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# Iatmul

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## ALTERNATIVE NAMES

The Iatmul are also known as the Iatmoi.

## LOCATION

The Iatmul are located on the middle Sepik River, Papua New Guinea.

## CULTURAL OVERVIEW

Some 25 Iatmul-speaking villages line the middle Sepik River. For Melanesia, these villages are large—upwards of 1,200 people. They are also prosperous, with fertile gardens, access to jungle and grasslands, and a continuous source of water for drinking, bathing, and food.<sup>1</sup> The river, which recedes and floods in an annual rain cycle, provides fish, prawns, and mayflies. Extended families tend small horticultural gardens of taro, yam, sweet potato, and fruit trees (e.g., coconut, banana).

Colonial administrations, beginning in the 1880s, introduced beans, cucumber, pineapple, watermelon, and other crops. Iatmul may also eat chicken, wild bird, turtle, crocodile, snake, frog, sago grubs, lotus seeds, bandicoot, cassowary, and, during ritual, pig, and sometimes dog. Iatmul attribute bodily strength and cultural vitality to sago, a starch produced from the *Metroxylum sagu* palm, which is associated with maternal nurture and, say some men, breast-milk.

Today, trade stores stock rice, canned fish and meat, biscuits, flour, beer, cooking oil, tea, coffee, powdered milk, cookies, and biscuits. Additionally, Iatmul—mainly women—regularly schedule markets with bush-dwelling Sawos-speaking hamlets to obtain sago and sometimes meat (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977). Formerly, Iatmul exchanged fish; now, they mainly pay cash.

Iatmul villages are organized into a nested hierarchy of patrilineal descent groups, sometimes forming totemic moieties. Each patrilineal group justifies its existence on

the basis of an exclusive corpus of totemic names that refer to mythic-historic migrations. Men tend to have custodianship over these names.

Yet matrification and maternal sentiment are profound and, in some contexts such as disputes, eclipse the androcentric social structure. Villages are acephalous. Political leadership is male and extends only to the limits of the descent group. Residence is normally patrilocal; marriage generally takes place within the village. Warfare, once endemic, is extinct. But men and women still manifest an assertive, often aggressive, ethos that nonetheless coexists with the high moral value of mothering.

## CULTURAL CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER

Gender influences all aspects of Iatmul culture and social life. A major theme of the culture is the clarification of the relationship between male and female as they are defined in terms of a pervasive maternal schema.

Iatmul recognize two genders: male (*ndu*) and female (*tagwa*). From one angle, these genders are exclusive, distinct, and complementary (Weiss, 1994). Men fish with spears, women set traps; men stand in canoes, women sit; men carve, women weave; etc. This omnipresent dichotomy is also natural and biological: men have penises and testicles, women have vaginas and wombs. The traditional and modern person is unambiguously gendered through clothing, personal adornment, treatment of the body, and even gait and verbal intonation. Today, men wear pants and often go shirtless, while women don skirts and, unless elderly, mission-derived floral blouses. Little boys run naked; girls never do. Many men are scarified, as I discuss below, while women may tattoo themselves with soot. During rituals too, men and women are differentiated by ornamentation such as body paint. Even when men and women ritually switch their stereotypical garb, as in the famous *naven* rite that celebrates first-time cultural achievements for everybody (Bateson, 1936/1958), differentiation is preserved.

Yet the symbolism of Iatmul gender, especially in religious contexts (e.g., ritual, myth, art), expands beyond a dichotomy to a “common pool” of dispositions and values. From this angle, both men and women define themselves through competing claims to fecundity, reproductive primacy, and nurture—that is, to the cultural idea and ideal of motherhood (Silverman, 2001). Therefore Iatmul gender is dual and unitary, a matter of difference and emphasis. Men’s ritual prerogatives signal their difference from, and superiority over, women. Yet the symbolism of ritual is thoroughly infused with uterine themes (see below). Women, by contrast, never aspire to the culturally perceived bodily capacities and qualities of fatherhood. True, women may desire male privileges. But the symbolism of womanhood does not disclose a wish to become fathers in the same way that the symbolism of manhood discloses the wish to become mothers.

For the Iatmul, dichotomous gender is pervasive and natural. At the same time, Iatmul culture often appears to be a grand irreducible dialogue of ambiguity and ambivalence, voiced in a maternal idiom, concerning the relationship between male and female. For men, maintaining a divided world by excluding women is vital. Women are far less compelled to maintain this gendered dichotomy and often, argues Hauser-Schäublin (1977, p. 260), strive for synthesis and unity.

Attractiveness for both men and women is largely visual: pronounced nose, clear and shiny skin, and bodily cleanliness. Men desire women with firm breasts, while women desire strong muscular men.

