# GENDER AND SEXUALITIES

## UNIT 1

### Gender Identities

**Ethnography 1:** *Identity Gender and Poverty: New Perspectives on Caste and Tribe in Rajasthan* by Maya Unnithan-Kumar

**Ethnography 2:** *Life Cycle, Gender and Status among Himalayan Pastoralists* by Aparna Rao

## UNIT 2

### Rites De Passage

**Ethnography 1:** *Coming of Age in Samoa* by Margaret Mead

**Ethnography 2:** *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* by Victor Turner

## UNIT 3

### Gendered Bodies

**Ethnography 1:** *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* by Serena Nanda

**Ethnography 2:** *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* by Matthew C. Gutmann
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This block deals with the issues of gender and sexuality. One of the important concepts in today’s anthropology is of identity and the way in which it is constructed in different societies. An area that has been investigated – and requires more investigation – is the relation between gender and identity.

In the first Unit titled ‘Gender and Identity’, you will study the ethnography on the Girasia of Rajasthan. The author of this work, Maya Unnithan-Kumar, shows that these people exhibit the characteristics of both tribal and caste communities. With respect to tribe, they seem to resemble the Bhil, and with respect to caste, the Rajput. Here is an example of a community which is not ethnically-distinct. In such a situation, the author prefers to take up an identity-focused approach. Women emerge in this work as the markers of identity. The second ethnography aptly titled ‘Autonomy’, Aparna Rao’s work is on the Bakkarwal, a nomadic pastoral group in the region of Kashmir. The people of this study live in a mixed environment, which has two conflicting ideologies, an egalitarian ideology of Islam and of Hindu hierarchy. The central theme of this work is the presence or absence of the personal autonomy of men and women. Marriage is analysed here in its multiple aspects – demographic, ritual, economic, and political. The theme of gender and gender relations run through the entire work.

Gender identities are a product of the process of socialisation. The performance of rituals at various levels marks the differences of gender and age. Here, Margaret Mead’s work is of central importance. Her work included in this Block is based upon her research and study of youth on the island of Ta’u in Samoa. Mead particularly focused upon adolescent girls. Franz Boas, the veteran anthropologist, in his Foreword to Mead’s book said that the values of courtesy, modesty, and good manners are culturally-produced. Thus, anthropology is the only discipline that can enable us to investigate other societies and find the root causes of social problems. Mead compared Samoan society with that of the American, pointing out the differences between them.

*The Forest of Symbols*, the next work, comprising ten essays that had been previously published on various aspects of ritual symbolism among the Ndembu, is a solid contribution to the anthropological understanding of religion and ritual and also, the formation of cultural identities. Among the Ndembu, Victor Turner, the author of this book, finds the operation of two principles – matrilineal descent and virilocal residence. Matrilineal descent is the main organising principle but its tendencies are worked against when it is combined with virilocality. To understand the place of conflict in societies, Turner gave the concept of social drama.

Certain social categories have remained unstudied. One of them is of the *hijra*, a third-gender category in India (and Pakistan). They are considered by themselves and also by others as neither male nor female. Translated as eunuch, the *hijra* are not just castrated male. Some of them are born inter-sexed; some do not grow sexually. Also, among them are ‘normal’ males who want to live the life of a third-gender person. The category of *hijra*, therefore, is cultural. Serena Nanda, the author of this work on the *hijra*, describes the activities carried out by them. The *hijra* are endowed with healing powers that are believed to work especially
in case of children. Another belief is that if they are annoyed, they may curse. Thus, the *hijra* are respected in a special way. Nanda’s work shows the social construction of the third-gender in juxtaposition to that of the ‘male’ and ‘female’.

The last ethnography, by Matthew C. Gutmann, investigates the social and cultural world of Mexican males. Gutmann carried out a piece of fieldwork in a working class *colonia* in Mexico City. One of the central outcomes of his work is that there does not exist a single, all pervasive Mexican masculinity that of the ‘macho’. There are a variety of masculinities and there exist real-life complexities that affect the construction of ‘malehood’ in Mexico. Masculinity is not static; not only it is dynamic but also continually contested.
UNIT 1 GENDER IDENTITIES

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Learning Objectives

In this unit, the students will learn about:

- the concepts of identity and status;
- gender ideologies; and
- gender and inheritance pattern in relation to the two ethnographies to be discussed.

1.1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of identity was adapted to replace the earlier less flexible concept of status to deal with what was understood as a more dynamic and flexible approach to the study of societies. Identity as a concept lent itself to much theoretical manipulation as it was seen as operating at multiple levels, as dynamic and flexible and as both self-ascriptive and ascribed by others. The possibility of conflict and negotiations, manipulations and manifest and latent identities helped towards analysing and understanding society as both complex and contested. The gender identities served to classify both individuals and groups as often group boundaries were drawn around women and their representation. From the perspective of individual members of groups (also the gender ideologies) served as important indicators of group norms and values. In this unit we have selected two ethnographies that are comparable in that both deal with relatively marginal
Gender and Sexualities communities practicing subsistence economies and are classified as tribes. Yet they are situated in two different environments and while one community compares itself to a high Hindu caste, the other is Muslim.

1.2 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY Identity Gender and Poverty: New Perspectives on Caste and Tribe in Rajasthan IS AN EXAMPLE

Maya Unnithan-Kumar’s main goal in seeking out the Girasia of Rajasthan for a study was to gain a deeper understanding of what it meant to be a woman from a marginal, poor and tribal community in comparison to her own self as urban and middle class. She wanted to investigate if the popular conception about the freedom of tribal women was true. A second more important level of investigation was regarding the processes of identity construction where she found that the boundaries (both social and physical) were important sites of identity making and also breaking. In this context she finds kinship and economy to be the major defining paradigms to dictate intergroup relationships as both hierarchical and non-hierarchical. In this sense she is moving away from the more conventional studies of caste in South Asia where hierarchy and intergroup dynamics have been emphasised more and less attention paid to boundaries.

1.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

1.3.1 Intellectual Context

Defining certain groups as castes or tribes has often been a difficult task both for scholars and administrators of South Asian societies. One of the major problems is that there is quite often a mis-match between self-ascription and ascriptions by others. Also as we see in this ethnography a group may lay simultaneous claim to two contradictory statuses as is the case with the Girasias who claim both high caste Rajput status and also a scheduled tribe status in Rajasthan. One major intellectual task of this ethnography is to set a theoretical benchmark for the definition of a group and like many other scholars Unnithan-Kumar also finds that it is not easy to set limits on the boundaries of caste and tribes in India. Thus while Kumar is convinced to a large extent that the Girasia claim to be descendants of high Rajput clans seems historically justified, their claim to a tribal status and consequent benefits under the positive discrimination policies is also justified because of their abject poverty and marginalisation on the Bhakar, an unproductive and isolated stretch of land that they occupy.

Another major intellectual perspective is the well-recognised social mechanism to use women as boundary markers between groups. Most social divisions in the world attribute an otherness to the group with which they do not identify in terms of “how different are their women from ours?” In caste society for example women of lower castes are usually depicted as free and easily accessible and so on. In Rajasthan as the author tells us, the standards for ideal womanhood are set by the gender constructs of high caste Rajput lineages. The traditional practice of Sati being one hallmark of the loyalty and purity of Rajput women, who rather than face life as a widow are ready to die on their husband’s funeral pyre. The
**Sati** is also deified and worshipped in Rajput society and is looked upon as the highest ideal of womanhood. Women from all other groups are compared to this ideal to set the groups level is social hierarchy. However again as shown in this ethnography the assigned gender construct differs substantially from the way in which a group assesses its own women. And in all communities men and women have varying standards of evaluation of the ideal norms.

### 1.3.2 Fieldwork

The field study was conducted mostly in the year 1986 with a revisit in 1989, and the author tells us these had been years of great deprivation as a severe famine had hit them from 1984 onwards. Thus the centralisation of the concept of poverty is partly due to the time of conduct of fieldwork. The methods used by the author were of participant fieldwork, where she lived in the Bhakar (rugged hilly terrain) occupied by the Girasia and was adapted by them as members of certain families. She specifically mentions the “happiness and friendliness of these women that my research interests were sustained” (p. vii). She had got married before beginning fieldwork and thus had a ‘normal’ status of a young married woman. However as a male escort she kept a young boy from her father’s village in South India who passed off as her brother while her husband visited her occasionally. Since like most villages in the arid areas of Rajasthan this one also had a scattered rather than a compact habitation she reports feeling initially ‘scared’. The particular village studied by her located near the Abu Road tehsil, is of the Taivar lineage of the tribe. In accordance with the requirements of local identification she claimed a Rajput status for herself as her father belonged to the Nayar caste of Kerala. Considering her own gendered position, she writes, “I was able to get a good idea of what women experienced in terms of their sexuality, details about menstruation, sex and the body and able to share my own experiences with them.”(p.39). Obviously she did not have the same kind of experience with the men who also dismissed her as being ignorable that was actually a facilitator for her to conduct fieldwork with less interference or suspicion from their side. She could communicate in Hindi and prepared a questionnaire (a schedule) about general information on household production and other economic activities. The total number of Taivar households was 178 and that of non-Taivar households was 47 in the village. She tried to get information from the older households within a sub-lineage and thus compound her knowledge as they were able to give information on several households. Also she prepared a separate set of questions to get data on bride price, location and members of natal households and daily routine for forty women from all generations to cover the gender dimension of her research.

The field data was supplemented by an initial visit in 1986 to the Tribal Research Institute in Udaipur to get archival data regarding tribes and society of Rajasthan.

### 1.3.3 Analysis of Data

The Girasia were included among the list of scheduled tribes in Rajasthan but not in neighbouring Gujarat. However their self-perception as members of Rajput lineages persists and the author is agreeable to their claims based upon historical analysis of local power structures that indicate that there was always fluidity in hierarchy of various lineages and loss of power and marginalisation in the Bhakar are real historical possibilities. Moreover as she says, “given the complexities of
the politics of identities in the region, it is impossible to use ‘caste’ to describe some communities and ‘tribe’ to describe others” (p.3). However the specific characters of those communities described as tribes show a definite tendency to give importance to territorially defined lineage groups in their social lives and also the centrality of kin and gender in identity and social positioning but they also exhibit a degree of fluidity and negotiability in their social interactions and identities.

In spite of stereotypes to this effect, the data does not indicate that Girasia women enjoy any particular liberty as compared to their upper caste counterparts. The Girasia practice bride price that they also consider as part of the ‘Girasianess’, or core identity that sets them apart from other communities nearby. Yet this does not give particular advantage to the women as these negotiations are between men and give power to fathers and brothers to negotiate for the value of their women. Sometimes a husband may give away a wife for a high bride price. Marriages can take place by capture (khichna) and although it gives some advantage to the man for not paying bride price yet the engagement ceremony, that of hagai (where bride prices are fixed) must take place. The real wedding ceremony may take place much later and usually a man and his family will invest in such a ceremony only when the wife produces children and the stability of the marriage is ensured. As the author narrates, no wedding ceremony took place during her fieldwork because as already mentioned it was a period of drought and dire poverty. However it is only hagai that is important and couple may go through life without ever having the wedding performed.

