

NHH08. Making Men in Sambia Gardens

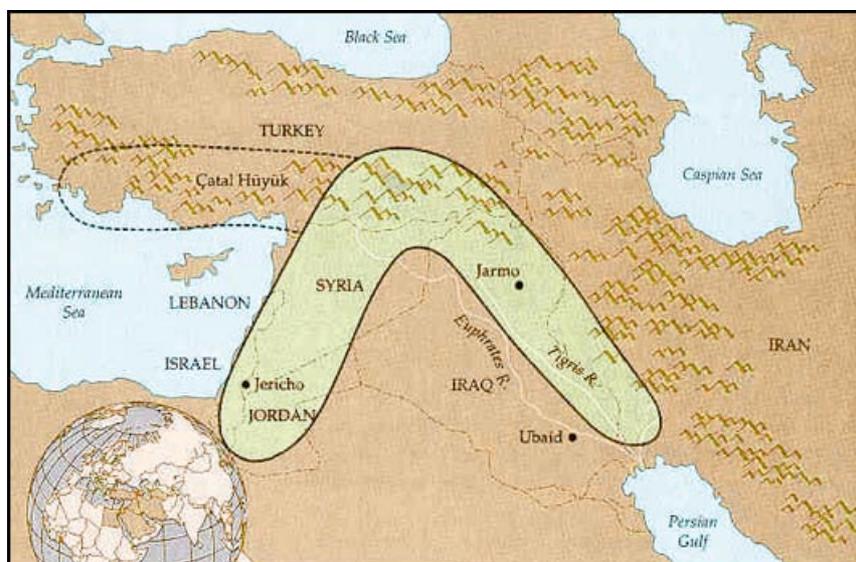
The Prehistory of Homosexuality II

WC 3621

Around 10,000 years ago the Last Glacial Maximum, which we know better as the Last Ice Age, came to an end and the Earth entered a new climatic era which is called the Holocene. Compared with the earlier Pleistocene, this is a relatively stable, warm and moist phase in the Earth's weather which allowed our distant ancestors to make a revolutionary discovery which totally changed their lifestyle. This "giant leap for Mankind" was the invention of agriculture which, along with the domestication of some animals and the use of pottery, allowed human beings to settle down in one spot, have larger families and eventually, to live in villages, towns and ultimately, cities.

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 seaboard of the United States, and a region extending from Mexico into Central America. And, as archeologists have recently

been surprised to discover, also in New Guinea.



The "Fertile Crescent" (dotted lines show extension into Turkey)

Wherever agriculture was invented, the inventors were most probably women since it was usually women's work to forage while the men hunted. 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 to enjoy the relative freedom and excitement of hunting: after all, they did not always have to bring home the bacon — it is variously estimated that 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.



Women farming sweet potatoes in the Highlands of PNG.¹

After Greenland, New Guinea is the second largest island in the world; in the interior, it is in parts so mountainous that people on one side of a valley can see and hear their neighbours on the opposite side yet cannot readily make physical contact with them. Trees began to re-appear in the New Guinea uplands about 9,600 years ago, following revegetation after the Ice Age by shrubs and leafy plants.

After Greenland, New Guinea is the second largest island in the world; in the interior, it is in parts so mountainous that people on one side of a valley can see and hear their neighbours on the opposite side yet cannot readily make



Low-fired earthenware pot, hand-built and decorated with ochres, from north coast of New Guinea (near Wewak) – late 1960s, coll. BH.

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 Denham² of Flinders University in Adelaide found evidence, in the form of ancient drainage ditches and

¹ <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic-art/373679/3061/Sweet-potato-farming-Southern-Highlands-province-Papua-New-Guinea>

² TP Denham et al.: "Origins of agriculture at Kuk Swamp in the highlands of New Guinea," *Science* 301:189-93, July 11, 2003

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 use of pottery *per se*³ was among the early Jomon people who were still mostly nomadic hunter/fisher/gathers in Japan about 16,000 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 tradition⁴.

