Psychodynamic Universals, Cultural Particulars in Feminist Anthropology: Rethinking Hua Gender Beliefs

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ABSTRACT  This article disputes the view that systems of gender identity are so extraordinarily variable cross-culturally as to suggest that they are wholly culturally constructed, and, therefore, not open to universal explanation. Instead, we argue, these systems are underlain by a universal unresolved tension between being masculine and being feminine. This tension can best be understood in terms of the psychoanalytic concept of splitting, as developed by Melanie Klein and extended by feminist theorists Nancy Chodorow and Jessica Benjamin. We illustrate our argument with a detailed reanalysis of ethnographic material, published by Anna Meigs, on the Hua of Papua New Guinea. Our analysis challenges anthropologist Henrietta Moore’s construal of the Hua case as evidence against the cross-cultural applicability of Western categories of gender identity.

Anthropologists, most recently feminist anthropologists, have contributed numerous descriptions of gender-belief systems, many of these systems exhibiting curious twists, to the ethnographic record. Satisfactory explanations for these variant systems of belief are much harder to come by. The
current intellectual climate in cultural anthropology at large, and femi-
nist anthropology, more particularly, altogether forestalls anthropological
attempts to explain gender beliefs as they vary cross-culturally. Rather,
different gender-belief systems are now to be understood on their own,
ethnographically particular, terms. Indeed, this particularism has been
raised to the level of a theoretical position in and of itself. Cross-cultural
variation, especially seeming variation from Western beliefs about gender,
is held up as evidence for the cultural constructedness and unlimited vari-
ability of all human beliefs, practices, and institutions and, hence, beyond
any general explanatory account. The British feminist anthropologistHen-
been an ardent spokeswoman for this position in regard to gender beliefs
cross-culturally, and will provide us here with an example of the impasse
we believe is crippling feminist theorizing.¹

Moore comes to her consideration of gender beliefs cross-culturally
via a concern with gender identity. Her reigning premise is that gender
identity, like all else about gender, is wholly culturally constructed and,
hence, limitlessly variable. This assumption draws on arguments made by
Judith Butler (1990), whose work has become widely referenced today in
feminist theory, including anthropological theorizing on gender. Identity,
in Butler’s view, is constructed from social discourses; Western social dis-
courses on gender pose a binary system of male and female identity, and
they naturalize this binary distinction by reference to the anatomy of the
human body.² Moore sets out to expose the binary, anatomically based
system of gender identity as a peculiar Western construction by demon-
strating that other systems, constructed of other social discourses, are not
only variant but variant in ways that do not make gender identity binary
or fix it in the body.

Moore is hardly alone in her position. Georgina Born, writing of the
debates that have burgeoned around Sherry Ortner’s famous 1974 arti-
cle, “Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?” (discussions that Moore
herself joined in her earlier, 1988, book), says,

> These debates appear to have settled into a postmodern orthodoxy, centered on a cri-
tique of the ethnocentric assumption that one could employ Western categories of male
and female, culture and nature, analytically as though they were fixed and universal.
Rather, the postmodern position argues, it is necessary in each case to interrogate the
particular classification system at issue. [Born 1998:376]

This settled orthodoxy shows no signs of destabilizing up to the
present time. Indeed, the more general postmodern position with regard
to the constructedness of categories of all kinds, the ethnocentrism of
Western analytic categories, and the celebration of cultural variability and
uniqueness, as against a comparative search for cross-cultural universals,
has gained a few advocates in contemporary psychological anthropology (see Munroe and Munroe 1997:174–176 for a discussion of these currents within the subdiscipline).

**A DISAGREEMENT WITH HENRIETTA MOORE**

In support of her argument for variability in gender-identity systems, Moore catalogs a small number of ethnographic cases, drawn from the anthropological studies of gender that have flourished since the 1970s, in which beliefs about gender do indeed seem very different from our own. Thus, she reports a case described by Anna Meigs (1990:108–109) for the Hua people of Eastern Highlands Papua New Guinea, summarizing Meigs’s argument “that individuals are classified by external anatomical features, but that they are also classified according to the amount of certain male and female substances they have in their bodies,” substances that may be transferred between those with male and female genitalia through eating, heterosexual sex, and casual contact and that accumulate in the course of such transfers to gradually change a person’s gender over the course of their lifetime (Moore 1994:23–24). Alongside this she places a second case, reported from Nepal, of gender identity conceived of as inhering in substances. The Nepalese case is one “where the difference between the female and the male are conceived of as the difference between flesh and bone” (Moore 1994:13–14), and, hence, both maleness and femaleness are once again located to some degree in the bodies of both men and women.

Moore adds two further cases, one contributed by Harriet Whitehead (1981) for the native North American berdache and another, parallel description supplied by Jane Atkinson (1990) for the Wana of Indonesia. These two are examples, not of systems based on “substance,” Moore (1994:39) explains, but of a different kind of system, represented by “a large number of cases where it is the performance of particular kinds of activities or tasks which guarantees gender identity rather than simply the possession of the appropriate genitalia.”

Moore tops off her list with an anecdote about non-Westerners trying to fathom Western gender. This is an incident described by Deborah Gewertz (1984:618–619) that occurred early in her anthropological fieldwork among the Tchambuli, a Sepik River people of Lowland Papua New Guinea. Gewertz tells that her “participation in meetings in the men’s house led to her being characterized as ‘probably not a woman at all but a strange creature who grew male genitals upon donning trousers’” (Moore 1994:38)—a hermaphrodite thought incapable of bearing children. These five cases, briefly described, add up, in Moore’s estimation, to cross-cultural evidence of the particularity of the binary distinction between male and female
bodies that, as Westerners, we and our Western theories are said to predicate. This conclusion would seem to foreclose any comparative theory of gender identity, and Moore does not propose or advocate any such.