Unlike in upper caste societies the woman is always seen as part of her father’s lineage and never fully incorporated into her husband’s lineage. She may not cook at any ritual occasion and if her own lineage is of less status than her husband’s then she is not allowed to cook for any of his relatives even if they are visiting. It is for this reason that Girasia men cook for most formal occasions. Members of a lineage may eat cooked food from their own women but by the laws of virilocal marriage, the sisters are married elsewhere. At the time of marriage a woman carries a metal plate and a vessel for drinking water from her own household thus symbolically asserting the fact that she actually belongs to her natal lineage. No one except her own children and husband may ever eat from these vessels. A widow is not entitled to any support or care from her husband’s lineage and if she has no grown up sons she may return to her brother’s lineage where if she is of reproductive age, she will usually remarry. Brothers do not want to let go the opportunity of getting extra bride price although rates are reduced for second marriages. But the amount of bride price is also negotiated according to the qualities of the women that include ability to produce children and to work hard.

Children are the most important assets of the people and a barren woman faces much marginalisation in society. Also children are very important for helping their parents in work, and a woman with growing up children does not prefer to go for a second marriage as her work load is considerably reduced by her children. Since women cannot take away the children from the husband’s lineage they have to begin a family all over again if they remarry. The Girasia beliefs give primary role of conception to the father, the mother’s womb is seen only as a vessel for carrying the child. However mother’s milk is important in establishing social relationships.
Women are always connected to their father’s lineage even after marriage and for this reason they are never fully incorporated in their husband’s lineage but at the same time they have only marginal role in their father’s lineage because of patriarchy. A woman has to work hard all her life to justify the food that she eats. Food has great symbolic and practical value among the Girasia. Even the bride price that is paid is not a compensation for a woman’s labour value but a payment given to her father for having fed her till her marriage. In the same way if a woman leaves her husband he has to be compensated for the food that he has fed her. From the earliest time the bride price was only by money and not in kind and reflects the zero value put on woman’s work as if it is always like compensating for feeding a non-productive member of the household. If a man dies his children are brought up by his father’s brother’s wife and the widow is mostly asked to leave especially if she is still fertile. Women do not inherit anything and even if a woman does not have a brother her father’s land will pass to a male collateral relative. Even if there is a ghar-jawai (or resident son-in-law) who may work on his father-in-law’s land, after the death of the father the land passes to his male relatives and not to either daughter or son-in-law. Thus a woman has no property rights at all or any right even over her children and remains dependent all her life for her maintenance.

The Girasia economy depends on the production of rain fed crops mostly maize. When crops fail they have to buy wheat from the market. When asked what the most coveted economic position for them was, most Girasia said that it was to be able to have at least one full meal of maize roti (bread) every day. Yet during the period of fieldwork, most of them were dependent on wheat bought from ration shops with money procured from performing famine relief labour. Most of the food consumed by the Taivar was grown or collected from the bhakar. In the pre-colonial period the forested land was free and belonged notionally to the local king but was used freely by everyone. The British separated the forests from the villages and brought them under central state jurisdiction to exploit the forest resources; however marginal areas like the bhakar were left free. But in the post-colonial era, the Indian government has great interest in the forest produce of the bhakar and the people are being progressively marginalised from local resources that constitute one major reason for rising poverty among the forest dwellers. However the Taivar are the sole owners of the bhakar and the land from this region does not pass to any non-Girasia and is passed on only through sub-lineage affiliations through the system of pattidari. Thus while overall land ownership follows the bhaichara (male brother hood) pattern where it is confined only to the Girasia, the individual lineages inherit land through transfer of pattis; strictly to the males. A village is always referred to as kaka-baba re, meaning a place of one’s father’s younger and elder brother. Adoption always follows a set pattern where a boy is adopted within the village by a father’s brother and a girl by her father’s sister who belongs to another village. However when a girl gets married her bride price goes to her biological father and not to her adoptive mother’s husband. But for an adopted boy, the bride price is paid by his adoptive father. When a woman is not happy in her husband’s house her brother lets this be known so that prospective grooms may contact him for possible bride price payments. Thus even though remarriage of women does take place and divorce is a possibility all negotiations are done by the men of the lineages and women have little say in the matter.
The almost complete marginalisation of Girasia women within their community is not perceived as such by outsiders who maintain the stereotype of the free tribal woman, primarily by seeing the Girasia women in the market place. The market place is a kind of liminal place for a woman in between her natal and her affinal household; a place where she has a certain degree of freedom. Because of poverty women have to frequent the market to sell various things like produce and forest collections. The market and the forest are the only two places where she is free from any man’s control and husbands often feel that their wives may pick up relationships in these places.

A woman in her natal household has female friends who are primarily her classificatory sisters, daughters of her father’s brothers and second wives. And she has her brothers, sons of her parents, her father’s brother’s sons and of his other wives. The closest and most permanent relationship a woman has is with her brother, who has both rights (claim to bride price) and responsibility of getting her married or looking after her. A man trusts his sister the most and it is a husband’s sister who is often called upon to deliver her brother’s child. A brother is responsible for gifting odhni to his sister. The odhni is an outer covering that symbolises shame and honour both. It is always a brother who accompanies his sister on a long journey. A woman can make dharambhai (or ritual brothers) in her affinal village, who gain this status by the gift of an odhni. They form a kind of comfort group for her to turn to as there is no one else who will support her in her husband’s place.

1.3.4 Conclusion

This ethnography discusses the important dimensions of gender as markers of boundaries and also shows that what is commonly assumed as stereotypes about ‘other’ women is not necessarily true. It also reflects on how a group like the Girasia can have caste like characters and be considered as a tribe because of their symbolic association with a particular place (here bhakar) that is wild in the collective imagination. Thus Unnithan-Kumar finds it difficult to clearly demarcate caste and tribe in this context yet she justifies the inclusion of Girasia in the category of tribe because of their poverty and marginalisation. In this sense poverty can be seen as a marker of identity as can be gender relations. The gender relations especially the devaluation of women may have complex underlying factors as discussed in details in this work.

1.4 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

One of the important issues in Indian anthropology concerns the distinction between tribe and caste. One of the observations is that the communities have been classified in either of these categories. This ethnography has shown the difficulties in classifying communities in either of the categories. The Girasia are a scheduled Tribe of Rajasthan although in terms of their characteristics, they have a combination of tribe and caste. The ethnography also supports the observation that there are different types of patrilineal societies and this is one where woman after marriage continue to have some rights in their father’s group. The ethnography contributes to an understanding of the sibling relations between brothers and sisters.
1.5 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY Life Cycle, Gender and Status among Himalayan Pastoralists IS AN EXAMPLE

While the first ethnography, Identity Gender and Poverty: New Perspectives on Caste and Tribe in Rajasthan focuses more on externally conceived identities between groups and gender as a boundary making mechanism; the second one, Autonomy: Life Cycle, Gender and Status among Himalayan pastoralists written by Aparna Rao, deals with the construction of selves and individuals in relation to their own society and how such constructions inform the distribution of ingroup resources. In other words, the first ethnography is more concerned with identities between groups and the second one with identities within the group. While the first deals with social definitions of groups as castes or tribes, the second deals with concepts of personhood and agency at levels of individuals.

1.6 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

1.6.1 Intellectual Context

The focus of this book as its name suggests is on the individual, the recognition of the individual as an autonomous and decision making person and to what extent this is made possible in any society through ideology, norms and practice. The key concepts are self, personhood and individual and also agency and the relationship between them. The theoretical approach bases itself on cognitive anthropology, the presuppositions that precede any action; these can be conscious that are based on explicit considerations and subconscious the implicit and routinised aspects those that one performs but does not think about. Thus knowledge about why certain actions are performed may be gained by focusing on who are the agents of action, why and how they perform and what guides them and also enables them to do what they do. Thus it is important to understand the culturally constructed and known concepts about personhood and how they are contextualised in the setting in which people live and operate. Since persons are conceived of as male and female in any human society, gender becomes an integral aspect of analysis of personhood as also does the concept of life cycle as the person is not static over time but changes in roles as life progresses through various status stages.

Autonomy (or the right to make decisions), when a person feels full agency that no action is beyond his or her control is the central focus of this book that investigates who in a society is autonomous and to what extent and why?

1.6.2 Fieldwork

Aparna Rao was a young married woman of about thirty when she conducted this fieldwork among the Bakkarwals of Kashmir beginning from 1980. Her field area is concentrated in the valleys of Lidder and Sind and also in Jammu-Jandrah area. It was conducted in phases of varying time periods right up to 1992. She did classical anthropological fieldwork staying with various families and also moving in and out of their groups, with her husband joining her for certain periods of time. She combines qualitative and quantitative data, using the latter as supportive of her statements. She used her own knowledge of Hindi
and Urdu and later became more conversant with the local dialect and had no need for an interpreter. Beginning from a systematic collection of household data she went on to more open ended participation in conversations from which the bulk of the data has been composed. In addition there has been collection of life histories, migration patterns, kinship and botanical terminologies. Demographic data was directly collected and compared with data collected by the Government Census officers. Since the women engage in outdoor activities and there is no segregation of men and women in this society, she could collect data from both although the more intimate data like on sexuality could be collected only from women. Her distance from her informants was never judged in terms of religion, ethnicity, etc., but the class difference a general principle of equality (that of being a herder and of equality before God) prevented much problems of interaction.

1.6.3 Analysis of data

The Bakkarwals assign a gender to all beings except God and therefore, identity is primarily gendered. Beginning from birth baby boys are ritually cleaner than girls and the period of pollution to be observed by a mother after birth of a girl child is longer. Both parents have equal role in conception and the blood of an infant is received entirely from mother and the semen determines aspects such as gender of a child. Gender is seen as a transmitted category over generations and some lineages have a tendency to have more children of a particular gender. The women are respected as givers of milk that is also responsible for formation of a child’s character. This gift is called batri and is collateral in nature as distinguished from rag associated with lineal ties. Rag coming from males also induces competition while batri is a cementing positive tie.

At birth every being is a shakas but only humans become banda after evolving into a social person. Banda confers qualities of belonging to the social world while shakas is simply being alive in a neutral way. The innate temper of a being of any species is called mijaj and is transmitted through male semen and linked to the core or true nature (akikat) of a person. It describes what a person is like dependable, responsible or not reliable, etc. The nature of mijaj in terms of its akikat depends on the species, the community to which one belongs, the family or zat or pedigree (for animals) and also one’s individual make up. Not two beings are therefore exactly alike and differ in some aspects of mijaj that is ultimately seen as God given. “Families living over generations in the same contiguous areas and using adjoining pastures are thus likely to have mijaj which are reasonably similar” (p.49), in other words food, water and air, all go into constituting mijaj as does the species characters of an animal. Thus the physical and spiritual aspects are also seen as contiguous and not separate; that is your mental makeup is affected by food and air that go into the body.

