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# PERMEABLE AND PARTIBLE PERSONS: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF GENDER AND BODY IN SOUTH INDIA AND MELANESIA

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Recent anthropology of Melanesia has elaborated an understanding of gender and person through an understanding of exchange, and the notion of the partible person. This article puts into relief the concept of the partible person through a comparison, not with the West, but with South India, where the person has been similarly characterized in contradistinction to the Western bounded individual. Gender in South India is fixed and stable, based in bodily difference between women and men, and importantly focused on the capacity for procreation. In Melanesia gender is performative, shifting and contextually defined. This contrast relates to differences between the two areas in notions of the person and of the exchange of substances or parts of persons.

The comparative project in anthropology is almost invariably an explicit or implicit comparison with the West (itself rather loosely defined). The West is the source of many of the analytical terms and issues which constitute the discipline, so that, as Strathern (1988) has demonstrated, Western anthropologists confront other ways of understanding not with neutral analytical terms but with the skeleton of their own society. This article makes an explicit comparison between two areas between which there has been some borrowing of terms of analysis: the 'dividual' which has made its way from India to Melanesia is here 'extracted' back, and this article is by way of return gift for that extraction.

The article is based on fieldwork carried out in the fishing village of Marianad, in Kerala (South India) among the Mukkuvar community (see Busby 1995; Ram 1991). My interpretation of Mukkuvar notions of gender and person has been much influenced by my reading of Melanesian ethnography, particularly Strathern (1988), a book which accompanied me to the field. What I found in Marianad was very different from what I read about Melanesia; nevertheless, the contrasts, and occasional similarities, are illuminating for both regions.

I begin by describing notions of gender in South India as they arise out of understandings of procreation and kinship. Though based on my data for Marianad, my arguments concern understandings of relatedness in Dravidian kinship systems in general, and thus claim some relevance for the whole of South India. The importance of bodily difference and procreative capacity for the understanding of gender is further explored through a consideration of the pan-Indian phenomenon of *hijra*, hermaphrodites or emasculated men who are considered 'neither man nor woman' (Nanda 1990). I then return to the issue

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of gender in Marianad and to the importance of gendered exchange, particularly between husband and wife. Finally, the article considers Melanesian ethnography, and develops certain contrasts between concepts of gender, person and body in Melanesia and South India.

### *Marianad*

Marianad is a substantial fishing village in Trivandrum District, Kerala. The sea fishing communities of Kerala are divided almost equally between Hindu, Muslim and Latin Catholic, the latter converted in the sixteenth century by the Portuguese. In Trivandrum District about three-quarters of the fishing community are Latin Catholic Mukkuvars, and Marianad is a wholly Catholic village.<sup>1</sup>

The Church is extremely strong in the area, but Catholicism appears to have had little impact on marriage practices or the reckoning of kinship: the kin terminology is Dravidian in form, and marriage with the actual first cross cousin is not unusual. Marriage is associated with dowry payments from the family of the bride, which take two forms: a dowry proper, known as *stridana*, which goes to the couple, and a payment to the family of the groom, known as *mulukudi panam*, literally 'breastfeeding money'. Marriage is uxorilocal, and after marriage a man is held to have responsibilities to his wife's family rather than his own, so that the *mulukudi panam* is seen as a compensation payment to his family for his loss.

Uxorilocality means that women are central in kin networks, and there is much coming and going between houses of matrilocally related women, and frequent borrowing and lending. Women control household finances, and often bring in a substantial income themselves through selling fish. In addition, they are prominent in dealing with credit, which is extremely important in a fishing economy.

There is a strict sexual division of labour, not unusual in fishing economies, with men exclusively fishing and women selling fish and managing household finances. 'Men are of the sea', I was told by one woman, 'and women of the land', and the differences between them are strongly emphasized in all that they do. The strong division of labour means that a series of exchanges takes place within the household between women and men, exchanges of fish, money, labour and services, and it is in these exchanges that gender differences are made especially clear. In particular, the indigenous understanding of gender becomes focused on the relationship between husband and wife and the enduring series of exchanges that constitute the marital bond. There is another area, however, where gender difference is marked strongly; this is in the kinship system and the understanding of relatedness.

### *Relatedness: blood, milk and semen*

Because the kinship system among the Mukkuvar is Dravidian in form, the terminology makes a distinction between the children of two sisters or two brothers (such children are considered siblings and as too closely linked to marry) and the children of a sister and a brother (who are potential, even preferred, marriage partners). I have made elsewhere a detailed analysis of this system and its roots in people's understandings of gender and relatedness

(Busby 1997). Here, it is important to note that crucial to this understanding is the notion that men are related to their children in a male way, through semen and male blood, while women are related to their children in a different, female way, passing on female substance through the womb and breast milk. These contributions are considered different but essentially equal, so that a child is related as much to the father as to the mother – the child is simply related to each of them through a different substantial link.