We think otherwise. We believe that the observable variability in the cultural constructions of gender across the world can be dealt with comparatively. Specifically, we think we can make sense of beliefs such as those of the Hua and the Wana, or the native North American berdache, beliefs by which “male” and “female” qualities migrate across male and female bodies. We observe, to begin with, that these and other features of gender beliefs cross-culturally have an undeniably psychological hue to them. We sketch, in this article, an interpretation of such gender beliefs in terms of relational psychoanalysis.

Moore, without a doubt, would object to the argument we develop in this article. Our argument would be doubly objectionable to her: First, it rests on a theoretical approach that Moore rejects because it is a Western theory. Moore finds psychoanalytic theory unacceptable in this respect while at the same time crediting its contemporary appeal to the cultural alternative it poses to biological theories. Psychoanalytic theories, she says, “have proved persuasive because of the way in which they stress that feminine and masculine identities are not natural or given in biology, but must be constructed and should be understood therefore as cultural achievements” (Moore 1994:42).

But we do not take such a reductive view of psychoanalytic theories. Instead, from our point of view, the line between culture and biology is more blurred than Moore would accept. Masculinity and femininity cannot be reduced entirely to either developmental outcomes of genital differences, as early psychoanalysis posited, or cultural norms and expectations, as Moore would have it. We regard psychodynamic processes as having their basis in universal human cognitive, emotional, and motivational constraints and propensities at the same time that they are profoundly culturally shaped. Our project is to identify the psychodynamically universal embedded in the culturally particular.

The second reason Moore would reject our argument is that, as will emerge, it depends centrally on a particular psychoanalytic concept that poses a universal binary opposition. This binary opposition is not based on the biological difference between male and female anatomy, but arises from a psychodynamic process, splitting. We hope to show, in our analysis, that the psychodynamic process of splitting can indeed be transported across cultures to explain a great deal that is known about non-Western as well as Western systems of gender belief.

Before we launch into this analysis, let us explain why we do not subscribe to Moore’s position regarding the Western theory on which we plan to draw. On the one hand, Moore seems to be seeking a general
explanation for gender-identity systems, which are, for her, the critical issue in the anthropology of gender. On the other hand, she subscribes to a set of assumptions that we think prohibit developing such an explanation. Hers is a characteristic position into which a number of feminist anthropologists have gotten themselves via the same route, to wit: Because all is culturally constructed, so is Western theory. It follows for Moore that theories must be rejected whenever they appear to incorporate intellectual assumptions that can be identified as Western derived. This being so, there is, in the end, nothing general or theoretical to be said (by Western theorists) about the variety, cross-culturally, of folk beliefs concerning gender. Without hope of explanation derived from Euro-American theory about such cross-cultural differences, there is no use revising this Western theory on the basis of findings regarding non-Western systems of gender belief. The only use to which these findings can be put is to discredit such theory.

Among the Western theoretical casualties of Moore’s position, we have seen, is object relations theory, which we find so useful in interpreting gender beliefs cross-culturally. Certainly, of course, this and other psychoanalytic theory cannot afford to be unresponsive to charges that it assumes, without evidence, a universal gender binary, or separation-individuation as a universal developmental stage, or that it otherwise does violence to non-Western experience, and Moore’s discussion is useful in requiring us to be alert to such biases. Indeed, it seems to us, the revision of psychoanalytic theory as this pertains to gender, to make it accountable to cross-cultural evidence about gender, is exactly the kind of theoretical project to which a comparative, empirically grounded anthropology of gender is ideally suited.

**TWO THEORIES OF MALE GENDER IDENTITY CONFLICT**

A starting place for our thinking in this article has been two older theories of gender difference cross-culturally: the work, on the one hand, of John and Beatrice Whiting, Lee and Ruth Munroe, and their colleagues on what they have called *male sex-role resolution* (see the 1981 review carrying that title by R. L. Munroe, R. H. Munroe, and J. Whiting), and, on the other hand, the theory of Nancy Chodorow about what she has labeled *the reproduction of mothering* (see her 1978 book by that title). The two approaches diverge in a number of ways that we will not elaborate here but share important commonalities, as well, and it is this common ground from which we depart. Both see the formation of gender identity as posing quite different potential problems for men and women, emerging from earliest maternal caretaking. Because infants and small children are everywhere
cared for by their mothers, Chodorow posits, both boys and girls begin life with an initial feminine identification that boys, but not girls, must reverse (girls, in her theory, have their own gender identity conflicts). While this scenario is premised on the universal fact of primary child caretaking by mothers, Chodorow argues that it will find its most pronounced version in societies in which mothering is exclusive and fathers tend to be absent, as in late 20th-century America. The male sex-role resolution theorists point to a subset of the world’s societies in which adult men have low salience for infants and young children, and hence, it is theorized, boys will develop an initial feminine identification. Low male salience has been measured by these researchers in a variety of ways, including father absence, matrilocal residence (which would sometimes mean that the father was more absent but that has proved the least predictive measure), mother–infant sleeping arrangements, a long postpartum sex taboo (which would foster mother–infant sleeping), and close and prolonged bodily mother–infant contact (caused by infants being carried in, e.g., slings, shawls, or arms rather than cradles, carriages, or cribs). In societies characterized by low male salience, the resulting gender-identity conflict experienced by boys leads to institutional resolutions of this conflict. Those societies in which male sex-role conflict is sharpest, and institutional resolution required, are most likely to be “middle-level” societies in which warfare is (or was) endemic and boys at or before puberty leave their mothers’ households to reside in separate men’s houses. Societies in which pubescent boys are trained as warriors, and must associate closely with men for this purpose, reinforce this stark reversal of gender identity with male initiation rites.