## GENDER OVER THE LIFE CYCLE

The cultural stages of the Iatmul life cycle are relatively congruent for men and women, with one exception. Men traditionally underwent a male initiation ceremony, which I discuss below. This was the only significant regularly performed rite of passage for either men or women.

There is a tacit sense that postmenopausal women shift somewhat into an unnamed category that is less of a threat to men. The female body, especially her genital secretions, are polluting to men and male ritual—she “cools” the magical “heat” associated with masculine aggressiveness and potency, and the efficacy of spirits. As Iatmul men and women move through the life cycle, they tend to acquire increased politico-ritual rights as well as

responsibilities for overseeing a kin group and its residential ward and resources. With age, too, men and women gain prestige and authority, especially in matters of ritual, magic, and, at least today, knowledge of “tradition” or “custom.”

## Socialization of Boys and Girls

Infant boys and girls tend to be socialized similarly. Both boys and girls interact with the same expansive kin group although grandfathers and mothers’ brothers tend to be more interested in boys. The major caretakers and socializers of children are mothers, older siblings (typically female), and matrikin. Infancy and childhood entail no distinct rites for boys and girls, and there are no major gendered expectations.

Boys are valued over girls in regard to the inheritance of totemic names and the reproduction of the patrilineage. Yet girls are prized, since married daughters, more so than sons who are said to be busy with brideservice obligations, care for elderly parents. Furthermore, a son-in-law performs labor for his wife’s parents: hews canoes, clears gardens, etc. By contrast, a daughter-in-law is said to be greedy.

Below the age of about 7, there is little gendered differentiation in the tasks of boys and girls (Weiss, 1990, p. 339). But since women are the primary adult caretakers, boys tend to assist their mothers and women more than their fathers and men. Additionally, Mead (1949, p. 112), reported Iatmul boys were somewhat feminine; their play often recalled the events of childhood rather than their future participation in the “splendor” of male life. At the same time, boys seem slightly masculine when they perform female tasks.

The play of little children tends to exhibit little significant gender distinction. Children form autonomous groups, roaming the village and foraging for snacks. However, older prepubescent boys and girls do often enact the gender-specific roles of adults. But this distinction is largely informal; boys and girls do not fully segregate their peer groups until puberty. The possessions of older prepubescent children do somewhat reflect gender (Weiss, 1997). Thus, boys have stools while girls, like adult women, sit on the ground. Boys are more aggressive in their play (e.g. athletics and shooting slingshots). Boys and girls may stage a “ritual” for themselves (Weiss, 1983). Mirroring adults, the boys parade in masked costumes while the girls dance in celebration.

But these youthful outings are less segregated than their grown-up counterparts.

Prior to puberty, there is little formal education or apprenticeship, gendered or otherwise. Caretakers tend to educate, instruct, and discipline boys and girls similarly. Boys seem to be hit more often than girls, and girls seem to get into trouble more often than boys, perhaps because they have greater responsibilities.

Both boys and girls run errands—ferrying messages, fetching things—for adult men and women (Weiss, 1981). But girls have greater responsibility than boys for household chores and supervising younger kin. (I have two enduring images of prepubescents: boys wrestling, and girls holding younger siblings.) Weiss (1990) emphasizes that Iatmul mothers can only perform all their daily tasks (fishing, gardening) if children look after the younger ones. Men are far less dependent on children.

## Puberty and Adolescence

Older children, to repeat, begin to manifest gendered patterns of play, games, and leisure. They increasingly model their behavior after adults. At puberty, boys and girls form sex-segregated groups. Today, these groups freely roam the village, often to the annoyance of adults who complain about the erosion of traditional authority and public behavior. These complaints typically mention the sexual licentiousness of young men and women.

Gendered socialization becomes increasingly important with age, especially for boys who, as children, spent most of their time with other youths and women. Adolescents are more self-conscious in their gender identification. Girls continue to assume regular household chores and obligations. Boys, too, begin to participate in the affairs of adult men, especially in regard to ritual. But while girls in their early teens are capable of performing nearly all female tasks, boys do not become fully competent males until their late teens (Weiss, 1990, p. 339).

With the exception of male initiation, which I discuss in the next section, there is general continuity in socialization around puberty.

## Attainment of Adulthood

For both men and women, adult personhood is attained mainly on the basis of marriage and the subsequent birth of children. Traditionally, Iatmul men were initiated into adult manhood and the male cult. The bloody painful

ordeals of initiation allowed men to emulate the fortitude of women during childbirth, and to “grow” boys into adult males. Although men never attend birth, since they deem it polluting, male initiation is permeated by symbols of parturition and maternal nurture. This way, men effectively supplant the culturally lauded role of motherhood. Cicatrization purges neophytes’ bodies of maternal blood, which inhibits the development of a masculine physique. But the resulting scars, which are visible emblems of manhood, are said by men to resemble the breasts and genitals of woman and female crocodile spirits. The rite forges exclusive masculine identity by aggressively exaggerating birth, maternal feeding, and moral mothering. At the same time, male initiation associates the female body with danger, pollution, castration, and somatic atrophy. Initiation thus constructs Iatmul manhood as an identity that opposes yet emulates motherhood.

