1935:301) notes that in the Trobriand Islands "the payment given for erotic services is called buwana, and this name is, I think, derived from the word for betel nut, Buwa." He does not describe the nature, content, or direction of this payment. On the northern Massim island of Gawa, the gifts of food given to a child's spouse by his or her kin are called *buwaa* (Munn 1986). *Buwa* is a cognate of the reconstructed Proto-Austronesian term for betel nut, *buNah (Conklin 1958:2). The Vanatinai term for betel nut is *ghelezi* or *eledi*, depending upon dialect. Betel nut is often given to a lover and is sometimes first bespelled with love magic (Lepowsky 1982). It is possible that *buwa* on Vanatinai is a loan word that originally derived from the word for betel nut in many present-day Austronesian languages.

9. Young (1983a, 1983b) identifies the "theme of the resentful hero," who offers wealth but is rejected and abandons the place where the rejection takes place, as a motif common to the mythology of many parts of the Massim culture area. One wealth-producing resentful hero of patrilineal Goodenough Island is a male snake (Young 1987:236). In the Vanatinai case, the snake protagonist who offers wealth but is driven off the island is female. Similar mythical accounts of a female snake from whose body shell wealth is produced and who also departs resentfully for Rossel Island after being attacked by a human male have been recorded for matrilineal Duau (Normanby Island) in the southern Massim (Róheim 1950:202; Thune 1980; cited in Young 1987:236–37).

10. However, Vanatinai also has thousands of these shell currency pieces circulating in traditional forms of exchange. Known as *daveri* on Vanatinai and *ndap* on Rossel Island, the valuables are used differently on each island. They were made famous to scholars as "Rossel Island shell money" by Armstrong (1928). Their extensive use on Vanatinai was first documented by the present writer (Lepowsky 1981, 1983, 1989a).

11. A positive value of male aggression in certain contexts in the Vanatinai past is suggested by the reports of present-day islanders that in the period just before European contact enemy skulls circulated in traditional exchanges more frequently than ceremonial valuables. Also, islanders say that shell-disk necklaces (*bagi*) of the kind used in exchange both in the Vanatinai region and in the *kula* area to the northwest, which are manufactured on Vanatinai, were originally decorated human

skulls transformed into necklaces, with white shell substituting for the skull nowadays in what is referred to as the "head" of the *bagi* (Lepowsky 1983, n.d.b).

12. Similarly, Macintyre (1987:227) speculates that the involvement of Tubetube women in *kula* is a postpacification phenomenon. The locally famous story of Dulubia's combined trading and raiding expedition from Kwaraiwa, an island adjacent to Tubetube, to Vanatinai and nearby islands around 1910 indicates that some women from the Engineer Group of islands did make long-distance journeys during this unsettled period before colonial authorities managed to suppress warfare in the Massim (Lepowsky 1983).

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