It is noteworthy, in the context of this special issue on feminism and psychological anthropology, that Munroe et al. (1981:613–614) credit Margaret Mead (1949) for the earliest, if partial, formulation of their theory, based on her fieldwork observations in seven societies. Although Mead did not ascribe its origins to endemic warfare or fully work out its psychology, she (1949:73–74) identified much of this cycle of “endlessly reinforcing” practices and institutions—male separateness from women, men’s houses, little boys growing up among women, male identification with women, and men’s “endangered certainty of their manhood,” leading them to assert this manhood by isolating themselves from women yet anew in each generation and by performing “over-compensatory” male initiation ceremonies. She also remarked on two other features of such gender-identity systems that will take on significance later in our analysis: a heightened symbolic preoccupation with the differentials between men and women, and male envy of women. As Munroe et al. (1981:614) relates, her observations inspired the first cross-cultural tests for correlations among elements of this complex.
The male sex-role resolution theorists also point to certain other societies in which men’s conflicts over early feminine identification seem equally sharp but are not resolved by means of male initiation rites. A different institutional resolution, common to many of these societies—the intensive practice of the couvade—is interpreted by these theorists as a covert or unconscious expression of femininity. The couvade may partly resolve men’s conflicted sex-role identity in the direction of their accepting elements of their femininity. However, lack of full resolution is evidenced, in these couvade-practicing (and other) societies, in defensive masculinity (also termed hypermasculinity or, as we have come to call it in the United States, after its Latin American version, machismo), which these theorists interpret as an overt denial of femininity. The empirical cross-cultural findings supporting these correlations, representing an extended and multifaceted research project, are stunning. Chodorow contributes a more fully developed discussion of the hypothesized psychodynamics of boys’ early feminine identification. (Even more central to her argument, perhaps, than the effect on boys’ and men’s development of being cared for by mothers, is the effect of this early care on girls’ and women’s development, which we do not address in this article.)

Neither of these two theories was devised primarily to explain gender beliefs, although both have something to say about such beliefs. The male sex-role resolution theorists are most concerned with practices, but the practices surrounding defensive masculinity, in particular, include negative beliefs about women. Chodorow is most concerned with psychodynamic processes, but she argues that one important process by which men secure adult masculine identity is by rejecting it through repressing it in themselves and denigrating it in women. Under these circumstances, cultural beliefs as to the inferiority of women are widely shared among men.

With regard to gender beliefs, we think, a distinction among societies in which male sex-role conflict is resolved, those in which it goes unresolved, and those in which it does not occur at all is misleading. We do not dispute the male sex-role resolution theorists’ distinction between initiation-rite societies and couvading societies, but, as shall emerge, we think that male sex-role conflict funds each of these practices and that this conflict, and the anxieties it engenders, remain everywhere unresolved to some extent, and everywhere produce certain characteristic kinds of beliefs about women and tensions among these beliefs. At some level, the conflict and its attendant anxieties and beliefs exist, in our view, whether or not institutional responses have emerged or crystallized. A rapprochement between our position and that of the sex-role resolution theorists, suggested by Lee Munroe (personal communication), would be that in all societies men experience gender identity or sex-role conflict, but only
when it is posed especially sharply, and, therefore, felt especially severely, do institutional resolutions of this conflict emerge.

At the same time, a general theory such as Chodorow’s may be too undifferentiated to explain variation in gender beliefs from society to society. Although we adopt Chodorow’s position that a small set of universal psychodynamic processes underlie the cultural production of gender beliefs everywhere, we recognize that the specific content and configuration of these beliefs is culturally distinctive, and may vary quite widely depending on the particulars of child care and gender relations in a given society and the larger cultural context in which they are set.

It should be clear from this last assertion that we find ourselves in full sympathy with the feminist anthropological call for description of how particular gender-belief systems work. At the same time, we oppose the feminist anthropological abandonment of generalizing theory about gender beliefs. Indeed, we believe that general theory depends on particular description. Such theory about gender identity and gender beliefs is most likely to come from a consideration and, ultimately comparison, of the fine-grained descriptions of gender-belief systems that feminist anthropology is producing.

**HUA BELIEFS ABOUT GENDER**

One such description is that provided by Anna Meigs of the Hua of the Eastern Papua New Guinea Highlands, described in Meigs’s 1990 article, “Multiple Gender Ideologies and Statuses”—one of the very case studies on which Moore draws. However, Moore’s professed commitment to ethnographic particularism does not stop her from ripping beliefs held by Nepalese, Indonesian, Native American, and Papua New Guinean peoples out of the context in which we might possibly understand them, and assembling these isolated beliefs together in such a way as to accentuate their seeming difference from our own, and hence their exoticism. Instead, we will consider the more comprehensive account of Hua beliefs about gender that Meigs gives us. 8 By the end, we hope to have assembled the theoretical apparatus necessary for a general theory of gender belief cross-culturally.