Women were once initiated if men judged them to be excessively aggressive, if they espied male cult secrets, or if a sonless father wanted a daughter to inherit his totemic esoterica and magic (see also Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 178; 1995). But this practice was rare; it remains poorly understood today by either ethnographers or Iatmul.

Initiation offered novices only a little guidance about adult behavior. However, they were admonished to avoid adultery and practice birth spacing. Upon the attainment of adulthood, men and women are expected to be busy with adult activities, which are almost always gender segregated. Men tend to gather in cult houses and related ritual spaces unless otherwise engaged in occasional subsistence and work activities. Women are responsible for daily fishing, preparing meals, and maintenance of the household.

## Middle Age and Old Age

Middle age offers few real changes to men and women. However, old age confers increased respect and prestige. Older men are the custodians of totemic knowledge, myth, kinship, ritual rules, and overall cultural lore. They also tend to supervise major communal labors and ceremonies. Elderly women are also viewed with respect for their lore, magic, knowledge about childbirth and healing, and general cultural erudition. At the same time, elders ponder the inevitability of death and their waning authority as younger adults assume roles of leadership.

## PERSONALITY DIFFERENCES BY GENDER

Bateson (1936/1958) summarized the ethos of Iatmul men as histrionic, aggressive, competitive, and flamboyant. Women were more demur, nurturing, cooperative, and practical. Male personhood is expansive and public; women are more domestic and personal. Women, too, take pride in male kin who uphold the showy self-important swagger of manhood (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 130). But since men tend to restrict their politico-ritual voice to the cult house, one hears in the village mainly women as they loudly talk, laugh, yell, and fight. The ethos of masculinity notwithstanding, women are far more likely to scuffle than men. In fact, men often attribute social tensions between groups to women, especially female sexuality, which men regard as divisive.

When normal coping mechanisms fail, men may try to kill the source of their frustration. Women may commit suicide (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, pp. 128–139).

Iatmul women tend to laugh more than men. They also seem to have greater freedom for informal sociability and emotional expression since they are less beholden than men to the strict rules of decorum that govern the male cult. Both men and women are ashamed by dependency. Men, more than women, are driven by dominance. Both genders are shy, or reticent, when making requests, which signals child-like dependence. Men are apt to be more suspicious and guarded, especially in matters of totemic and mythic knowledge. Yet, as elsewhere in Melanesia, men and women habitually refuse to speculate on other people's unstated motivations. Men are particularly prone to prideful insults. However much they attribute conflict to women, men are the ones who constantly require conciliatory gestures.

Men are more likely than women to think about the world in terms of dualities and distinctions (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, pp. 243–245). They tend, for example, to divide social groups and gender. Cognitively, women strive for unity. Men are greatly concerned with maintaining social and gendered boundaries. They fear the possibility that women might intrude on their all-male spaces. Women exhibit little comparable concern. While women often desire the exclusion of men, it is not because a male presence would threaten the definition of Iatmul femininity. (Women, I sense, simply want time away from male swagger!) Men, however, exclude

women from male rituals precisely because a female presence would call into question the procreative, uterine dimensions of Iatmul masculinity.

Iatmul men frequently conceptualize kinship as an abstract system of rules. Women tend to think about kinship in terms of specific relationships and actual persons (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 152).

## GENDER-RELATED SOCIAL GROUPS

All significant social institutions in Iatmul society are structured around males or females. When men and women form a single group, gender defines their respective social roles.

Village residence wards correspond to patrilineal groups, which are largely exogamous. Residence is typically patrilocal. Since Iatmul villages are endogamous, the proximity of natal kin reduces a bride's psychological distress when she relocates to her husband's residence ward. (Some men view the idea of living with affines to be shameful.) Generally, an extended patrilineal family inhabits the house. Men sleep near the central areas and entrances of the dwelling, while women (wives and unmarried daughters) reside along the periphery. This way, the Iatmul house, like the internal spaces of canoes, reflects the gendered spatial organization of the society.

Iatmul gender is also shaped by an opposition between what Bateson (1936/1958) called "patrilineal structure" and "maternal sentiment." Although descent is patrilineal, kinship is more fluid, with men and women using both male and female links to determine relationships. Larger kin groups and ritual moities tend to be patrilineal. But people do follow matrilineal "paths" when defining group affiliation for some ceremonies and prohibitions. There are no important, or formal, nonkin associations for either males or females.

## GENDER ROLES IN ECONOMICS

Married women tend to remain and work within their husband's residence ward, gardens, and riverbank. Women, as noted earlier, are responsible for daily subsistence. They fish by canoe with traps and nets, tend gardens, catch prawns, and cook all meals. Because women are associated with the warmth of houses, they also care for the small hearths that smoulder underneath dwellings.

