

Women and Anthropology

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Women: An Anthropological View

Evelyn S. Kessler. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1976. Pp. 267

Female of the Species

M. Kay Martin and Barbara Voorhies. New York: Columbia University Press, 1975. Pp. 432

Women and Men: An Anthropologists

View Ernestine Friedl. Toronto: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1975. Pp. 148

Women in Cultures of the World

Dorothy Hammond and Alta Jablow. Menlo Park Calif.: Cummings Publishing Company, 1976. Pp. 158

Conventional anthropological theory and research has concentrated overwhelmingly on male relationships and institutions in the varying world cultures which have been examined by anthropologists. Moreover, it is not only cross-cultural analysis which has been 'androcentric.' Other sectors of the discipline as well--in particular the study of human evolution and the study of animal behaviour--have neglected the female. Elaine Morgan (1972) is one prominent--and also hilariously funny--critique of the bias in those two areas of research. It is only in this decade that the discipline of anthropology, like the other social

sciences, has made an effort to counteract this overemphasis by re-examining data, compiling new research and developing theory which are relevant to female roles and institutions.

Kessler (1976), Martin and Voorhies (1975), Friedl (1975) and Hammond and Jablow (1976) are the available works which bring together the various components of this new perspective. Each of the four volumes differs in the scope of the material included and in the audience for which it is intended. (There are also collections of some of this new material, notably Reiter (1975), Rosaldo and Lamphere (1974) and Matthiasson(1974), which will not be discussed here.)

Kessler's book is the most comprehensive. She makes it clear that anthropology is supposed to be the study of all aspects of human behaviour. The biology of sex differences, the archaeological record and cross-cultural comparison are included as well as short life-histories of sixteen women representing differing cultural experiences. The book is, however, very much a text-book, filled with tedious definitions, stodgy jargon and very simplified analysis. It is probably intended for use in a high school or first-year university course and might be difficult to appreciate except in the context of

use as only one text in an entire course.

Martin and Voorhies also are broad in scope. They present the perspective of general anthropology--integrating biological, ethological, archaeological and cross-cultural material into a single analysis. The role of the female in human evolution (including a good critique of male bias in traditional evolutionary theory) is combined with a carefully prepared compilation of the evidence available on the status of women in the various societal 'types' (foraging, horticultural, pastoral, agricultural, industrial) which are commonly distinguished in the discipline today. Cross-cultural material, including quantitative comparisons, is balanced by case studies for each type of society. This case material is much more detailed and illustrative than the brief portraits provided in the Kessler volume. A very concisely written chapter on the biology of sex, an examination of the evidence for the genetic or cultural origin of sex-linked traits and a chapter on 'super-numerary sexes' i.e., cultures in which more than two sexes are recognized, is also included. In short, Female of the Species is a very comprehensive and generally well-written work. A balance is struck between the understandable desire of the authors to develop theory and a realistic assessment of the scarcity of the data on many questions.

On the whole, the Martin and Voorhies volume would appeal to a general reader as well as a student, since it is not written in a particularly academic style. It is, however, much longer than the other three; it is this added length which allows the authors to be comprehensive, not superficial like the Kessler work.

Friedl (1975), in a much shorter volume, is concerned solely with cross-cultural comparison. She contrasts just two societal 'types'--foraging societies and horticultural societies. These two kinds of societies are of interest to the general reader in that they represent what most people think of as the typical subject matter of anthropology--'primitive' society.

The text is very densely written and the author is unwilling to make many easily assimilated generalizations from her comparison. The general reader is likely to find the material difficult to follow. She does not make clear to a non-anthropologist why these societal 'types' are distinctive and important categories which should be used to sort out the various cultures which have existed in the world. The comparisons do, however, indicate that subsistence technology (i.e., foraging, horticultural,) and the social and political organization which follows from a particular technology critically affect the sexual division of labour and, hence, the differential allocation of power and recognition to men

and women.

Friedl presents the interesting argument that spacing of children and child-rearing practises are made compatible with the economic tasks which are allocated to females in a society, and not vice versa, the conventional interpretation (e.g., see Brown, 1970.) She does not, however, make it clear to what extent women in primitive society can control their fertility, thus providing evidence to support her view. Another quite intriguing point that she makes but does not illustrate is that men traditionally are allocated the tasks of defense and warfare for the society not because they are physically stronger or naturally more aggressive but because they are more expendable than women! She also has some controversial conclusions about the implications for industrial society of her comparative analysis of the 'primitive.' She claims, for example, that a higher social status for women will only be possible as women gain access to external (non-domestic) sources of power, but she has only seven pages in which to demonstrate this point. The reader is apt to be left with the impression that this is only half of an intended volume.

Hammond and Jablow (1976) have produced a work most suitable for the general reader who would like an introduction to the varying cross-cultural institutions which affect the status of women. The book compiles available material

on women in family roles and on women's economic role in the numerous societies studied by anthropologists. Some basic questions, such as how a polygynous marriage system works or how the definitions of 'men's- and 'women's-work' vary between cultures, which most feminists are curious about at one time or another, are concisely answered. The book is essentially a well-written description of customs; it has few theoretical pretensions.

In summary, the best academic survey of the new perspective in anthropology is provided by Martin and Voorhies. A general reader with an interest in brief introductions will find Hammond and Jablow most helpful. There is still, of course, much to be done. This is most obvious from a reading of Martin and Voorhies. In their chapter on foraging society, they include both a description taken from a classic ethnography, the study of the Tiwi of Australia by Hart and Pilling (1960), and also a re-interpretation of that society provided as part of a complete re-study by Jane Goodale (1971). Her re-examination suggests that much of our perspective on women in simpler cultures is distorted and superficial. Women have tended to be viewed from a male point of view as passive tokens exchanged in social life, not as actors. Our present level of theory about the status of women in non-Western cultures may change quite extensively as more primary field-work is done from a female perspective.

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