

The Social Function of Gender

Cheryl Claassen

Paper read at the annual meeting of the Society for American Archaeology, Philadelphia, April 9th, 2000 and at the 6th Archaeology and Gender Conference, Flagstaff, Arz. Oct. 2000

Introduction

What is the social function for gender? Many theorists outside of archaeology (e.g. Rosaldo 1980) and several voices within (Conkey and Spector 1984, Conkey and Gero 1991:8-11, Hollimon 1991, Kornfeld and Francis 1991, Whelan 1991) have argued that the function of gender varies across space and time, that gender waxes and wanes in a society contingent upon social issues, and that social function varies with societal need. They have even posited that there were American cultures where gender did not operate (Borker and Maltz 1989:412, Kehoe 1998:23). By and large, however, it seems that most archaeologists imagine gender to have been present in all *Homo sapiens* cultures and the social function of gender to be to organize labor. In this paper I reject many of these notions and return to gender its fundamental role as cultural organizer of reproduction and its consequent, that there has always been a gender system with but one function in *Homo sapiens* societies. Cultural variation is not in gender, but in the expressions of gender.

Sexual Selection and Gender

Mating is the basis of reproduction and reproduction is the basis of speciation. A species is a reproductive isolate. We humans continue as a species because of mechanisms that prevent us from mating with most other species or when we do, prevent reproduction. Two evolutionary pressures brought us vertebrates two sexes. One pressure was to increase zygote size which improves its survival chances, and the other pressure was to increase the number of gametes which would require a reduction in size but improves the chances of mating. These two pressures are contradictory and the evolutionary response that has marked all of hominid history was the development of two sexes, one evolving larger eggs, the other evolving multiple tiny sperm (Jones 1996:4). It is difficult to imagine, let alone seriously posit, that there have been more than two sexes in human evolutionary history.

"Once two sexes exist, the stage is set for sexual conflict, both within a sex and between the sexes" (Jones 1996:5). This conflict was recognized first by Charles Darwin as the source of sexual selection. Unlike natural selection which operates on traits relevant to survival, including primary sexual characteristics, sexual selection regulates the competition over mates, and thus reproduction, and selects for secondary sexual characteristics--body hair, body size, skin color, breast size, etc.. In brief, sexual selection theory is interested in the "forms and consequences of competition over mates" (Jones 1996:4).

Biologists studying sexual selection have observed numerous times that vertebrate males compete to mate often, while females compete to mate well. "Male ornamentation evolves through sexual selection by female choice of mate, and male weapons evolve through sexual selection by contests between males for mating opportunities" (Jones 1996:5, 7).

"Understanding human sexuality means recognizing that the human psyche is adapted not merely for individual survival and well-being but for reproductive competition. . .[t]he most complex adaptive system known, the human mind, consists of a set of adaptations for reproductive competition" (Jones 1996:4), be it direct or indirect mating competition.

Furthermore, "human beings are virtually certain to have psychological mechanisms for detecting external cues of mate value. . ." (Symons 1996). The evolution of mating systems, then, influences sexual selection and sexual selection influences mating systems. Something so fundamental to Homo sapiens as reproduction must have a designated cultural subsystem. While it was my reading of Judith Butler (1990) in 1991, who is quite far from being a proponent of evolutionary theory, that led me to say that the social function of gender was to organize sexuality (Claassen 1992), it is my reading of sexual selection literature now that leaves no doubt in my mind that gender is simultaneously the cultural and biological arena within which sexual selection works, and mating systems are designed.

Of course, I am not alone in thinking this. For instance, I found this quote in the first book I read on sexual selection:

"Gender systems are an adaptation, shaped by selection over evolutionary time to solve some recurrent adaptive problem. . . mate choice" (Symons 1996:viii).

Gender systems guide us as to who not to mate with and who to mate with, tell us when to mate, and show us how to mate. Dobzhansky and Mayr divide reproductive isolating behaviors and signals into those which prevent mating and those which prevent fertilization or survival or reproduction by hybrids. In addition to those isolating mechanisms, members of a species have "adaptations for assessing the mate value of potential sexual partners, using visual and other cues. "[S]tandards of physical attractiveness may reflect the operation of these adaptations." (Jones 1996:42) and they are both innate and learned. Furthermore, "Mate choice learning mechanisms are likely to be complex [and] . . . to operate differently from food-choice and other learning mechanisms (Jones 1996:35). The extent imitation plays a role in the development of standards of attractiveness and to what extent standards of attractiveness undergo "cultural drift" are open questions. Doug Jones and Charles !