Men, too, work in gardens, but this labor, like other male tasks—felling trees, hewing canoes, building houses, clearing gardens—is intermittent. (I have heard some women complain that men, for all the work they do, are like children!) Men's work is often collaborative, involving different descent groups. Women mainly work individually. When they labor collectively, women generally perform parallel tasks within their natal or husband's group.

Men and women work together, albeit in well-defined roles, when gardening and producing sago. The latter activity is a cultural symbol of gender complementarity. Men chop the pith, which women knead and process through an apparatus of troughs and filters. Women fry or boil the sago—as men say, only women can properly cook it.

Women, reported Mead (1949, pp. 180–181), work more willingly than men, who labor begrudgingly. Economic independence is highly valued in women, especially by men (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 148).

Traditionally, both men and women participated in prestige exchanges. Women pleated baskets and sleeping mats, cultivated tobacco and tubers, harvested fish, raised pigs, and fed visitors. Husbands exchanged female products for shell valuables and prestige, which also enhanced the status of their wives. However, men do consult with female kin before transactions.

Today, men and women derive intermittent cash income from the sale of tobacco, betel nut, fruit, fish, chicken, pig, crocodile skins, and cocoa. Villages contain small trade stores. They are largely, but not exclusively, owned and managed by men. Many Iatmul men and women migrate to towns and cities for employment as teachers, soldiers, lawyers, mine workers, civil servants, hotel staff, policemen, store clerks, and so forth. They may periodically return and send remittances. My sense is that more men are employed in these capacities than women (in Tambunum, one third more adult women than men reside in the village). But this may reflect more on a capitalist division of labor than Iatmul culture.

Traditionally, neither men nor women labored outside the village environs. Today, Iatmul who relocate for jobs are commonly accompanied by spouses and children. Employed women still remain responsible for female-coded domestic tasks such as cooking (Stanek & Weiss, 1998, pp. 320–321). Because women produce most food in the village, Stanek and Weiss continue, unemployed women who live in town find themselves in

a new position of total economic dependence on their husbands.

Tourism is the primary source of income today in the village. Men carve wooden objects such as masks, tables, animals, and ornamented stools, while women create netbags, baskets, and small rattan animals (Silverman, 2000). Often, wives and female kin decorate a man's woodcarvings.<sup>2</sup> Proceeds are dispersed to those who contributed materials and labor, regardless of gender. In the town of Wewak, women rent stalls at outdoor markets to peddle baskets and occasionally woodcarvings. (Travel by truck on the dirt roads to Wewak lasts anywhere from 4 to 15 hours.) Women, too, sometimes with men, vend objects outside a Wewak hotel. A tourist guesthouse in one Iatmul village (Tambunum) employs men and women as security staff, grass cutters, maintenance staff, housecleaners, and cooks. Tourists, too, occasionally pay men as canoe drivers and guides.

Both men and women within the patriline inherit property, which is often gender specific: houses, canoes, outboard motors, fishing nets, cooking implements, storage jars, kerosene lanterns, and sometimes a little cash. Men, not women, tend to inherit totemic names, magic, and ritual prerogatives. A widow remains in her husband's house and continues to have full access to his gardens, property, and so forth. I am unaware of either major disputes between men and women over the inheritance of material property or any eviction after a spouse's death.

## PARENTAL AND OTHER CARETAKER ROLES

Caretaking and custodial roles in Iatmul culture are envisioned as forms of mothering. Mothers are associated with food, feeding, cooking, warmth, house-cleaning, flower gardens, dishwashing, laundering, and the like. Mothers breast-feed infants, soothe tears, teach toddlers to walk, bathe children, cleanse their urine and feces, and carry them throughout the village. When men assume these roles (e.g., the socializing mother's brother), they also act maternally. Motherhood is clearly idealized. Yet mothers and not fathers are primarily responsible for punishment, which can be brusque and rough.

In ideology, the father–son relationship is tense and oedipal. Thus it differs dramatically from the mother–child bond. Sons are said to replace their father in the



political–jural order of society. Moreover, sons inherit from fathers a large domestic house—a house that was not only built at considerable expense and labor by the father, but which also symbolizes a mother. Often, sons physically displace their father from his house–mother, consigning him to live out his days in a small shack. Why, then, do fathers build houses only to cede them to their sons? Because fathers fear ridicule, especially from their daughters-in-law.

Men and fathers, far more than women and mothers, tend to shoo children from their activities, especially at the cult house. They encourage children to return to their mothers. I myself was once chastised by a father to “Go walk with your mother! You don’t walk with your father!”

