8. Making Men in Sambia Gardens
The Prehistory of Homosexuality II

About 21,000 years ago the Earth’s climate took a nose-dive and mankind experienced the Last Ice Age or, as the text-books call it, the Last Glacial Maximum. During this time huge domes of ice covered large tracts of northern Europe, the northern half of the West Siberian Plain and most of Canada. All of Britain, except the southern-most parts, were covered by ice sheets up to 3 km deep! Nothing could live on the ice or, for that matter in the frozen deserts which stretched for thousands of miles around the ice domes. Because so much water was tied up in ice, sea levels dropped by up to about 150 meters from present shores-lines. In Europe, populations declined and the survivors were forced to retreat to what are called “refugia” in the south of France and Northern Spain and parts of the Ukraine and the Balkans where they could still grub out a difficult living. It was during this time the ancestors of about 45% of modern Europeans painted or engraved the wonderful pictures in the caves, such as Lascaux or — my favourite — Combarelles. They did not live in these caves but used them probably as places of refuge when the never-ending winds got too cold and most likely, also as places in which initiations were conducted.

The effects of the Ice Age extended even into the southern hemisphere: in southern Australia, for example, rainfall dropped by up to 90% and vegetation was reduced almost as much as in Europe and North America while shifting sand dunes covered half the continent. Although most of us of European descent are perhaps more inclined to identify with ancestors in Europe, we must remember that the Aboriginal people had been here in Australia already for a very long time and would have been greatly affected by these changes.

Around 10,000 years ago the Ice began to retreat and the earth to warm up once more. Then, about 8,000 years ago a new invention revolutionized human history. This was agriculture, by which we mean not only the planting and harvesting of plants for food but the domestication of some species of animals and the invention of pottery. This “agricultural revolution” was probably gradual and initially, at least, people simply planted some seeds and left Nature to do her work while they followed the game, coming back only later to harvest their produce. Eventually, however, as seed stocks began to yield bigger and better harvest, people settled near their gardens, to watch over them and care for
the growing resource. In this way, small permanent settlements evolved, the first villages.

As far as Europeans are concerned, agriculture was invented in the Near East, but there appear to have been several centres where the planting of crops, the domestication of animals and pottery were all invented, including the Middle East, China, South America, the eastern seabord of the United States, and a region extending from Mexico into Central America. And, as archeologists have recently been surprised to discover, New Guinea.

Wherever agriculture was invented, the inventors were most probably women since it was usually women’s work to gather seeds and other vegetable foodstuffs. If it was women who were the first farmers then they also greatly increased their own work burden and the social oppression they were to suffer for ever more. Agriculture meant more food and with more food, more babies so, compared with the hunter/gatherer/fisher women of earlier times, they were pregnant for more of their life and had more children to look after as well as being held responsible for the most burdensome work in their gardens.

Men seem to have accepted the agricultural revolution more slowly than women did. Perhaps it was more convenient for women to work in a field than to walk for miles, foraging while carrying babies or with infants toddling behind. Perhaps too, men continued the enjoy the relative freedom and excitement of hunting: after all, they did not always have to bring home the bacon — it is variously estimated than fewer than one in 3 hunting expeditions were successful.

**Pigs and Gardens**

As I did with the Aranda, I want now to detour into looking at a culture which was at least materially and technologically about the same as were those which invented agriculture. Remember, we cannot directly compare them or extrapolate from the historical to the pre-historical, but we can at least see how people managed their lives with similar resources.

New Guinea is the second largest island in the world after Greenland; in the interior, it is in parts so mountainous that people on one side of a mountain can see and hear their neighbours on the opposite side of the valley yet cannot make physical contact with them. Trees began to reappear in the New Guinea uplands about 9,600 years ago, following revegetation after the Ice Age by shrubs and leafy plants. Rather than
become more seasonal, the region seems to have become more uniform in climate.

People certainly lived here before the Ice drove them from the higher altitudes: there is evidence of human habitation in New Guinea from at least 35,000 years ago. When they first started to garden is uncertain but Tim Denham1 of Flinders University in Adelaide found evidence, in the from of ancient drainage ditches and microscopic remains of banana plants, which indicate that New Guineans have been gardening for the last 7,000 years. This pushes the date of their agricultural revolution back almost as far as the invention of agriculture in the Near East.