Darwin proposed that imitation/copying and cultural drift may play significant roles.

It is through gender and the highly variable gender systems of different cultures around the world that we humans have formed mate categories, learn sexuality, identify mates, avoid mating, and complete mating. Gender systems employ words, signs, sounds, movements, costume, symbols, taboos, kinship, social hierarchy, and religion, to circumscribe mating, to teach mating, and to insure mating. Within any gender system are the culturally approved manners of expressing age and fertility, courtship, foreplay, and intercourse. While polygyny, promiscuity, and mate choice facilitate sexual selection by giving men and women and boys and girls lots of opportunity and practice in

mating, "factors like monogamy and arranged marriages may limit potential for sexual selection in humans" (Jones 1996:47).

Sexual Selection, Gender, and Archaeological Thought

The import of squarely positioning gender as the source of and arena for sexual selection in humans is significant, even profound for an archaeology of gender. This positioning negates several widely held beliefs about gender, negates several feminist programmatic statements and goals, and indicates a very different gendered archaeology program than has heretofore been enacted.

Implications of linking gender and sexual selection

- Gender is both biological and cultural, not exclusively of the cultural realm. Similarly, sex is both biological and cultural. As Judith Butler herself said in 1990 "gender must also designate the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established. As a result, gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or "a natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive." (1990: 7). And with yet another quote from Butler, "Sex, by definition, will be shown to have been gender all along (1990: 8).

What in other species is called natural behavior--courtship, mating, kinship, rivalry, social hierarchy, etc. --in humans is called cultural behavior. Either other species have culture or humans and their gender systems are a whole lot more natural than acknowledged. Culture works upon gender and biology works upon gender.

- There have been but two sexes in human history, one capable of producing eggs, the other of producing sperm.
- Conflict between the sexes is a natural part of being human. The expression of that conflict is rooted both in culture and biology.
- 4All human societies prior to now, existing now, and in the foreseeable future, have gender. Gender is not sometimes absent in a society (contra Conkey and Gero 1991:10) but must always be present for mating purposes.
- 5Gender's social function does not vary over time or cross culturally (contra Conkey and Gero 1991:10). Gender does not wax and wane in a society's history. Gender did not come late to humans but was present from the beginning.
- 6Within the history of our species, gender and age were the first social axes, the first forms of social differentiation. In fact, age and gender may be one and the same. While we can not assign gender and age primacy in the lives of individual humans, they were the primary markers of difference in our species.
- 7The study of gender in this paradigm does not presuppose male domination or even gender hierarchies. While sexual selection and gender rely on two sexes, they do not require a sexual division of labor. These are optional ways of organizing mating systems. In sexual selection theory and observation, females choose their mates.
- 8 Mating systems can have, and in deed do have, multiple genders. I think that realistically, all cultures have at least 3 genders, those prior to or past reproductive potential, and the two fecund genders.

•9 Social efforts to dissolve gender distinctions will continue to meet with failure as long as mating is required for human reproduction contrary to the efforts of feminists, the radical Lesbian agenda of the 1970s, and the agendas of Communism and Socialism in the 20th century. But given that gender hierarchies are but one way to structure a mating system, gender hierarchies are vulnerable. Shulamith Firestone knew it in 1970 and as the 1970s progressed, many others of us currently working in archaeology knew it but we forgot--gender and conflict between the sexes will only disappear when sexual reproduction is moved outside of the human body.

Gender Studies by Archaeologists

Modern studies of sexual selection take as their starting point the fact of reproductive competition. They then look for how potential mates are identified and attracted, how rivals are repelled, how females evaluate males and then enact their choice, and what characteristics of males and females are preferred. It seems to me that the corresponding "cultural" topics and institutions are genetics, kinship, marriage patterns, status hierarchies, costuming, dance, music, industriousness, physical attraction, health, fecundity, fertility, population parameters, puberty ceremonies, warfare, trade. Together, these topics will tell us about ancient gender systems. Largely uncertain about what gender actually did in society, archaeologists have addressed a smattering of these different issues in a piecemeal fashion.