Thus the similarity between the children of two brothers can be explained with reference to shared (male) blood. As one man explained it:

It's the blood that makes the difference. The blood comes from the father. Your father and his brother have the same blood, their children have the same blood. Your father's sister's children, they have their own father's blood, so they're different.

The children of two sisters, similarly, share blood because women carry their children in their wombs, and 'if children are carried by the same woman, that makes them brother and sister. Between two sisters it's the same [i.e. their wombs are the same], so their children are brother and sister'. When talking of mothering, the most common associations are with the womb, in which women carry children and 'shape' them, and the breast milk, with which they feed them after they are born. These associations are also evoked by the term for the money paid to compensate a groom's family for his loss on marriage – 'breastfeeding money'.

In most contexts people say that children are equally related to their mothers and fathers and that 'the blood comes equally from both'. There is a dominant sense of complementarity and bilaterality, which accords with the widespread presence of bilateral principles across the Dravidian region and the symmetry of the kinship system (cf. Yalman 1967). The active, complementary involvement of both parents in procreation is highlighted by the idea, presented to me by both men and women, that while the man provides the seed, the woman is the farmer who actively cultivates it: 'Anyone can scatter a seed, but it takes a lot of skill and hard work to make that seed grow'. This is in striking contrast to the more usual metaphor of the seed and the soil, also found widely in India (Dube 1986). A woman is not considered a passive recipient of seed, or compared to the ploughed earth, but becomes the active agent of transformation, the 'farmer'.

While men and women have equal roles, however, these roles are not equivalent. There is a pervasive sense of gendered *difference* in the ways mothers and fathers are connected to their children. Children share blood and substance with both their parents, but these are transferred via the semen, in the case of men, and via the womb and breastmilk in the case of women. It is this which makes the crucial difference between cross and parallel cousins: while a woman, like her sister, passes on female substance, her brother passes on male substance. Thus the children of two sisters share female substance, while the children of a sister and a brother have different female substance (the children's mothers are unrelated) and different male substance (their fathers are unrelated). They are therefore considered to be different enough to be marriageable, while the parallel cousins are so similar as to be effectively siblings (Busby 1997).

*Gender, kinship and substance*

That men only pass on male substance, and women female substance, has important consequences for the ways in which people trace substantial links between themselves and others. It is notable, however, that these gendered substances are not separately identifiable in the body of the child. They are considered to merge and become indistinguishable. As one woman observed:

Babies have part of both their mother and their father. You can't point to one part, like the blood or the skin, and say that is the mother's or that is the father's. They have something of both.

This does not mean that babies, or persons in general, are considered ungendered. They are gendered through the presence of the sexual substances – semen, womb blood and breast milk – the substances which they will be able to pass on to their own children, and through which they will forge further gendered links. The presence of these substances is indicated by the genitals, a sign that the child contains within itself male or female substances and capacities.

The genitals which indicate such internal capacities are a sign also of the child's closer link either to the father or to the mother. It is a common understanding in Marianad that women are more closely related to their mothers and men to their fathers, a phenomenon which also underlies the distinctions commonly made between groups of sisters or brothers. Thus as one woman put it:

Father and son are more related than father and daughter. It's the same with mother and daughter – they are closer. That's why sisters are like each other, and are not so close to their brothers.

This is reflected in naming practices, with women taking as their family name the first name of their mother, while men take the first name of their father. Thus Lily Rosemary is the daughter of Lily, and George Victor is the son of George. This idea of gendered relatedness is suggested also in the early account by Thurston and Rangachari (1909: 110–11), who note of the Mukkuvar that when a marriage took place between a Mukkuvar woman and a Mappilla Muslim, the daughters of the family would stay with their mother, but the sons would be returned to their father's community.

This link between mothers and daughters, and between fathers and sons, has been noted also by Daniel in Tamil Nadu. Discussing procreation theories, he observes:

Once the ... mix [of sexual fluids] enters the womb, if the man's proportion of the mix is denser than the woman's, it settles towards the bottom of the womb and results in a male fetus. If the woman's portion is denser, the fetus will be a girl (1984: 176).

Thus girls will have proportionately more female substance and boys proportionately more male: as in Marianad, a woman is more related to her mother than a man is.

Trawick also notes that 'a man sees his son as a continuation of himself' (1990: 158), and 'a woman sees herself as a continuation of her mother' (1990: 163). For a man, 'sons were the proprietors of the two substances in which the selfhood of a village man was most invested – his land and his seed' (1990: 158), while the continuity between generations of women is imagined through the metaphor of a vine, a common image also for the young woman herself.

