

nese culture, she notes (*ibid.*), unless one "is free," that is, able to act independently and thus meet challenges (here defined as those of career). And in her survey of women's attitudes, the anthropologist Takie Lebra, herself Japanese, found that the prospective brides she interviewed stressed familiar qualities of masculinity as desirable in husbands. Most young women said they would shun weaklings who acted dependent or irresolute. These weaklings were not considered real men. What the women all wanted was a "manly man" (1985:137), an ideal expressed in phraseology hauntingly reminiscent of Buruma's musings above.

Finally, as we have seen in the case of the feudal hero Yoshitune Minamoto, with his "active amorous life," sexual assertiveness is also important in establishing masculine credentials in Japan. Let me illustrate this, again, by reference to ethnographic participant-observation. When the American anthropologist John Embree was about to leave Suye Mura, a village he had studied in Japan during the 1930s, the villagers made one collective request of him. They insisted that before he leave Japan he sleep with one of the local women. Somewhat put off by his reticence during his stay, the village people said that this was his last chance to "show that you are a man" (Smith and Wiswell 1982:66). Embree politely demurred, with everlasting damage to his reputation. In Japan, the road to manhood is indeed a hard one.



### Exceptions: Tahiti and Semai

Every man is the son of his actions.

—Cervantes, *Don Quixote*

Whether "hard" or "soft," manhood has to be validated, vindicated, and defended in many societies. Even when equivocal, as in Hindu culture, manhood is experienced as a problematic status—a labile boundary that can be traversed in either direction. With all its attendant anxieties, however, the manly threshold is not universal as a cultural category. There are some societies where the concept is either insignificant or absent. These virtually androgynous cultures raise questions about the universal "need" for masculinity in male development, and in my opinion they suggest that cultural variables may outweigh nature in the masculinity puzzle.

We already have some famous examples of such sexually indeterminate cultures in Margaret Mead's *Sex and Temperament in Three Primitive Societies* (1935). Championing an extreme cultural determinism in this book, Mead tries to show the limitless plasticity of gender roles and images by describing three societies where sex roles are utterly unlike those of the Western model. Though appreciating the colorful palette used in the ensuing descriptions, I prefer not to use her data

here because her work has aroused controversy as to accuracy (Freeman 1983). Rather than involving myself in this debate, I will use two examples, the people of Tahiti in French Polynesia and the Semai of Malaysia, who have been described in less controversial monographs. Here I rely mainly on Robert Levy's fine work on the Tahitians (1971, 1973) and Robert Dentan's (1979) exemplary monograph on the Semai of Malaya. First, the Tahitians.

#### TAHITI: CROSSOVERS

Tahiti is one of the Society Islands, formerly a part of French Polynesia. Today almost synonymous with the phrase "tropical paradise," Tahiti was first contacted in the middle of the eighteenth century by, among other Western explorers, Captain Cook. From the very first European visits, Tahitian culture, especially its treatment of sex roles, has piqued Western curiosity because of its casualness. Most visitors have remarked upon the unusual and—by Western standards—bizarre lack of sexual differentiation and role playing on the island. For example, one of the first Westerners to write about native sexual mores, the sailor John Forster (1778:421–22), noted that Tahitian women had a remarkably high status and were permitted to do almost everything that the men did. There were women chiefs with effective political power; some women dominated and even beat their husbands; any woman could participate in men's sports, sometimes even wrestling against male opponents; and in general women went about conversing "freely with everybody without restriction." Forster went on to contrast this state of affairs with the other islands he had visited in his travels where women were often secluded.

Later, in the nineteenth century, the American author and diplomat Henry Adams wrote home from Tahiti that the sexes were too much alike for his taste. "The Polynesian woman," he complained, "seems to me too much like the Polynesian man; the difference is not great enough to admit of sentiment, only of physical divergence" (1930:484). And in the same period, the

French painter Paul Gauguin described the native men as "androgynous," adding that "there is something virile in the women and something feminine in the men" (Gauguin 1957:47).