Mothers abide by less numerous and restrictive avoidance taboos than fathers in regard to children. Mothers dominate early childhood in terms of education, physical proximity, care, time, supervision, and affection. Fathers have little normative role in formal child-raising other than bestowing magic and totemic names onto sons, arranging (and funding) children’s marriages, and ensuring that sons are initiated or otherwise integrated into the male cult. The father is not a primary male socializer. This role belongs to the mother’s brother, as a “male mother,” and other men from the father’s age grade.

Iatmul describe fathers as distant, tense, and unloving. But fathers can be, and often are, quite tender and nurturing. For both mothers and fathers, then, the ideology of parenting often clashes with actuality (see also Bateson, 1936/1958, p. 76; Mead, 1949, p. 114).

Iatmul children and adults highly value individual autonomy and initiative. Children may view daily school attendance as an unjust constraint. If Iatmul parents want their children to attend school regularly, which mainly occurs in urban settings, they may experience shifts in normative parenting. A father may become more active in the everyday affairs of his children. But since childcare is a female role, it is the mother who must discipline the children and restrain their autonomy. Thus she, not the father, clashes in a negative way with Iatmul norms for the parent–child relationship (Stanek & Weiss, 1998, pp. 322–323).

## LEADERSHIP IN PUBLIC ARENAS

Most village leaders are men since women are banned from the male cult house, the center of political debate

and ritual preparation. Leadership largely arises from totemic erudition, which is mainly restricted to men. Formerly, leaders were also noted sorcerers and warriors, two social roles denied to women. While there are female leaders among women, their prestige and authority is less expansive than male leadership, confined to the domestic organization of a residential ward and household. Women leaders have no public arena on par with the men’s house from which to mobilize resources and labor. In short, female leadership lacks equal authority.

## GENDER AND RELIGION

The central feature of Iatmul religion is the male cult, which by definition excludes women. However, the Iatmul pantheon is dominated by neither male nor female spirits. The spirits mete out magical punishment to those who transgress social and ritual norms. More broadly, they are responsible for creating and sustaining the cosmos. But the spirits communicate only through men since men alone are the current custodians of magic, flutes, ceremonies, and other sancta. Men, not women, recollect cosmogonic events by chanting totemic names during ritual. Men alone impersonate spirits during religious rites in the guise of bamboo flutes and other sound-producing objects, masked costumes, and various artistic displays. Female religious practices, such as kneeling before effigies during annual funerary rites, are said to be subordinate to rituals enacted by men.

Virtually all forms of male-enacted ritual are intended to awe (and sometimes seduce) women with beautiful melodies, frightening sounds, and dazzling spirit displays. Women are not supposed to know that spirit expressions are male impersonations. A major concern of men is to prevent women from achieving this revelation.

But men did not always maintain exclusive custodianship over religious rites, sacra, and spirits, at least according to myth. Originally, women blew the flutes—and gave birth. One day, men frightened away the ancestresses with the sound of bullroarers and stole the flutes and ritual paraphernalia. Ever since, men have blown the flutes—although never with the beauty of the original ancestresses. Today, women hear the flutes during ritual—but they must never glimpse them. Otherwise, men say, women might steal them back! Major Iatmul rituals are thus dangerous to men since women might

reclaim their dominance over cosmic forces by unveiling the spirits as men and stealing back their sacra. Ritual, too, is dangerous to women. Their reproductive potential is imperiled if they glimpse the flutes or view “too carefully” the sacred art. In sum, Iatmul religion expresses yet denies male desire for female fertility (see also Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 147; Mead, 1949, ch. 4). While men purloined the flutes from ancestresses, primal women stole nothing from men. The ability to birth children is a considerable source of pride for women. I suggest that, through their rituals, men aspire to the same form of self-respect.

In Tambunum village, an elderly woman must always know the “truth” about the flutes and sacra—that men stole them from women. In another village, all women are knowledgeable about the primal theft and, indeed, they are proud of this former privilege (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 165). There, too, some female rites mock male ritual. Hence, Hauser-Schäublin (1977, p. 146) describes the flutes as “secretive,” not “secret.” Yet these women do not view this myth as a model for an egalitarian society. Rather, suggests Hauser-Schäublin (1977, p. 66), the primal theft expresses the cultural value of motherhood, the dominant maternal role in child-raising, and early male cross-sex identity through the close mother-child bond.

The mythic origin of the cosmos—and its possible demise—was aquatic. Water, especially the river, is feminine. Trees, land, and villages, which were created by male culture heroes in mythic history, are masculine. The yearly cycle of rain, flooding, and dryness thus corresponds to a cosmological tension between female watery erosion, which is also linked to death, and masculine stability. Mythic time is also gendered: male time moves forward, while female time moves backwards (Silverman, 1997). Esthetic idioms of watery fluidity and terrestrial permanence, which evoke notions of female and male, pervade the religious system.