Along with growing crops, another feature of this period in human history was the discovery that if you put a clay pot in a fire, it becomes permanently hard and durable. While the earliest known invention of pottery was among the early Jomon people who were still mostly nomadic hunter/fisher/gathers, in Japan about 9,000 years ago, it is probable that pottery was invented in New Guinea fairly early on. Even today, Papua-New Guinea still has a rich indigenous hand-built earthenware tradition2.

Another feature of this so-called Neolithic period of human development was the domestication of animals — that is, animals for food: dogs adopted us thousands of years earlier and have been our best friends for so long that some scientists consider they sacrificed vision in favour of smell and hearing while we, symbiotically, sacrificed those senses in favour of binocular vision. Together, man and dog were a formidable hunting team.

In Europe, the basis for the domesticated flocks were goats, sheep, and cattle, but New Guinea had none of these. However, they did have pigs — not the lovable pink Babe type but the big black hairy ones common throughout the South East Asian region.

Even though it was missionaries from a variety of nations who were the first Europeans to see the gardens of the Highlands, they tended to keep the knowledge to themselves because they feared rival sects would follow

in their footsteps in the search for souls to save. Instead, it was Australian gold prospectors who first revealed the marvels to the outside world. In 1935 Jack Hides and his mate, Jim O’Malley entered one of the inter-montane valleys and could not believe his eyes:

_On every slope were cultivated squares, while little columns of smoke rising in the still air revealed to us the homes of the people of this land. I had never seen anything more beautiful. Beyond all stood the heights of some mighty mountain chain that sparkled in places with the colours of the setting sun._

**The so-called “Sambia”, semen-eaters.**

There is a feature of the initiation of boys into manhood which is common through much of Melanesia, the region inhabited by brown-skinned people which stretches from the present-day Indonesian province of West New Guinea to Fiji in the east. This characteristic is what anthropologists call “ritual insemination”, that is the putting into the boys’ bodies the semen of older youths or men, a practice which is believed essential to the proper growth of the boys into manhood. Of course, this practice, either _per os, per anum_ or both, was also found in many other cultures outside Melanesia, for example, among many Murrayian Aboriginal societies in tribal Australia, and the most famous of all, in Ancient Greece.

The best-known of the Papua-New Guinea societies which practise this form of initiation are the so-called “Sambia”, a group of people who live in the South-Eastern Highlands. As far as I know, this was not their true name, the anthropologist who studied them, Gilbert Herdt, and whose book (and BBC documentary) called _“Guardians of the Flutes”_ has made them famous, took pains to hide their true identity and location: even the photos in his book are rather anonymous. As a doctoral student at the ANU, Herdt lived among the Sambia from 1974-1976, during which time these initiations were still carried out; by now, however, they are probably extinct, vanished under the flood of Christian missionary zeal and white fella cargo.

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3 Quoted in Steven Mithven: “After the Ice – A global human history 20,000-5,00 BC”, Phoenix, 2003 (p.339).
The Sambia were not the only New Guinean culture to lead, what to our eyes is a rather bizarre sex life, not so much in adulthood but in childhood and adolescence. Anthropologists estimate the between 20% and 30% of neighbouring cultures were similar, differing in some details but generally similar in the manner in which sexuality is institutionalised for the benefit of their tribal life. This has been known since the 1930s when ethnologists and missionaries first started collating the details of native cultures, but prevailing moral values made it impossible for them to publish the information as they found it. For example, in 1967 Dr. M.R. Allen, a one-time brewer for Guinness before he eventually became lecturer in Anthropology at the University of Sydney, published what was for a long time the classic in its field, “Male Cults and Secret Initiations in Melanesia”. This remarkable survey of its subject-matter does not mention insemination, yet it can hardly have gone unnoticed by the many researchers whose work is covered by the book. It was not until 1981 that Gilbert Herdt broke the rules and published the steamy details!

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The Sambia were both simple farmers and fearless warriors. Their horticulture is of the “shifting” agricultural type, that is, they move to new areas of bush where they slash down the vegetation and burn the remains before planting their crops. Leaching of nutrients from the soil is a common problem in these rainforest gardens so that, after several seasons, the farmers move on, repeating the “slash and burn” cycle.