In the 1960s, when Robert Levy did fieldwork on Tahiti, he found these impressions of sexual indeterminacy still valid. He writes that sex differences are "not strongly marked" in Tahiti but rather are "blurred" or "blended" (Levy 1973:234–35). Men are no more aggressive than women; women do not seem "softer" or more "maternal" than the men. As well as having similar personalities, men and women also have roles so similar as to seem almost indistinguishable. Both perform most of the same tasks, and there are no jobs or skills reserved for either sex by cultural dictate. The men routinely do the cooking (*ibid.*:233); women do almost everything that men do outside the house. In addition, there is no stress on proving manhood, no pressure on men to appear in any significant way different from women or children. Men have no fear of acting in ways Westerners would consider effeminate. During dances, for instance, adult men will dance together in close bodily contact, rubbing against each other without any anxiety, and most men visit the village homosexual frequently and without shame (the *mahu*, whose ritualized status we will discuss later).

Even where minimal sex differences are noted by Tahitians, frequent "crossovers" in role, as Levy calls them (*ibid.*:235), take place, especially among the men—a situation that he found surprising (*ibid.*:234). Men show no discomfort at assuming a female identity, and a typical male informant would often illustrate a point by saying, "Suppose you are the man and I am the woman, and we have an argument." Sometimes in such an example, Levy notes, the informant "would make me the woman and himself the man" (*ibid.*:235). Levy continues:

There are many other examples of minute crossovers in role playing by men. Terii Tui [a Tahitian informant], for example, demonstrated the traditional method of giving birth to me and to his youngest children by pretending he was pregnant and sitting down on the floor in the proper position. He then asked his oldest sons to pretend to help him with the delivery. Other men, when talking about the

nursing of a baby, showed how it was done by holding an imaginary baby to their own breasts. (Ibid.)

Such male crossovers in role playing are not only very frequent but are also accompanied by no evidence of anxiety whatsoever. Levy was struck by this curious nonchalance and continually questioned the men about it. But the men invariably said that there "are no general differences" between male and female in terms of character, thoughts, moral characteristics, or the difficulty of their lives (ibid.:236). No "strong thought" here! Indeed, "effeminacy" (Levy's term) is generally accepted as the general and ordinary kind of male personality (ibid.:133). Macho types are regarded as foreign and unsavory. Like Gauguin and Henry Adams, Levy concludes, almost plaintively, "the men seemed a little feminine and the women a little masculine" (ibid.:100).

This blurring of sex roles is echoed in the Tahitian language, which does not express gender grammatically. Pronouns do not indicate the sex of the subject or the gender of the object, and gender has no role in any other aspect of grammar. It is in fact possible to listen to someone talking about an interaction with another person for a long time without knowing whether the subject or object is male or female. In addition, most of the traditional Tahitian proper names are applied equally well to either a man or a woman. Although some related peoples, like the New Zealand Maoris, are said to have classified many non-sexual objects in their environment into male and female, there is nothing of this in contemporary Tahiti (ibid.:232-33).

#### MALE ROLE

Unlike the fiercely protective Trukese, the Tahitians make no effort to protect their women or to fend off foreign intruders. In fact, the opposite is true—much to the shock and delight of Western observers. When the English ship *Dolphin* put in at Tahiti in 1767, the sailors were amazed at their reception: the native women, wrote the ship's captain, "came down and stripped themselves naked and made all the alluring gestures they could to

entice them onshore" (cited in Levy 1973:97). Apparently the Tahitian men had not only acquiesced in this behavior but had actually given their blessing to it (ibid.:126). Later the French explorer Bougainville, who rediscovered Tahiti ten months after the *Dolphin's* visit, was so struck by the easy eroticism of the women and the connivance of their menfolk that he named the place *La Nouvelle Cythère*, after the island where Aphrodite, in some versions of her history, first appeared from the sea. Bougainville writes, "Each day our men walked in the country without arms alone or in small groups. They were invited into the houses and fed; but it was no light snack to which the civility of the host is limited here. They offered them their daughters" (1958:128). Compare this behavior to that of the Trukese!

