

Chris Knight 1991. Chapter 4, The Sex Strike. *Blood Relations: Menstruation and the origins of culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, pp. 122-153.

‘In cases of extreme mistreatment of one of them by the husband, they may institute a *Lysistrata* regime, an economic and sexual boycott in which they may enlist their other sisters in the community.’

Laurent Sharp, 1933. The social organization of the Yir-Yoront tribe, Cape York Peninsula. Part 1. Kinship and the family. *Oceania* 4: 404-31.  
(Discussing the Aboriginal people of Cape York Peninsula, Australia).

‘The strongest weapon the Council had and used against the men was the right to order mass strikes and demonstrations by all women. When ordered to strike, women refused to perform their expected duties and roles, including all domestic, sexual and maternal services. They would leave the town *en masse*, carrying only suckling babies.’

Ifi Amadiume, 1987. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands. Gender and sex in an African society*. London and New Jersey: Zed Books, p. 67. (Discussing the Igbo people of southeastern Nigeria).

# Chapter 4

## The Sex Strike

The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles. Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another, carried on an interrupted, now hidden, now open fight, a fight that each time ended either in a revolutionary reconstitution of society at large, or in the common ruin of the contending classes.

Karl Marx, *The Communist Manifesto* (1848)

The first class antagonism which appears in history coincides with the development of the antagonism between man and woman in monogamous marriage, and the first class oppression with that of the female sex by the male.

Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884)

I now want to address a question which Chapter 3 implicitly posed but left unanswered. Granted that 'totemism', 'sacrifice' and other rituals seem to have emerged through a historical process of transformation of the hunters' 'own-kill' rule – *where did this rule itself ultimately come from?*

Rather than keep my reader guessing, let me anticipate the conclusion and then set out my reasons for arriving at it. My answer is not difficult to state. Since mothers and their offspring must always have been the main beneficiaries of the 'own-kill' taboo, since men probably had no 'natural' (as opposed to cultural) inclination to abide by it, and since men's rewards for compliance appear to have been overwhelmingly marital and sexual – avoiding one's own kill must in some sense have been *motivated and established by women*. I will leave to future chapters the problem of how women could ever have had sufficient motivation or power to do this.

Lévi-Strauss holds men to have created culture. Where conscious, creative action is concerned, he sees not mixed human social groups but groups of men alone. These male groups establish the incest rule through an act of trust and generosity toward one another. Imposing upon themselves a sexual taboo, the men in each group surrender to others 'their own' women (sisters and daughters), hoping and trusting to receive back other women in return.

Lévi-Strauss is at pains to emphasise in this context what he terms 'a universal fact, that the relationship of reciprocity which is the basis of marriage is not established between men and women, but between men by means of women, who are merely the occasion of this relationship' (1969a: 116). Women, in other words, have no active role to play. Lévi-Strauss richly illustrates this model with examples from every continent, and declares it to lie at the basis of all culture.

Lévi-Strauss' 'exchange of women' model of cultural origins inspired a book which remains (despite all the criticisms) the most comprehensive and coherent cross-cultural analysis of kinship systems that social anthropology has achieved. Beginning with the simplest conceivable system of 'restricted exchange' – a system in which two groups of men exchange their sisters and/or daughters between themselves – Lévi-Strauss' *The Elementary Structures* showed how an immense variety of more elaborate systems can be conceptualised as systematic permutations and transformations worked upon this model.

The novelty of Lévi-Strauss' approach was that instead of merely examining the internal structure of descent groups, he visualised streams and currents of precious valuables – above all, women – flowing between groups in often immense cycles. A current of women would flow in one direction whilst, typically, another current of bride-wealth valuables (treated by Lévi-Strauss as less essential or merely symbolic) flowed in reverse. In the more open-ended, 'generalised' structures of sexual exchange, an extraordinary amount of inter-male trust was involved, as men in one group surrendered their most precious sexual and reproductive assets to another or several other groups in an extended chain, knowing or hoping that some time, some day, the system of reciprocity would ensure repayment in kind and the restoration of the temporarily forfeited imbalance. The participants' point of departure was a collective understanding that eventually – after in some cases many generations – the wheel should have turned full circle, with 'wife-givers' and 'wife-takers' having settled accounts. Where the number of male groups linked in each cycle was large, the streams of women functioned as continuous threads binding together in to one coherent fabric groups of men dispersed widely over the landscape and stretched across several generations.

I have no wish to survey here the numerous criticisms which have been levelled at Lévi-Strauss' work on kinship. At this point I will simply return to Lévi-Strauss' point of departure – his 'exchange of women' model – and ask some questions posed by our previous discussion.

The 'value of exchange', writes Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 480),

is not simply that of the goods exchanged. Exchange – and consequently the rule of exogamy which expresses it – has in itself a social value. It provides the means of binding men together, and of superimposing upon the natural links of kinship the henceforth artificial links – artificial in the sense that they are removed from chance encounters or the promiscuity of family life – of alliance governed by rule.

It is by means of exchange, then, that the 'natural' bonds of kinship are overridden by the 'artificial' – that is, cultural – bonds of marriage.

A number of features characterise this model. Firstly, it is assumed that links of 'blood' or kinship are 'natural'; it is only marital alliances which establish the realm of culture. Culture is based neither on the biological family, nor on links – however extended – through brothers, sisters or parents and offspring. It arises exclusively out of the 'artificial' marriage links forged between biological units – links which are produced by the incest taboo and consequent need for each male-dominated family to exchange its sisters and daughters.

Secondly, each marital union, once produced, remains intact as the basis of social order: there is little room in the model for divorce, remarriage, promiscuity or extra-marital liaisons. While Lévi-Strauss does not assume monogamy (1969a: 37), his view is that marriage, whether polygamous or not, is in principle a permanent bond: a woman, once yielded by a 'wife-giving' group, remains normatively with her husband's group for life.

Thirdly, whether a woman is sexually available or non-available is, according to Lévi-Strauss, a matter decided by the application or nonapplication to her of male-imposed rules of exogamy or incest avoidance. In all this, there is little room for decision-making by women themselves.

How does all this correspond with the evidence of ethnography?

The model fits reasonably well with an image of patrilocal, patrilineal bands or lineages, each organised around a male core of kinsmen who bring in wives from other similar groups. It is less able to cope with alternative arrangements, especially where (as in most hunter-gatherer cultures) residence patterns are flexible and/or 'marriage' is established tenuously with a long period of bride-service and initial uxorilocality. Neither does the model fit at all easily with a matrilineal and/or matrilocal bias, which may be pronounced in some systems and a dimension or component in many others. In Lévi-Strauss' eyes, indeed, a 'matrilineal society, even though patrilocal', has 'peculiar problems to resolve' because of the difficulties of cementing the marital union and incorporating the wife firmly in her husband's group (1969a: 116-17). Yet his account of the development of 'generalised' exchange posits a dynamic in which 'disharmonic' regimes are superseded by 'harmonic' ones, usually patrilineal; in the less integrative mixed systems, either the descent rule was matrilineal or the

residence rule matrilineal (1969a: 265-91, 438-55). Given Lévi-Strauss' point of departure – masculine primacy and the centrality of male marital control – it is unclear how such rules could have come to establish their force. Why should either matrilineal descent or matrilineal residence, both treated by Lévi-Strauss as inconvenient to males, have arisen if men from the beginning had always decided on such matters themselves?

A further technical difficulty is that the model gives enormous prominence to incest/exogamy rules as the basic factors constraining women's sexual availability, whilst very little is said about other kinds of sexual taboos. In particular, *periodic* taboos – on sex during menstruation, before and after childbirth, whilst meat is cooking, while preparing a trap, making hunting nets or organising a collective hunting expedition – these and comparable restrictions are not accounted for by the theory. Indeed, given an underlying assumption that sexual availability is a married woman's normal and permanent state, such things inevitably appear as anomalies.

Even more anomalous-seeming are institutionalised elements of marital instability, whether or not these are associated with a matrilineal and/or matrilineal bias. Lévi-Strauss (1969a: 116) insists that for human culture generally, 'patrilineal institutions' have 'absolute priority' over matrilineal ones. Furthermore,

it is because political authority, or simply social authority, always belongs to men, and because this masculine priority appears constant, that it adapts itself to a bilineal or matrilineal form of descent in most primitive societies, or imposes its model on all aspects of social life, as is the case in more developed groups. (1969a: 177)

In this context, the model's emphasis on the absolute cultural primacy of marital alliance would make factors such as female-initiated separation or divorce appear anomalous in the extreme. The implication is that marriage is final and permanent. Women with their kin can have no say in restricting or terminating sexual access to a spouse *after* marriage.