Each living being derives three core aspects from their parentage; nafas, rû and ôsh. The two former characters are liquid and dry up at death while the rû persists. Nafas is the life force that is transmitted to a baby through its mother’s blood and milk; it also represents a negative kind of energy and all negative characters found in a person are traced to its nafas; to some extent it can be described as selfhood and causes selfishness. Osh comes later in life and is the capacity to distinguish between good and evil, like developing a sense of judgment. It is also associated with growing up and taking on responsibilities as a member of
society; with rationality, knowledge, control and such positive emotions. It also includes empathy, sympathy and thus a capacity to give reasoned opinions. One must have \textit{nafas} to have \textit{osh} and their quantities are homologous.

The quantities may vary over the life cycle and differ with gender. Ideally a woman should have more \textit{osh} than a man but in reality it is the opposite. A foetus with no \textit{osh} can be dangerous to its mother’s life and may poison her. During this danger period just after birth the mother and child are vulnerable to bad spirits and need to be secluded. The first few drops of mother’s milk are very important and help a child to choose its profession when it grows up. Name giving is an important aspect of making an infant into a person and is done only when the parents are sure of its survival. Rao’s data taken in the early eighties shows a rise in Islamic names for both boys and girls, possible as the community gets more exposure.

The life cycle is divided into seven phases, the first four of which is confined to the first four years of life when also the child’s \textit{nafas} stabilises and it makes a transition from a \textit{shakas} to a \textit{banda}. The Bakkarwals begin to distinguish between the sexes from early infancy and boys and girls are dressed differently. To be properly dressed is part of being well-mannered and well behaved throughout a person’s life. Babies of both sexes begin to wear caps that become gender specific around the age of four to five. Head and hair among them is a sign of honour and to offer someone one’s cap is “like offering one’s honour, one’s head, one’s life” (p. 97).

Outside knowledge (or \textit{ilum}) is well recognised and both boys and girls may be sent to school but in reality at the time of this work very few children actually went to school for various reasons for catching the evil eye, taking on bad ways and practical difficulties of combining schooling with a nomadic lifestyle. Some families had begun to feel that schooling could combine with land and cattle so as not to let a boy move out of a pastoral economy.

Boys are regarded as heirs (or \textit{waris}) to their parents and expected also to fulfill their obligations as such. But women can also be heirs. A male \textit{waris} must have enough \textit{osh} to make good decisions while a female \textit{waris} must have enough \textit{batri} to be affectionate and caring. The Bakkarwals clearly recognise the liminal phase of growing up or adolescence, as an intermediate phase of being a child and a young adult (\textit{jawan}). At around the age of ten the \textit{osh} stabilises and a child can make judgments by itself and does not need adult guidance. But between this age and around sixteen and seventeen the balance between \textit{nafas} and \textit{osh} must be stabilised through mixing with right persons and getting proper training. Some boys were reported to have gone missing because they came in contact with the wrong kind of people.

Once they are regarded as sexually adults the terminology for boys and girls changes to \textit{gadro} and \textit{gadri} from the earlier \textit{larrallura} and \textit{betki} (affectionate terms for little boys and girls). The boys are then initiated into the freedom and space of the herder’s life a much romantised phase in local culture. The girls must practice self-restraint and must abstain from ‘hot’ foods and must prepare to keep the ritual fasts of Ramzan that marks the ritual development of adult personhood. As soon as a girl begins her first menstruation she is classified as those who must maintain norms of modesty and shame.
The final growing up is marked by marriage, a process largely controlled by the community and where lineage identities (zat/khel) play important roles. The Bakkarwals put a strong value on biradari or brotherhood. By birth one belongs to a biradari (zat/khel) and by marriage one acquires a further extension of the biradari in terms of affinal kin. At the time the fieldwork was conducted both biradari and zat/khel denoted the patrilineage. Marriages confined to one’s zat/khel are seen as better as the less the mixing of blood the purer the progeny in terms of moral character. The zat/khel representing one’s own blood also gives a sense of emotional security. Thus the predictable nature of zat (you know what you are getting), the accountability of fellow zat members and the reliability of endogamy within the zat/khel is the basis of a successful marriage.

A woman remains in relation to others all her life and she is never left alone, where alone means also being with only strangers. Although the Bakkarwal camps are small a woman always has a relative nearby that is also ensured by the practice of lineage endogamy. However the capacity to be alone was dependent upon certain qualities that men possessed more than women and therefore to be a real man was defined as the capacity to be alone and to have things under his control. It included qualities such as physical strength, bravery, intelligence, generosity, empathy, and also to be compassionate. Women were not morally prevented from being alone but they felt they did not have these qualities and were thus afraid to be alone. Similarly not all men have all these qualities and all are not real men (saeææomard).

A person is autonomous when he has things under his or her control is one who is able to demonstrate a state of well-being that is has the legitimate amounts of nafas and osh. This again is demonstrated by the person’s social and economic status, the number of children and the size of his flocks. The concept of relationality includes among the pastoral Bakkarwal the herd animals as well as human beings. A young man who inherits his father’s flock is rated by the family to which he belongs but under Islamic laws the women also inherit from her parents and is entitled to 50% of her son’s herds. A woman has rights to transfer her own herds and leaves 40% of her animals to her sons and 60% to her daughters. Women also receive some animals each time they visit their parents and build up their own herds from these gifts. However since a family owns its herds together the separation of a woman’s herds from her husband’s is only theoretical. Husband and wife over a long period of marriage also tend to identify with each other as persons. In early years of marriage a woman often exerts her right to receive the money obtained by selling her animals. The existence of the Bakkarwal household depends upon two major resources, children and herd animals and both are highly valued. A residential household is referred to as a dera. A young man is always said to be living in his father’s dera and uses the term tabbar for his own wife children and household belongings but which becomes a dera as his sons get married eventually. When a person can say that he has his own dera (that includes his fahter’s) he is complete as a banda but as long as he lives with another person as servant he is not a complete person.

Since the Bakkarwals practice mobile pastoralism their lives oscillate between mutual cooperation and autonomy where the herder may have to take individual decisions. It is one’s innate nature that dictates the balance between two and if properly regulated gives rise to maximum wellbeing. Usually since a rich man has more access to resources including better health services he is likely to remain
Gender Identities

rich and not lose his herds. Women have animals but not pasture rights and rights of inheritance can also be manipulated by stronger men in their favour. Women also do a lot of work in the pastoral economy besides household work like cooking and cleaning. She milks the animals, prepares milk products, gathers vegetables and dries and stores them, cares for the dogs, sets up and dismantles the tents and packs up for migration. But men’s work depends more upon their socioeconomic rank than simply gender. A man can do all these works if he is dependent or a servant. When the ewes are lambing and shearing takes place every one gets very busy and there is little time for anything else. The author has narrated an incidence when the parents had no time to take their son to a doctor and he subsequently died as the needs of the animals and of the household economy comes first.

A man begins to assert his identity when he separates from his father’s herd and sets up his own dera. The stimulus for this is always seen to come from women as a daughter-in-law wishes to be independent of control by her mother-in-law. A woman has more agency in her own nuclear household especially since her natal household members can visit her. A successful man can set up his own dera but an unsuccessful man may be forced to join another dera and indicate a drastic lack of wellbeing. Such a lack of success is attributed to insufficient amount of nafas (selfhood) and osh (personhood). Thus a man is not necessarily autonomous and is guided by his temperament and capacity for reasonable choice making. A powerful man is less likely to lose his wife through divorce and he is also more likely to get a second wife. Thus the more power one has the more it builds up. A woman has some agency to move in and out of marriage but it is very limited and mostly controlled by her male kin. Again it is members of a large zat (lineage) that can count more influential men among themselves and more men are polygamous such that larger biradari are also sign of “well-being, agency and autonomy”( p. 261).

1.6.4 Conclusion

This ethnography is focused on the construction of personhood and the ways in which some people have more agency and autonomy than others in a society. Although we see that women as a category have less agency than men; it is not that all men are equal. They differ by what is perceived as their inner temperament and partly acquired and partly inherited abilities that include being part of more powerful linages and having a wealthy father. Ultimately it is the balance of selfhood and personhood that makes a man complete and makes him autonomous to take his own decisions that will be respected by others. Women also have their space and scope for power and it is nothing inherent but simply lack of certain qualities that makes them more dependent. Thus ideally the gender differences are less than they are in practice. Identities are thus a combination of inner propensities and external resources.

1.7 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

This work devoted to an ethnographic account of a Muslim pastoral community of Kashmir, explores the question of to what extent the individual is able to exercise his or her autonomy in ideology and practice. It is generally thought
that individualism does not exist in simple communities. This ethnography takes up this issue, and shows the existence of individual autonomy; these ideas can be taken up in other studies.

1.8 SUMMARY

We learn from these two ethnographies that identity can be understood in many different ways as can gender. Gender relations in any society are dependent upon their folk beliefs, their world view and cosmology. One must know about construction of personhood and the ideals of interaction and conferring of status in each society by detailed fieldwork as each society is also understood only in the context of their natural and social environment and other historically derived parameters. Thus there can be no one theory of gender although one can make hypotheses as made by Unnithan–Kumar that gender is an identity marker at the boundaries of two groups and Rao shows that gender is only part of the more general theory of construction of personhood in any culturally specific situation. Both men and women are not totally circumscribed by social norms and there is always space for manipulation and strategising such that both gender and identity remain dynamic concepts.

References


Sample Questions

1) Discuss the status of Girasia women with respect to lineage affiliations.

2) Is it justified to treat caste and tribe as separate categories for all parts of India?

3) What was the role of the Bhakar in defining the social status of the Girasia?

4) Discuss the parameters by which a person is constructed in the cosmology of the Bakkarwals.

5) What is the role played by women in Bakkarwal economy and social relationships?
UNIT 2  RITES DE PASSAGE

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Learning Objectives

In this unit, you will learn about the:
- practice of socialisation;
- importance of psychological aspects in cultural studies;
- rites de passage; and
- presence of individualism and autonomy in simple societies.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In every culture there is some way in which growing up is marked, although the meaning of ‘growing up’ and the practical implications of it vary greatly from one culture to the other. In this Unit, just to illustrate the point as to how much the notion of ‘growing up’ can vary we have chosen for you two ethnographic texts, set in two parts of the world. In one you will find that the entire process is not marked out by any significant ritual or any kind of emotional and cognitive transition. In fact the passage from childhood to adulthood follows the pattern almost like we find among animals with no fuss at all except for the biological changes. In another, the transition is marked by significant and elaborate rituals that have dense symbolic content. In fact to grow up here means that you make a sudden leap and the two phases of childhood and adulthood are clearly marked.
The two ethnographies that we have chosen for you are both classics in anthropology and they also are based on two significant theoretical premises. The first one written by Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* created a stir in America when it was published and became a major contributor to the culture and personality school of which Mead was one of the founders along with Abram Kardiner, Cora Dubois and Linton. The second one *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Rituals*, by Victor Turner is also a landmark book that set up its own theoretical premise in the field of symbolic anthropology.