Meigs’ largest point is that the Hua, and by inference other peoples, do not have a single coherent system of gender beliefs and statuses but, rather, several different uncoordinated systems, open contradiction among which is averted because the beliefs are compartmentalized, each belief complex pertaining to very different social contexts. Although Meigs offers no explanation for Hua gender beliefs, she provides a highly suggestive analysis
of the contexts in which these beliefs are invoked, and we will build on her account.

Hua recognize, for one, that males have male genital organs and females have female genital organs. The former are called **vi** and the latter are called **a'**. With Meigs (1990:108), we regard this anatomical difference between men and women as being of such regularity as to overdetermine its adoption everywhere as one basis for the cultural construction of gender categories. Moore (1994:23) acknowledges the Hua classification of males and females by their external anatomical features, and she, too, recognizes the universality of such classification. This universal is irrelevant to her argument about the cultural constructedness of gender categories, however. Moore views cross-cultural variability in these categories as unconstrained by universal anatomical differences:

> The obvious fact of biological differences between women and men tells us nothing about the general social significance of those differences; and although human societies all over the world recognize biological differences between women and men, what they make of those differences is extraordinarily variable. We cannot deal, therefore, with the observable variability in the cultural constructions of gender across the world or through historical time simply by appealing to the indisputable fact of sexual difference. [1994:71]

The universal fact of binary categories based on genital difference also does not play a role in our account, which is based instead on Hua psychodynamics.

According to a second complex of Hua beliefs, quite apart from their genitals, women differ from men along an evaluative dimension:

> Females are disgusting, dirty, and dangerous. All feminine body substances, but particularly menstrual blood, have the power to destroy not only male growth and strength but also any male endeavor. The inside of a woman's body is alleged to be dark and putrid like that of scavenging animals. Males by contrast are like the birds: clean and pure and associated with arboreal heights. Female degradation in this ideology is not only physical but also moral and social. Women are stupid and lack information, perspective, and insight. Their loyalty and honor are suspect. Their ability to cooperate and subordinate personal to group interest is denigrated. . . . This ideology is enshrined in many ritual and institutional devices . . . but particularly in the food rules enjoined upon a young male initiate. These rules equate most items of the extensive Hua food inventory with some aspect of the female's reproductive anatomy or physiology, which food is then labeled as disgusting and dangerous and tabooed to the male initiate for a varying period of time. In the process males are taught an ideology of male contempt for, disgust at, and fear of female reproduction (Meigs 1990:102).

It is clear immediately from the description of this set of beliefs that, even though the Hua have the distinctive system allowing the interchange of masculine and feminine fluids to which Moore draws attention, and that we will later consider, they also recognize the gender binary that she would have us believe is distinctively Western. Unlike Moore, and given the
theoretical departure point we have taken, we fully expect such systems of gender opposition, and invidious comparison of women to men, to be widespread if not universal. These beliefs everywhere project onto women male anxiety and ambivalence about men's own femininity. Meigs goes on to explain that "in its pure and unadulterated form," this complex of beliefs about women as disgusting, dirty, and dangerous is taught to adolescent Hua males in their initiation. It is accompanied by avoidance of women and extensive food taboos:

They must not look at women, they may not eat foods from women's gardens, foods that women have prepared, or foods that resemble any aspect of the female reproductive system or its products—to name only a few of the hundreds of rules enjoined on young male initiates. For them the appropriate message is the dangerous and repugnant inferiority of the female body and of females in general. [Meigs 1990:103–104]

This description fits, to a "T," the theoretical expectation that men, in the process of reversing an early feminine identification and claiming a masculine one, will denigrate women and reject all things feminine in themselves. More specifically, the Hua are a horticulturalist ("middle-level") people who traditionally warred with their neighbors over scarce land. Hua men exhibit "a warrior code of bravery and toughness," and tell "proud tales of gang rape" (Meigs 1990:106). These facts—male initiation, the prominent theme of avoidance and denigration of women during this initiation, and defensive masculinity as well as a strict division of economic labor and the exclusion of women from men's ritual knowledge (Meigs 1990:106)—accord well with male sex-role resolution theory—although Meigs, in line with contemporary feminist anthropological practice, overlooks these theorists.

From here, the case gets theoretically more interesting. Later during the same initiation rites, adolescent boys encounter a new, contradictory, set of beliefs about women:

The idea that the female, far from being inferior to the male, is actually his superior, is a secret inner lining of initiation taught when the young males are well into the initiatory process. This teaching revolves around rules regulating the eating of possum and human blood and around the practices imitating female menstruation. . . . At the earlier stages of initiation, the young males are taught that they can under no circumstances eat possum or human blood (otherwise considered edible). Possum is prohibited because it is, according to the direct statements of male informants, the counterpart of women. Blood is prohibited because all blood in Hua thinking is female. What the initiands soon learn, however, is that the doctrine of male chauvinism and avoidance of female substances has a complex and secret wrinkle in it. When males are sick, their growth stunted, or their virility or vitality impaired, those substances that can best effect a cure are substances associated with women. A secret suppressed ideology is revealed: that the female body is the ultimate source of power and vitality. This knowledge is restricted to secret contexts of the men's house society. No male is supposed to reveal this ideology to any noninitiated person. No woman or child is supposed to know it. But this ideology exists within the men's house society and the culture of initiation as an alternative to

Meigs also tells us that Hua men feel intense insecurity about the more rapid growth exhibited by females, and their alleged greater endurance and longevity. “In secret ceremonies they eat food directly associated with the soft, juicy, fast-growing quality of the female body that they supposedly abhor. They ingest these substances, they say, to compensate for the lack of vitality inherent in the male body” (Meigs 1990:102). Hua also believe that males can become pregnant, and, like some other New Guinea peoples, Hua men blood-let in imitation of female menstruation. Finally, along with their beliefs in the superiority of the female body, and practices that seem to reflect envy of women, Hua have one of those sacred flute myths, also the secret province of men, casting women as the original producers and owners of the cult flutes, and, hence, the original rulers of society.