Witchcraft, now largely extinct, was attributed to both men and women. Yet most witches were female. Witchcraft was often transmitted from mother to daughter, and menstruating women were particularly prone to this nefarious craft (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, pp. 139–140). Conversely, only men were sorcerers. Both men and women know myth, but male tales contain totemic names and are thus more “truthful.” Still, some men ironically rely on their wives for mythic knowledge. This way, male prestige is supported by female erudition

(Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 169). Both men and women can employ magic, but male spells are more potent. Women may call upon male magicians to assist pregnancy and birth.

Today, men and women adhere in varying degrees to Christianity as well as to the traditional religious system. But this new religion tends to empower women by extolling the virtues of cooperation, passivity, and temperance. Still, Iatmul women do not harness Christianity to any sustained critique of the male cult and its religious conceptions.

## LEISURE, RECREATION, AND THE ARTS

If, by leisure time, we refer to activities that do not result in material products such as food, then men have considerably more leisure than women. Men often congregate in the men’s house, sometimes just to laze in the shade and nap, or to chat about the day’s events. Men, too, much more than women, discuss politics, recount myths, plan ritual, and so forth, typically in the men’s house. In this respect, adult leisure is gendered.

Still, neither men nor women, in my assessment, are so burdened with daily toil that they are unable to enjoy at least some daily leisure. Both men and women socialize with friends—who, in this society, are kin. Men often socialize during collective work efforts—say, hewing a large canoe. Women do likewise while engaged in productive activity. Hence, a group of women might individually prepare reeds for basketry while chatting about village events.

Women may sing during the day, sometimes dirges to deceased kin. Men may blow flutes during communal labor. In the main, though, music and dancing is confined to ritual, both traditional and Christian. Both men and women sing during “prayer meetings,” but men alone play musical instruments.

There is another gendered dimension to art. Ritual carvings and masks, when decorated for display, are wooden “bone,” which directly recalls the paternal contribution to conception. The floral ornamentation is female “skin,” which derives from the mother’s blood. Paint colors are also gendered. Black evokes masculine power. White symbolizes semen. Red recalls menstrual blood or blood shed during warfare, which is masculine. Yellow is the color of birds and femininity.

Tobacco and betel nut are currently used by both men and women. Traditionally, some say, these substances were utilized mainly by men. Beverage alcohol is consumed by men with very few exceptions, and then typically during the honorific *naven* celebration when women assume the demeanor of men.

## RELATIVE STATUS OF MEN AND WOMEN

To repeat, the fundamental structures of Iatmul villages are patrilineal: clans, lineages, and sublineage “branches,” as well as ritual and sometimes totemic moieties. Inheritance is also agnatic. Leadership is mainly male. It is determined by primogeniture, and reinforced through prestige activities such as totemic erudition, ritual prominence, magical renown, and, formerly, warfare and sorcery. Men have greater access to spirits as well as traditional and modern technology. Some women own sewing machines, but only men use guns, outboard motors, bicycles, and large canoes. Men, not women, regularly gather at an exclusive shelter (the cult house). The male village “path,” unlike the female “passageway,” is privileged to run through the center of the village or next to the river. Women exercise considerable influence over the economic and social activities of kin groups. But men have greater access to public decision-making processes that affect the entire community and its relationship to other villages. All told, Iatmul men enjoy greater rights, privileges, and authority than women.

Women have considerable autonomy in regard to their sexuality, modern education, marriage, and divorce—but so do men. While elder women, too, accord respect, senior men elicit greater deference due to their ritual, magic, and totemic knowledge.

But the gender hierarchy that is so apparent in Iatmul culture is called into question by the ideology of manhood and mothering. One symbol of male leadership is the wooden “stool.” But the real stools, men say, are mothers since only mothers bear and feed children. Likewise, the superstructure of the male cult is female; the roof of the cult house is literally supported by a carved ancestress. In this sense, the relative status of men and women is less clear than it first appears. From one angle, men dominate. From another angle, male superiority is compensation for men’s lack of uterine maternal powers.

## SEXUALITY

Iatmul sexuality is aggressive (Bateson, 1941, p. 52; Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 135; Mead, 1949, p. 208; Silverman, 2001). For men, erotic passivity contravenes the martial ethos of manhood. Men may even compete with female partners to see who can first induce the other to orgasm. (Likewise, mourning women may “compete” with men during funerary ritual to see whose sounds, keening or flute music, are loudest.) A child’s sex is determined by the parent with the “strongest” procreative substance.

Linguistically and culturally, men are sexually active while women are passive. Grammatically, Iatmul can only say: “He (active subject) has sex with her (passive object).” In practice, though, both men and women initiate lovemaking. Yet while women often refuse sexual advances, a man would be ashamed to do likewise since a woman’s flirtations challenge his masculinity (see Bateson, 1936/1958, p. 149). Iatmul women often directly approach potential partners. Men are more reticent. They rely on intermediaries and the psychological support of love magic (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 75). Women also tend to be more bawdy than men in joking relationships (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 74). Men associate women with uncontrolled sexuality, and themselves with self-restraint (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 75). But a “bad” woman, Hauser-Schäublin continues, is not promiscuous; she is a neglectful mother.