Many archaeologists have followed a theoretical position that sees asymmetrical interests and conflict as the basis of human interactions. They have taken gender hierarchies as their starting point (Jones 1996) and interpreted subsequent actions and results as domination and resistance motivated. Theories of sexual selection, however, indicate that hierarchy is but one way mating systems can be arranged, and cannot therefore, be assumed to be present, or even be the most beneficial way to investigate sexual selection.

The archaeology of gender has, heretofore, concerned itself with issues of hierarchy, labor, production, health, status, and professional dynamics without recognizing that each topic is united by the study of human mating systems and without recognizing that the results of studying of human mating systems will be particular to each culture. While the social function of gender does not vary, what does vary over time is the configuration of a gender system. Mating may involve gender hierarchy at one stage in the society's history and not in another, it may involve musical equipment in one era and not in another, it may discriminate against foreigners or it may not. Notions of sexuality and its visual sexual releasers, kinship systems and related ideas of incest, hierarchical structure for gender, monogamy/polygyny, age categorization, and costume might also vary. Furthermore, notions of what constitutes reproduction may also vary over time.

To understand gender as a sexual activity, we will need studies directed at costume, population characteristics, community and individual health, aging, Two-spirits, cultural isolation and interaction. Studies of gender directed at changes in pottery production output or hunting success using the bow and arrow, for instance, need to be situated within the mating system. With gender being the study of mating systems which are dependent upon competition for mates, mate choice, sexuality and fecundity markers,

and physical attractiveness, archaeologists seem to have barely begun the inquiry and to have yet produce a comprehensive study of any one gender system.

References Cited

Borker, Ruth and Daniel Maltz

1989 Anthropological Perspectives on Gender and Language. In *Gender and Anthropology: Critical Reviews for Research and Teaching*, edited by Sandra Morgen, p. 411-437. American Anthropological Association, Washington, D.C.

Butler, Judith

1990 *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York, Routledge.

Conkey, Margaret and Janet Spector

1984 *Archaeology and the Study of Gender*. In *Advances in Archaeological Method and Theory*, vol. 7, edited by Michael Schiffer, pp. 1-38. New York, Academic Press.

Conkey, and Joan Gero

1991 *Tensions, Pluralities, and Engendering Archaeology: An Introduction to Women and Prehistory*. In *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory*, edited by Joan Gero and Margaret Conkey, pp. 3-30. Oxford, Blackwell.

Firestone, Shulamith

1970 *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution*. Bantam, New York.

Hollimon, Sandra

1991 *Health Consequences of Divisions of Labor among the Chumash Indians of Southern California*. In *The Archaeology of Gender*,

Jones, Doug 1996 *Physical Attractiveness and the Theory of Sexual Selection*. Ann Arbor: Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan Anthropology Papers 90. ASU GN 2 .M5 no.90

Kehoe, Alice

1998 *Appropriate Terms*. *Society for American Archaeology Bulletin*, 16(2):23, 34.

Kornfeld, Marcel and Julie Francis

1991 *A Preliminary Historical Outline of Northwestern High Plains Gender Systems*. In *The Archaeology of Gender*, edited by Dale Walde and Noreen Willows, pp. 444-451. Calgary, The Archaeological Association of the University of Calgary.

Rosaldo, M. Z.

1980 *The use and abuse of anthropology: reflections on feminism and cross-cultural understanding*. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 5(3): 389-417.

Symons, Elwin

1996 Forward. Physical Attractiveness and the Theory of Sexual Selection. Ann Arbor: Museum of Anthropology, University of Michigan Anthropology Papers 90.

Whelan, Mary

1991 Gender and Archaeology: Mortuary Studies and the Search for the Origins of Gender Differentiation. In *The Archaeology of Gender*, edited by Dale Walde and Noreen Willows, pp. 358-365. Calgary, The Archaeological Association of the University of Calgary.