We have seen that in Lévi-Strauss' model there is no room for women who can indicate 'yes' or 'no' in sexual terms themselves. Women are spoken for in this respect by men. While this may to an extent reflect what happens in numerous male dominated societies, as a model of the 'norm' – against which to measure elements of female autonomy as 'deviations' or 'anomalies' – it simply does not work. Simplicity in a model may be a virtue, and Lévi-Strauss' model of culture's 'initial situation' certainly excels in this respect. But the advantages are lost if the outcome is that a vast range of 'anomalous' findings remain unaccounted for, leading to the need for various additional models and theories which may serve their own purposes but meanwhile complicate the field. In this connection, we need only mention that Lévi-Strauss' model of incest avoidance attributes the taboo's origin not in part to mothers and sisters but exclusively to the altruistic self-denial of fathers and

brothers; it is men in positions of responsibility, not humans of both sexes, who are attributed with the power to say 'no'. The extraordinary cross-cultural strength of the mother-son incest taboo as compared with the notoriously poor record of older or 'responsible' males in keeping away from their daughters/younger sisters (Herman 1981) seems in this light anomalous; it is not discussed by Lévi-Strauss.

Finally, although it claims to present an image of the origins of human culture as such, Lévi-Strauss' model is in fact much more restricted. Despite the wider claims of structuralism generally, the 'exchange of women' has implications only for kinship studies in a somewhat narrowly defined sense. Culture is many things besides formal kinship, and a theory of its origins ought therefore to be testable in the light of cross-cultural economic, ritual, political, ideological and mythological findings – in addition to the kinship evidence on which Lévi-Strauss in *The Elementary Structures* relies. Lévi-Strauss of course turned to some of these other topics in his later works, but by this time – as we noted in Chapters 2 and 3 – he had lost his earlier thread, and was no longer focusing on the incest rule or upon material processes of exchange.

If we take as our starting point, not 'the exchange of women' but gender solidarity and an exchange of services *between* women and men, a model can be produced which enables us to overcome most of these problems. We can retain Lévi-Strauss' insight that in the process of cultural origins a vital step must have been the establishment of sexual taboos. But in this and the following chapters, we will take it that women themselves had a role to play in determining whether they were sexually available or not. A model will be presented within which the 'incest taboo' arises as an aspect of a more basic reality: the capacity of the evolving protohuman female to say 'yes' – and her equal capacity to give a firm 'no'.

Human culture is based on solidarity. What precisely is involved in this will become clearer as we proceed, but at the outset it may safely be supposed that without some capacity for community-wide collective agreement, there could be no language, no rules, no sexual or other morality – and indeed, no 'society' at all. Lévi-Strauss is only one among many to have emphasised this point, even though in his case what is envisaged is exclusively solidarity between men (1969a).

We may accept another aspect of Lévi-Strauss' thesis without difficulty. Human cultural solidarity in its earliest stages must have found a way of surviving in the face of what must have been its most difficult test – sex. In primate societies, coalitions do emerge and play an important role, but the ever-present threat of sexual conflict places severe limitations on what such coalitions can achieve. Outbreaks of sexually motivated inter-male fighting are the stuff of politics among monkeys and apes, as are female sexual

rivalries. Where collectively sanctioned sexual and other regulations and taboos are unknown, the disruptive effects of sex can be enormous. Somehow, in the course of human evolution, this problem must have been overcome. As Marshall Sahlins (1960: 80) some years ago put it, writing of human cultural origins: 'Among subhuman primates sex had organized society; the customs of hunters and gatherers testify eloquently that now society was to organize sex...?'

But while accepting all this, this book is based on a third assumption which takes us beyond Lévi-Strauss' frame of reference. The forms of human solidarity underpinning the transition to culture must have had sexual dimensions, and could not have been all-male. In fact, I will show that had not females been involved in asserting their own forms of sexual solidarity at crucial moments, our ancestors could not have achieved the profound sexual changes necessary if they were to transcend the limitations of primate sexuality and sociability.

The remainder of this chapter will focus not on solidarity in the abstract but on *gender solidarity*, which will be viewed, using Marxist concepts, as the outcome of various forms of struggle between the sexes – a struggle transcending the boundaries between nature and culture. I will examine gender solidarity (1) among primates and (2) among members of non-western – and particularly hunter-gatherer – societies.

## PRIMATES

### **Primate Politics**

Modern primatology is explicitly concerned with the politics of ape and monkey social life (de Waal 1983; Dunbar 1988). Whereas twenty years ago, the term 'politics' would not have been used, nowadays this and other terms derived from lay language are increasingly being drawn upon by primatologists, some of whom allow themselves to empathise with the animals almost as if they were human subjects. Supposedly 'clinical' terms such as 'agonistic interaction' – meaning an argument or fight – are going out of fashion. Primates are extremely intelligent animals whose actions cannot be understood in purely mechanistic, behavioural terms. What the animals are *trying* to do, it is now realised, is essential to grasp if what they *actually* do is to be understood (Dunbar 1988: 324).

It is now recognised that chimpanzees, gorillas, gelada baboons and other primates are rational beings able to set themselves goals, work out long-term strategies, memorise the essentials of complex social relationships over periods of time, display distinctive personalities, co-operate, argue amongst themselves, engage in deception, exploit subordinates, organise political alliances, overthrow their 'rulers' – and indeed, on a certain level and in a limited way, do most of the things which we humans do in our localised, small-scale interactions with one another.

Robin Dunbar (1988) is a rigorous materialist and an inventor of ingenious tests for selecting between rival primatological theories. In his published writings he takes great pains to prevent subjective impressions from distorting his findings. Yet he confidently describes his subjects as displaying 'trust', 'opportunism', 'psychological cunning' and similar characteristics, and as 'reneging' on joint understandings, 'retaliating' against those who renege – and even 'voting' on issues of communal concern.

Likewise, the Dutch primatologist de Waal (1983) has described chimpanzee 'power politics' in almost human terms, writing of 'political ambition', 'collective leadership', 'conspiracy' and so on, and portraying the individual personalities of his chimpanzee subjects in Arnhem Zoo with a novelist's attention to detail.

Provided it is constrained by the use of proven techniques of sampling, statistical analysis and the rigorous testing of hypotheses, all this can be validated as good scientific methodology. It is now realised that the esoteric, impoverished and cumbersome clinical terminology of the earlier functionalist and behaviourist studies – studies which avoided the rich resources of lay language for fear of lapsing into 'anthropomorphism' – actually obstructed our understanding of primates, these most intelligent of creatures whose mental capacities so obviously approximate to our own.

Dunbar spent many years studying wild gelada baboons in Ethiopia, and has done as much as anyone to synthesise modern primatological knowledge into a comprehensive overall picture. He argues that the components of primate social systems 'are essentially alliances of a political nature aimed at enabling the animals concerned to achieve more effective solutions to particular problems of survival and reproduction' (Dunbar 1988: 14). Primate societies are in essence 'multi-layered sets of coalitions' (p. 106). Although physical fights are the ultimate tests of status and the basic means of deciding contentious issues, the social mobilisation of allies in such conflicts often decides matters and requires other than purely physical skills.

Instead of simply relying on their own physical powers, individuals pursue their social objectives by attempting to find allies against social rivals and competitors. For example, when two male chimpanzees are aggressively confronting one another – in a quarrel over a female, perhaps, or over food – one of them may hold out his hand and beckon, trying to draw a nearby onlooker in to the conflict on his own side. If the onlooker is influential and sympathetic, that may decide the outcome. De Waal (1983: 36) describes the 'aggressive alliance' or 'coalition' among chimpanzees as 'the political instrument par excellence'.

The manipulation and use of coalitions demands sophisticated intelligence. It is even possible (although unusual) for a relatively poor fighter to dominate more muscular rivals if he or she is better able to mobilise popular support. The factor militating against this is that most individuals want to be on the winning side, so a good fighter is also likely to be popular as a focus

of successful coalitions, whereas a consistent loser may be shunned by the strong and the weak alike.

In any event, brawn without brain is inadequate, and it is now thought that the considerable brain-power displayed by most of the higher primates functions not only to ensure the individual's survival in a direct relationship with the physical environment but more importantly to aid success in the many 'political' calculations which have to be made within society itself (Chance and Mead 1953; Jolly 1966; Kummer 1967, 1982; Humphrey 1976; Cheney and Seyfarth 1985; Dunbar 1988; Byrne and Whiten 1988). Applying this to human evolution, most authoritative statements have stressed that it was not foraging or tool use as such that generated human levels of intelligence but rather the associated social, behavioural and cultural processes required to direct and organise such activities (Reynolds 1976; Lovejoy 1981; Holloway 1981; Wynn 1988).

### **Elements of Female Solidarity Within Primate Societies**

In the 1950s and 1960s, when field studies of primates were just beginning, specialists tended to think of each species of primate as having its own characteristic form of social organisation, regardless of immediate geographical or ecological conditions.

Moreover, investigators focused almost entirely upon primate males. Hamadryas baboons in Ethiopia seemed to be organised in markedly male-dominated social systems. The males were 'the active sex', fighting among themselves for females, the victors organising their seized or kidnapped females into compact harems which could be efficiently supervised and controlled from above. A straying, wayward female would be brought back into line by means of a bite on the neck – a bite so hard that it sometimes lifted the female off the ground (Kummer 1968: 36-7). The female would follow her overlord closely from then on. There were no successful female rebellions or revolutions. For primatologists, there seemed to be little point in concentrating attention upon what the females were feeling or trying to achieve.

