

# *Sambia Nosebleeding Rites and Male Proximity to Women*

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Since the early work of Bateson (1936) and Mead (1935), New Guinea cultures—especially in the Eastern Highlands studied by Read (1951, 1952)—have been identified with various initiatory rituals, among which none have proved as symbolically complex or theoretically controversial as those of bloodletting. In spite of considerable cross-cultural variation in the practices, researchers have not only drawn on these data, but have also reached divergent conclusions about their meaning. Furthermore, each of the proposed interpretations implied different slants on the developmental context of the rites that were seldom explicated, let alone demonstrated. It is remarkable, then, that after these many years of

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theoretical interest no ethnographer since Read (1965:127-133) had published detailed observations of these ritual behaviors until recently (cf. Lewis 1980; Poole 1982; Tuzin 1980:72-78), and none has systematically described the behavioral experience or cultural context of bloodletting in the male life cycle of a Highlands people. It is these problems—in relation to the cultural structure of nosebleeding and the ritualization of proximity to women throughout the developmental cycle—that I shall examine among the Sambia, a hunting and horticultural people of the Eastern Highlands.

New Guineasts have tended to view bloodletting rites from several analytic perspectives. Read's (1952) emphasis on the social solidarity effected by the cult context of such rites has been widely supported (Berndt 1962; Newman 1965; Strathern 1969). Others have also concurred with Read (1952:13) that bloodletting is a form of "psychological conditioning" associated with the male warrior ethos (Allen 1967; Hogbin 1970; Mead 1935; Tuzin 1980; Whiting 1941). Meggitt (1964) saw consistent correlations between types of sexual activity (e.g., "lechers" and "prudes"), purificatory cults, and intergroup hostility vis-à-vis affines (cf. Allen 1967:11-12, 52-53). Langness (1967) went further, arguing that "sexual antagonism"—within the warring Highlands environment—arose as a culturally constituted response to deny men's dependence upon women. Lindenbaum (1972, 1976) contended that rites like male bloodletting operate as systemic ecological controls on women and their productivity (cf. Chowning 1980). Langness (1974) further added that the secrecy of cult rituals effects *male* solidarity and power in regulating strategic female domains in which male social control needs "supernatural" aids. Moreover, many New Guineasts have emphasized native ideas that expurgations of maternal substance or "pollution" are needed to develop and maintain masculinity (Bateson 1936:130ff.; Berndt 1965:92-94; Herdt 1981; Hogbin 1970:103ff.; Lewis 1980; Mead 1935:85; Meigs 1978; Newman 1964; Poole 1982; Read 1951, 1965; Whiting 1941:64ff.). In sum, however, these studies have taken a synchronic viewpoint which stresses the *adult outcome* of ritual experiences for the functioning of social groups and institutions.

Here I take a diachronic perspective on Sambia sexual polarity and ritual that will, I hope, offer fresh questions and answers about ritual bloodletting by attending to the developmental context in

which it emerges. Let me begin by stating several analytic points about the Sambia sociocultural system (see Herdt 1981, 1982). The first point concerns a societal imperative: before pacification (1964-1965), Sambia communities needed to create tough, aggressive fighters to fill and replenish the ranks of their warriorhood. Next, I believe that the production of this type of "warrior personality" among males anywhere was not easy or "natural" (Mead 1935 and Schwartz 1973); moreover, its difficulties were exacerbated by the Sambia developmental cycle that results in the presence of too much mother and too little father, thus stunting the male's early separation from his mother in childhood. Last, the accommodation of these early childhood experiences, and core gender identity (see Stoller 1968), to the demanding behavioral environment of adult male character structure, established special, enduring, psychosocial needs for autonomy that could be symbolically sustained through ritual mechanisms—e.g., nosebleeding behaviors—enabling competent adjustment to, and performance of, the adult masculine gender role throughout life. Although these psychosocial needs arose as unintended social consequences of Sambia socialization, their symbolic expression has been culturally transmitted and reproduced to filter those needs. The symbolic structure specifically "filtered out" mother and all that she stood for, and "filtered in" father, aggressivity, and ritualized proximity to women; and these "symbolic filters" (Herdt 1981) came to take on a life of their own—as "internal discourses" for the institution and audiences (Foucault 1980:28) of bloodletting. Viewed in this way, the experience of nosebleeding binds the ideological and sensory poles of meaning to the *designata* of dominant symbols (Turner 1967) in Sambia ritual, making the male warrior ethos and world view (Geertz 1973) a dynamic product of a developmental context.

It is obvious and has been well reported (see below) that cutting the body in bloodletting is painful. It is also known that these "mutilation rites" are, throughout New Guinea, first administered forcibly by elders on groups of boys in collective initiation. Bloodletting is often said to be necessary for "male growth," so one can understand, in terms of the native model, why bloodletting should be done until maturity has been achieved. But what motivates those ritual behaviors afterwards, on into old age? Unless one assumes (as I do not) that these painful operations are *intrinsically* pleasurable