This third complex of beliefs and practices would seem to reflect a large residual dose of feminine identification, even in this male-initiation society. Thus, what seems to be at work here is an unresolved opposition between two sets of deeply held but contradictory beliefs about women and gender relations. Meigs explains that Hua men are able to hold contradictory beliefs because these beliefs are compartmentalized so as to be encountered in different social contexts, but we would argue that this ignores an important psychological process. The defense against the psychic conflict that such contradiction might engender is not, as Meigs would have it, compartmentalization; it is what relational psychoanalysts would refer to as splitting. The particular instance of splitting before us would seem to be funded, like the more basic preoccupation with masculinity and femininity in which it is grounded, by men’s anxieties.

THE PSYCHODYNAMICS OF SPLITTING

A brief summary of the concept of splitting and the relational psychoanalysis that frames it, especially the object relations theory of Melanie Klein (1975a, 1975b), will orient readers not familiar with this thinking. First, issues surrounding separation lie at the heart of object relations theory. Object relations theory focuses on an individual’s interactions with external and/or internal (real and/or imagined) other people, and on the relationships between her or his internal and external object worlds. Internal images are regarded as being formed by interactions and relationships with significant people in the individual’s early life—most often maternal caregivers—which shape an individual’s attitude, perceptions, and mental representations (often called an “inner world”). According to Klein, the inner world of the baby develops as he or she experiences and learns to
manage strong feelings of ambivalence toward the maternal caregiver. In her view, the infant is at first unable to acknowledge that the caregiver it loves and is dependent on is the same being as the caregiver it hates for frustrating it. Thus, the infant splits the caregiver into two opposing parts or objects—one that is good (and idealized and even envied) and the other that is bad (and persecuting or hateful). This is a mode of organizing experience that enables the infant to separate the nurturing from the endangering aspects of the caregiver, and of life itself. Splitting, as a mode of organizing experience of both self and (m)others is, thus, also an important psychological safeguard. It is a psychodynamic process that enables an individual to cope with or manage opposing realities, to deal with contradictory feelings or tendencies within the self and/or toward others.\(^\text{12}\)

In our embrace of the assumption that splitting arises in the context of separation, we may differ most sharply with Barlow (this issue) who, and in common with various other anthropological critics of object relations theory, argues that societies like that of the Murik described in her article emphasize “relationality rather than separation and individuation.” Barlow concludes, therefore, that “the paradigm of mothering as loss” that she ascribes to object relations theory is a peculiarly Western story, and that the trauma of this loss is specific to, or at least most pronounced in, Western societies. In our understanding of Klein, though, splitting is not about loss of the caretaker but about ambivalence—about coming to a new, conflictual, appreciation of oneself in relation to the caretaker that includes an appreciation of one’s separateness. We think that our analysis strongly supports the presence of such ambivalence on the part of Hua men toward mothers and other female caretakers, and the splitting that results. Barlow’s (this issue) own characterization of how Murik mothers strategize to displace their children’s inevitable rage and frustration toward the agents of frustration, routinely recruiting other female caretakers to do the frustrating of children’s impulses, is evidence of the same kind of ambivalence on the part of these children. That rage and frustration are displaced onto other caretakers merely suggests another interesting variation on the Kleinian paradigm.

As will prove important for the argument we are building here, over the course of development, the more extreme versions of splitting (good–bad; idealized–denigrated) give way to greater integration. Developmentally speaking, the child’s “achievement” is the gradual recognition that the loved and hated caregiver (or object, in Klein’s terms) is one and the same. Meanwhile, there are different qualities of anxiety associated with managing opposing realities and feelings, and these qualities change over time and through significant relationships.

In her 1988 account of gender identity, Jessica Benjamin considers how issues surrounding separation and splitting are tied up with
how a child confronts gender difference and takes on a gender identity. Benjamin’s account builds on Chodorow’s psychodynamic theory described earlier, whereby men secure their masculinity by way of rejecting those qualities or tendencies within their selves that are understood to be feminine. In our own society, the psychodynamics of male gender identification take place in a cultural context whereby qualities of masculinity (i.e., freedom and autonomy) are idealized and associated with the father and with men. These qualities are pitted against the culturally assigned qualities of femininity (i.e. nurturance and dependency), which are denigrated or devalued and associated with women and mothering. Meanwhile, ambivalence toward mothers (being able to hold both hatred and love, denigration and envy, toward one’s original love object in the Kleinian system) is culturally denied (i.e., through ideologies about good vs. bad mothering), which makes managing the anxiety produced by these gender splits all the more difficult. Benjamin points out that splitting need not be an inevitable result of gender identity development:

What is not inevitable is that this confrontation will be resolved only by splitting, and that this splitting will be conventionalized as gender opposition. It is not inevitable that the knowledge of difference be reduced to the complementarity of male and female—a parallel to the split between subject and object; good and bad, doer and done-to. It is this complementarity which, even as it appears to idealize sexual difference, recasts the knowledge of difference as invidious comparison. As we have seen, the spurious embrace of difference only defines the other in mirror opposition to the self. It thus precludes the necessity of dealing with the contradictory tendencies within the self. [1988:222]

The form of splitting about which Benjamin is writing is perhaps most familiar to Westerners as the “virgin mother/whore complex,” a layered set of beliefs in which masculine and feminine sexuality is reduced to male subjects and female objects or men as sexual doers and women as the sexual done-to’s; and in which women are split into two ostensible sexual kinds: those who are good, asexual mothers and those who are bad, sexual actors.