This picture was not decisively modified when, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, attention began to be redirected from baboons to wild chimpanzees. Although chimpanzees seemed to be more easy-going, the males being sexually more tolerant of each other, it was still found that males were the dominant sex. Many accounts concentrated on the degree to which male chimps were prepared to tolerate other males within their ranges and to 'share' their female sexual partners – a pattern which was contrasted with the hamadryas baboon norm of pronounced inter-male sexual intolerance (Reynolds 1966, Sugiyama 1972).

The contrast between baboons and chimpanzees became deeply embedded in almost all primatological thinking. Primate 'family' units were divided between two contrasting categories – 'one-male units' on the one hand,

'multi-male units' on the other. Intolerant ('hamadryas-like') males produced the first kind of unit; more tolerant ('chimpanzee-like') males formed the second kind. No one referred to 'one-female units' or 'multi-female units'. The presence of females with their offspring was taken for granted, the only question being whether a group of females attached itself sexually to one adult male or to several.

Inseparable from all this was what is now called a 'priority of access' model of sexual relations. Females were thought of as passive creatures waiting to be kidnapped, snatched, stolen or conquered by males. The males were seen to fight one another for priority of access to the females, and, basically, the possible outcomes were these: either (a) an individual victorious male exclusively controlled a whole 'harem' of females-with-young or (b) a group of two or more successful males chose to compromise with one another, collectively defending and sharing access to a group of females. The first outcome was popularly conceptualised as a 'Cyclopean' system more or less corresponding to Freud's 'Primal Horde'; the second was seen, at least by some writers, as a form of 'group-marriage' (Fox 1975b: 12, 16).

In either case, the object of a male sexual fight was simply to defeat one's opponents) and seize or win over his (or their) females. Noting the mental demands placed upon males, one of the great founders of modern primatology, M. R. A. Chance (1962: 31), hypothesised that the human brain may have become enlarged in the course of evolution precisely to deal with such taxing and risk-laden situations. The protohuman male, in other words, was thought to have needed a large brain in order to work out when to attack, when to ingratiate himself with a more dominant rival, when to run away, when to bluff – and also when and how to express his emotions so as to convey signals to his own advantage. In developing this theme, Robin Fox (1966; 1967a) argued that the 'whole process of enlarging the neo-cortex to take-off point' was based on 'a competition between the dominant and subdominant males', those surviving being 'those best able to control and inhibit, and hence time, their responses'. He concluded: 'Here then are the beginnings of deferred gratification, conscience and guilt, spontaneous inhibition of drives, and many other features of a truly human state.'

Chance himself (1962: 32) cautioned that all this need only have been 'a phase in man's development', antedating the period of maximum cortical expansion. Nonetheless, his support for the view that male brain-power evolved in the context of sexual fighting gave new respectability to a widespread popular origins myth (see Chapter 1).

But how and why did hominid females develop their brains along with males? And how might our protohuman female ancestors have responded to the males supposedly fighting around them all the time? Such questions were not usually thought to be an issue. Until the impact of sociobiology became felt, an influential view among primatologists was that female behaviour did not really matter, because it had little bearing on overall social structure. As

one specialist put it: 'the number of adult males and their reciprocal relationships determine the social structure of the group as well as the group behavior as a whole' (Vogel 1973: 363).

It is now widely recognised that all this presented a distorted picture of reality. The defects can be discussed under several headings.

### **Female Dominance in Primates**

Firstly, it is in part coincidental that male dominance came to be assumed to be the 'natural' or 'default' condition for primates. Had primatologists begun their field studies among lemurs in Madagascar instead of among baboons in the Sudan or Ethiopia, a very different picture might have become fixed in the popular mind.

Prosimians are sometimes thought of as the most 'primitive' of living primates (Hrdy 1981: 60). They exhibit pronounced 'matriarchal' tendencies. Ring-tailed lemurs, brown lemurs, white sifakas, ruffed lemurs, black lemurs, diademed sifakas, indris – these and many other Madagascan species are characterised by female dominance as the norm. Alison Jolly (1972: 185) studied ring-tailed lemurs in southern Madagascar and reported that despite male swaggering 'females were dominant over males, both in threats and in priority for food. Females at times bounced up to the dominant male and snatched a tamarind pod from his hand, cuffing him over the ear in the process.'

Admittedly, the prosimians represent only one suborder within the general order of primates. Most primate species *are* male-dominated, in the sense that a dominant male will displace any female from her position if he wants to. But this says nothing at all about 'natural' or 'original' states. As Hrdy (1981: 59) points out, by focusing on baboons, langurs and orangutans, one can 'demonstrate' that male dominance is the natural condition for primates. By concentrating on prosimians, one can argue that female dominance is the primitive and basic condition, for among all the social lemurs ever studied, this is so.

### **Female Determinance of Social Structure**

More interesting than this, however, is the modern sociobiologically inspired finding that among primates generally it is the strategies pursued by the female sex which ultimately determine the overall social structure.

Females and males have different priorities. To a large extent, this stems from the basic fact that, in all mammals, a male can in principle father an almost limitless number of offspring, whereas there are strict limits to the number a female can produce.

Male primates (with some exceptions) are not equipped to do much to ensure the survival of their offspring once these have been conceived. Except for a

few functions such as defence against predators, offspring can gain little benefit from their fathers, who are in no primate species inclined or able to provide their partners or young with food. In perpetuating their genes, therefore, it usually makes better sense for males to abandon their mates soon after conception and attempt to inseminate more females (a general fact of mammalian biology which may help to explain why only about 4 per cent of mammal species are monogamous – Hrdy 1981: 35). By contrast, once they are pregnant or are nurturing offspring, female primates, like most mammals, have little to gain (in terms of the replication of their genes) by getting inseminated again and again. What matters is that their existing offspring survive. This means feeding them, and this in turn means that females tend to be more interested in ‘economics’ than sex – or in any event, tend to prioritise this aspect more than do males.

These differences have spatial correlates and consequences. Female primates, who are burdened with the task of producing and provisioning their offspring, distribute themselves in space according to their needs and preferences for shelter, comfort, safety and – most importantly – for particular types of food. Instead of endlessly searching for males, they prioritise such on-going, day-to-day ‘economic’ concerns. Males, on the other hand, are primarily interested in securing access to oestrus females. Foraging activities are subordinated to this overriding sexual quest. The result is that while females distribute themselves according to their own foraging and nurturing requirements, males note how the females have arranged themselves in space and then decide how to map themselves on to this pattern so as to maximise their mating opportunities.

The extent to which the males fight or co-operate, form large or small groups, define ‘closed’ or ‘open’ systems – all this depends on what the females have set about doing in the first instance. The extent to which the males are ‘tolerant’ or ‘intolerant’ depends not just on genes but on the immediate social situation, and this is at root female-defined. It is in this sense that the female pattern is ‘basic’ (Wrangham 1979; Hrdy 1981: 123-4; Rodman 1984). In Marxist terms, one might say that the female distribution pattern is to the male sexual-political pattern as ‘economic infrastructure’ is to ‘political superstructure’. To change the whole system in any fundamental sense, the underlying ‘economic’ pattern of female ecological relationships would have to be changed first.

How the females arrange themselves in space depends (a) upon immediate geographical and ecological conditions and (b) upon the females’ genetically determined preferences and abilities to make use of what the environment has to offer. For example, chimpanzees have digestive systems rendering them dependent on ripe fruit, which require much travelling and searching to find. Quite different are gorillas, which can munch almost anything, including leaves, and so can usually feed on what is immediately to hand without moving much at all. Most monkeys fall somewhere between these

two extremes, combining leaf-eating with a preference for ripe fruit when these are available (Hrdy 1981: 123-4).

Where food is hard to find and widely spaced, females may have to travel fast and far in order to eat; if food is available almost everywhere, little movement may be required. If the food is scarce – in the form, for example, of an occasional small bush or tree transiently laden with fruit – the females may not want to be accompanied by others but would prefer to be alone so as to monopolise what they have found for themselves. If the food is abundant, and/or if there are other considerations – such as defence against predators – making group life advantageous, they may prefer to cluster in groups. The variations and permutations are numerous, but the basic result is that females arrange themselves across the landscape in characteristic patterns – grouped or isolated, fast-moving or slow, in trees or on the ground – and the males in pursuing their sexual goals adopt strategies which take account of the situation which the females have defined.

How do the males ‘map’ themselves on to the pre-existent female distribution pattern? It all depends on the circumstances. If the females are clustered in manageable or defensible groups, a male may realistically attempt to monopolise a whole harem all to himself. If the females are very isolated and scattered, however, any one male may only be capable of monopolising one female at a time. If the females are clustered quite closely, but move too independently, are too assertive or are in groups too large to be fenced off and defended by single males, those patrolling or defending their ranges may find it best to collaborate, particularly if they are close kin, the result being what Robin Fox (1975b: 16) calls ‘group marriage’ – a pattern in which two or more brother-males collectively defend the joint ranges of several females. This happens among chimpanzees (for a theoretical explanation see Rodman 1984).

