

Book Review: Female and Male in Borneo: Contributions and Challenges to Gender Studies

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Vinson H. Sutlive, Jr. *Female and Male in Borneo: Contributions and Challenges to Gender Studies*, vol. 1. Williamsburg, Va.: The Borneo Research Council Monograph Series, 1991). 528 pp. \$30.00 (cloth).

First, a disclosure: the authors of the articles in this volume are primarily anthropologists, many of whom have devoted their lives and careers to producing these ethnographic accounts of gender relations and practices in Borneo, while the author of this review is a sociologist who has studied gender roles in Indonesia, particularly in Java. Thus, I approached these studies with interest and respect, but from a different knowledge and disciplinary base. Second a qualification: these are not recent studies, nor is this a new volume; rather it was published in 1991 and brings together research reports based on work that in many cases was far from new at the time. Nevertheless, the window into gender roles and sexuality provided by these diverse studies stands up to both the test of time and the continual development of the field of gender studies. The result is a hefty volume that provides fascinating portraits of gender roles in one of the more remote corners of Southeast Asia and a valuable compilation of accumulated knowledge about indigenous peoples as their culture and lifestyles were in the process of confronting profound change in traditional ways of life.

Borneo is an island divided between different nation states and populated by hundreds of different societies and ethnic groups. The sixteen chapters that report primary research cover eight separate indigenous societies spread across Sarawak, Brunei, Sabah, and Kalimantan. The Iban (famous as former headhunters) and the Rungus (less belligerent) are most heavily represented in these accounts, but there are also studies of a handful of other groups. The chapters vary from wide-ranging descriptions of gender roles and sexual behavior to studies on the various stages of the life course, ranging from birthing to mortuary practices and everything in between. There are detailed accounts of highly gendered and formerly widespread occupations such as headhunting (male) and weaving (female) and absorbing discussions of controversies such as the practice of *latah* (unruly verbal behavior exhibited by semi-marginalized women in many of these communities) and the use of penis pins as displays of manhood and status. There is even a historical chapter detailing attitudes about miscegenation and

other forms of cross-cultural gender relations in the early days of nineteenth century British colonial rule. Taken together these articles represent both a highly diverse and reasonably comprehensive depiction of the varieties of gender roles and experience found among the indigenous peoples of Borneo. The individual chapters also make fascinating reading.

Given the diversity in topic and approach, one of the clear strengths of this volume is the introduction coauthored by Vinson Sutlive (the editor) and George Appell. In addition to summaries of individual chapters and topics, the authors draw generalizations from this work, enumerate ongoing questions and controversies, attempt to answer outstanding questions based on the cumulated evidence, and indicate the gaps in the knowledge base. For example, they indicate that in all of these societies women and their work are highly valued even if not universally given as high status as men; gender roles tend to be complementary and equivalent rather than identical; women typically are excluded from occupying political roles although informally they often have a strong voice in collective decision-making; sex role socialization and particular aspects of women's sexuality are inadequately investigated; biological sex differences are recognized and built into the fabric of the gender division of labor; and there is wide variation in attitudes and prudishness about sex. Intriguingly, rape and other forms of sexual violence do not appear to have existed traditionally in any of these societies. This is particularly noteworthy given the high degree of real and ritual aggression exhibited by Iban men and others in this area.

These and other insights from this overview provide important context and balance for the almost bewildering array of detail discussed in the individual studies. While virtually every chapter is compelling in some way, some stand out either for their wealth of information or for the inherent interest of their seemingly exotic subject matter. For example, in addition to the studies of *latah* (chapters by Doolittle and Winzeler), penis pins (Brown), and mortuary practices (Schiller) mentioned previously, there are detailed accounts of the meaning of headhunting (Davison and Sutlive), the practice of *bejalai* – traveling or journeys undertaken by men as quests for status and expressions of male prerogative (Kedit), and the importance of weaving to women's lives and social influence (Mashman and Drake). Several chapters represent family collaborations one way or another. For example, different aspects of Rungus gen-

der roles and sexuality are studied by three members of the Appell family (L. Appell, G. Appell, and A. Appell Doolittle), providing one of the more comprehensive and compelling accounts of these topics found in this volume. Alternatively, Crain draws upon the experiences of his family who accompanied him in his field work. He contrasts his family's childrearing practices based on western assumptions and methods with those of the Lun Dayeh, a group located in Kalimantan near the Sarawak and Sabah borders. The direct comparison between Western and Lun Dayeh approaches are starkly illustrated in the mutual surprise expressed over his young son's upbringing, and Crain implies that the early childhood experiences have had lasting effects on his son's character and preferences. This account is one of the more intriguing as well as frustrating as it would be informative to have much more detail on both accounts. It also bears out the conclusion alluded to previously about the relative lack of good specific information on sex role socialization.

One of the best aspects of this volume is that it truly contributes to *gender* studies, examining both male and female, separately and together, so that it is possible to get an emerging picture of how gender roles are constructed and practiced in collaboration and in opposition. There are numerous detailed accounts of the gender division of labor and how material culture and practices associated with gender are linked to ritual and spiritual life. Less convincing are the occasional efforts to give theoretical underpinning to these accounts, especially in light of more recent developments in gender relations and feminist theory. As raw material for theory construction, however, these provide ample and sometimes provocative data. For example, an article on the existence of a highly oppositional binary system of social relations based on male-female opposition among the Selako (Schneider and Schneider) details how virtually all activities, artifacts, and beliefs appear to be assigned separate gendered meaning, ranging from allocation of space in traditional houses to cooking practices (men roast, women boil). These findings are highly suggestive in light of strenuous efforts to resist conceptualizing gender in binary terms in contemporary feminist theory.

Many of the studies are accompanied by extensive and high quality photographs and diagrams. There are detailed depictions of long-house organization, weaving patterns,

children and adults at work and play, and even portraits of historical figures and settlements, providing important visual detail that would not be available through narrative description alone. Unfortunately, few of these are dated or clearly specify when they were taken, and it would be valuable to have more consistent indication of the provenance of these photographs.

In fact, the absence of clear information about date and time is part of a more general problem for a number of the accounts of the research discussed in this volume. While it is evident that some of this research reaches relatively far into the past, when and what duration for the fieldwork is not always clearly specified or the information is buried in footnotes. Similarly, there is great unevenness in amount of information supplied about methods used. Perhaps this reflects one of those disciplinary differences alluded to earlier, but to have cross-disciplinary impact, as I believe these accounts potentially have, it is important to have systematic information on how study sites were selected, complete sources of information, who were the key informants, language and translation issues, etc. Some of these studies satisfactorily supply this information, others leave the reader with too many questions.

The greatest strength of this volume is the amount and depth of information on gender roles and practices within a variety of small communities, many of whose traditional ways of living are undoubtedly on the way to extinction. The accumulated research reported here provides important baseline information whose existence makes a strong case for the necessity of continued follow up to investigate changes produced by the increasing volume of contact with the outside world. The book ends with one such account of changes to traditional culture from rural-urban migration contributed by the volume's editor. One of the more intriguing findings is the ways that women appear to be increasingly disadvantaged relative to men, even though in their traditional societies they had strong claims to near equal status. It would be extremely interesting to have similar research on all of these societies as well as systematic case comparisons across these and other social groups. It is from such work that more detailed and nuanced understanding will emerge of how gender is conceptualized and constructed across the varieties of human experience.