Few demands are made on Tahitian men. They do not hunt. There are no dangerous or strenuous occupations that are considered masculine. There is no warfare or feuding. The colonial French administration was relatively benign, providing welfare assistance for the indigent. The local lagoon supplies plentiful fishing without the need for arduous deep-sea expeditions as in Truk. Arable land is also plentiful: everyone either owns sufficient land or rents it "for a very small sum" (Levy 1973:11-12). Domesticated animals are plentiful as well, and there is no grinding poverty or economic struggle. The economy, rather than promoting competitiveness among men, fosters an unusual degree of cooperation, as families help each other out both in fishing and in harvesting the two major crops, vanilla and taro. Materialistic striving is not only rare among men but, according to Levy, is actually frowned upon as un-Tahitian. The average Tahitian man "refuses to strive" and is content with bare subsistence (ibid.:40). A laconic attitude toward work is considered "traditional, truly Tahitian" (ibid.). Non-Tahitian residents and visitors find the men lazy. One deviant male type was pointed out to the anthropologist. Of mixed Polynesian and Caucasian ancestry, he was brought up by a Chinese-born father to work hard and to make money. He is criticized by other villagers because "he works too hard and plans too much to be an ordinary Tahitian" (ibid.:51).

In conformity with this mild self-image, men are expected not only to be passive and yielding but also to ignore slights. There is no concept of male honor to defend, no "getting even." Men share a cultural value of "timidity" which forbids retaliation, and even when provoked men rarely come to blows (*ibid.*:285). The remarkable passivity of the men is something that visitors since Cook have noticed with astonishment. One early explorer, John Turnbull, generalized (1812:339), "Their dispositions are gentle to an extreme. . . . I never saw a [Tahitian] out of temper the whole time I was in [Tahiti]."

Prohibitions against aggression go far to exclude thoughts of revenge even when cheated. A French gendarme who administered a Tahitian district in the early 1960s remarked on this with satisfaction. He had worked previously in French Guinea, Algiers, and Morocco. For him the Tahitians were "lambs" in comparison (cited in Levy 1973:276). The French policeman contrasts the Tahitians with the people of Morocco, who were "hot tempered, easily angered." The Tahitians, he writes, are "the other end of the world." What most surprised him was the total lack of a vengeful spirit. "Even when they are cheated by a visitor or a merchant they do not seem to show any anger over this, or any need to get even." The same observation was made in pre-Christian times by the missionary James Wilson (1799:327), who describes the Tahitian men in the following terms: "Their manner [is] affable and engaging; their step easy, firm, and graceful; their behavior free and unguarded; always boundless in generosity to each other, and to strangers, their tempers mild, gentle, and unaffected; slow to take offense, easily pacified, and seldom retaining resentment or revenge, whatever provocation they may have received."

#### rites and mahus

Without any behavioral discriminants or markers for a conventional masculinity, the Tahitians do however have a rite of passage ceremony for boys. It consists of a superincision of the

penis. Unlike the other circumcision rituals we have seen, this is done for "health" purposes only and has no connotation of testing. It is not looked at as a passage to manhood but simply as a medical procedure. The ritual is simple and unstressful. When old enough, the boy is taken to a secluded place, where the expert performs the brief operation in private. There is no public evaluation of "performance." There is no onus attached to crying out or showing fear, and many of the boys have been known to faint dead away with no scandal at all (Levy 1973:119-20).

A standout feature of Tahitian culture is the figure of the *mahu*, or village homosexual, an ancient tradition often noted by early explorers. Like the famous *berdache* among the North American Plains Indians (W. Williams 1986), or the *xanith* among the Omani Muslims described recently by Wikan (1984), the *mahu* is apparently a transsexual who elects to be an honorary woman. More than simply tolerated, he is, again like the *berdache*, often highly respected. One early visitor, James Morrison, gave this account based on observations between 1789 and 1791:

They have a set of men called Mahoo [mahu]. These men are in some respects like the Eunuchs [*sic*] in India but are not castrated. They never cohabit with women but live as they do. They pick their beards out and dress as women, dance and sing with them and are as effeminate in their voice. They are generally excellent hands at making and painting of cloth, making mats and every other women's employment. They are esteemed valuable friends in that way. (Cited in Levy 1973:130)