We suggest that just as gender-belief systems opposing and comparing masculine and feminine qualities are universal, so are the split views that both the Euro-American virgin mother/whore complex and Hua beliefs about women exemplify.13 That is to say, Hua men, no less than U.S. men, hold split views of women as both denigrated and idealized. The fact that the Hua denigration of women is an “oft-proclaimed public posture,” whereas beliefs about female superiority and envy of female powers, by contrast, are closely guarded male secrets, the rituals associated with them covertly practiced, suggests how thoroughly male initiation has driven men’s feminine identification underground. Meanwhile, by splitting feminine qualities into good, protective substances and bad,
dangerous substances, both of which men can partake, Hua men can claim their masculinity without giving up their identification with femininity.

Note that Hua male anxieties and their resolution look different from our own. For U.S. men, it might be argued, and for reasons we cannot delve into here, it is dependency toward, intimacy with, and sexual feelings about their mothers that the virgin mother/whore split manages to preserve, and that then is played out in adult life around sexuality (Katherine Frank, personal communication). For Hua men, it appears that it is their access to and envy of perceived female power and vitality that is at issue. As we have said, gender beliefs and the cultural systems in which they are embedded may vary widely. Yet, and this is our point, the Hua system no less than Western ones is structured around a universal set of psychodynamic processes: men’s initial feminine identity, their subsequent claiming of masculine identity, the denigration of women and things female that that achievement requires, and the split images of women that arise as a result. For another example, the North Indian Hindu case described by Seymour in this volume clearly also exhibits the splitting of images relating to women. That ethnographic case would reward the kind of analysis we have presented here for the Hua. We would certainly expect it to differ, in details as well as in overall thematic emphasis and configuration, as much from the Hua and U.S. cases as they differ from each other.

**SPLITTING IN THE HUA CASE**

That Hua gender belief systems are tied up with splitting and issues surrounding separation is perhaps most evident in the timing of these belief systems across the life course. Although adolescent boys are taught, as part of their initiation, denigrating beliefs about women and the necessity of avoiding women,

this complex of ideas, taught in the early grades of initiation, slowly weakens. Prohibition after prohibition on substances that look like something female or on various kinds of interaction with females are relaxed through a scheduled sequence of ritual releases worked on the age mate group as a part of, and then a sequel to, their initiation process. The initial list of several hundred rules shrinks, until by middle age the male need hardly observe more rules than the female. As the rules drop away, the ideology of chauvinism and sexual avoidance is replaced by one of relative egalitarianism and cooperation. Middle-aged males may sleep, eat, have sex, and work with their wives. [Meigs 1990:104]

In still a fourth Hua belief complex that now comes into play, females and males are conceived of as different, but equal: Femaleness is that which is korago—wet, juicy, fast growing, and cool; whereas maleeness is that which is hakeri’a—dry, hard, slow growing, hot, and strong. Meigs sees these beliefs about men and women as not only egalitarian but also complementary and interdependent. She argues that just as boys’
initiation turns them into the kind of fighting men needed in war, the subsequent relaxation of male avoidance of women, as a practical matter, allows men and women to cooperate in another equally vital societal task, sexual reproduction and the raising of their families. We would not quarrel with this interpretation.15

What is most interesting from our perspective, however, is the timing of introduction of these belief complexes, a timing highly suggestive of their developmental underpinning. Beliefs about women’s inferiority and avoidance of women are timed to have maximum impact on adolescent boys as they are separated from mothers and must undergo a break with their initial feminine identities. This separation from women and these teachings and avoidances are reinforced by the manner in which Hua boys’ bodies, during initiation, are “purged” (Meigs 1990:111) of their femininity, through, for example, “the forced removal of female substances from their bodies (vomiting, nose bleeding, and sweating)” (Meigs 1990:110) that Meigs calls a “massive reorganization of male and female substances.” Hua boys subjected to such practices must be coping with intense anxiety, reminding us of Klein’s (1975b:73) observation that “when anxiety is paramount, the ego even denies that it loves the object at all.” The relaxation of these beliefs comes later, once adult masculinity has been secured.

By contrast, men’s beliefs about women’s superior bodily powers neither wax nor wane, but persist throughout adulthood, enacted, for example, in periodic ritual retreats at which adult men now improve their vitality and virility by consuming soups made of the very korago substances that were forbidden to adolescent initiates. These beliefs and practices represent the other side of the “split,” and reflect men’s never fully resolved anxieties about women and their own femininity. If these later precautions are less drastic than those imposed on boys during initiation, it is because men’s residual anxieties are less extreme. Thus, they could be seen as moving toward an integration of opposing tendencies within the self, of the sort that Kleinian theory envisions.