The situation can be summed up by saying that in all cases, the basic pattern is that primates, male and female, compete for resource-filled space. Sleeping or nesting space, feeding space, grooming space – the whole of life is, in a real sense, about space and the competition to monopolise portions of it for certain periods. But whereas females in the first instance compete among themselves for foraging space, which may well be ‘uninhabited’ at the outset, what males compete for is *space already occupied by the opposite sex, the females themselves being the main ‘valuables’ within it*. It is true that subsequently – once males have established their domain – females may compete among themselves in order to get closest to the dominant male, who may confer various competitive ‘privileges’ upon his temporary or permanent ‘favourites’. For example, when many geladas in a group arrive simultaneously at the same waterhole, the male and dominant females drink first and perhaps wallow in the water; subordinate animals wait their turn – and may even miss their turn altogether if the dominant animals move on whilst jostling around the water remains intense (Hrdy 1981: 106). It makes sense, then,

for females to compete for privileged space close to the dominant males. But the male arrangement that ultimately emerges depends fundamentally on the nature of the female-defined space for which males initially compete among themselves.

### **Female ‘Voting’ to Confirm or Repudiate Male Status**

Most primate systems are male dominated. That is, once a male has gained control over a space with one or more females ranging within it, he may from time to time choose to displace a particular female from her feeding position in order to eat the food which she has found. If she cannot use her sexual attractions to alter his intentions she may try to resist, in which case the male may use physical force. The literature is replete with examples of dominant males casually stealing food from ‘their’ females or offspring – in the case of some macaques species, even to the point of nonchalantly raiding the inside of females’ mouths (Hrdy 1981: 114-15). Whether in such extreme forms or in milder ones, this kind of thing is really what ‘dominance’ – the basic organising principle of all primate societies – is about.

But this does not mean that the females are always passive or inactive. On the contrary, they can often determine which male is to be their ‘overlord’, or which males collectively are to patrol over their ranges.

For example, when a male gelada sets out to attack a previously dominant rival so as to take over his harem, the females concerned may insist on their own say in the outcome. At various stages during the fighting, the females may ‘vote’ among themselves on whether to accept the provisional outcome. There may be real internal arguments, with some females wanting to restore the old overlord while others welcome the newcomer. As Dunbar (1988: 166) in his fascinating account puts it: ‘During the process of this “voting” procedure, the females are involved in a great deal of fighting amongst themselves as those who do not want to change males attempt to prevent those that do from interacting with the new male.’ The traditionalists, in this account, are clearly attempting to impose a collective sexual boycott upon the unwanted newcomer male. These females are likely to be those who had held a satisfactory status within the harem under the old order. The more ‘radical’ females – those wanting a change – are likely to be those who were previously discriminated against within the harem; their hope is for a better deal under new management. Voting is simple – ‘no’ is signalled by refusing to groom the newcomer; ‘yes’ is signalled by going up to him and grooming him.

Dunbar (personal communication) adds that the females do not make their decisions as such until some time in to the fighting. It is as if they were waiting to see how the two males initially shape up before beginning to decide one way or the other. Although the females continue to bicker amongst themselves long after the males have stopped fighting, the struggle effectively ends once a majority of females have ‘voted’ for or against

the new male. Dunbar (1988: 166, 167, 243) writes that the ultimate outcome of an inter-male sexual fight always depends in this way on the female votes, although he does not infer that there is any very accurate electoral 'count'!

In some higher primate species, such as hamadryas baboons and gorillas, there is little sisterly solidarity, as a result of which 'females are abjectly subordinate to a male leader' (Hrdy 1981: 162). In the case of geladas, however – despite a rather precarious and superficial male 'dominance' – female solidarity within the harem may confer considerable power. Hrdy (1981: 104) cites an incident in which an overlord male rushed aggressively towards a 'straying' female. Had she been a hamadryas, no sister would have supported her: she would have cringed, received her punishment and got back in to line. But the gelada female did no such thing. She snarled and lunged back, whereupon three other females from her own harem joined her and stood their ground beside her until the male, who was supposed to be their 'leader', was chased off.

Among hanuman langurs, when a new male overlord from an external troop wins a harem, his first concern is to bite and kill the young infants so that their mothers stop lactating and so come back in to oestrus more quickly, conceiving and bearing offspring by the new male (Hrdy 1981: 82). It is unclear why the females in this species have not evolved countermeasures to resist this. However logical the behaviour may be in terms of the male's calculations of genetic benefit, such wastage of maternal investment is certainly not in the mothers' own reproductive interests (Hrdy 1981: 92). Among savanna baboons and squirrel monkeys, it is quite common to see a group of females collectively 'mobbing' a male who had attempted to molest an infant (Hrdy 1981: 96). However, it must be admitted that successful infanticide is fairly common among primates, including chimpanzees, and that although males may be the worst offenders, rival females are also sometimes guilty (Goodall 1977: 259-82). There is an obvious contrast here with human hunter-gatherer societies, which never tolerate infanticide for these kinds of reason.

In the case of many primate species, if a new male overlord makes a serious political 'mistake' – killing, eating or threatening an infant might be an example – he may antagonise the females so much that they collectively make it impossible for him to maintain his position (Dunbar 1988: 165, 243-4, 261). For one reason or another, his unpopularity may be such as to provoke a 'sex strike' – in the sense that a group of females may simply refuse to turn their attentions to a particular male, even when he has supposedly or provisionally 'won' them in a fight (Dunbar 1988: 165, 167, citing Herbert 1968, Michael *et al.* 1978).

Finally, among chimpanzees, an intriguing phenomenon is what de Waal (1983: 38) calls 'confiscation'. A ferocious adult male may be 'displaying' aggressively towards a rival, his hair all erect, his body swaying from side to

side – and brandishing a stone in one hand. An adult female ‘calmly walks up to the displaying male, loosens his fingers from around the stone and walks away with it’. De Waal writes that the male may try to pick up another weapon – only for the female to take away that one too. On one occasion, a female confiscated no fewer than six objects in a row!

This female confiscation sequence was a recurrent pattern among de Waal’s chimpanzees. ‘In such a situation’, writes de Waal, ‘the male has never been known to react aggressively towards the female’. After millennia during which evolving hominids may have been tempted to fight each other using hand-axes – lethal conflicts probably occurring from time to time (Chapter 8) – comparable female-inspired disarmament may eventually have played an important violence-transcending, culture-creating role.

### **Matrilineages**

A further fascinating finding is that although the females of many species enter into fewer relationships than do males, the bonds they do forge tend to be more enduring and play a much bigger role in determining the overall kinship structure.

This is not a new finding. As J. H. Crook (1972: 89) put it, females form the more cohesive elements of primate groups and, as a consequence of their solidarity, tend to play a considerable role in determining who emerges as their ‘overlord’ or ‘control’: ‘Males by contrast. . . are the more mobile animals, transferring themselves, as recent research shows, quite frequently from one group to another.’ Males, being often bigger and stronger than females, seem to need their relationships less; they are more likely to rely on their own muscular strength, to wander off on their own, or to visit other groups. Moreover, in negotiating their way through the political landscape within any particular group, they tend to switch allegiances more often, prompted by immediate calculations of transient self-interest.

Except in the case of a few species, such as the monogamous gibbons, it is the males, therefore, who are the more exploratory sex, tending to establish quite extensive ranges, each overlapping the smaller ranges of several females. Females, by contrast, choose their partners and their localities carefully and invest in them more heavily – for each needs to prepare a long-term protective ecological and social niche for herself and her offspring.

Since males move around and change their relationships, while females tend to retain theirs throughout life, the result is something like a matrilineal descent system. A concise and emphatic statement on this point was made by a pioneering authority on hamadryas baboons in 1971: ‘Nonhuman primates’, he wrote, ‘recognise only matrilineal kinship’ (Kummer 1971: 34).

Although it would seem to be a theoretically possible arrangement, in no known case do females live together in a territory, occasionally receiving visits from a transient male, whom they drive away once impregnated.

Females always appear to appreciate a degree of continuing male commitment to them and to their offspring, particularly in the form of protection against predators or stranger males. Although non-monogamous male primates may not show any particular long-term commitment to any one female within their domain, their commitment to the defence of this domain as such – and hence to the defence of their own genetic offspring within it – is strong and of value to the mothers. Genetic calculations suggest that a father should risk his life for the defence of his own offspring more readily even than should a mother's sister (Hrdy 1981: 56).

Nevertheless, within their male-patrolled ranges, primate females of all species tend to choose other females, not males, as their immediate foraging companions (Dunbar 1988: 138). Why this is so is not quite clear, but many intriguing suggestions have been made. It may be simply because of the differences in priorities mentioned earlier. To any female, her male partner is likely to be somewhat unreliable – likely to abandon her for some other female should a good mating opportunity arise. For a mother interested in feeding herself and her offspring, a male constantly on the look out for new mating opportunities could be quite a nuisance: he would keep trying to steer the family in directions quite irrelevant to its search for food. Moreover, even when a female had found food, her dominant male partner would be quite likely to displace her should he feel hungry – and eat the food himself (Ghiglieri 1984: 189). On the other hand, among many species, males and females have somewhat different diets, and so would choose to go in different directions in search of food (Dunbar 1988: 138). Another factor may be the reluctance of females to become involved in inter-male sexual fights; much better to let the males get on with their fighting at safe distance, so that the offspring do not get hurt! More positively, females may appreciate the presence of nearby sisters or non-dominant companions to lighten the load of caring for offspring, or to enable the young of several mothers to benefit from playing among themselves (Ghiglieri 1984: 188-9).