The mahus are practicing homosexuals, entertaining men and boys by offering sodomy and fellatio. Each village seems to have one of these transsexual characters, and only one, and he is always accepted without opprobrium by his fellows. Most Tahitian men consort openly with the *mahu* when there are no women available and think nothing of it. Interestingly, unlike the other men we have looked at, the "normal" Tahitian men usu-

ally assume the passive role in sex with the mahu, and they are quite open about saying so. Levy (1973:135) reports, "Males describing their relationships with mahu tend to stress their passive participation in the relationship and the lack of symmetry, as the following quotation from Toni [an informant] suggests. 'I was "done" by a mahu in Papeete.'"

Levy is suspicious of his informants' blasé attitude about the mahu, finding the custom problematic psychologically. In his inquiries on the matter, however, his informants told him again and again that the mahu is just a temporary sex object who represents nothing more than a substitute in a pinch for a woman. Like Gregor, Levy is an orthodox Freudian who seems to believe that all men everywhere have masculinity problems as a result of innate oedipal castration fears. In this view, a need to be "masculine" is innate, not socially constructed. Thus an explanation is required when the men show no interest in proving their masculinity both in relation to the mahu and in the culture more generally.

Levy proposes the kind of functional psychosocial explanation (1971) that used to be popular in the culture-and-personality school. He argues that the mahu represents a negative model of masculinity for men. In comparing themselves to the mahu, the latter can assure themselves that they are indeed men: "since we are not mahu we are masculine," they say to themselves, or words to that effect. Otherwise, given their androgynous culture, these men would have no cultural means of corroborating a male identity—which Levy believes to be a psychological necessity. There may be some truth in this, but I find the argument both ethnocentric and forced.

For one thing, from Levy's own account, there is absolutely no evidence that masculinity is itself a matter of any great concern for the Tahitians. They never actually say anything like, "We are manly because we are not mahus," either explicitly or implicitly, and as we have seen, despite probing, Levy never detected any observable sexual anxiety in his informants. On the contrary, they seem to have little use for a manliness that is

separate and opposed to femininity. The concept is simply foreign to them. There is no stress on boys to take risks or prove themselves in this way, or to be different in role or personality from their mothers and sisters. I think therefore that it is more in concert with the facts (as Levy presents them) to take the Tahitians at their word: they do not care very much about masculinity, and the mahu is, just as they say, nothing more or less than an alternative sex object. One may conclude that, for whatever reasons in Tahiti (repression, cultural conditioning, ego-ideal), manhood is not an important symbolic or behavioral category. One wonders, however, how a Tahitian man would react if his manhood were questioned in a hostile or provocative way, or if men ever insult each other in this fashion. Unfortunately, I have discovered no reliable source of information on this matter.

#### THE SEMAI

We now turn to the Semai people of central Malaysia, who are in some subtle ways similar to the Tahitians in their lack of a "gender schema" (Bem 1983). The Semai are one of the aboriginal peoples of Southeast Asia, who live presently in the hills and mountains of the Malay peninsula. They are also called Senoi Semai. The word *Senoi* means "person," hence, "Semai people." Anthropologists use it to refer to those Malayan aborigines who do some primitive farming and who speak one of the peninsula's indigenous languages. These Senoi languages belong to the Austro-Asian family, which also includes Cambodian, the Mon language of Burma, and the languages spoken by some Vietnamese hill people. These peoples are all distantly related and probably represent vestiges of an indigenous pre-Mongoloid south Asian population, possibly including the Dravidians of south India and the Australian aborigines. The present-day Semai are split into two populations divided by topographical barriers: the east Semai and the west Semai. More isolated, the former lead a relatively traditional life; the latter, more accessi-

ble to outsiders, are slightly more acculturated to Malay ways.