Finally, Hua have one further variant system of beliefs about gender categories. It is this final Hua perspective on gender that completes our account. In this perspective, male and female substances may differentially inhabit both males and females. This is the belief complex that attracted Moore’s attention. Individuals in whom the male substance predominates are called kakora, and individuals in whom the female substance predominates are called figapa. Tellingly, “the relevant substances”—that is, those that transmigrate across bodies—“are female” (Meigs 1990:109):

Those people regardless of genital identity whose bodies have been in contact with and thus contain varying amounts of menstrual blood, parturitional fluids, and vaginal secretions are called figapa “uninitiated person” and are said to be “like women” (in the genital sense). They need observe relatively few food proscriptions, can publicly eat
possum (the most tabooed of all foods), need observe relatively few avoidance rules, and
do not participate in men’s house activities. Included in the class *figapa* are children of
both sexes, premenopausal women, postmenopausal women who have borne two or less
children, and old men. The bodies of all these people contain female substances and, as
a consequence, all may be classified as *figapa* “like a woman.” (Children contain female
substances because of the continual exchanges of body substance that occur as a natural
part of everyday interaction between mother and child.) The mature woman is the
origin of all substances relevant to the *kakora-figapa* distinction. Her body at menarche
becomes the possessor of a large but finite amount of menstrual blood. This blood plus
the closely linked parturitional fluids and vaginal secretions are steadily spent through
the reproductive activities of the premenopausal years. Each act of sex involves the
release of a small quantum of these fluids (some of which is transferred to her partner),
each menstrual period a larger release, and each childbirth a massive one. By menopause
the women who have given birth to three or more children (have been massively cleaned
out three or more times) are understood to have been defeminized. They are now, as
the Hua say, “like men,” are called *kakora*, take up residence in the men’s house and
become privy to male secret knowledge. Some of those substances released by females
are taken in by males in the act of eating foods prepared by reproductively active women
(which food is contaminated in Hua male thinking with traces of female reproductive
fluids transmitted from the vagina through the hand to the food), in the act of sex, and
in the process of everyday casual contact. These intakes of female substances gradually
feminize the male so that by old age he is reclassified as *figapa* and said to be “like a

This understanding of male intake of female substance makes sense out of additional features of Hua male initiation:

Little boys classified as *figapa* become *kakora* through the forced removal of female
substances from their bodies (vomiting, nose bleeding, and sweating), their isolation
from any further contact with female substances, and then in the context of purity
(in regard to female substances) the ingestion of male substances (older males feed
initiates blood let from their veins, their hair sprinkled on food, and their semen in acts
of oral sex . . . and rub the initiates’ bodies with sweat and oils removed from their own).
It is through this massive reorganization of male and female substances that the genitally
male but “like a female” *figapa* becomes a *kakora* and thus takes up residence in men’s
house. This state, though, is not permanent. As noted earlier, the male’s separation
from the substances of female sexuality is limited to the period after the boy leaves his
mother to take up the life of an initiate and before he takes up a sexual, eating, and
residential relationship with his wife. Once his relationship with his wife begins, so also
begins the refeminization that culminates in his reclassification in old age as *figapa*
(Meigs 1990:110).

We are also able, now, to see the system of complementary male and female
principles in action. Although male initiates are quintessentially *kakora*,
Meigs (1990:110) tells us, “The female from menarche to the birth of her
first child is femaleness at its strongest.” As the reproductive fluids with
which her body is awash “are gradually released through the reproductive
activities of her adult years, she becomes steadily dryer and harder; she
becomes masculinized.”

How should we interpret this pair of principles—that struck
Moore as so un-Westernlike—by which men first become determinedly
masculinized and then gradually feminized again, as women become masculinized, through the transfer of female substance? We think this Hua belief must be understood as facilitating the process of integration over the life course. Not only do the taboos on men’s contact with women lessen over time: through this contact men gradually regain their femininity as the threat of that femininity lessens. Perhaps it is the sharp and traumatic way in which Hua boys are made to separate from women and renounce their femininity that calls for such a cultural response. Perhaps the belief in masculine and feminine fluids is an independent cultural invention, native to the part of the world in which the Hua live, for the resolution of this human dilemma. But it is a system of belief fully comprehensible within the psychodynamics of splitting.

CONCLUSION

No matter how, or how forcefully, men’s initial feminine identification is later reversed, no matter what psychic and cultural strategies are used to cope with anxieties produced by contradictory feelings and tendencies within the self and toward others, wrestling with tensions between femininity and masculinity is a lifelong and universal process. In our view, there is no human society in which these tensions are fully resolved. In a belief system such as that of the Hua, this unremitting tension between femininity and masculinity gets converted into an account that, although it does not rejoin the split between good and bad feminine powers, does acknowledge that men, to some extent, partake of this femininity. To understand the dynamics of these Hua gender-substance beliefs, we would need an even fuller account of it than Meigs’s data provide. What we most assuredly also need is comparative work that, using rich accounts such as Meigs’s, catalogs the different kinds of transformations that subject–object splitting can undergo cross-culturally, and that ultimately subsumes these variants under a truly general psychodynamic theory.

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NOTES

Acknowledgments. The time and effort, insightful readings, and sound advice of two colleagues and friends, Katherine Frank and Lee Munroe, have made this a much better article than it would otherwise be.
1. See Quinn (2000) for a discussion of this impasse.
2. See Strauss and Quinn (1997:26–36) for a fuller rendition and a critique of Butler’s position.

3. A full discussion of Moore’s reductive notion of psychoanalysis is beyond the scope of this article. See Chodorow’s (2003) recent work for a discussion of how phenomena not usually associated with gender—such as the biological and psychological experience of time—can shape women’s experience of reproduction.

4. See also Barlow (this issue) for Moore’s useful corrective with regard to mothering.

5. This subset consists of about half of their sample, or, controlling for independent language families, one-third (Munroe et al. 1981, table 18–1).

