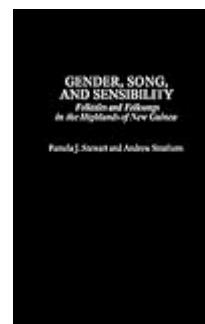


Pamela J. Stewart, Andrew Strathern. *Gender, Song, and Sensibility: Folktales and Folksongs in the Highlands of New Guinea.* Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2002. x + 235 pp. \$69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-275-97792-4.



Reviewed by Abby McLeod (Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, The Australian National University)

Published on H-ANZAU (March, 2003)

Gender, Song, and Sensibility: Folktales and Folksongs in the Highlands of New Guinea presents an important case for alternative conceptions of gender and sexuality in the Papua New Guinea Highlands. Building upon their Collaborative Model of relations between men and women, Stewart and Strathern highlight the existence of gender collaboration and complementarity, aspects of sociality that are largely subverted by stereotypical representations of male dominance and sexual antagonism in the Highlands. Female agency is explored via the examination of courting practices, marriage, courting songs, folk tales, oral narratives, ballads, body decoration, female spirits, and initiation, all of which are said to embrace cultural and imaginative sensibilities. In examining the sensibilities displayed in these genres of expression, the authors aim to explore the underlying ethos of categories of action such as courtship, marriage, and reproduction, thus offering greater insights into gender relations in Papua New Guinea.

Gender, Song, and Sensibility draws upon a broad variety of literatures emanating from the disciplines of anthropology, psychology, phenomenology, philosophy, and natural science. In addition, Stewart and Strathern utilize fictional works by Papua New Guinean authors. The authors fail, however, to draw upon the large corpus of relevant ethnomusicology scholarship, a striking fact

given their primary focus upon oral traditions, in particular song. In analyzing courting and marriage practices, alongside a variety of expressive oral performance genres, Stewart and Strathern traverse the entire Highlands region, in addition to areas such as Lake Kutubu, the Strickland-Bosavi area, and East Sepik. Detailed information on courting practices from Eastern Highlands, Chimbu, the Wahgi Valley, Hagen, Pangia, and Duna is intertwined with the thematic analysis of song texts, providing practical examples of female agency (such as the primacy of female choice in the selection of marriage partners and the permissibility of sexual relations prior to marriage), and examples of the ways in which female agency and desire is expressed, both explicitly and metaphorically, in song texts.

In their analysis of song texts, the authors pay particular attention to the sensibilities expressed in courting songs, all of which are said to relate to personal desires. Their use of the term sensibility, however, is not always clear and the reader can easily become confused by the way in which the word is treated interchangeably with other terms. For example, the Hagen term *kond* (feeling sorry) is variously referred to as “the emotion of *kond*” (pp. 63, 119), “[t]he sensibility of *kond*” (p. 63), and “the sentiment [of *kond*]” (p. 67). While this does not severely obscure the analysis of texts, as a pivot concept,

the term sensibility begs clear definition and consistent employment. Furthermore, given the authors' claim that ethnographic materials gathered in *Tok Pisin* and English "miss out on the richness of expression that local language maintains" (p. 15), some discussion of the methodological implications of linguistic transcription is clearly warranted.

Having analyzed courting songs and practices extensively, Stewart and Strathern proceed to an analysis of folk tales, oral narratives, and ballads, focusing particularly upon materials from Hagen and the Southern Highlands (and to a lesser extent Eastern Highlands), in which female spirit figures feature prominently. As in previous chapters, the authors speak to the relatedness of practical and abstract expressions of gender relations, emphasizing the fluid relationship between mythological, ritual, and everyday spheres of action. In pursuing this point, they argue that while mythological texts inevitably embrace idealized themes that are little practiced in everyday life, "mythology acts as a kind of background or 'landscape' of thought, experience, and sensation, against which everyday action takes place" (p. 94). Consequently, oral texts, in which earthly men are dependent upon female spirit figures and earthly women are portrayed as self-assertive and violent, are held to simultaneously influence and reflect everyday female agency. Actual acts of female agency, however, at this point are yet to be explored in any real depth.

In chapter 6, a refreshing break from oral texts is provided by analyses of body decoration which, like song, is said to encode sensibilities and desires, albeit in a non-verbal form. Here the authors claim that messages about bodily attractiveness and the roles of men and women may be encoded into the decorated body. A particularly interesting discussion of netbags ensues, in which brightly coloured netbags are contrasted with less decorative netbags, the former being said to express women's sensuality, the latter being related to women's role as providers of produce. In discussing the communicative potential of netbags, it may have been useful to note that in many areas of Papua New Guinea, the way in which a woman wears her netbag is indicative of her marital status, with many Chimbu groups claiming that a married woman must wear her netbag on her head, lest she appear promiscuous.

Such practical observations come most clearly to the fore in the final chapters, dedicated to the discussion of

female spirits, initiation, and concluding remarks. Unlike previous chapters in which the lengthy description of oral texts prevails, these chapters offer keener insights into the practical manifestations of female agency and gender collaboration, particularly in relation to male initiation and female menstrual taboos. Here the authors critically re-examine narrow constructions of these phenomena. First, they argue that while male initiation practices have been singularly construed as acts of male dominance reinforcing the separation of the sexes, many such practices rely heavily upon the centrality of a female spirit, charged with the transference of knowledge and ritual protection. Second, they critically engage with ideas about menstrual blood, highlighting the fact that as menstrual taboos regulate the behavior of both women and men, they may be more accurately interpreted as acts of collaboration, rather than mere male domination. Their point that the regulation of bodily substances pertains not only to menstrual blood, but also to semen, further supports this argument.

In examining the ways in which Highlands sensibilities are encoded in genres of imaginative self-expression, Stewart and Strathern have undertaken a somewhat unconventional examination of gender relations in Papua New Guinea, and more specifically of female agency. Their exploration clearly demonstrates the need to approach investigations of gender relations from a variety of perspectives, necessitating an approach that allocates significance to the ways in which local peoples themselves encode, express, and enact notions of gender. A clearer explication of the relationship between these three factors throughout the book (via practical examples), rather than the relative separation of discussions pertaining to expression and action, would have further emphasized their inter-relatedness. In addition, the authors' proven ability to illustrate the ways in which the spiritual and mythological inform the practical could have been further demonstrated, for example, via a comparison of the ways in which female agency is practically manifested among cultural groups with (e.g. Hagen) and without (e.g. Chimbu) female spirit figures. Ultimately though, *Gender, Song, and Sensibility* achieves the expressed aim of contesting and modifying existing stereotypes about gender relations in the Highlands of New Guinea. On this basis alone, it significantly contributes not only to the Highlands ethnographic record, but also to the analysis of gender relations more generally.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-anzau>

Citation: Abby McLeod. Review of Stewart, Pamela J.; Strathern, Andrew, *Gender, Song, and Sensibility: Folktales and Folksongs in the Highlands of New Guinea*. H-ANZAU, H-Net Reviews. March, 2003.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=7306>

Copyright © 2003 by H-Net and the Electronic Journal of Australian and New Zealand History, all rights reserved. Permission is granted for the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use contact Paul Turnbull <paul.turnbull@anu.edu.au> or the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.