Another feature of this so-called Neolithic period of human development was the domestication of animals — that is, animals for food: dogs adopted us about 40,000 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.



Killing a pig for a feast. Pigs constitute wealth in New Guinea and feasting plays an important part in ceremonial interchanges among clans and villages (this is in Irian Jaya/Indonesian New Guinea)⁵

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:

³ The use of fired clay to make small "Venus figurines" was first invented well back in the Pleistocene, including at Dolní Věstonice in the Czech Republic (dated Gravettian 29-25 KYA) and in Siberia about 20-18 KYA.

⁴ Like the Aztecs and Incas, they never invented the wheel. The mountainous terrain would have made its use for transport problematic. See May, P. & Tuckson, M.: *The Traditional Pottery of Papua New Guinea*, Bay Books, Sydney 1982.

⁵ www.bakubo.com/Irian%20Jaya/ij-report.htm

*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.*⁶

The so-called “Sambia”, semen-eaters.

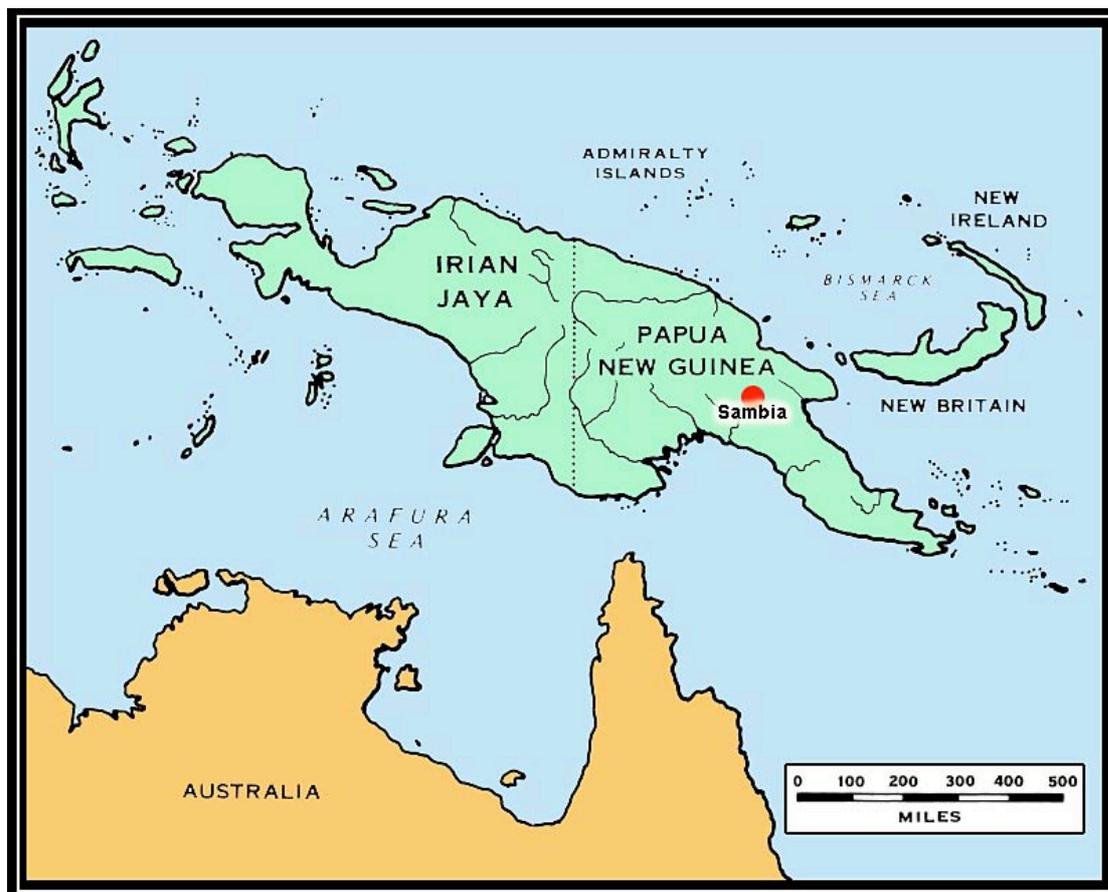
Genetically, the people who occupy the so-called "big island" of New Guinea are of two distinct types: on the one hand, there are the people who live in the highlands of the interior. Like all of us, they are the descendants of the first people to come out of Africa ~85 KYA but, in their case, their remote ancestors followed the beaches of India and South-east Asia until, somewhere in what is now the Indonesian archipelago, they could go no further. There, about 65 KYA, when sea-levels are at their lowest for millennia, these ancient migrants made short sea voyages, hopping from island to island until they reached the great super-continent of Sahul. Whether they made this journey with the first Australians or whether the ancestors of the aboriginals made their crossing a bit further south (to the Kimberley coast), archaeologists are not sure, but the Aboriginals and the New Guinea Highlanders were fellow-travellers for most of the long march from Africa and still share some genetic characteristics. It would have been these people who gradually invented agriculture, pottery and the domestication of their big black pigs.