6. To be clear, both Chodorow’s argument and that of Whiting et al. posit the initial care of boys by women, and the logic of neither requires a theoretical differentiation between the exclusive maternal caretaking that characterizes the U.S. middle class, and the multiple but still heavily female caretaking described in the articles in this volume by Seymour and Barlow. So there is no contradiction between our argument in this article and Seymour’s argument, in her article, for a theoretical reorientation in the light of multiple mothering.

7. The couvade is a set of institutionalized practices observed by men during their wives’ pregnancies, such as food taboos or a taboo on heavy lifting, that often parallel those observed by the pregnant women themselves and that may be accompanied by pregnancy-like physical symptoms experienced by these husbands.

8. We also consulted, but do not find it necessary to cite further here, Meigs’s 1984 monograph.

9. Meigs (1990:108–109) considers that there may be other bases, cross-culturally, for this classification into male and female, such as behavior (e.g., the sexual act or the act of giving birth) or substances (e.g., menstrual blood or semen). We wonder. As Meigs observes, such criteria can and do result in the classification of a genitally male person as female and vice versa. We would note, however, that the knowledge that such persons are genital crossovers is not lost but is everywhere preserved in “third” gender categories for them. There is a large anthropological literature, which we cannot take up here, on the institution of the berdache and other such third-gender systems.

10. We can agree with Fausto-Sterling (2000:31) when she labels contemporary Western medical notions that there are only two anatomical sexes—rather than the anatomical continuum that actually pertains when one takes into account intersex individuals—“cultural conceits.” We simply expect such notions to be conceits in many, if not most, cultures—given that genital sex differences between males and females are such a regular feature of the natural world.

11. It is fair to say, as does Barlow (this issue), that Klein’s theory is attenuated in respect to mothers’ subjectivity. But for us, this critique does not diminish the usefulness of Klein’s characterization of children’s subjectivity. Indeed, from the perspective and in the fantasies of the child—the focus of Klein’s theory—the mother can be experienced as the object of one’s needs and, therefore, in terms of failure and of loss.

12. We are not the first to apply the psychoanalytic concept of splitting to the analysis of cultural belief. Among earlier applications we have come across is Allen Johnson’s 1997 analysis of the beliefs and attitudes about each other held by sharecropper tenants and their landlords on a Northeastern Brazilian fazenda. Georgina Born (1998) is the only writer we have encountered who specifically applies the concept of splitting to cross-cultural beliefs about gender (see N. 13).

13. Georgina Born’s (1998) treatment of gender classification, a brief segment of a longer article, is especially relevant to ours, although we did not come across it until after we had written the original draft of this article. (By coincidence, Born chose, as did we, to develop her position by reference to that of Moore, although she argues against claims from Moore’s earlier, 1988, book.) Born finds Klein’s theory of splitting, with idealization and envy of the object, on the one hand, denigration and fear of it, on the other hand, and the potential for
“unstable oscillation between the two” (Born 1998:376) key to understanding the tenacity of gender ideologies. In this article, we have turned to theories of initial male feminine identification to explain why it is men who split and women who are split, and we work out the details in a lengthy analysis of one particularly rich case of splitting. However, we wish to acknowledge Born's proposal, published earlier than our own, which is substantially in line with it.

14. Meigs gives us no information as to the quality of marital and other adult intimate relationships, and we do not know how issues of dependency or intimacy might be played out in the lives of Hua adults.

15. She (Meigs 1990:106) adds that “within the last twenty years males and females have begun to live together more continuously (residential integration) and to cooperate in garden labor and child care (weak division of labor). I have seen males carrying babies on their shoulders to work in their gardens.” One does not know what to make of these observations. Has a decline in warfare weakened sex segregation, as male sex-role resolution theory might predict (see Whiting and Whiting 1975)? Or, has the division of labor always been honored in the breach?

16. We note that systems of thought that could fairly be characterized as “substance” models of gender do surface in the West. A famous historical example of a Western fluid model of masculinity and femininity, although it worked differently than the Hua model, revolving around the idea of men’s depletion of male fluid, rather than their intake of female fluid, is that of the “spermatic economy” of 19th-century bourgeois United States (Barker-Benfield 1978). More contemporary U.S. substance ethnotheories entertain “masculine” and “feminine” parts of the self, or opposite sides of the brain thought to be differentially developed in men and women, or male and female hormones that find different levels in each. Indeed, this folk theory of so-called sex hormones is quite similar to Hua belief, with the difference that Hua men are feminized through transfer of female substance, whereas in popular U.S. belief, paralleling the 19th-century belief about semen loss, men are feminized through gradual depletion of testosterone (and women masculinized by the loss of estrogen) as they grow older (Katherine Frank, personal communication). It seems that we, no less than the Hua, are capable of entertaining two seemingly contrary gender-belief systems, one that distinguishes categorically between males and females, and another that blurs this distinction by allowing men and women to be more or less masculine and feminine.

17. One ethnographic monograph of a Lowland Papua New Guinea society is notable here because it describes a system of gender beliefs and practices having commonalities with that of the Hua, and treats these beliefs and practices within a psychoanalytic framework as we do the Hua material. This is Silverman’s (2001) monograph on the Iatmul, a Sepik River people. Silverman provides a rich, detailed, and nuanced psychoanalytically motivated account of Iatmul masculinity, but this account does not focus on the role of subject–object splitting in regards to Iatmul gender classification, beliefs, and practices.

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