The fact that related females bond with each other, often more enduringly than males, in some cases leads to the formation of 'matrilineages'. Japanese and Indian macaques are an example. They arrange themselves into matrilineal extended lineages or clans. Certain whole clans are dominant over others within a troop, and individuals are ranked within each clan. At the top of each matrilineal hierarchy is the founding female. Clusters of these clans form troops, each associated with a group of males who may not be related, and these males may outrank the top-ranking matriarch of each clan. But despite this male dominance, each male's rank still depends on female support, and derives in large measure from the rank held by his mother from the moment he was born. A high-ranking mother will have high-ranking daughters and sons, while a low-ranking mother's offspring will inherit her lowly status. This is a kind of matrilineal 'feudalism', in the sense that 'individuals inherit unequal lifetime benefits according to the

happenstances of birth' (Hrdy 1981: 112). Low-ranking individuals are harassed by others, eat less well, sleep less well and produce fewer surviving offspring (Hrdy 1981: 114-22).

In the case of these macaques, while dominant males associated with a lineage come and go, each male's relationship to the troop being transient, female power is much more enduring. Among Japanese macaques, males move out of their natal troop when they are only two or three years old, and eventually establish sexual relations with other females who remain with their kin. Females remain in the same troop for a lifetime, whereas males transfer out after a few years. This, then, is a kind of matrilineal and matrilocal system (although I hasten to add that what primatologists mean by 'matriliney' and what social anthropologists mean are rather different things!).

Although the 'matrilineages' may not always be so extended or so stable, it is a fact that most primates have some such system. That is – in contrast with Lévi-Strauss' model of human origins – it is usually the males who are exchanged between groups, not the females. Among macaques, baboons, geladas and vervet monkeys, this is certainly the case. Wherever it is the females who stay in their natal group whilst males transfer out, matrilineages tend to evolve as the basic embodiments of solidarity. Only in a few exceptional cases – forest-dwelling chimpanzees being the main example – do primate males remain in their natal groups while females emigrate. Among gorillas and red colobus monkeys, both sexes change groups with more or less equal frequency (Dunbar 1988: 80-1).

Perhaps most interesting of all is the suggestion that life in the more open and exposed, relatively impoverished environments seems to produce 'matrilineal/matrilocal' systems. This has obvious potential relevance to human social evolution and will be returned to later (Chapter 6).

According to Dunbar (1988: 81), where danger from predators is severe, females tend not to leave their own natal group but stay with their kin. Among primates, danger from predators tends to increase with distance from the safety of trees to climb up in to, and Dunbar's finding is that among primates in general, there is in fact a good correlation between medium to large group size, low female migration rates, long-term kin-based female coalitions and a terrestrial or semi-terrestrial way of life (1988: 297-305).

In explaining this finding, Dunbar suggests a dialectical sequence of reciprocal causes and effects spurring the formation of extended matrilineal coalitions as groups are compelled to forgo the relative safety afforded by trees. In this view, movement in to more open territory increases the risk from external predators, motivating the females to be particularly cautious and compelling the animals generally to seek safety in numbers. However, this aggregation creates a new problem of its own. As large numbers of animals forage together in compact groups, internal conflicts over food, space and sexual partners tend to intensify. Females of low status tend to be harassed by other females and displaced

from the best feeding spots and may also find themselves marginalised within their harems and relatively ignored by their male overlords. Such females might have low prospects of reproducing and passing on their genes.

The only way out is for the oppressed females to seek coalition partners – sometimes males who can afford protection, sometimes other females. Dunbar argues that the rather extensive female coalitions and matrilineal kinship networks of the more terrestrial primates evolve through some such logic. Related females support one another to avoid being harassed and marginalised. This then has further consequences. Once a female has become part of a coalition, it becomes very difficult for her to emigrate or move between groups, since any female intruding in to a new group would place herself in conflict with the resident females and would have no sisters on whom to rely for support. The upshot is that whereas predation risks as such would only necessitate temporary external aggregations – ‘safety in numbers’ – the social consequences of crowding combine to bring about a new form of matrilineal internal cohesion, with considerable endurance and internal stability.

Dunbar suggests that if chimpanzees – or protohumans – were to venture right out in to the open savanna, this logic would prevail. The females, that is, would form cohesive groups with their own internal solidarity. Dunbar argues that this would initially lead towards a system in which dominant males, faced with relatively coherent female groups, would attempt to monopolise whole harems of females for themselves. These related females, however, would have their own strength derived from solidarity. ‘This clearly has implications’, Dunbar (1988: 319- 20) concludes, ‘for the evolution of hominid social systems’.

## HUMANS

### **Female Sexual Solidarity in Cultural Contexts**

This chapter began with a discussion of Lévi-Strauss’ views on male gender solidarity as the point of departure for human culture. It was then seen that primate studies provide evidence of a struggle between the sexes, males and females having different priorities and forming distinctive patterns of solidarity according to material circumstances. Before turning to consider how human culture might have arisen, we may conclude this discussion by re-examining Lévi-Strauss’ views in the light of some evidence for comparably complex patterns in traditional human cultures.

The existence of female power in male-dominated societies has been documented in numerous studies of gender relations (Holy 1985: 186). Such power as women have may be the embodiment of a definite strategy to subvert patriarchal relationships; alternatively, the forms of female solidarity may constitute less conscious defence reflexes against male dominance (see Cronin 1977; Ullrich 1977). In particular, women’s refusal to cook or to

cohabit sexually with their husbands has been described as ‘a usual strategy to which women resort to gain their way in the face of men’s dominance or as a sanction against men’s actions or conduct which they consider inappropriate’ (Holy 1985: 186, citing Paulme 1963; Cohen 1971; Strathern 1972; 27, 45-6; Rosaldo 1974: 37; Lamphere 1974: 99). Holy (1985: 186) writes that in the case of the Berti (Northern Darfur Province, Sudan), ‘The woman’s favourite stratagem in the case of a dispute with her husband or when she feels that she has been maltreated by him is to refuse him sexual access and to refuse to cook for him.’

In a more full-blooded way, Amadiume (1987: 66-7) describes the Inyom Nnobi (the ‘Women of Nnobi’) – a traditional all-female council among one group of the Nigerian Igbo. A kind of women’s trade union, it was headed by the Agba Ekwe, ‘the favoured one of the goddess Idemili and her earthly manifestation’. She carried her staff of authority and had the final word in public gatherings and assemblies. Central among her tasks was to ensure men’s strict observance of woman-protective taboos – for example, the two-year ban on sexual intercourse with a nursing mother. She was equally alert to reports of sexual harassment of young girls when travelling along bush-paths. In this rather male-dominated society, the community of women were aware of their strong communications network, and took full advantage of it. ‘What the men feared most’, the ethnographer adds (p. 67), ‘was the Council’s power of strike action’:

The strongest weapon the Council had and used against the men was the right to order mass strikes and demonstrations by all women. When ordered to strike, women refused to perform their expected duties and roles, including all domestic, sexual and maternal services. They would leave the town *en masse*, carrying only suckling babies. If angry enough, they were known to attack any men they met.

Idemili, the goddess in whose name such action was always taken, was a ‘water-spirit’ who sometimes appeared in dreams as a python (Amadiume 1987: 100, 102). Some decades ago, when a male Christian convert deliberately killed a python – totemic symbol of Idemili’s worshippers – the women from all around marched half-naked to the provincial headquarters to besiege the resident’s office with their complaints. Gaining no satisfaction, they returned to their own locality, went straight to the Christian offender’s house and razed it to the ground – a particularly severe method of withdrawing domestic services (Amadiume 1987: 122)! Deprived of his home, the man reportedly died two weeks later. In Chapter 13 we will examine the symbolic logic by virtue of which, on a worldwide basis, female punitive ‘class action’ of this fearsome kind is traditionally associated with an immense ‘All-mother’ or goddess-like ‘snake’.

The ethnographic record provides a mixed picture of relations between the sexes. Although male dominance may be universal or nearly so, it is offset by numerous factors in different cultures to a greater or lesser extent. Lévi-Strauss' 'exchange of women' models notwithstanding, women after marriage are not necessarily detached in any permanent sense from their own kin, fully incorporated in to their husband's group, totally lacking in autonomy or deprived collectively of a sphere of power of their own. Where decisions on sexual availability are concerned – to take only one aspect of decision-making – they often have some say themselves (Amadiume 1987). Within the intimate sphere of marital relations, this is surely no less 'normal' (on any definition) than the situation in which a wife must always be sexually ready for her husband.

But it is not only private intimacies which are at issue. Where – as in most hunter-gatherer societies – a man's marriage for many years gives him no absolute or unconditional sexual rights in his spouse, a woman can draw on the support of her mother, sister, brothers or other kin as a lever to secure advantages for herself within the relationship. Whereas 'a man whose marriage is secure need obey no other' (Collier and Rosaldo 1981: 317), an element of marital insecurity obliges a man to listen to his wife and her kin. An unsatisfactory husband or lover (particularly if he is not well established or is a lazy, inept or selfish hunter) may be unceremoniously told to go.