The Semai are called in the anthropological lingo a "refuge population." This means that they once occupied a much wider geographical area than their present habitat and were displaced by more numerous or more powerful invaders, retreating to the undesirable hinterlands (in this case the central hills). Although we know virtually nothing about the early contacts between the Semai and the invading Malay peoples who have displaced them, ethnologists speculate that this contact was not a happy one for the Semai. Conceivably a series of military defeats at the hands of the more populous and technologically advanced Malays led the aborigines to adopt "a policy of fleeing rather than fighting" (Dentan 1979:2). If true, this might help explain the present Semai emphasis on nonviolence and their tendency to retreat from danger rather than defend themselves. For, as we shall see, the Semai are among the most unaggressive and retiring people on the face of the earth—a remarkable quality that has given rise to a virtual industry of scholarly speculation about whether they have any aggressive impulses at all (see Robarchek 1977; Paul 1978; Robarchek and Dentan 1987).

Physically the Semai are a tiny people. Most east Semai men are slightly under five feet tall. The west Semai are on the average almost a half foot taller. An interesting trait is that all the Semai are racially very mixed, a product of decades of casual miscegenation with Malays, Chinese, and others passing through their forest enclaves. Some Semai people look almost Chinese, with modified epicanthic eye folds; others have the Negrito features and dark chocolate skins of the neighboring Semang people. Many are smooth skinned with little or no body hair; others have heavy body and facial hair. Some are indistinguishable in physiognomy from Malays. So interbred are they that physical anthropologists have difficulty in assigning them to any of the recognized ethnic stocks and have given up in despair. The reason for all this genetic diversity stems from their nonviolent culture. The explanation is as follows.

## PUNAN: TABOO

The Semai believe that to resist advances from another person, sexual or otherwise, is equivalent to an aggression against that person. They call such aggressiveness *punan*—a very important concept in their culture, meaning roughly "taboo." *Punan* is a Semai word for any act, no matter how mild, that denies or frustrates another person. The Semai believe that if you *punan* someone, his or her "heart becomes heavy" and the affected person may therefore hurt himself or become disoriented and do something inappropriate or even violent. This would place the entire village in jeopardy of punishment by the spirits who forbid untoward behavior. For example, if a confused *punaned* person in his befuddlement made a loud noise or hit someone, Enku, the mighty monkey god, might send down a violent thundersquall with torrential rains and hurricane winds to wash away the village. To avoid such calamity, Semai always accede mildly to requests and importuning. If a man wants to have sex with a woman, married or not, he simply tells her so and she is supposed to accommodate him without protest by lying down and spreading her legs. The converse is also true. To deny a suitor is *punan* (Dentan 1979:62). By the same token, a man or woman must not nag or "wheedle" another person for sex unduly, for that is also shockingly aggressive. The same is true for requests made for material objects or for other favors. Obviously, the Semai express no sexual jealousy, and adultery is rampant. They say of extramarital affairs, "It's just a loan."

These prohibitions against hurting another person's feelings balance out for the most part, so within Semai villages, sexual behavior is generally conciliatory, guided by these rather extreme rules of civility. Yet for more aggressive outsiders, especially persistent Malays and Chinese, the Semai women are easy marks. "Malay men often get access to west Semai women by wooing, bribing, or threatening them" (ibid.:9). In the past this sexual predation occasionally took violent forms. Until the

1920s, Malay raiders were likely to ambush Semai at any time, killing the unresisting men and taking the women and children away (Dentan, letter to the author, 12 Jan. 1988). Without any conception of male honor or paternal rights to inspire them, the Semai men make no effort to resist this "welter of interbreeding" (1979:11). Nor are there unhappy consequences for the offspring of rape or seduction. Any illegitimate children born of such liaisons are loved and well treated by the Semai, because they cannot "bear to see children neglected" (ibid.:9). In short, the Semai men do not worry about honor, paternity, or social boundaries, and outsiders often find Semai women both attractive and complaisant. Though it sounds odd, this is how their culture works.