### 2.2 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *Coming of Age in Samoa* IS AN EXAMPLE

Mead was not only a pioneer woman anthropologist, she was the direct student of Franz Boas, whom we may refer to as the father of American Cultural Anthropology. Boas laid the foundation of what came to be known as the Culture Personality School, by his seminal work, *The Mind of the Primitive Man*. The American cultural tradition was always inclined towards a study of human psychology and its relation to culture and it was the cross-cultural perspective introduced by scholars such as Mead, that later led to the neo-Freudian input into psychology and the present field of cross-cultural psychology has gained much from the work of anthropologists. Put simply this school of thought advocated that while one accepts the Freudian theory that early childhood experiences shape adult personality, these experiences are not the same universally but set within a cultural frame so that children grow up differently in different cultures. Therefore it is wrong to assume that certain Freudian generalisations such as adolescent trauma, the Oedipal complex and the Electra complex are universal for all humans. In other words it is culture that shapes human sexuality, rather than the other way around.

As a young scholar of only twenty three years of age, the first field study that Margaret Mead conducted was in Samoa. Her task was to study the process of growing up and to compare it to the American society where the adolescent trauma was taken as a natural and given condition of being human. According to Freud, the adolescent trauma derived from the psycho-biological transition from latent to overt sexuality accompanied by significant changes in the human body as it acquired the secondary sexual characters associated with adulthood. Since this biological process is identical for all humans it was presumed that adolescent trauma would also be a universal sexual/social experience. Mead was sent to the field by her teacher, Franz Boas to test the hypothesis as to the universality of the adolescent trauma that causes so much distress to parents and society in general in America. One reason why she chose Samoa at that time was Samoa would have appeared to be as far removed from American culture as possible, making it ideal to test this hypothesis in a cultural setting completely different from the USA.

### 2.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

#### 2.3.1 Intellectual Context

As already mentioned the ethnography is part of the culture and personality school that began in the American cultural tradition by paying attention to the process
of cultural history. Unlike the British Social anthropology of that time that followed the Durkheimian sociological tradition, looking only into social variables; the American Cultural tradition looked upon culture as a process that developed in its own historical context. They were keenly interested in the way the minds of humans were shaped by culture and how the shape of culture was linked to the way the culture bearers mind were shaped. The introduction of the concept of mind as a variable inevitably led the scholars to examine Freudian and other psychological theories, putting them in the intellectual context of cross cultural comparison, the hallmark of the anthropological methodology. The main task of the anthropologists was not just to explain the fact of existence of culture as a human trait but to explain why, given that the human is one species, cultures vary so much.

2.3.2 Fieldwork

Interestingly, while in all modern ethnographies the methodology finds place of pride at the beginning of the work, Mead had tucked away her methodology in the Appendix. Mead stayed in the island of Tau in Samoa and collected data from three contiguous villages mainly concentrating upon adolescent girls and backed it up with cultural data on ceremonies surrounding birth, adolescence and marriage from all the seven villages of Manu’s archipelago. The total number of people included in her study numbered six hundred and she did qualitative data gathering for six months using the native language (she mentions the total length of her stay being for nine months). She has used the detailed case study method dwelling upon the emotional, social and cultural dimensions of each case in detail. In fact her vivid descriptive ability is put to best use as she brings each girl alive in our imagination. Very interestingly she mentions the subjectivity of the scholar in analysing the data, as she says, “The conclusions are also subject to the limitation of the personal equation. They are the judgments of one individual upon a mass of data, many of the most significant aspects of which, can, by their very nature be known only to herself” (p.171). She also uses a cross sectional study to substitute for a linear technique usually done for a study of adolescence. She had chosen twenty-eight children, much below the age of adolescence and twenty-five girls who had passed puberty within the last four years at the time of her fieldwork as the main focus of her study. She had also compared them with very young children and young married women to complete the age grade. Overall comparison is made with European girls of the same age group that being the primary purpose of her work.

Unlike the focus of some anthropologists only on the social and cultural data, Mead dwells at length on the emotional and psychological dimensions of the behaviour that she has observed in the field. The observed behaviour includes detailed and comprehensive aspects of their day to day life, the various occupations and details of village setting, material culture and domestic life are given. The Samoan way of life is the back drop in which the detailed case study of these young girls in terms of their life history has been done. She assesses their problems stemming mostly from their life situation but also from their differential mental makeup, their levels of intelligence (on which Mead makes subjective assessment), their exposure to the outside world mainly in the form of the Christian religion and the missionaries and the possible life situations that may be specifically distressing or favourable.
2.3.3 Analysis of Data

The Samoans are described as having a subsistence economy based on fishing, making canoes for the same purpose, growing fruits and vegetables and keeping domestic animals like pigs; their staple foods being yams, breadfruit and bananas. They made their own houses, boats and clothes and had little contact with the outside world except the residential school maintained by the missionary father. The life is described as a routine broken only by regular happenings like birth of children, marriages and death. Time is kept as a cycle of events and not as days of passing minutes. Children are born in regular succession and each time a new born arrives, the child slightly older is expected to take care of it. Thus almost from the age of five years onwards, little children take care of infants dragging them along to the best of their ability.

Socialisation, a process on which Mead has specifically focused her attention is shown to be casual, with little attempts at control coming from the little caretakers; and each child is controlled not as much as the authority exerted upon it as by the fact that it also has to take care of the next young sibling. Thus responsibilities are the real teachers and not any form of formal imparting of education.

The girls and boys gradually learn the more complex tasks as they grow up, beginning with the simpler ones. By the age of seventeen or so a girl knows most of the things she needs to know to become a mother and wife. The tasks of women are relatively undifferentiated. The boys on the other hand can aspire to rise in their class position and become a part of a chief’s social circle.

Samoa society is divided into classes and is not totally egalitarian although the actual difference in life style of an ordinary person and those of the class of head men and chiefs is not too much. Men are also divided in terms of their craft specialisation; thus a young boy can become a “house builder, a fisherman, an orator or a wood carver” (p. 32). If a boy excels in the task in which he specialises he can hope to climb the social ladder, and there is stiff competition. However if a young man joins the rank of the select, he has to stop behaving like a young man and become responsible and also behave like an older person. The upward mobile young man must also choose his wife carefully so that she is proficient and clever enough to discharge her duties. A dull girl cannot hope to marry an important man.

So like in many other stratified societies, where positions are to be achieved, both young men and women have to do so by virtue of their personal qualifications.

The composition of Samoan households is flexible as there is no fixed rule of residence. The head of a household is called a matai, who gives protection and is entitled to work from all who are under him. Widows and widowers often return to their natal households. But the village boundaries are more important than actual household boundaries as people often go over to live with a relative for many reasons. Children quarrel with their parents and simply go and live with some other relative, but within the village. Small children and even babies move from hand to hand and never come to any harm. Most children move from household to household testing out the best possibilities, like least scolding, best food etc.
Mead discusses at length with the help of detailed case studies how relationships are worked out. What emerges is that emotions are diffused over a wide range of relationships rather than being concentrated on a few. Thus according to Mead there is more range and less depth in the emotional content; in other words violent emotional responses are very rare. For example right from childhood, instead of rebellious or delinquent behaviour within a household, the children simply move from household to household if they have any problems of staying in any one place.

However favouring blood relationships is quite often seen when a choice has to be made between numbers of eligible kin for conferring rank. Again Mead cites examples to show how a less favoured daughter may be preferred over a better qualified niece to become the ‘princess’ the most favoured daughter of a chiefly house.

Friendship is however of less importance than kinship and siblings form closed peer groups. Only girls who may make friends outside of kin are the ones who stay at the hostel run by a pastor.

Age at marriage can be quite high as few girls prefer to marry young for the best time is for them between around seventeen when they can boss around their younger siblings and are exempt from doing too much of hard work. Also there are no specific restrictions on premarital sex or any kind of sexual activity that Mead emphasises is minus any feeling of guilt or moral sanction that exists in Western society.

From a young age children are exposed to all the bare facts of life like death, childbirth, burials, miscarriages or anything at all that may happen in the village. There is no concept at all of ‘shielding’ children, even the very young from anything. To Mead they grow up perfectly normal and none the worse emotionally or otherwise even while being well aware of all sexual and other activities from infancy. There are hardly any menstruation taboos and girls carry on most normal tasks when in their periods.

Since the girls are given little social recognition in terms of rank and position in the kin group, they also do not bother about kin and social relationships; like the boys are supposed to do. Boys must for example know by heart, the entire genealogy of their lineage and village; an essential skill to negotiate their adult lives but women has no such requirements.

The only taboo on sexual behaviour is between siblings and this is strictly enforced. Otherwise, as Mead points out there are three recognised forms of sexual relationships between the unmarried; a clandestine encounter where boys and girls meet secretly, the relationship that is well announced and the third one, where a boy who finds no acceptance anywhere indulges in a form of rape where he may crawl into an unsuspecting girl’s bed at night. In the last case if found out he becomes the subject of much ridicule as it becomes apparent that he is not able to woo any girl on his own merit. The only girl who must maintain her virginity for the sake of honour of her lineage is the taupa or the princess, the chosen one of the chiefly household.

Mead find every little occasion for conflict to occur as there are not many restrictions or deep emotional commitments. Marriages can be easily broken
and so can most other relationships, by simply moving away. “The absence of any important institutionalised relationship to the community is perhaps the strongest cause for lack of conflict here” (p.109). In comparing the Samoans with the Europeans, Mead also attributes the attitude of naturalness adopted in their culture towards birth and sex and even death, as against the Western culture where children are often kept away from exposure to such ‘facts of life’. Also the range of what is natural is extended far beyond that of the western society (of that time). “This acceptance of a wide range of ‘normal’ provides a cultural atmosphere in which frigidity and psychic impotence do not occur and in which a satisfactory sex adjustment in marriage can always be established” (p. 147).

2.3.4 Conclusion

In summary it can be said that Mead found that sexual activities and thus growing up, can be much better managed, if they are treated as natural and not in a hush-hush manner that only creates more tension and maladjustments and can make growing up a painful experience and lead to what is understood as adolescent trauma. Samoan child on the other hand grows up naturally accepting all sexual activities as natural as ‘eating food’. They never have to make any sudden transition to growing up and thus grow up without having to pass through adolescence at all. Thus adolescence can be viewed as a cultural rather than a natural phenomenon and certainly not as inevitable.

2.4 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

The ethnography teaches us that personhood and identity are socially constructed. Franz Boas, Mead’s advisor, wrote that courtesy, modesty, good manners, and conformity to ethical standards is universal but what constitutes these varies from one society to another and this is exactly what Mead’s pathbreaking work on the Samoa suggests. Furthermore, this book showed the importance of the psychological approach in cultural anthropology, a point that the American cultural anthropologists tended to ignore.