Men and women view sexuality to be natural and pleasurable. Carnality is neither shameful nor solely reproductive. Sexuality is not, as in some Melanesian cultures, banned from the cultural spaces of the village. Yet men view any sexual contact with women to be potentially depleting and harmful through the loss of semen and, more seriously, contact with polluting vaginal fluids. (Cunnilingus is anathema to men.) Menstrual taboos, men say, protect them from female defilement. However, women view menstruation as purifying, not polluting (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 137).

Little honor is accorded to female or male virginity. There are no expressed norms against premarital sexuality, and little attempts to censure children’s erotic play. Hauser-Schäublin (1977, p. 135) remarks that Iatmul men did not traditionally view women as sexual objects.

Affectionate touching in public occurs solely between the same gender. Men and women deny the occurrence of ritualized or everyday same-gender sexual



relations.<sup>3</sup> Little boys who once exhibited homoerotic interaction were made to fight (Bateson, 1936/1958, p. 291). For men, receptive homosexuality bespeaks an unacceptable feminine identity. What many men find particularly shameful about homoeroticism is the possibility of discovery in flagrante delicto by women.<sup>4</sup>

Still, men privately mention the homoerotic activity of their peers. Innuendo is common, especially as insult. Yet same-gender liaisons do occur among men, albeit clandestinely. Male initiation lacks ritualized homosexuality but is replete with homoerotic themes and gestures. These antics, if seen by women, would be highly shameful to men. In the male cult, though, they are shielded from women and lent a cosmological inflection.

Today, both Iatmul men and Iatmul women fear rape by youth gangs that prowl highways and towns (see also Mead, 1949, p. 113). Iatmul women did not engage in prostitution as a means to material benefit (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 135). Men use sex as a form of violence to manipulate persons, while women use sex as a means to emotional security or love.

Despite the maternal ideology of manhood and cross-sex identification by men, Iatmul society permits no mundane cross-dressing or transvestism. Only during major cosmogonic ritual and the common famous *naven* rite can men and women assume the demeanor of the other gender. A *naven* celebration may climax when a maternal uncle slides his buttocks down his nephew's leg (Bateson, 1936/1958; Silverman, 2001). This gesture flirts with the feminine and homoerotic dimensions of masculinity that are otherwise muted by the ideology of manhood.

## COURTSHIP AND MARRIAGE

All Iatmul are expected to marry. Nearly everyone does so except people with physical deformities or cognitive impairments. However, it is particularly important for a man to have a spouse. Hence, there are more single women than single men (Weiss, 1995). Men depend on women for daily meals. Women need male labor only intermittently (Weiss, 1990, p. 338). Unmarried adults are not formally barred from politico-ritual authority. Yet, unless they are elderly widows and widowers, they tend to be marginal.

Iatmul practice several marriage patterns: sister exchange, second-generation cross-cousin marriage

(a man weds his father's mother's brother's son's daughter [FMBSD], a woman called *iai*), and elective marriage. Only the latter formally admits love prior to the union. The other forms of marriage are usually arranged by the spouses' kin. They forge alliances and, most importantly, instance maternal sentiment since, when a man weds his FMBSD, he marries a woman his father calls "mother" (Silverman, 2001). The cultural sentiment underlying *iai* marriage—that a man (the father) should "get his mother back" (his son's bride)—is equally strong for men and women. No marriage can occur unless both spouses consent. Men and women can, and do, refuse betrothals. Today, romantic love and companionship are increasingly important ideals in marriage, especially among the young. This change is part of a wider assimilation of "modern" personhood that includes individualism, the importance of personal choice in a capitalist consumer economy, and the rise of coeducational settings such as schools, urban areas, and disco dances.

Many men wed polygynously—usually two wives, but sometimes upwards of four or five. This way, the husband can draw on a broad economic base of female labor. Today, male prestige is largely detached from the ceremonial exchange of female labor products such as baskets. Therefore it is less clear, even to Iatmul themselves, why some men still desire multiple spouses.

Divorce is acceptable and relatively common. It entails mainly the return of brideprice. The typical divorce occurs while the spouses are young, and the husband weds a second wife. Divorcees tend to remarry. Sometimes, a woman's first husband receives compensation for his brideprice from her second spouse. Widows and widowers can remarry, but surviving spouses who are elderly tend to remain single.

Both genders desire hardworking spouses and complain loudly about laziness. Some Iatmul court to raise their prestige or access to magical and/or material resources.