They live in small villages in a highly forested area on the edge of the Highlands. These villages are organised on a patrilineal basis without strong leaders or other social hierarchical structures. Marriages are arranged in two manners: in one, women are exchanged between the different villages within the tribal area; in the other, women are obtained from distant villages through warfare — in effect, through “bride capture”. In the first instance, the friendly interchange between neighbouring villages, a pattern of cross-cousin marriage is the favoured one. In such a system, these villages are allies, welded together by kinship ties. On the other hand, the second method of finding a wife and the uncertainty which follows it, leads to the remarkable paranoia which exists between men and women in Sambia society.

Among the Sambia, the division between the sexes is extreme and the initiation rituals serve to preserve this. There are many explanation for such sexual antagonism and for its reinforcement in the ritual life of Melanesians, some of them quite fanciful psychoanalytic concoctions
propounded by, for example, Bettleheim\textsuperscript{7} and even Reik\textsuperscript{8} and relied upon quite heavily by Allen\textsuperscript{9} in his 1967 survey. Most of these favour explaining aspects of ritual (subincision, circumcision, nose-bleeding, vomiting, and re-birth rituals) as a means of resolving the Castration/Oedipus complex and representing in their detail men’s envy of women’s capacity for childbirth.

Personally, I prefer an explanation given by Herdt\textsuperscript{10} himself in an interview he once gave on the subject of “secrecy”…. In this he explained that in a Sambia village, women often came from enemy villages and they were assumed to have continuing allegiances to relatives and friends “back home”.

\textit{Warfare, in the historical and the material environment of the Sambia and many of the other people in New Guinea, created absolute conditions of survival that meant people could never really trust those outside their own village. But because of the necessity of social reproduction, which meant that women would be brought in from other villages in order to ensure that incest would not occur, women were being brought from hostile, essentially enemy villages to marry into a local patriarchal group. In a small village, these women were treated tantamount to being enemies. When they came in, then, they became a proxy for that enemy group.}

\textit{Thus was created a double symbolic representation—of enemy as a political group, which is the "men over there," and "enemy as Woman," who is "inside the group" and potentially disloyal and disruptive. The antagonism was exacerbated greatly by the fact that since these small villages had such highly ritualized relationships with each other, they had to arrange marriages as political agreements. Hence, marriages were created in which people were almost strangers when they were wed. Men and women alike had virtually no say over whom they would marry. The elders arranged marriages.}\textsuperscript{\textsuperscript{11}}

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{7} Bettleheim, B: \textit{Symbolic Wounds}, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1954,
\item \textsuperscript{9} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{10} Examining Secrecy and Sexuality - \url{http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center/examine.htm}
\item \textsuperscript{11} Herdt, as 8. above
\end{itemize}
This meant not only that there would have been no room in Sambia society for love and romance in marriage, at least until the man and women had spent many years sharing their lives and trust could have grown between them. For much of the time, women remained Woman as Object, not so much a personality to her husband but the vehicle through which he had his children but who was also skilled in growing things in the garden.

Motherhood however, was a different matter. Women, perhaps potential enemies within the village, had of necessity a long and intimate relationship with their sons. Many Melanesian societies, the Sambia especially, had an extraordinary fear of a son’s ties to his mother and for that reason, young boys, as young as 6 or 7, were usually separated from their mothers and taken to live in the men’s house. Strict avoidance protocols were also the rule, women being forced even to use different paths through the bush than the men.

Boys could not talk to or see their mothers. They could not take food or other goods directly from their mothers. The mothers could never go close to the men’s house and certainly could never enter it—that was absolutely forbidden. All of the secret activities surrounding war and rituals were off limits for women and young children.

By creating secrecy within the men’s house, the men provided an alternative reality to the maternal reality that the boys grew up with, which was the reality of the public domain, as well as their experiences with their mothers and the subjectivities of being close to their mothers and other women.

The effects of all of these secret practices are to deny the dependency of men upon women and to create a bond among the men, which is more powerful and stronger than anything else that existed before it. In such a utopian world, the men go to the farthest extreme, which is to claim that they, within themselves, can reproduce the world, which denies an absolute relationship to women in order to reproduce the culture.

If a man was to associate with women, especially if he was to have sexual intercourse in order to produce babies, then he had to be strong enough to withstand what the Koran calls “the honey of women”…. Among the Sambia, it all depended on the “essence” of the person and its relationship to a special organ within the body called the “tingu”.

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female case, the tingu was full from birth with the female essence, that is, with blood which went on building up and building up as the girl grew until, finally, at menache, the tingu overflowed and the blood came out.