2.5 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndemu Rituals IS AN EXAMPLE

Victor Turners works are today read as seminal in the area of anthropology of symbolism or symbolic anthropology. His ethnographic community was the Ndembu of Africa and he published several books based on his work on them, beginning with Schism and Continuity in an African Society (1957). The book that we have chosen is not strictly an ethnography like his earlier book, but focuses on the major contribution of Turner to anthropological theory, that of symbolism, primarily of rituals and that too of life cycle rituals. But since is it all about one single culture, it can be treated like an ethnography. This work also compares with the earlier one in that it deals with the process of growing up in a culture and how a culture deals with the formation of new sexual being, a social person who will then become a full fledged member of that society. While Mead has dealt with the process of socialisation and the formation of a psychosocial human being, Turner looks at the role of dominant symbols in both capturing
and disseminating meanings about life to the members of a culture. It is the symbols that inscribe the emotions and the psychological state of making a transition from a child to an adult.

### 2.6 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

#### 2.6.1 Intellectual Context

Turner introduced the concept of a ritual structure instead of that of social structure, and also the concept of a dominant symbol. He focused in his analysis of a culture primarily on its rituals and its symbols to know, not just the overt behaviour of people, but the inner impetus for these behaviours and the manner in which they are imbibed.

He defines a ‘ritual’ as “prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers” (1967:19) and a ‘symbol’ as, “the smallest unit of ritual which still retains the specific properties of ritual behaviour; it is the ultimate unit of specific structure in a ritual context” (ibid). He did a functional analysis of ritual to see how they helped members of society adjust to transformations in their position within the social situation and the rituals acted as “a positive force in an activity field”.

A ‘dominant symbol’ is defined by him as that symbol which encapsulates what is called as an axiomatic value, or it is an end in itself. It thus makes references to many different aspects of that culture, of whatever is the primary context in which the society operates. For example if it is a nation, then the national flag is a dominant symbol as it stands for the nation itself: it becomes thus an end in itself. Like people would lay down their lives to save the national flag. Similarly a church or a temple may become the dominant symbol of a religion or a sect and so on.

Thus an analysis of all that a dominant symbol stands for; will become a complete description of that entity, a culture, a tribe, a nation and so on. Such a symbol will have condensed within it an entire range of emotions and values and is not a specific signifier of any one aspect or dimension.

For the Ndembu, the dominant symbol is the mudyi or the milk tree. Significantly, Turner writes, “one educated Ndembu, trying to cross the gap between our cultures, explained to me that the milk tree was like the British flag” (p. 21). The milk tree stands for breast milk, the puberty of girls (getting breasts) but ultimately for the entire tribal culture, “The child depends on the mother for nutriment; similarly say the Ndembu, the tribes men drinks from the breast of tribal custom” (ibid: 22). The milk tree thus represents all that the culture stands for, harmony, benevolence, nurturing and cultural continuity. But it also represents oppositions and contradictions that are enacted through the puberty rituals that form the core of this book.

Turner emphasizes the positivist approach of looking at the culture from the outside. Thus he wants to give primacy to the interpretation of the anthropologist who, in his understanding gets the total or holistic picture as an outsider as compared to the situated view of the participants to the culture.
A second major contribution of Turner is to put forward the theory of liminality, in the analysis of rites of passage in which he follows upon Van Gennep to analyse the ‘in between’ or liminal period when an individual makes a transition from one state to another in terms of the social structure. He describes how the ritual structure is analogous to the structural transition taking place in a person’s life; and how it is reflected in the ritual symbolism that is often drawn from a bodily analogy.

### 2.6.2 Fieldwork

The Ndembu are situated in northwestern Zambia in south-central Africa. Turner is apprehensive of the fact that under the impact of industrial civilisation many of the traditions of these tribes are dying out. He did two and a half years fieldwork in Mwinilunga as a research officer of the Rhodes–Livingstone Institute. He recorded the points of view and interpretations of the natives but was totally convinced that it is only the anthropologist who can get the correct explanation. His history of Ndembu shows them to be like most other tribes a people with a dynamic rather than a static identity. They are a matrilineal and virolocal people thus having with them the classic tensions of such societies where the inheritance is in the line of mother but the mother stays at the father’s place so that the inheritors of property are located away from the property. Turner notes that mobility is a way of life for these people as they keep changing their residences and the villages also keep relocating.

To get to his primary objective of analysing the structure and property of ritual symbols, Turner had collected what he terms as three classes of data. First of them are what may be collected by external observations, the kind that anthropologists get by living within the field. The second category of data is what is obtained by talking to the informants and getting their explanations about things; and the third category of data are the ‘significant contexts’ that the anthropologists works outs. In other words, the first two are inductive and the third a deductive process of reasoning that is done by the scholar.

In his field observations he pays special attention to meanings as well as to the native forms of classification of objects such as colour. In fact colour classification is an aspect to which he pays special attention as these are important components of ritual. His analysis of black, white and red colours are significant as it puts them in opposition to each other. It is interesting to note that he refers to the Upanishads to compare the colour classifications of red, white and black with ancient Hindu scriptures, so that his range of analysis goes beyond the immediate field observations to include comparisons with a wide range of texts. He has given a great deal of importance to deductive analysis and interpretations of meanings. Apart from focusing on cognitive classifications he has collected comprehensive data on rites of passage especially rites of initiation of both girls and boys. Since this unit focuses on growing up, we shall discuss in greater details the data about these initiation rituals.

### 2.6.3 Analysis of Data

The Ndembu living in vast areas of forested land have a subsistence economy. The Mudyi or the milk tree is the focus of all their rituals especially that involving the initiation into adulthood of both girls and boys. The initiation ceremony of the girls is called as Nkang’a and symbolises her maturity into an adult woman.
as often she is married at the same time as the initiation. She then becomes a “sexually accomplished spouse, a fruitful woman, and a mother able to produce a generous supply of milk” (p. 23). The initiation ceremony is done for each girl, separately, just as a specific tree is chosen just for her and she and the tree are symbolically united. The novice is made to lie down motionless, as if she were dead, and the women dance around her in a circle. No man is allowed to come near, and the mother too must stay away. The mother however cooks a large meal of cassava and beans (staple food) and feeds all the women ritually. She carries a large spoon of food and the women are supposed to snatch it from her, and when a woman succeeds, thereafter everyone eats.

The ritual symbolises the separation of daughter and mother as the daughter is incorporated as an adult after the ceremony. Instead of her daughter, she then becomes a rival in a way as she will inherit from her mother, this being a matrilineal society. At the same time the love relationship between mother and daughter remains. The society being virilocal, the mother does not want her daughter to be married far away. It is believed that if a woman from the same village is the first to snatch the spoon, the initiate will be married close by.

The Mudyi tree meant for the ritual is separated out (made sacred) and referred to as a ‘place of dying’ and of ‘suffering’. Since it secretes a white fluid when it is starched, it is compared to breast milk and breasts; there after it also stands for a mother and her child and finally a matrilineage and the tribal structure. It is also a symbol for learning for a initiate learns to become a woman by drinking the milk of the Mudyi. Thus Turner draws three lines of symbolic association from the milk tree. One line develops along breast, mother-child relationship, matriline and the Nedmbu social structure; in other words going in direction of social and structural relationships. The second line develops along the sequence; breasts, womanhood, married womanhood and childbearing, thus going towards sexual development. The third line goes from suckling to learning the tasks, rights and duties of womanhood and we may compare it with process of socialisation. Thus the milk tree is polysemic and emanates meanings in several different directions.

To understand the importance of the milk tree we must understand the Ndembu conceptualisation of birth and the role of parents. They believe that mother has minimal role in conception, her body is only a vessel where the father’s semen produces the baby and it is God who gives life. The primary role of mother is in giving breast milk and nurturing the child. This also explains why the Ndembu emphasise the role of the father even though they are matrilineal. They are virilocal and the father son relationship is given a lot of importance. A father may incorporate a favoured son into his own matrilineage and in spite of matriliny the father son relationship is close.

The male initiation rite is called the Mukunda, and is a rite of circumcision. Circumcision is connected to purity and an uncircumcised man is like menstruating women, except that the latter is temporarily impure while a man not circumcised in permanently impure and subjected to all kinds of taboo; including separation from circumcised men. The unit that takes part in a Mukunda is a vicinage or a cluster of neighbouring villages and the most important is the father son relationship that is emphasised in the ritual.

There are two kinds of settlements, the traditional village based around a head man and his matrilineal kin, most of whom are male as the women are married
The second type is a farm, where the farm head separates from his matrilinage in order to set up his own unit and try to enter the cash economy. Only one head man out of all these villages that form part of a vicinage is the sponsor of a Mukunda. and there is a competition to be able to do so. To be an office holder in a Mukunda was a matter of prestige and usually the chief circumciser, the organiser and the one who presides over the ritual are all men of prestige and seniority who have chance of becoming headmen. So the ritual is also linked to the status system of the society. There is considerable manipulation and contestation for these positions.

Turner relies on the extended case method, to discuss these rivalries in great details, taking the help of detailed processes and narrative histories. He is of the opinion that culture is not an orderly system but a medley of disparities and the regularities can only be observed on a long term basis.

There are three major steps to a Mukunda, ‘entering’ the circumcision lodge, ‘staying inside’ it and then ‘coming out’. All these three steps are full of ritual significance and dense symbolism.

The novices are also differentiated and there is one who is the Kambanji or the leader and one who is the last, or Kajika. It depends on their own performance, crying out loud; slow in answering questions, etc. It is almost like an examination where performance is ranked. The novices are ritually made closer to their mothers and special medicines are made for them. A very important medicine used in the ritual is called nfunda and the dance of the men who are the circumcisers takes place around the chikoli tree. The symbolism of the chikoli is described by the Ndembu as, “The elephant fails to break it. Neither wind nor rain can break it, and white ants cannot eat it. It stands upright like an erect penis, or a man’s strong body” (p.191). In other words the boy’s initiation symbolism is one of being strong. The medicines are supposed give strength as well as protect the novices from witchcraft and sorcery.

The circumciser’s songs contain three major themes, the symbolic death of the novice, his separation from his mother and her matrilineage, and the change in social order brought about by the Mukunda. The last emphasises the transformation of boys attached to their mothers to men who are now separated from her. There is a lot of expression of male aggression and hostility towards mothers in a matrineal society. However fathers show deep concern for their sons and feed them with their own hands after the operation.

One of the major purposes of the male initiation rites is to transform the boy into a full member of the wider social units of his village, descent group and tribe. It reduces the narrow affiliation to the family (to mother) and extends it to the wider tribal community; through the father son relationship. The ultimate aim of the Mukunda is to return the boys to society as full-fledged men who have received the necessary instructions for growing up.