Landes (1938: 131) writes of the Ojibwa of Western Ontario:

A married man who is too lazy to hunt can be supported by his wife for a time, but her tolerance will be changed for scorn, then to indifference, and finally she will desert him. A man who is unsuccessful on the hunt, and who goes with his wife to her parents' wigwam, can expect to be rejected and left to die of starvation. In one case the parents' scorn was so great that they took their daughter in to feed and lodge her, but refused their son-in-law. Folk-tales are concerned with the same theme.

Sex and economics are here intertwined – no meat means, in effect, no sex and, eventually, complete annulment of the man's marital status. 'If a man does not hunt', writes Richard Lee (1988: 266) of the !Kung San of the Kalahari, 'his wife will make pointed comments about his sexual prowess. And vice versa: if he is no good in bed, he cannot hunt.'

In fairy-tales throughout the world, the theme of suitors' trials refers to the same basic relationship, storytellers often delighting in depicting the hero as overcoming the most extraordinary obstacles to win the hand of his chosen bride. Although reality may be less romantic, prospective bridegrooms often have to prove their worth in difficult trials. Lowie (1920: 22-3) writes that in South America, among the Arawak Indians of Guiana, 'the prospective husband was obliged to prove his marksmanship by, among other tests, shooting an arrow in to a woodpecker's nest from a moving boat'. Similar motifs occur 'as a constant refrain in the utterances of North American

Indians, where the skilful hunter figures as the ideal son-in-law' (Lowie 1920: 22-3). Among hunter-gatherers generally, some such pattern was certainly the norm rather than the exception (Collier and Rosaldo 1981).

Among most hunters and gatherers, a man's wife was never simply 'won'. She was not suddenly transferred, in a single, once-for-all transaction called 'marriage'. She had to be earned over a period of years or even decades, in a process known as 'bride-service'.

Phyllis Kaberry (1939) encountered this pattern among the Aborigines of Western Australia, describing the passage of gifts from a man to his wife's kin as 'a constant drain on a man's resources throughout his lifetime'. All this investment and effort, she went on, constituted 'a definite recognition of the value of the woman as his sexual and economic partner'. Here as in other cultures, the man's gifts were mainly of meat which he had hunted himself. The reader will recall similar Australian and other instances from the previous chapter, in which men's constant yielding of meat to their wives' kin was discussed in connection with the 'own-kill' rule.

One interpretation might be that the bride herself in such situations was a mere pawn, used by her kin to extract labour-service from the in-marrying husband. But would such a verdict be fair?

It seems probable that in most cultures the authority figures most feared or respected by the bridegroom were indeed the bride's mother, father, brothers or other older relatives, rather than the young woman herself. Nevertheless, usually, the effect was to secure meat for the wife. In Australia, among the Walbiri Aborigines, a man's wife's brothers or other kin may

upbraid and sometimes attack him physically if he refuses to give meat to his wife. Other members of the community approve as legitimate their attempts to force him to adhere to the law. Moreover, the meat should come from game he has hunted himself . . . (Meggitt 1965: 252)

Among the Siberian Yukaghir, the picture we are given is that of a young man taken in to his in-laws' house where he must 'serve' for his wife for 'as long as any members of the family older than herself are alive'. His position is strictly subordinate:

He must neither look at nor speak to the parents and older relatives of his wife. He must obey all the orders given by these relatives. The products of his hunting and fishing are under the control of his mother-in-law. (Jochelson 1926: 91)

In these and countless other cases, it is the wife's older kin who most clearly impress the husband as powers to be reckoned with.

However, the evidence is that women who remained with their kin and

received visits from their spouses in the early years of marriage – the norm among hunter-gatherers almost throughout the world (Collier and Rosaldo 1981) – were not just ‘used’ by their kin groups. They positively welcomed the support and protection afforded by their kin, and were involved with them in upholding the value which their sexuality represented for their kin group as a whole.

A Californian myth tells of Seven Sisters who used their collective sexual solidarity as a weapon against husbands who refused to provide them with game. The myth was recorded in Los Angeles County early in the nineteenth century:

#### The Seven Sisters

There were seven brothers married to seven sisters, who lived in a large hut together. The men went daily to hunt rabbits and the women to gather roots of flags for food. The husbands invariably reported ‘bad luck’ in their hunt, with the exception of the youngest, who, without fail, handed his wife a rabbit.

This continued every day until the females held a conference and became convinced that they were being cheated by their partners. They agreed that the youngest sister should remain at home the next day, under pretext of having a pain in her jaw, and so watch the return of the party. Next day the men as usual took their bows and arrows and set forth. The six sisters then departed, leaving the other concealed among the flags and rushes at the back of the hut in a position from which she could see all that happened inside.

Several hours before sunset the hunting party returned laden with rabbits which they commenced roasting and eating, except one which the youngest set apart. The others called him a fool and bade him eat the remaining one, which he refused to do, saying he still had some affection for his wife and always intended to reserve one for her. More fool you, said the others; we care more for ourselves than for these root-diggers. When they had finished, they carefully hid all the evidence of their feast. When all this was later reported to the sisters, they cried a great deal and talked over what they should do. Let us turn in to water, said the eldest. That would never do, responded the rest, for in that case our husbands would drink us. The second proposed being turned in to stones, which was rejected on the ground of being trodden upon by the fraternity. The third wanted them to turn themselves in to trees, which was not accepted because they would be used for firewood. Everything proposed was put aside until it came to the turn of the youngest. Her proposition to change themselves in to stars was objected to on account of being seen, but overruled as they would be out of reach.

They proceeded to the lagoon, where they daily collected flag roots and constructed a machine (impossible to describe) out of reeds, and ascended to heaven and located themselves at the *Pleiades*. These seven stars still retain the names of the originals. (Reid 1939: 246-8; slightly adapted and abridged).

With its emphasis on the sisters' not wanting their husbands to use or enjoy them – to 'drink', 'tread on' or 'burn' them – this myth suggests that 'becoming stars', tantalisingly visible but out of reach in the sky, is a metaphor for collective sexual withdrawal. The reader who follows this book to the end will link this in turn with actual or pretended menstruation as a pretext for seclusion in 'another world'. This would make the 'machine' which is 'impossible to describe', and which is associated with female collectivity around a 'lagoon', a code term for female synchronised menstruation (see Chapters 11-14).

In real life, in most of the world, it may have been unusual for sisters as such, without support from their mothers or from male kin, to rely solely on one another in the manner portrayed in this myth. Yet the story encapsulates an important aspect of the logic widely at work. In their own economic interests vis-a-vis their spouses, women relied on one another to uphold their security and sexual status, retaining at all times the ultimate right to withdraw.

Throughout the world, married women have appreciated the availability of female kin on whom to rely in time of need. By the same token, husbands almost everywhere – at least until very recently – have known that a wife is someone with her own independent support system. The following extract from a case study exemplifies this point:

. . . wives could not rely upon their husbands to stand by them while they reared their children . . . So the wife had to cling to the family into which she was born, and in particular to her mother, as the only other means of ensuring herself against isolation. One or other member of her family would, if need be, relieve her distress . . . or share to some degree in the responsibility for her children. The extended family was her trade union, organised in the main by women and for women, its solidarity her protection against being alone.

The notion of such an all-women's 'trade union' will be encountered frequently in later chapters of this book. Although in the above passage they were writing of the traditional extended family in London's East End, Willmott and Young (1957: 189) were conscious of describing a widespread cross-cultural logic. 'It is, to judge by anthropology', as they put it (p. 189), 'almost a universal rule that when married life is insecure, the wife turns for support to her family of origin, so that a weak marriage tie produces a strong

blood tie'. As feminists are well aware, this can be put the other way around: if sisterhood is to be prioritised, marriage bonds must be kept relatively weak.

### **The Mother-In-Law**

A woman's trade union would be of little use if her husband could ignore or abuse her mother. This relative's authority has always been, indeed, the minimum condition for a wife's relative autonomy within marriage. Certainly, a wife in most cultures would tend to seek contact with her mother more frequently during married life than any other authority figure among her kin. This may help to explain why, in so many traditional cultures, the figure of the mother-in-law was invested – in husbands' eyes – with awesome supernatural power. Although male relatives were also involved, it was to an important extent she who had 'given' her daughter, and she who – if offended – could take her back. Moreover, unlike male in-laws, the mother-in-law was particularly in need of ritual defences against the merest hint of sexual oppression or abuse. No mother could defend her daughter within marriage unless her own sexual non-availability and social dominance had been established beyond question in her son-in-law's eyes.

Sometimes a man was not allowed even to see his mother-in-law, let alone act disrespectfully towards her, and had to run or hide when she came near. The 'commonest sounds' to be heard in a camp of Navaho Indians, according to an early authority (Stephens 1845: 358), 'are the friendly shouts, warning these relatives apart'. So tabooed was a man's mother-in-law, and so fearsome in his eyes, that in some cases at least this figure seems to have succumbed to the temptation to abuse her own power! Róheim (1974: 29) writes of a case among the Aranda Aborigines of Central Australia: 'I was told of one old woman who would often appear suddenly when her son-in-law was eating. When he ran away, she would sit down and eat the food he had left.'