On the other hand, another group of people reached New Guinea about 5–6 KYA. They are generally referred to as the *Austronesians*. Some of them settled on the coast and riverine valleys of New Guinea and its peripheral islands while others sailed further east, avoiding Australia, until they reached the various Pacific Islands where they became the ancestors of the Melanesian and Polynesian peoples.

There is a feature of the initiation of boys into manhood which is common through much of Melanesia, the region which stretches from the present-day Indonesian province of West New Guinea to Fiji in the east. This cultural 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.

⁶ Quoted in Steven Mithven: “*After the Ice – A global human history 20,000-5,00 BC*”, Phoenix, 2003 (p.339).

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*”⁷ 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 pella cargo.⁸



Approximate location of the Sambia

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

⁷ Gilbert Herdt: *Guardians of the Flutes, Volume 1: Idioms of Masculinity*. University of Chicago Press, 1981, 1994
 Preceding the book was Herdt's 1977 PhD Dissertation *The Individual in Sambia Male Initiation*, Australian National University, Canberra.

⁸ Knauff, Bruce M: “What Ever Happened to Ritualized Homosexuality? Modern Sexual Subjects in Melanesia and Elsewhere”, *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 2003

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_qa3778/is_200301/ai_n9208658

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”*⁹. 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!

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.



Illustration from Herdt's "Guardians of the Flutes"

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,

⁹ M.R. Allen: *“Male cults and Secret Initiations in Melanesia”*, Melbourne University Press, 1967.

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, Bettelheim¹⁰ and even Reik¹¹ and relied upon quite heavily by Allen¹² 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 Herdt¹³ 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".

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.

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

¹⁰ Bettelheim, B: *Symbolic Wounds*, Glencoe, Ill., Free Press, 1954,

¹¹ T. Reik: *Ritual – Four Analytic Studies*, New York Grove Press, 1946, cf. *The Puberty Rites of Savages*, pp 91-166.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ Examining Secrecy and Sexuality - http://www.vanderbilt.edu/rpw_center/examine.htm

*and women alike had virtually no say over whom they would marry. The elders arranged marriages.*¹⁴

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.



*A man with a large flute at Mameri, on the Krosmeri River*¹⁵.

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

¹⁴ Herdt, as 8. above

¹⁵ photo: <http://www.xray.mpe.mpg.de/~skomossa/pic17.html>

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.

A Highlands man carrying construction materials. Note his body shape (and male balding pattern).

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*”. In the 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 menarche, the *tingu* overflowed and the blood came out.

In the male case, the *tingu* at birth was a tiny, shriveled 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!)

The 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.



New Guinea Highland warriors in full gear.

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 ingestion 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.



Huli dancers from West New Guinea (Huli are also often called "Wig Men").

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 so, of necessity, 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.....