Thus there is also significant difference in the initiation of the girls and the boys. While girls are initiated individually and the emphasis is on their becoming good wives and mothers within the family; the boys are initiated in a large group that is inclusive of a wide social system. The boys are growing up to become members of an entire tribe and have legal, ritual and moral power. There initiation is also
a status driven game of prestige that involves a wide social circle. Sexuality and reproduction plays a secondary role to the social power game that is prominently displayed all along the Mukunda.

Turner makes use of his own concept of liminality to analyse the significance of initiation rites and the symbolism of the puberty rituals. The three stages on the rites of passage are evident in both the girl’s and the boy’s rituals of growing up. The in-between stage, which is symbolically associated with death, occurs in both. For the girls, it is the lying still under the Mudyi tree and for the boys their entering the initiation lodge, where they remain circumscribed with taboos and ‘socially invisible’ till they emerge again as newly formed social persons. This symbolic death is highlighted in many ways, the most important being that as novices they have no social status. It is what Turner has called the “betwixt and between”, when time and space are both suspended. The novice ceases to be what he was before and he is not yet anything else. The initiates make a social disappearance before they can make a re-appearance. This is the period in which they must learn and elaborate rituals make this learning very effective. Thus the process of initiation for both boys and girls teaches them about appropriate behaviour, norms and actions that will make them successful members of society. The gender appropriate values and roles are imbibed into them. Unlike a slow process of growing up, the dramatic and symbolically charged ritual of initiation transforms them quickly and in a short period of time into adults. The symbolic ‘dying’ of the initiate is followed by a ‘rebirth’ into a different social being. This transformation is not limited to the individual but is a social transformation where all relationships from within the family to the level of the tribe changes. The most significant at the level of individual is the separation from the mother. Yet to be an adult, the child is attached and dependent on its mother and as an adult it is both separated and in some contexts opposed to the mother.

Turner tells that while the informants emphasise only the harmonious aspects of the rituals; from an outsider perspective he is also able to see the oppositions and contestations between different categories of social entities.

2.6.4 Conclusion

Thus we find that growing up in the context of the Ndembu is a jump from one state to another made possible by rather dramatic rituals of initiation. Turner’s analysis of the rites of passage is a classic contribution to anthropological theory. During the course of his analysis he has also dwelt on other aspects of symbolism; significant being the analysis of colour symbolism. Although Turner does not follow the culture personality school, yet he does evoke psychoanalytic theory in order to analyse and comment upon the deep seated impact of symbols on the human mind. He has also done a comparative analysis taking the data from nearby and similar tribes and other non-western and western systems of symbolism referring to the work of Mary Douglas, from whom he has borrowed the notion of the human body as a primary source of symbolism. Thus birth and death of the body are symbolically enacted in the rites of passage to produce dramatic results.
2.7 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

Victor Turner’s work contributes to our understanding of rituals, for the members of the Rhodes-Livingstone Institute, who were working in Africa, paid little attention to the ritual activities of the African tribes. This work contributes to an understanding of the dominant symbols, which appear in many different ritual contexts. However, their meaning has a high degree of autonomy and consistency throughout the total system of symbols. This work has advanced our understanding of symbolic anthropology.

2.8 SUMMARY

Comparing the two ethnographies reveals some interesting insights. While Mead’s work is located in the early twentieth century, the fieldwork for this work being done in 1923, although she published it only in 1949; and Turner did his fieldwork in early 1960s situating it in a time period almost 20 years or more later. There is a lot of variation in the use of theory although Mead appears to depend more on narratives and qualitative data and Turner on a diachronic case study method, where he looks into the antecedents and the process of building up of each case of contestation and disharmony.

Although Turner in deference to his times did acknowledge that in the long run there must be some cohesive system to everything; in the present and in a specific situation he is able to identify much fluidity and lack of cohesion. In fact Turner is among those pioneer anthropologists who broke away from the picture of perfectly harmonious functionally integrated systems to analysing societies as dynamic and internally contradictory.

Mead on the other hand also refers to aberrations, but she situates them at the level of individuals and not culture as a whole. Mead’s descriptions are more in the line of overviews although she too focuses on detailed case studies; while Turner is far more detailed in terms of structure of relationships.

Both give us useful insight into what goes into making adults out of non-adults. The social significance of this being that it is only as adults that we become full members of society and can take on all the roles and responsibilities that is required to reproduce the society; the primary being its physical reproduction through sexual activity. Yet every society sets its own limits on when a person can or cannot be seen as a sexual being and when he or she is seen as capable of parenting. Along with this primary duty social persons take on other duties situated in the realm of economy, politics and religion.

References


**Suggested Reading**


**Sample Questions**

1) Is the phase ‘adolescence’ only a biological state? Discuss with illustrations.

2) What theoretical framework has Margaret Mead used in analysing the transition to adulthood in Samoa?

3) What has been the influence of Mead’s work on psychological theory and why?

4) What is understood by ‘dominant symbol’? Discuss with examples.

5) What is rite of passage? Who gave this concept and what is Turner’s elaboration on it?

6) What does Turner understand by the liminal period? Where does it occur and why?
UNIT 3  GENDERED BODIES

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Sample Questions

Learning Objectives

In this unit, you will learn about the:

- concept of gendered bodies;
- society’s acceptance of behaviour of man and woman, which do not fall under the prescribed norms; and
- meaning of macho.

3.1  INTRODUCTION

Human beings are being born as ‘male’ or ‘female’ and based on societal norms, the cultural construction of a person as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ takes place. The behaviour of a ‘man’ or ‘woman’ is patterned by society and has nothing to do with the sex of a person. In this unit, we will try to understand the concept of gendered bodies from the ethnographies *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* by Serena Nanda and *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City* by Matthew C. Gutmann, set in two different cultural settings and how the question is perceived by the subjects of the study.
3.2 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* IS AN EXAMPLE

Nanda’s work *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India* is a defining pathway in gender studies. As stated in the introduction, the notion of ‘gender’ (attributes of masculine and feminine) is socially and culturally constructed, and in the recent past this has been brought to light by many anthropological and historical studies, slowly making it an acceptable fact. *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*, is an anthropological work among the Hijras of India who do not confirm to the culturally and socially constructed gender norms but prefer to belong to a third category.

3.3 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

3.3.1 Intellectual Context

This work reflects on gender identities which for a long time in most cultures were perceived as either masculine or feminine. This work deals with gender systems that have institutionalised alternatives. The role of the hijras in India from a religious context has been explored in this work. Nanda delves into the role and status of the hijras as neither man nor woman, falling out of the realm of accepted gendered bodies, and their acceptance by society due to socialisation. This work contributes to an interactionist perspective on gender, and how sex assignment and subsequent socialisation has resulted in the acceptance of intermediate or ambivalent gender identity of the hijras in India.

3.3.2 Fieldwork

Nanda conducted multisited fieldwork in different parts of India to capture the lifestyle and essence of the hijra community. The fieldwork was phased out into three phases at different interval of time over a period of six years from (1981-87). Nanda’s fieldwork didn’t involve living with the hijras as is usually seen in anthropological fieldwork. Thus, the fieldwork in itself reflects on the new age ethnographies that were coming up where the study no longer pertained to the concept of ‘living among the natives’ at a particular place.

Fieldwork also involved working with interpreters as Nanda was not conversant with the local languages that are spoken in India. Working with an interpreter thus involved training the interpreter, so as to avoid overenthusiasm on the part of the interpreter that could have led the study to go out of focus. Interviews, case studies, life histories and observation were the main techniques and methods used in fieldwork.

Nanda’s fieldwork also reflected on the ethical dilemma of representation of a group of people who otherwise had been romanticised and sensationalised. Questions and doubts come in when hijras are being spoken of as ‘neither man nor woman’, thus, she had to carefully portray the power of the hijras (emasculating process- surgical removal of the penis and testicles without the construction of a vagina) to transform themselves from men into women without the help of photographs which almost all hijras go through. She writes; ‘I would
never feel comfortable showing such (the genital area) pictures, even to a scholarly audience, and that to focus on a disembodied physical part of a person who was my friend would be contrary to my understanding of a human personality as a whole’ (p.157).

3.3.3 Analysis of Data

Introduction to the book begins with a narrative of her first encounter with a hijra in Mumbai in 1971 and how in the subsequent years her interest in alternative gender studies led to fieldwork for a detailed understanding of the lives of the hijras. Herein, she also tries to define the hijras and the problems related to the definition. The major issue was the disjunction between the cultural definition provided by people in general and the hijras who defined themselves based on a variety of roles played individually in the society right from being born as neither man nor woman, to a conflict with respect of gender identity leading to the emasculation ritual and becoming a member of the third gender, or being initiated as a hijra due to sexual impotence, an ascribed physical condition of intersexuality. Then again the question of hijras being generally referred to as prostitutes, which needed sensitive understanding.

‘Hijra Roles in the Indian Society’ has been taken up in the first chapter. Hijras in India play a culturally significant role as ritual performers. The author introduces the important social role of the hijras through which they have legitimised themselves and their acceptance in Indian society. The crucial subject of hijras being homosexual prostitutes has also been taken up in this chapter.

This chapter begins with the description of two performances of the hijras, first on the occasion of the birth of a baby boy and second one after marriage. Traditionally, the hijras are known for these performances in India, the birth of a baby boy is an occasion of great joy and celebration as it is believed that the boy would carry forward the family line and name. The hijras are expected to bless. The performance known as badhai is marked by singing, dancing and clapping hands (sound generated by beating the hollow palms together which is peculiar to the hijras only). During the performance the leader of hijras examines the genital part of the baby boy and finally blesses the child with the power of creating new life and taking the family line forward, which the hijra does not possess. The author writes; ‘it is for this role that the hijras are given the greatest respect, and it is this role that defines their identity in relation to the world around them’ (p.3). At the end of the performance the hijras are presented with traditional gifts of cash and goods.

Next description is the performance of the hijras after a marriage at the groom’s house. Herein, the author captures the essence of the ‘ritual of reversal’ in the jokes of the hijras that are targeted at the groom and his family, which in traditional Indian society is always held high in esteem than the bride’s family. The ambivalence of the hijras and the fear of their curse are also reflected in the instance where an orthodox groom’s family politely refuses the bride to meet the hijras, owing to the belief that the infertility of the hijra would contaminate the bride and prevent her from bearing a son. This chapter further describes the relationship of the hijras with their audience. It is a very peculiar relation as the hijras are regarded with awe much so because of the fear of their curse while at the same time their blessings are also sought and at times also ridiculed as impotent.
men (eunuchs). Towards the end of this chapter Nanda broaches the sensitive topic of prostitution. The hijras’ dominant cultural role is of a ritual performer, while at the same time it is also known that they are homosexual. She presents the views of the various authors in this chapter and towards the end of the book bring in the views on this aspect (prostitution) as part of the narratives of life histories of the hijras.