For the concept of punan to work, the Semai must cultivate the passive, noncompetitive characteristics upon which such unquestioned compliance is based. The Semai personality is founded on a pervasive and strict nonviolent self-image. But, as Dentan points out, this extreme pacifist self-image is not merely an ideal for which the people strive. It is incorporated—introjected—into personality structure as an unconscious element of the ego-ideal. Thus the Semai do not say "Anger is bad"; they assert, "We never get angry," and an obviously angry man will flatly deny his feelings (ibid.:55). The Semai do not say, "It is good to run away when threatened"; they say, "We run away when threatened." They never hit each other or fight, and even noisy arguments are forbidden because noise "frightens people." If a man feels disgruntled because of the actions of another, he simply walks away or sulks. If disputes cannot be resolved without rancor, one of the antagonists will leave the village.

This staunchly nonaggressive image is the face that the Semai present to the outside world. They are in fact famous in Malaya (and among anthropologists) for their excessive, almost masochistic timidity. Westerners who have lived among them invariably use adjectives such as "weak" and "timid" to describe them (ibid.:56). As noted, there is a self-deprecating aspect to this recessive image. The Semai often speak of their own inferiority

and backwardness in comparison to the stronger peoples they know, such as the Malays. A word they use for themselves when speaking to non-Semai is the Malay "Sakai," which means something like "bestial aboriginal" or "slave" (ibid.:1). When spoken to roughly by outsiders, they may attempt to defuse the confrontation by referring to themselves as "just dumb, stupid savages" who mean no harm. Although such linguistic self-effacement may mask deeper feelings of resentment, as is true among some oppressed peoples, we have no evidence of this, and the Semai deny that they harbor any angry feelings. Whenever trouble arises, they either immediately capitulate, or else they disappear into the forest. The east Semai are so afraid of strangers that they sometimes flee from the sound of a motorboat coming upstream into their territory (ibid.:43).

Not surprisingly, the Semai have no sporting competitions or contests that might involve one person losing and feeling bad. No one may give orders to another, for to do so would "frustrate" him. Children also may not be disciplined. Here the interesting concept *bood* comes into play. *Bood* means, roughly, "not to feel like doing something." If a parent tells his child to do something and the child replies, "I *bood*," the matter is closed. To put pressure on the child is punan and thus unacceptable. As Dentan (a master of understatement) puts it, "The Semai indulge their babies" (ibid.:59). There are no competitive or violent children's games. There is no pressure on boys to act strong or tough. To do so would be incomprehensible to the Semai.

The Semai do not distinguish between a male public and a female private realm. There is no effort to seclude or protect women (as we have seen above), and the Western concept of privacy, domestic or otherwise, is not to be found. For example, to refuse someone admission to your house is considered an act of extreme hostility and is therefore punan. Dentan had some trouble adjusting to this:

My wife and I had a great deal of trouble getting used to the idea that seeking privacy was aggressive. For example, the east Semai often go to sleep early in the evening. Our house was therefore

relatively empty, and we used the evening to type up field notes. The problem was that around five o'clock in the morning some well rested Semai would decide to drop in for a visit. . . . A person who dropped in by himself might just sit down for a while humming a little tune, or he might rummage through our belongings in hope of turning up something interesting. (Ibid.:29)

There are no social boundaries recognized as such among the Semai and consequently not even the remotest notion of "protecting your own," as the concept "your own" has no meaning to them.

### ECONOMY

Semai people put little stress on personal property, individualism, or material ambition. Their economy is based on a subsistence-level slash-and-burn farming. Their main crops are amaranth (the leaves are boiled to make a gruel), maize, rice, and squash. Land is relatively plentiful, and the Semai seem to be under no pressure to intensify or modernize their harvests. Their farming practices are cooperative rather than competitive. There is no private ownership, either of land or of consumer goods. If a man has no land under cultivation, he can simply ask a friend or kinsman for a portion of his land. To refuse such a request would be *punan*, so the land is cheerfully handed over (ibid.:43). The same is true for tools and other moveable items.