But the status of the mother-in-law cannot be understood in isolation. It is only one aspect of the fact that in almost all human cultures, no matter how male-dominated, elements of blood solidarity are to be found as a check on husbands' rights in their wives, this being a feature absolutely central to social structure. In this context, whether a wife calls for support upon her mother, upon some other female relative or upon male kin is less important than the fact that she is not alone.

### **Sex for Meat**

Among the Australian Yir-Yiront Aborigines of Cape York Peninsula (Sharp 1933: 418), a man feels constantly in debt to his in-laws. He says: 'I get my wife from that mother's brother's group; I avoid them, give them presents, and take care of them when they are old.' Here as elsewhere, it is quite clear that the husband is repaying his wife's kin for the privilege of being allowed

sexual access to her. In the case of this particular community, moreover – and again the pattern is not unusual – a man may have several wives who will all be related to one another as real or classificatory ‘sisters’. It might be supposed that these women would all be divided among themselves, but not so. In fact (reminding us, perhaps, of the Seven Sisters in the Californian myth discussed earlier), solidarity in the form of a ‘sex strike’ is a weapon which the women can fall back upon if need be:

the solidarity between the wives of a polygynous family gives them considerable influence over the husband. In cases of extreme mistreatment of one of them by the husband, they may institute a *Lysistrata regime*, an economic and sexual boycott in which they may enlist their other sisters in the community. Since a man normally will not have sexual relations outside the conventional limits of those he calls wife, such a programme may prove extremely effective. (Sharp 1933: 430)

All over the world, wherever hunting was part of the traditional way of life, women treated marriage as an economic-and-sexual relationship, claiming for themselves the meat which their spouses obtained. Indeed, contrary to the views of Lévi-Strauss, this was everywhere what marital alliances were largely about. They were not just means to enable male in-laws to form social relationships among themselves. They had an *economic* content which was absolutely central. Marital relations (in contradistinction to mere ‘sexual relations’) were the means by which women, supported by their kin, achieved something that no primate females ever achieved. They were the means by which they secured for themselves and their offspring the continuous *economic* services of the opposite sex.

Among the Brazilian Shavante Indians, women receive an unsuccessful hunter ‘with a marked coldness’, while a successful hunter ‘flings down his game for the women to prepare’ and basks in the resulting glory (MayburyLewis 1967: 36). In the case of the Mundurucu, again in Brazil, ‘The man brings his kill to his wife . . . and she and her housemates butcher it. They send pieces to other houses, but they determine who gets which parts’ (Murphy and Murphy 1974: 132).

Among the Ache, hunter-gatherers of eastern Paraguay, ‘men consume very little meat from game items that they themselves killed’. All game caught each morning is taken to the women’s group, so that the hunters can continue unencumbered; the meat is shared not just within small family units but throughout the foraging band. Game caught at other times is also distributed widely throughout the band – always by a man other than the hunter himself. Nonetheless, in each case, people know very well who hunted the animal whose meat they receive. There is a strong suggestion that women are sexually attracted to good hunters; certainly, the more successful and generous hunters are most often cited by women as lovers in

extra-marital relationships (Hill and Kaplan 1988: 277 -89).

Among the Peruvian Sharanahua, to whom we will turn in the next section:

Both the pleasures and the pains of hunting are related not only to the actual activity but to the implication that a good hunter is a virile man . . .

Virility implies a positive response from women. Further, the culturally structured idea that a successful hunter is a virile man carries a sting: the unsuccessful hunter is by social definition not virile. (Siskind 1973b: 232)

Almost universally, similar ideas prevailed, women feeling sexual desire not in isolation but in a situation-dependent way, according to whether their menfolk were proving themselves or not. ‘Women expect meat from lovers’, as Collier and Rosaldo (1981: 314) put it, referring to ‘bride-service societies’ throughout the world. Far from being unusual, men’s need to ply their wives and/or in-laws with meat as the test of their virility and the condition of the marital tie may indeed be regarded as the norm – certainly among hunters and gatherers and probably much more widely.

#### **A Case Study: the Sharanahua**

We will now turn in greater detail to a particular example of this whole complex. We will examine a society in which women themselves, autonomously and as a gender group, use collective control over their sexuality as a means to induce their menfolk to hunt for them. It is worth dwelling on this case at some length, since it will be argued later in this book that a comparable logic of sexual and economic exchange must have been central to the origins of human culture.

Much of the literature on sexual politics in bride-service societies (Collier and Rosaldo 1981) indicates a complex interplay of male influences and female ones, as well as a subtle dialectic between economics and sex. In this connection, one of the most sensitive pictures is Janet Siskind’s (1973a, 1973b) account of life in the village of Marcos, among the Sharanahua of Peru (located on the Upper Purus River just west of the Brazilian border). Their cultural heritage is that of interfluvial hunters, and their society is still strongly focused on meat, although the women’s contribution through gathering is substantial and they have for generations augmented the proceeds of foraging with small-scale horticultural activities. Residence is matrilineal, a son-in-law contributing meat to his wife’s kin. The special value of Siskind’s account is that it shows us a mechanism of exchange through which women can gain strength in a hunting context – even though here as almost everywhere, it is the men who kill the animals.

The Sharanahua have two basic patterns of hunting. In the first, each man decides for himself whether or not to go hunting. He usually hunts alone and brings the game back to his own household. But men in this mode are

'reluctant and unenthusiastic', since the relative privacy makes it difficult for even a good hunter to gain the widespread female acclaim and sexual prestige for which every man yearns. 'At times', however, when there has been no meat in the village for three or four days, the women decide to send the men on a special hunt. They talk together and complain that there is no meat and the men are lazy (Siskind 1973a: 96). In contrast to the first pattern, during a 'special hunt' (the second pattern) the young men go hunting as a group:

The special hunt is started by the women. Early in the evening, all the young women go from house to house singing to every man. Each woman chooses a man to hunt for her, a man who is not her husband nor of her kin group, though he may be her cross-cousin, her husband's brother, or a stranger. The men leave the following day and are met on their return by a line-up of all the women of the village, painted and beaded and wearing their best dresses. Even the older men will not face this line without game, but, if unsuccessful, they beach their canoes and slink to their households by a back trail. The choice of partners is usually a choice of lovers, and many partnerships are maintained for years. (1973b: 233-4)

There is, then, a collective hunt, initiated by the women, at the conclusion of which the face-painted women form a kind of 'picket line' at the entrance to the village, warmly welcoming the hunters if they carry meat but rejecting and shaming them if they have been unsuccessful.

In motivating the men to go on such a hunt, the women use a mixture of sexual enticement, teasing and potential threat. While the men are away, the women talk and laugh among themselves about which of the men each is 'waiting for'. A short time before the men are expected to return, the younger women pick *nawawakusi* (stinging nettles) 'ready for later use against the men'. The men can be heard coming upriver when they are still half an hour from the village, and all the women 'who are taking part in the special hunt' line up in front of the main house. Assuming a successful hunt, it is at this point that the women take the game animals from the men:

The men walk solemnly up from the port, and silently each man drops the game he has shot on the ground before the waiting women and walks to his own house. Each woman picks up the animal that her partner has dropped and takes it to her own house and begins to prepare it. (1973a: 96-8)

The meat is skinned, cut up and put to boil by the women, and then eaten in a general process of feasting and reciprocal visiting. Siskind continues:

Everyone has barely finished eating when the young women burst in to action with stalks of *nawawakusi* in their hands, trying to corner a young man. The men laugh, but they run, staying out of reach, hiding behind a

house, until they are caught. Then they stand still, letting the girls triumphantly rub their chests, necks, and arms with the stinging nettle, which is said to give strength. The men finally seize some *nawawakusi* from the women and the chase becomes two sided with small groups of men and women in pursuit and retreat, laughing and shouting. (1973a: 98-100)

It is clear that in this society sex is one of the economic forces of production – it is the major factor motivating men to hunt. It is equally clear that the solidarity of the women – expressed in their periodic teasing of the men, their sexual inducements and their implied collective sexual threat – is not a mere superstructural feature, but is central to the economic infrastructure of society. If this underpinning of the social order were to change, the whole economic, social and sexual system would turn on its axis.

For Sharanahua men, the threat of female ridicule and withdrawal is very real. A woman wants to ‘eat’ a man; but she finds male flesh unaccompanied by the requisite animal flesh simply unexciting:

The prestige system carries a sting: The good hunter is the virile man, but the hunter with little skill or bad luck does not find sympathy. When children scream at their mothers, ‘Nami pipai!’, ‘I want to eat meat!’ their mothers’ reply, ‘Nami yamai’, ‘There is no more meat’, is a goad that women aim at their husbands, provoking them to hunt again, implying that they are less than men since there is no more meat.

A man may spend hours in the forest. One day Basta returned empty handed, tired, muddy from wading through swampy ground and picking ticks off his body. No words of sympathy were forthcoming, and I asked Yawandi why she and Bashkondi were painting their faces. She replied in a voice that carried to the hammock where Basta rested alone, ‘We want to paint, there’s no meat, let’s eat penises!’ On other days as well I have suspected that women paint their faces as an unspoken challenge to the men . . . (1973a: 105)

The special hunt usually results in more meat in the village than a normal day’s hunt. The social pressure of the special hunt, the line of women painted and waiting, makes young men try hard to succeed.