Chapter two titled ‘The Hijra as Neither Man nor Woman’ explores the role of the hijras as an alternative gender category, examining it in light of the Indian cultural context of what it means to be neither man nor woman. The question of neither being a man nor a woman is explained herein taking into account the life stories of the hijras and also the Hindu religious texts and mythological stories. Nanda, the author, first explores the definition of hijra as given by various scholars and it comes to light that there are basically two categories, one who are born hermaphrodite (intersexed) and the other who undergo the emasculation surgery (eunuch). In both categories the connotation is impotence.

In the first section of this chapter, Nanda explores the reasons why a hijra is not a man. From many interviews, she reports that the hijras do not consider themselves as male though most of them were born with male physical attributes. It was mostly stated that they never felt like a male and were not ever interested in females. Hijras enjoy dressing up as females and like to wear feminine accessories and keep long hair, even the ones who at times dress like males. One of the major insults, disgrace and punishment meted out to a hijra is to cut her hair for any misbehaviour. Many of them from childhood had shown keen interest to dress like females and prefer males as partners. Some of the hijras also marry and have husbands; so they do not regard themselves as men.

On the other hand they neither regard themselves as women as they do not have the female reproductive ability. If some of them are raised as girls at the time of puberty they realise their inability to reproduce as they do not menstruate. Thus, they do not consider themselves as real women even if they dress and behave like women. Moreover, the way hijras dress and their mannerism full of sexual connotations, abusive language and gestures is something which is very unladylike, ungracious, inappropriate and outrageous for ordinary women.

The noteworthy fact about the hijras is their acceptance as the third gender. They also find a place in epic texts and mythologies. Lord Shiva, Vishnu, Krishna all have at one time or the other taken the avatar of hijra, elaborations of which are given in the next section.

‘Emasculation Ritual Among the Hijras’, Chapter three presents a detailed account of the emasculation ceremony that forms an essential part of the rites of passage in the life of a hijra. The hijras believe that their power (shakti) comes after emasculation (nirvana). It means renouncing sexual desires to attain a state of liberation which is almost like rebirth. The Hindu scriptures call the beginning of this experience as the second birth, or the opening of the eye of wisdom, the hijras, too translate nirvana as rebirth (p.26). Nanda describes the elaborate process of emasculating which consists of three stages of the rites of passages as stated by Van Gennep (1960). Before the emasculation operation a hijra is secluded and not allowed to perform the daily chores for almost a month and after the operation the liminal period is observed and only on the fortieth day after the
ritual *puja* the assimilation and acceptance into the hijra community is complete. The mythological tales which confirm the powers and status of the hijras in Hindu society forms a part of this chapter.

The hijras worship Bahuchara Mata, whose main temple is near Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Nanda states that every hijra household has a picture of this goddess and they visit the temple of Bahuchara Mata at least once in their lifetime. The emasculation is also done in the name of the Mata; the hijras call upon the Mata to be present during the operation. In addition the hijras also worship Shiva and the Mother Goddess. It is the emasculation operation that links the hijras to two of the most powerful deities in Hindu religion, Shiva and Mother Goddess, which further sanctifies the hijras’ ritual role as performers in marriages and births.

**Reflection**

In one of the versions of Hindu creation myth, Shiva carries out an extreme, but legitimate form of *tapasya*, that of self-castration. Brahma and Vishnu had asked Shiva to create the world. Shiva agreed and plunged into the water for a thousand years. Brahma and Vishnu began to worry, Vishnu told Brahma that he, Brahma, must create and gave him the female power to do so. So, Brahma created all the gods, goddesses and other beings. When Shiva emerged from water, and was about to begin the creation, he saw that the universe was already full. So, Shiva broke off his *linga* (phallus), saying that “there is no use of this linga,” and threw it into the earth. His act results in the fertility cult of linga worship, which expresses the paradoxical theme of creative asceticism (p. 30).

Chapter-four ‘Social Organisation and Economic Adaptation’ is about how the hijra society adapt to and work together to meet day to day needs. The social structure consists of a *guru* and his *chelas* who has a marked territory where all functions are attended by them and hijras from other territories do not encroach. Adoption of a *chela* is a lengthy process in which a *chela* is observed for a few months and once the *guru* is satisfied the *chela* is formally adopted by calling in the *jamat* where the elder hijras from other areas are invited. Five rupee is placed by each elder and once the *chela* affirms the *guru’s* name he is accepted as a *chela* and has to pay one hundred and fifty rupees to the *jamat* which is usually borne by the *guru*. A *chela* is also free to leave his *guru* and join someone else on the payment of a fine. Hijras move between hijra houses across India. They stay for short period of times, during which they work as one of the group and also share household chores.

Chapters five, six, seven and eight consist of the life histories of four Hijras- Kamaladevi (a prostitute), Meera (a *guru*), Sushila, who has a husband and Salima (an outcast). The four life histories are well chosen as they focus on different aspects of the life of a hijra. Most of the hijras go through these phases of life except the fourth one who is an outcast. The interviews revealed that all the hijras at some point of their lives had been involved in prostitution. They freely agree to the fact that it is sexual desire that had attracted them to this profession. It normally happened at an age when they were trying to come to terms with reality that though they have been born a man they are not sexually interested in women but desire to be in male company and this is when one of the older hijras had introduced them to prostitution. Some give up prostitution after marriage or when they acquire a steady boyfriend or husband, but Sushila continued to be a prostitute even after marriage as she believed that she had to be self sufficient if her husband
ever left her. These life histories are a revelation as in the initial stages of the fieldwork most of the hijras had reported that they were not involved in prostitution.

The second life history is of Meera (a guru) who was also a dai ma (one who conducted the emasculation surgery). All her chelas (students) staying with her had been operated and her’s was the only known house in Bastipore well known for it. Meera had conducted eighteen surgeries and all were successful, though at the time of Nanda’s fieldwork she had given up performing the surgeries. Meera stated that the Mata had blessed her in her dreams with the permission to perform surgeries and after a few years it was Mata again in her dreams who had asked her to discontinue and so she stopped. Meera was well known for her successful surgeries and people from Mumbai also came to her; she earned a lot of money during those days besides achieving fame. On retrospect Meera reveals that though she had earned money, it was also spent quickly; she could not hold on to the money earned through performing surgeries.

Sushila had been living the life of a hijra for almost eighteen years but she was yet to go through the emasculation ritual. She could not get the surgery done as she never had enough money to pay for the surgery, though she was saving for it and hoped to get it done soon. Sushila lived with her husband, but regularly visited the hijra house being run by Meera and actively participated in the day to day chores. She also was involved in prostitution. One of the amazing facts about Sushila is that she found a girl for her earlier husband and married him off, so that he could live a complete life with his family. Before marriage she adopted him as her son and so now she has a daughter-in-law and a grandson.

Salima’s life history is a case of sorrow and grief. She was thrown out by her guru and made an outcast as it was alleged that she had a relation with the guru’s husband. She could not prove her innocence nor could she arrange the amount (five hundred rupees) that she had to pay as fine for being taken back into the hijra fold and thus for several years, she lived the life of an outcast on the streets. She was not allowed to join the hijra parties nor beg for alms in the hijra territories, and as word spread she was shooed away from other territories also. Proudly she stated that even in those difficult times she did not resort to prostitution as she had a boyfriend and believed that he would come back for her. During one of her visits Nanda did meet her boyfriend who had returned and married her. Salima was leading a respectable life as a hijra once again, though then she had taken up prostitution to support her ailing husband. Salima died of a ‘broken heart’ as she took to heavy drinking when her husband left her to marry a ‘real woman’.

3.3.4 Conclusion

The ethnography under discussion is a reflection on the lives of the hijras across India. The study of this community unearths many of the myths that have prevailed about the hijras. Almost all the hijras interviewed spoke of their voluntary entry to the community without being coerced into it. The life of the hijras is really challenging and tough as is revealed by these life histories. Many of them have joined it and stayed in it enduring the hardships. The guru-chela relation is one of the most revered and trustworthy relationships, though at times there has been cases of cheating also by either guru or chela. The emasculation ritual marks the complete transformation of a hijra and the acceptance into the hijra fold is absolute.
3.4 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

Nanda’s work on the hijras of India has brought to light the cultural construct and acceptance of a community who are neither man nor woman. This work based on fieldwork is a major contribution to the world of gender studies, as it has put to rest the romanticism that was attributed to the lives of the hijras.

3.5 THEORETICAL PART OF WHICH THE ETHNOGRAPHY The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City IS AN EXAMPLE

In *The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*, Gutmann bases his theoretical conceptions on two works: Antonio Gramsci’s “hegemony” and “contradictory consciousness” (here defined as tensions resulting from both consciousness inherited uncritically from the past and one more experientially based), and Raymond Williams’ “emergent cultural practice” (the idea that “culture” is not fixed but allows individuals to be cultural creators), which he, in turn, calls “cultural creativity.”

3.6 DESCRIPTION OF THE ETHNOGRAPHY

3.6.1 Intellectual Context

The term ‘machismo’ became popular during the mid-twentieth century in Latin American writings. Macho is regarded as equivalent to male chauvinism and a kind of patriarchal structure of gender relations that is basically seen in Latin American communities. The most common expression for a Mexican man is that he is ‘macho’; and thus, it brings into the fold all Mexican men without giving emphasis on individual behaviour and actions. This work is a deconstruction of the general understanding of a cultural norm. Gutmann’s work is a contribution to the theoretical and empirical construction of gender categories in their constantly transforming and transgressing expressions.

3.6.2 Fieldwork

Matthew C. Gutmann conducted his fieldwork in a *colonia* of Mexico city. This colony known as Santo Domingo is famous as it was occupied overnight by Mexican families who practically ‘parachuted’ into the rugged barren land of the Xitle volcanic remains. Fieldwork was conducted over a period of several months between 1992-93. Gutmann stayed in the *colonia* in a rented house along with his wife and daughter who was seven weeks old when he started fieldwork. Fieldwork was conducted using the standard anthropological tools of participant observation, interviews and documentation of everyday life of the residents of the *colonia*.

In one of the chapters Gutmann writes how he became a part of an afternoon binging session and one of the ladies rebuked him for leading the men on and he was responsible for all the showing off the Mexican men were involved during the drinking session. Gutmann became a part of the session because he wanted to feel like one of them (participant observation) and understand the drinking
pattern and habits of the Mexican men that is so popular. But days after the incident when he was gibe by others he realised that the session was over exaggerated and the Mexican men were actually putting on a show for him getting drunk.

3.6.3 Analysis of Data

The introductory chapter of the ethnography, deals with the issues of gender conventions. The chapter unfolds an argument about Christmas gifts for children between two Mexican men. The underlying truth about the argument is not so much about the gifts but the meaning that are conveyed through the gifts. The question here is who is a good father? The conventional Mexican image of a good father is one who spends money on expensive gifts for his children on Christmas to show how much he cares. The author however in this argument realises that the convention about Mexican working class men being portrayed as ‘hard-drinking’, ‘philandering macho’ is a mere generalisation, mostly created by the works of anthropologists, which is erroneous and harmful (p.2). The portrayal of the ‘typical Mexican Man’ ignores the role of fatherhood in the lives of Mexican men. The introductory chapter thus, sets the mood of the ethnography that is, the deconstruction of the image of the gendered bodies.