In the male case, the tingu at birth was a tiny, shrunken thing, empty and dry. The male essence was semen and this could be obtained from only one source, from post-pubertal youths and men.

The Sambia also had a notion that there were two kinds of sex, on the one hand, “sex as work” and on the other “sex as play”. To make a baby required a man to “work” at introducing more and more semen into the woman until some critical mass was achieved and a baby was made. Hence, the man had to have a plentiful supply of semen in his tingu… He should not waste it by too much “play”…..

At about the age of 7, boys were taken from their mothers and from then on spent the next decade or more in exclusively male company. From the time they entered the Men’s House they were gradually taught the men’s ritual secrets. They were constantly warned that the penalty if they revealed these secrets to women was death. Further, they were gradually taught the secret of the flutes which, until then they had never seen and believed were the voices of initiatory spirits but which were now revealed to them as musical instruments the men themselves played, and taught the ritual association between the flutes and the penis. (It is perhaps no accident that psychoanalysts had a field day with this symbolism!)

They key act of the entire initiation process was fellatio in which the young pre-pubescent boys fellated the older post-pubescent boys and drank their semen. In the beginning, a boy was introduced to fellatio by being told to take one of the spirit flutes into his mouth; he was then required to take the penis of one of the older boys into his mouth and instructed how to fellate it. Most boys reported to Herdt that they were very nervous at first, some even found themselves trembling at the prospect, but that they soon grew comfortable with the act. In fact, they soon come to welcome the fellatio because they understand that it is through this and the ingestion of the older boy’s semen that their own tingu was being filled and this would make them grow into strong, virile men. As they looked at it, this was “sex work”, not “play”, and the older boy whose semen they were drinking was doing them a favour.

All this was subject to strict rules. The younger boy was always the fellator, the adolescent the fellated. The older boy stood, the younger boy knelt in front of him. There was always a high degree of privacy
required: usually the boy and the youth went somewhere private in the bush, or did it in the dark of night. As far as possible, other males were not allowed to see this happening and certainly, it was never done in front of women.

Another prohibition was upon what might be seen as “incestuous” fellatio... the Sambia believed that semen could only flow through the same channels as marriage, so any other male who belonged to the group from which one might choose a wife qualified for fellatio.

As boys approached puberty they reported they sometimes got erections while fellating the older boys. This was a signal they were approaching the next step in their initiation into manhood. Now, it seemed, their tingus were fairly full so they too can take their turn in supplying this male essence to other, younger boys. Although this was still seen as a necessary responsibility to those in need, and therefore as “work”, these lads were now permitted at least to enjoy their work. At this stage, aged 14-16, the boys changed status during a major initiation ceremony. From then on they were officially what Herdt called “bachelors”. Their bigger, stronger, well-muscled bodies and their larger penises were taken to be good evidence that the ingestion of semen really worked and had made men of them!

There was an anomaly in this in that one would think being fellated by the younger boys would deplete the bachelors’ semen and so reduce their own development. To counteract this depletion, the bachelors were taught ritual secrets about nuts and berries and other foods to eat which would also build up their semen and permit them to do their good work at the same time for the younger boys.

Somewhere between 17 and 21 or so, the bachelors were judged strong enough to marry. Usually, marriages were arranged at or even before birth, so the young couple had little say in what happened. Furthermore, the woman was usually quite a bit younger than the man so they did not set up house together immediately; instead the man continued to live in the men’s house while visiting his wife occasionally. They did not have intercourse but now it was the wife who fellated the man, thus — through her ingestioin of his semen — strengthening her and conditioning her for childbearing later on.

During this stage, the man could go on being fellated by boys, the argument being that his penis was still safe for them to suck on because it
had not yet been in a woman’s vagina. Essentially, this then was a transitional period of bi-sexuality for the man.

All this ended however, when he began to have vaginal intercourse with his wife. From now on, his penis was considered too dangerously polluted by womanly secretions for it to be fellated by the needy boys. From this point on, the man’s homosexual or bi-sexual life came to an end and he was permitted heterosexual relations only.

Herdt reported that about 5% of the Sambian men were to a degree “back-sliders”, seeking fellatio with younger boys after they were married. A boy’s mouth, Herdt commented, had been “fetishized” through all those bachelor years and the “play” he enjoyed while helping the boy become a man…..