And this kind of hunt breaks across any tendency of society to fragment into isolated, self-interested, monogamous ‘family’ groups – a tendency which would be very risky given the chancy nature of hunting. Referring to hunting generally, Siskind (1973a: 88) writes that a system involving many men, and in which meat is widely shared, ‘provides some insurance against the bad luck, illness, or lack of skill of a single hunter providing for a single family’ (1973a: 88).

Meat from a special hunt is not just brought by a hunter to his wife,

mother-in-law or other relative within the household but to a variety of households depending on the choice of partner on each occasion. The women in each household, receiving meat from their chosen lovers, then issue invitations to eat to their sisters and cousins in addition to many others. And since a basic requirement of the special hunt is female solidarity against men, in which as far as possible none of the women allows marriage or a lover to come between them, the result is an extended network of relationships and households. As Siskind (1973a: 109) puts it, the 'combination of same sex solidarity and antagonism to the other sex prevents the households from becoming tightly closed units'.

The teasing and the provocation of the special hunt games are symbolically sexual, coinciding with the partnerships formed by the hunt:

Neither husbands nor wives are supposed to be jealous of the love affairs involved in the special hunt. In general, jealousy is considered to be a bad trait in a wife or a husband, and I have heard both men and women complain that they are unlucky to have a jealous spouse . . . . (1973a: 105)

Put at its crudest, comments Siskind,

the special hunt symbolizes an economic structure in which meat is exchanged for sex. This is neither a 'natural' nor 'rational' exchange since women produce at least as much of the food supply at Marcos, and a rational exchange would consist of viewing the economy as an exchange of women's production for men's. Certainly there is no evidence that women are naturally less interested in sex or more interested in meat than men are. This is a culturally produced socio-economic system in which sex is the incentive for hunting, and a man who is known to be a good hunter has a better chance of gaining wives or mistresses . . . . The special hunt gives an opportunity for men to demonstrate their hunting skill to women other than their wives. It is a dramatic portrayal of the exchange between the sexes, which structures daily interactions between men and women. (1973a: 103-4)

Siskind (1973b: 234) sees all this as a point along a continuum among South American tropical forest peoples:

One can see variations on a single theme from the crude gift of meat 'to seduce a potential wife' among the Siriono (Holmberg 1950: 166); the elaboration of the special hunt among the Sharanahua; to the young Shavante's provisioning his father-in-law with game after the consummation of his marriage . . . . (Maybury-Lewis 1967: 92). Whether men prove their virility by hunting and thus gain wives or offer meat to seduce a woman, the theme is an exchange of meat for sex.

Finally, it is worth adding that Siskind sees a connection between gardening among the Sharanahua and the development of more stable marital relation-

ships. Agriculture, she writes (1973a: 116-17), demands a synchronisation of the work of men and women. In addition, agricultural work is an investment of time and effort; a man will not work hard for two months clearing land without the security of knowing that women will harvest and prepare the food:

The sexual incentive for hunting is logical since hunting is a brief but recurring task as sex is a brief but recurring need. The ease with which marriages are established and broken at Marcos fits well with the basic economy, but a more stable relationship is essential for the responsibilities of agriculture.

Relatively weak marital ties – if this interpretation had wider validity – would then be an intrinsic feature of ‘the hunter-gatherer mode of production’, contrasting with the more tightly secured marriages required when this way of life begins to break down.

#### **Unconditional Marriage as Anomaly**

It was noted earlier that Lévi-Strauss’ ‘exchange of women’ model, resting as it does on the absolute primacy of marriage, produces some serious theoretical problems. It precludes female solidarity and fails to explain the patterns actually found in traditionally organised – particularly hunter gatherer – cultures.

Culture’s ‘initial situation’ cannot be dogmatically asserted, but we can be fairly certain that it bore little relation to Lévi-Strauss’ picture of women as ever-available, passive pawns in the political schemes of men. It would seem more likely that women, in the course of cultural origins, could give themselves sexually because they had something to give – their bodies were not completely owned or spoken for by the other sex in advance.

Viewing the same feature in the context of the development of hunting and gathering, we may take it that although women did not usually hunt, they could use a measure of control over their own sexual availability to induce men to hunt for them. An implication is that women (supported by kin) had the capacity to withdraw themselves sexually. In effect – like some female primates but in much more conscious and organised ways – they could go ‘on strike’.

Naturally, this does not imply that women did not enjoy sex or that sex seldom happened. It simply means that when sex occurred, it took place as a release from the basic cultural constraints – not in obedience to them. In this sense, no matter how joyfully celebrated and woven in to the meanings and symbols of all cultural life, sexual gratification from culture’s very beginnings has been delayed, sublimated and harnessed to economic and other ends, its actual consummation always taking place just beyond, behind and in a sense ‘in spite of’ culture. The bonding involved in love-making, as something tending to undermine wider forms of solidarity, has always been

for the public cultural domain something of an embarrassment – in a sense, it ‘should not’ occur. This, of course, has always been an aspect of the excitement of sex, for lovers can relish their rebellion against rules of behaviour which can be shed like clothes for the occasion – constraints which, for the moment, seem to belong to some other, duller, world. When sexual intercourse is actually taking place, the public, collective assembly either dissolves temporarily and happily for the occasion, or – if it remains in session throughout – it turns to one side, allowing the couple their privacy, as if pretending not to know.

Of course, there is all the difference in the world between sexually relaxed cultures and more repressive ones in these respects, but in no human social context are people simply uninhibited or unembarrassed in public in the manner of monkeys and apes. In any event, the prioritising of sex has never been allowed to last for long or to threaten society’s fundamental economic goals.

In what follows, inverting the usual assumptions, the situation in which a man’s marriage gives him absolute rights of access to his wife will be treated as anomalous. It may occur, but it has nothing to do with the initial situation for human culture as such. Many of the staple topics of ethnography – features such as menstrual and postpartum taboos, in-law avoidances, taboos on sex prior to hunting, the separation of spouses at meals, ‘totemism’, the ‘ritualisation of male solidarity in antagonism to female solidarity’ (Siskind 1973a: 109) etc. etc. – will now appear in a new light. They will present themselves no longer as peculiar anomalies to be explained, but as residual expressions of a common underlying norm according to which wives are as a matter of course set apart ritually and in other ways from their husbands, simply because they belong in the opposite gender camp.

In later chapters, as we follow through the implications of this model, it will be seen that women’s normative state of relative autonomy, in limiting men’s rights in their wives, simultaneously and by the same token limits hunters’ rights in their kills. In western South Australia, ‘the man’s gift (or obligation) of meat to his wife’s parents (tabu to him) is taken by the woman herself. She then passes it on to her mother, who is particularly to be avoided by the hunter (Berndt and Berndt 1945: 224). In Central Australia, among the Aranda, a hunter was (a) obliged to surrender his kills to his wife’s relatives and (b) was prohibited from eating with these people himself. If a man were to be seen by his wife’s kin eating with them ‘the food would disagree with him, and he would sicken and suffer severely’ (Spencer and Gillen 1899: 469-71). To the Wik-Mungkan Aborigines of Cape York Peninsula, any meat ‘stepped over’ by a man’s mother-in-law becomes ‘ngaintja’ (tabooed) to him, the blood in the meat becoming powerfully dangerous in a manner suggestive of menstrual blood (McKnight 1975: 77, 85).

In contexts such as these, the forces which ‘supernaturally’ protect women and those which impose taboos on meat food are seen to converge. Sexual respect rules and food avoidances turn out to be the same thing. The logic, the mechanisms and even the symbolic conceptualisations are at a deep level identical. Backed by each other and by their kin, women periodically reassert sufficient control over their own sexuality to clarify that men cannot take their availability for granted. In this way they make it clear that men as hunters must ‘earn their keep’ by regularly surrendering their kills.

This is the basic argument of this book. Women, from the beginning, have held the future in their hands. Their responsibilities for offspring have often compelled them to resist men’s advances, subordinating short-term sexual to longer-term economic goals. Thanks mainly to female insistence, backed by the imperatives of reproductive survival, culture from its earliest stages held male sexual dominance in check – not always completely annihilating it, but at least preventing it from holding undisputed sway. As the process of ‘becoming human’ (Tanner 1981) proceeded, women (usually with some backing from their male offspring and kin) resisted and even repressed the raw expression of primate male sexuality, eventually replacing it with something more acceptable. ‘The development of culture’, as Marshall Sahlins writes,

did not simply give expression to man’s primate nature, it replaced that nature as the direct determinant of social behaviour, and in so doing, channeled it – at times repressed it completely. The most significant transformation effected by cultural society was the subordination of the search for mates – the primary determinant of subhuman primate sociability – to the search for food. In the process also, economic cooperation replaced competition, and kinship replaced conflict as the principal mechanism of organization. (1972: 14)

We begin, then, not with the supposed sudden emergence of male sexual generosity and self-restraint – as in the origins models of Freud (1965 (1913)) and Lévi-Strauss (1969a) – but with something rather more believable. We begin with *female* child-rearing and economic priorities, *female* ultimate determination of social structure and *female* sexual self-restraint in women’s own direct material interests. From this, the incest taboo, food taboos and the other basic features of the human cultural configuration will be derived.