‘Real Mexican machos are born to die’, the title of the first chapter of the ethnography, defines the key terms used in the study and reflects on the theoretical issues concerning the study and methodological framework that has been used.

The second chapter reflects on how the city of Santo Domingo came into existence. The city was built on the remains (igneous rocks) of the Xitle volcanic eruption which happened in 200-100 B.C. In 1971, around 20,000 to 30,000 people ‘parachuted’ on this land and occupied space, and over the years built their houses. The entire city was constructed by the Mexican population on their own without any help from the government. The basic amenities (like laying the water pipes, electricity and the constructing of the streets, etc.) were all done by the invaders themselves. It was part of community activity where each resident contributed in terms of labour for building the city. Santo Domingo is surrounded by posh colonies and one such colony is Colonia Romero de Terreros. The residents of this colony erected a ten foot wall making passage between the two communities impossible. Till date the wall remains as a guardian of class privilege, dividing the rich and the poor. The residents of Santo Domingo call it El Muro de Berlin- the Berlin Wall (p.44).

Chapter three explores the question of fathering in Mexico; how much a father is involved in the upbringing of his children? The general myth is that Mexican men are not involved in child care as it does not fall within the purview of machosim. Reflecting upon his own personal experience the author cites an instance when in a cocktail gathering in Mexico the author who was carrying his baby was mildly rebuked by a bank official, ‘We Mexican men do not carry babies’. The emphasis herein is on the gendered body (man and woman) distinguishing the activities that a man is to be involved in or not to be based on his/her gender.

In another instance, the photograph of a man holding a baby and going about the regular task in a musical store in downtown Mexico City created no ripples in Santo Domingo as it was considered normal and routine. The same picture when
showed to anthropologists and people outside Mexico was received with curious reactions like ‘that can’t be true’. The picture of the Mexican man taking care of the baby while at work was beyond what is perceived as a ‘typical’ Mexican man’s behaviour, as it did not fit the image of macho. Closer examination by the author resulted in views based on class differentiation. In Santo Domingo it was seen that men are more involved in child rearing as usually both parents are working and parents have to take turns in taking care of the children. Normally it is the father who teaches his son the traits of his job from a very young age and is also responsible for acquainting him to the ways of the world. Father carrying his son on his shoulder, while firmly holding his daughter’s hand in the weekly market is a regular feature. While, the Mexican men living on the other side of the wall who can afford day care prefer to hand over all responsibilities and thus, usually do not participate in the day to day activities of the children.

If the Mexican men are machos, what about the females? How do they influence the lives of their sons? This question is being taken up in the next chapter, ‘motherly presumptions and presumptuous mothers’. In Santo Domingo the author has seen that the mothers are very active. During the early years of the occupation of Santo Domingo when the men were out for jobs it was the women who looked after the children and also defended the City from outsiders during the day. In a gathering of the mothers the decision to build the street and pave it was accepted. Women most actively participated in all the events of the colonia thus, depicting the richness of the community life and the ways women participate in it. The life of women in the colonia is explored in the multiple spaces that a woman has from being a housewife to looking after her children and as time passed finally coming out of the houses to take up jobs so as to financially support the family and make ends meet. The mothers were the prime support mechanism for a child during the growing up years and this was reflected in the statements when men stated about the role that their mothers played in making them boys and eventually men. Gutmann reflected that “most [men] define their masculinity in relation to the women in their lives...[A]s often as not for these men, manliness is seen as whatever women are not” (p. 89).

‘Mens Sex’ tries to unearth the present meaning of machosim among Mexican men in the present era. “Mexican male identities used to be wrapped up in adultery, polygamy, and siring many children, especially male children” (p.112). It was at one point of time common for a Mexican man to have many children from different relationships and the male child was valued more. A man who had less than five to six kids was often made fun of and not considered as macho. With the passage of time the thoughts began to change and Gutmann’s interviews with the colonia of Santo Domingo reflected the changes. Today Mexican men are becoming aware of sexuality and to a great extent have also accepted that there is a possibility that there are multiple sexualities and it does change. Young girls are being initiated by parents mostly mothers at the time of menstruation about the ways of life and procreation. Fathers normally talk it off with their sons and mostly the young get educated in school from their respective female and male teachers. The male cultural standard of Mexican men to have a male child was also one of the core areas of the author’s discussion. One of the earlier presumptuous beliefs by Mexican men was that a male offspring is the irrefutable conformity of a man’s seed and his male potency. This was also not so rampantly found in Santo Domingo, one of the residents of the colonia had even done vasectomy so as not to have children.
‘Diapers and dishes’ is yet again a chapter that breaks the image of the stereotypical Mexican men. The author reports that the interviews with the older generation in the *colonia* revealed that there was division of labour between men and women. Household chores and looking after children were mainly the concerns of the womenfolk whereas the men were the breadearners. The younger generation on the other hand spoke about equally sharing the household chores, cooking though was still considered to be the women’s forte. The involvement of the menfolk in the household activities like washing dishes, changing diapers, grocery shopping, etc, was attributed to *por necesidad* (or necessity) due to women taking up jobs to support the families. Children from a very young age were encouraged to perform tasks on their own. The author once observed a father give confidence to his five year old son to walk up to the *tortilleria* (a shop where tortilla — a type of thin flatbread made from finely ground wheat flour) is sold on his own. When the little boy returned with the tortillas wrapped up in a cloth, the father was seen beaming with pride at his son’s accomplishment, a task which for a long time was considered to be a woman’s job. “Picking up the tortillas is today less and less associated with women; thus a symbolically charged activity has become less gendered” (p. 151).

‘Degendering Alcohol’ and ‘Fear and Loathing in Male Violence’ are two chapters that look into social issues- abuse of alcohol and domestic violence. ‘Mexican men are drunkards’ is a commonly used phrase and it is considered normal for a Mexican man to drink. But the question here is. Is the generalisation of Mexican men as drunkards correct? Does it hold true for every Mexican man? Gutmann’s work reflects that all Mexican men like to drink but most try to control their drinks. It is not as if every man goes bingeing. Men in Santo Domingo are usually seen drinking in their own age groups outside one of their friends’ house or with family at home, preference for drinking alone is rare. This refutes the general conception that all Mexican men visit the *La Cantina* (all men bar) where the custom still prevails of only having washroom for men. It is normal for a grown-up man to take upto three pints of beers in a day, while alcohol is consumed on weekends and special occasion. Interviews revealed that drinking by women is a recent trend and for not many years ago women did not drink in the company of men. Alcohol abuse in some of the households was also seen though not always related to wife beating. Some men who were not heavy drinkers were also wife beaters though on the other hand some men who were habitual drinkers did not engage in wife beating. A few men who otherwise were impulsive were reported to be quite mellow after a few drinks. Use of alcohol thus, depended on the individuals and was not a national character. Gutmann also reported tolerance of teenagers drinking and at times going overboard by the elders of Santo Domingo. The residents of Santo Domingo view drinking and alcohol abuse by teenager’s as part of growing up, a phase that many young men go through but that passes and they become responsible adults. Rebuking the teenagers for alcohol abuse and public drinking was not seen in the *colonia* as every youth was considered to be a member of the community; and each individual was going through adolescence.

Domestic violence had its own history too. Many of the young men shared that they had gone through the same in life at the hands of mothers and thus, some considered it a part of cultural upbringing. While many are also aware that it is not normal and thus, freely join the *Centro de Atencion a la Violencia Infrafamiliar* (CAVI) for counselling. There are many reasons for domestic violence and the
issues of power and control loom large. As said earlier the issue of cultural upbringing and a history of abuse for some are also reflected as a major cause for domestic violence. Thus, in this chapter Matthew tried to look beyond the theories of alcohol abuse, faulty child-rearing patterns, urbanisation, male testosterone levels, and primordially brutish mores (a.k.a. machismo) (p.199).

The chapter on ‘Machismo’ is a discussion of the meaning of the term and how the Mexicans relate to it. Macho or machismo is used normally for a man who shows aggressiveness and is equivalent to male chauvinism in terms of literature. While in Santo Domingo a man who ‘has kids all over’ (children born out of wedlock) is normally referred to as macho. The older generation on the other hand liked to distinguish between two types of man-machos and mandilones (meaning female dominated man), herein the term macho refers to a man who is able to financially support his family and is honourable. The younger generation on the other hand is happy to be known as a ‘man’ a third category neither a macho nor a mandilone. This category largely comprises of the working class men of Santo Domingo, where both husband and wife has have to take up paid jobs to manage the ever increasing cost of living. As the man today has to help in household chores and most claim not to be a wife beater (wife beating is considered as an attribute of machos) Mexican men consider such terms as pejorative and not worthy of emulation (p.222).

3.6.4 Conclusion

Mexican men as machos as being unfurled in this ethnography shows that it is in reality much ado about nothing. The gendered body/description of a Mexican man as a macho is created by the academia at large. In reality things have changed and Mexican men as studied in the colonia of Santo Domingo shows that they are men who are involved in their family lives and shares as much household chores as any American. Being macho is not a national character as has been depicted in many academic writings. The Mexican men act and behave like any other men, they too get drunk or rise to a bet when provoked but this does not make every Mexican a drunkard or a wife beater. Though such cases have been reported from the colonia, this does mean that everyone has to be tarnished with the same brush of being a macho. In the colonia even the term macho is used in various other connotations other than the ones reported by academicians.

3.7 HOW DOES THE ETHNOGRAPHY ADVANCE OUR UNDERSTANDING

The ethnography is a study which tries to undo the perceived gender identities and unfurl the misconception of attributing certain behaviour as national character. Every Mexican men is considered to be a macho who is rugged and has a drinking problem. This ethnography helps us to understand the meaning of mascho as perceived and understood by the Mexican men and what they consider as being mascho. The anthropological study has infact helped to undo the myth of a Mexican man and his social construction of gendered behaviour. The study deconstructed the unitary meaning of Mexican masculinity into multiple Mexican masculinities.
3.8 SUMMARY

One of the important contributions of anthropology is to show that the reality is far different from the beliefs that may be collectively held. Both the ethnographies discussed in this Unit substantiates this assertion. The first ethnography on hijra is one of the first anthropological works to understand the construction of the third gender, and its interactions with the other two genders. The second ethnography shows that the popular image of men as ‘macho’ in Mexico is very different from the place of men in families and societies.

References


Sample Questions

1) Discuss the life of hijra as understood from the ethnography *Neither Man nor Woman: The Hijras of India*

2) The term ‘macho’ is used to describe Mexican men. Discuss ‘macho’ from your understanding of the ethnography, *The Meaning of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City*.

3) Analyse the role of hijras’ in ritual ceremonies.