There is no formal wedding. Typically, the bride publicly spends the night with the groom in his house or garden shelter. Later, her brothers may march to the groom's house to demand a preliminary token of brideprice, which is negotiated by the spouses' kin. Husbands also perform groomservice. Ideally, *iai* marriage entails long-term balanced reciprocity between affines.

Traditionally, there was little premarital sex. Men were initiated into the cult prior to intercourse, and they were admonished to marry before sexual activity.

The brief period after marriage is awkward for both spouses, who must adjust to new relationships, new obligations, and, for one spouse at least, a new residence. There is nothing on par with a Western honeymoon, or even much public interaction between newlyweds.

## HUSBAND–WIFE RELATIONSHIP

To the extent permissible in a culture that so consistently segregates the genders and encourages an ethos of aggression, the husband–wife relationship is marked by affection and companionship. But matrimonial gestures of tenderness are often muted—say, when spouses smile while quietly uttering a few words on a village path, or when a husband gently tosses his wife a few betel nuts. Public tenderness is confined to same-gender relationships. Aloofness is common; cooperation is always tenuous and, at least for men, reluctant. Hence, the husband–wife relationship is unable truly to develop into empathetic intimacy and companionship. Traditional latmul marriages effected a kind of balance sustained by fear. A wife's behavior influenced her husband's success in warfare. If she acted immorally, he might be killed. Conversely, the husband's behavior influenced his wife's pregnancy. If he erred, she might miscarry. Perhaps it would be best to characterize latmul marriage as brief moments of loving affection in a relationship of tolerated, even relished, antagonism.

Husbands and wives almost never eat together. latmul households do not value communal dining. When a woman prepares a meal, she offers some food to those who are present. The rest is wrapped in banana leaves or left in the pot for absent kin to partake later. Since women cook, children frequently dine with their mothers. Even then, there is a sense that each person eats alone.

Spouses do not traditionally sleep together under the same mosquito net. Most men spend little time with their wives since they relax, nap, and socialize at the men's house. Yet men and women do make joint decisions, especially about gardening, economic matters, and those major efforts such as ritual and house-building that require the husband to feed other men.

A wife focuses on maintaining household harmony while her husband is more focused on communal affairs such as ritual (Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 134). Matrimonial conflict over sexuality is common, especially when women adhere to postpartum taboos

(Hauser-Schäublin, 1977, p. 127). Husbands and wives may also fight over food.

Either spouse can initiate divorce. (Sometimes a disgruntled cowife will simply relocate to another residence, usually with agnates, but the marriage remains intact.) Custody is fluid. Young children tend to remain with their mother. If a wife leaves her husband, she may forfeit custody. Unless there is an explicit agreement of adoption, the children of divorcees retain membership in their father's patriline and share the inheritance.

The cowife relationship is tense. It often erupts into physical assault and fighting, usually over perceived imbalances in sex, work, and food. When cowives are hostile, suggests Hauser-Schäublin (1977, p. 132), their husband's role in the household becomes more secure. Cowife hostility, too, actually reduces domestic violence since neither woman wants to alienate her husband. Some latmul contend that a man's first wife is dominant; others deny the presence of any such rule, or assign this role only to an *iai* wife.

## OTHER CROSS-SEX RELATIONSHIPS

There are two other significant male–female relationships. First, as mentioned above, the mother's brother is a key figure in the life of his sister's children, male and female. He constantly interacts with them in a mode of tenderness and affection that is modeled after the ideal of motherhood. However, the avunculate forges a closer relationship with nephews than with nieces. Generally, the *amitate* has no close relationship to either her brother's son or daughter. The brother–sister relationship is also important. The sister often acts a mother-figure to her brothers, who in turn look after their sisters' welfare. The village is endogamous, some men say, because brothers do not want their sisters to leave the community.

## CHANGE IN ATTITUDES, BELIEFS, AND PRACTICES REGARDING GENDER

Throughout this entry, I have mentioned the many important changes that have altered gender roles and relations. Despite the introduction of capitalism, modernity, Christianity, citizenship, tourists, etc., men and

women remain opposed, complementary, and antagonistic. Pollution beliefs regarding women, and male initiation, have waned. New economic, educational, and religious opportunities now exist for women. But the essential differentiation remains mostly intact. Likewise, men continue to define themselves in opposition to, yet as a type of, mother.

## NOTES

1. Despite sociocultural variation across the Iatmul language group, I generalize, often from my own ethnographic focus which is the Eastern Iatmul village of Tambunum.
2. One young woman in Tambunum village assumed the clothing and habits of men, and was rumored to engage in same-gender sexuality. Like a man, she wore trousers, stood in canoes, and carved wooden objects.
3. Some men report that homosexuality was introduced into the Sepik by colonial Europeans (see also Mead, 1949, p. 113).
4. In ritual, men dramatize a fantasy of an anal clitoris (Silverman, 2001, p. 169).

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