Unlike the Tahitians, the Semai like to hunt. Only the men hunt. The main weapon is a blowpipe seven or eight feet long. The blowpipe is made of two tubes of bamboo, one inside the other so that the weapon will not bend over of its own weight. From this tube the men shoot small, featherless darts, the tips of which are smeared with a sticky poison compounded from the *Strychnos* vine and mixed with other poisons. The dart is notched at the end so that the point with the poison will break off and stay imbedded in the fleeing animal. Hunting is by no means a strenuous or dangerous affair. Only small game is taken, the largest animals being small pigs. The men do not go far into the

forest to hunt, usually returning to the village by noon—that is, before the day gets too hot. During the fruit season, most hunters will lie underneath a fruit tree and wait for the prey to come to them. If they encounter danger, they run away and hide without any shame or hesitation.

Hunting, moreover, is not essential: it provides little animal protein and virtually no ceremonial items. Much more game is taken by trapping, at which the Semai are proficient (ibid.:32). The Semai keep some domesticated animals, mainly chickens, but they cannot bear to kill them, so when they are fully grown, they barter or trade them to Malay or Chinese traders. The Semai know that the traders will kill these "pets," but they prefer not to think about it. This respectful attitude toward animals conditions Semai response to dangerous quadrupeds and predators, including elephants and tigers, which are common in the area. When such animals are sighted, the Semai do not confront them, like the Masai, but huddle together fearfully in their longhouse, leaving the animal to its depredations. If caught in the open, the Semai response is to run away and hide. People return to their interrupted chores only when the animal has departed. Neither nasty people nor dangerous animals may be challenged. That would be *punan*.

Stream fishing is also important to the Semai diet. Both men and women fish, the men using weirs, the women using baskets. Fishing by hand, sometimes with the use of mild fish poisons, is a children's game (ibid.:33). Sometimes men and women cooperate in fishing. A man and his wife, for example, will dam up a small stream with rocks or other debris, leaving a narrow opening in which they place a net. Then they beat an area of the stream above the makeshift dam, take their catch, and run upstream to repeat the process.

### GENDER

As one might expect from the above, the Semai place little importance on sex differences either in assigning social role or in assessing temperament. However, unlike Tahitian, their lan-



guage does distinguish between "male" (*kraal*) and "female" (*krdoor*), and gender is an important feature of Semai kinship terminology, second only to age as a discriminator. But aside from calling all rounded protuberances "breasts," the Semai have little use of gender distinctions in their speech, and they have no gender scheme. Women participate in political affairs as much as men, although they are less frequently local headmen. Men rarely become midwives, but there is no social onus to being one. There are no "invidious contrasts" between men and women (Dentan, letter, 12 Jan. 1988). Few traits are distinctively "masculine" or "feminine." The sexual division of labor is preferential, not prescriptive or proscriptive (Williams-Hunt 1952:51). That is, there are no rigid rules, and a man or woman may choose to do whatever he or she feels suited for without incurring criticism. However, the expectation is that someone skilled at an activity normally preferred by the opposite sex will be particularly good at it. For example, male midwives are especially talented, and female headmen are unusually powerful (*ibid.*). So few are the recognized differences between the sexes that the one visible sartorial distinction has achieved the status of a classic aphorism: "Men's loincloths are long, Women's loincloths are short." Otherwise, men and women are pretty much the same. No machismo here!

Despite all this sexual overlap, one cryptic statement in Dentan's book merits comment. The men are very solicitous of their blowpipes. No other possession can compete with the blowpipe "on an emotional level" (Dentan 1979:31). They lavish more time on making a blowpipe than on building a house; and after they have finished making it, they spend yet more time polishing and ornamenting it. Semai men, Dentan notes (*ibid.*), "treat their blowpipes as symbols of virility." Apparently (no other evidence is given) the men are concerned about their sexual potency, and the blowpipe is a phallic symbol. The weapon = penis motif celebrated by the Bushmen and other such gentle people seems universal wherever men hunt. Aside from this symbolism, the Semai seem to follow the Bartleby ("I prefer not to") school

of masculinity. Or rather, to use one of their favorite locutions, they prefer to "run away" from all challenges. As an inducement to courageous action, manhood has little use in their frame of reference, and bravado of any sort is antithetical to their moral system. Remember that the blowpipes are never used against people and that the Semai do not judge hunting prowess invidiously.

#### SUMMARY

One must be careful not to generalize from these two isolated cases. For one thing, neither case is black-and-white. Dentan tells us that the timid Semai men consider their blowpipes symbols of virility, which gives one pause. Whether or not they equate potency to some broader notion of masculinity is moot. Levy notes that Tahitian boys who are *very* effeminate may hear some mild teasing about being the next mahu. Nevertheless, neither society distinguishes a "real man" category with a restricted admissions policy. The Tahitians and the Semai simply do not seem to care much about manhood.

Despite the exiguous data, some reasonable inferences about the lack of a manhood cult in these two societies can be drawn through comparison. There are obvious similarities between them in terms of moral norms, modal personality, and material context. In both, men are relieved from having to prove themselves through taking risks. There is no want of natural resources and thus no economic incentive to strive or to compete, no agonistic ethos, no open market for skills. Because the economy is cooperative, ambition is devalued. There are no serious hazards in the external world that the men are expected to defend against (the Semai run away from dangerous animals and outsiders rather than fight them). Neither society feels threatened by invaders; neither engages in warfare. There is little pressure for worldly success. There is no concept of a secluded private sphere of women and children that men must protect. Men have no interest in defining themselves as different from or

superior to women, or as their defenders. In short, there is little basis for an ideology of manhood that motivates men to perform under pressure or to defend boundaries.

Although the correlations between ideology and material context seem clear, one must be cautious in drawing causal arrows here. Taken as givens, these two sets of data, the objective (or material), and the subjective (or ideological), could get us into a "chicken-or-egg" conundrum: which came first, the economy or the androgyny? Moreover, we would be guilty of teleological reasoning if we automatically attributed logical or causal priority to the material-economic conditions that seem to fit the regnant ideology (Giddens 1987:68-69). Although, as I have made abundantly clear above, I favor a materialist stance that awards causal priority to environment and basic economy, there is no way to prove that this stance is correct. Materialism, in all its forms, is still theory, not fact, and one cannot appeal to a theory to prove a hypothesis. For example, from an idealist perspective, one could reasonably argue that the ideology of passivity gave rise to the lack of economic competition rather than the other way around. Nevertheless, moving away from the futile quest for origins, one may at least hypothesize a feedback relationship in which the ideology, once formed, assists in and intensifies a matching adaptation to the environment. If a certain response is favorable to group survival and at the same time reconciles group and individual needs, we can assume that there will be selective pressures to retain it. Trait correlations, then, do not prove causal relations in any linear fashion but suggest the existence of third factors that produce the correlations (*ibid.*:69).

Both the Tahitians and the Semai have been described as "childlike" in comparison both to Westerners and to other, equally industrious civilizations. Perhaps without a typical manhood ideology, men are permitted the luxury of remaining passive and dependent, rather like stone-age Peter Pans. Because the information we have about their inner thoughts and fantasies is incomplete, we cannot know for sure what psychological processes are going on inside the natives' heads. But it does

appear that, in these two cultures (and others like them), there is little or no social pressure to "act like men" and that men feel no driven "inherent" need to act manly. This strongly supports the feminist notion that gender norms are ascribed rather than innate.

Finally, one may look to the larger picture of biological stimulus/response for some guidance here. When confronted with danger, all mammals, man included, excrete the hormone adrenalin (Konner 1982). This primes them for an appropriate survival-enhancing response. Though this hormonal priming is the same from a chemical point of view, the behavioral outcome differs radically from species to species. In the lower mammals the response is determined largely by genetic imprinting, that is, by instinct. Evolutionary pressures have predisposed some animals to fight, others to flee (this is sometimes called the fight/flight syndrome). In man, the behavioral response is conditioned not by instinct but by learning. Those cultures that have a pronounced manhood ideology seem to be the ones that have chosen fight as a survival strategy. Without a genetic imprinting, men in those cultures have to be conditioned to be brave in order to fight. The Semai and the Tahitians, for whatever historical reasons, have elected a strategy of avoiding confrontations. This is probably the explanation for their lack of a manhood ideology: they flee.