It is particularly through procreative abilities that mothers and daughters, and fathers and sons, are identified. It is these that mark out their gender, it is through these that they pass on, differentially, their own substance, and it is particularly and importantly these that make the apparent identity between them. The links between women and daughters, and fathers and sons, are links of gender: a metaphoric relation based on similarity merges with a metonymic one based on assumed partial identity. A woman passes on her femaleness to her daughters, while a man passes on his maleness to his sons. Gender itself, then, in this context, is a substantial attribute: it is also focused on the *reproductive* potential of women and men.

The links between gender, substance and reproduction are seen clearly also in the case of a certain category of persons in India defined as 'neither man nor woman'. Such persons are able to find some power for themselves as *hijras*, ritual performers associated with the Goddess.

### *The hijra: gender, role and substance*

*Hijras* are found in small, loosely defined groups and communities all over India, although mainly in the north, and are particularly associated with dancing and performances at births and marriages.<sup>2</sup> They are predominantly men who have gone through a process of apprenticeship and ritual castration, and who dress and act as women: their ritual role is important because they are considered to have strong connexions to the Goddess, particularly the Baluchara Mata, in Gujerat, through whom they have the power to give the blessing of fertility.

Nanda's recent study of the *hijras* (1990) makes it clear that the *hijras* define themselves, and are defined by other people, negatively, as what they are not: 'neither man nor woman'. The *hijra* is not a person that incorporates aspects of both male and female, but is someone who is excluded from the normal activities of men and women and who occupies a restricted niche of their own. What is particularly interesting here in the context of a concern with gender is the strong connexion that appears to be made between gender identity, bodily difference and the expression of gender through reproductive potential.

Although most *hijras* undergo an operation which removes both penis and testicles, some are born hermaphrodites and many *hijras* as well as most outsiders emphasize this as the standard definition of being *hijra*: they were 'born that way'. There is clearly a strong correlation enforced here between gender and bodily difference, so that a third gender must also necessarily be a third sex, and preferably born that way. If a boy is not born a hermaphrodite but becomes *hijra*, his body too must be refashioned. Thus in the ritual castration, which takes place usually in his twenties or later, his penis and testicles will be entirely removed, and with them the last vestiges of maleness. Nanda, describing the operation, notes:

When the cut is made, the blood gushes out, and nothing is done to stem the flow ... The blood is considered the 'male part' and should be drained off (1990: 28).

The negative definition of the *hijras* as 'neither man nor woman' points to another crucial defining feature of their gender: the inability to reproduce. Here we see a strong connexion between gender and the ability to act in gendered ways, particularly in the context of procreation. *Hijras* are unable to be efficacious reproductively in either male or female ways: they can neither pass on

semen nor carry and give birth to a child. They are taunted by young boys and called *kaurika*, a word that has connotations of an old, useless, 'empty shell' (1990: 9).

Central to the definition of the *hijra* as 'not man' is impotence, the inability to act the male part in sexual relations with a woman. Even in the case of men who still have their male organs, the organs are considered useless and may as well be removed. A strong link is made between maleness, and the ability to transfer male substance, semen. Thus active male homosexuals are not seen as less than men, and even passive male homosexuals need not be seen in this way provided they *retain* the ability to be potent with women. If passive homosexuals become impotent, as they are believed to do as a result of the practice, they may come to identify themselves as *hijra*, but 'not because they have sexual relations with men, but because they are impotent' (Nanda 1990: 14). In a nineteenth-century account of the *hijras*, quoted by Nanda, 'all state that they were incapable of copulation and that becoming [*hijra*] was on that account only' (1990: 14).

The link between reproductive or procreative ability and gender is reiterated in the case of the few *hijras* who are born and raised as girls. Here, the central factor in their definition as *hijra* is the failure, at puberty, to grow breasts or to menstruate. Again, the ability to reproduce in a female way is denied to them, and thus too the definition of them as having female gender.<sup>3</sup> As Nanda notes:

This sign – the absence of the onset of a female's reproductive ability – points to the essential criterion of the feminine gender that *hijras* themselves make explicit: they do not have female reproductive organs, and because they cannot have children they cannot be considered real women (1990: 18).

For the *hijra*, incapable of either male or female reproductive action, potency is achieved only through the power of the Goddess. Unable to act efficaciously in either male or female ways, they become *hijras*, and are therefore able to be 'vehicles of the divine power of the Mother Goddess, which transforms their impotence into the power of generativity' (1990: 5).

Gender, then, appears to be bound up not only with a bodily difference, but also with the potential that this body implies for procreation, with the ability to be potent in particular ways. To be a man is not only to have a penis but to be able to use it efficaciously, to pass on semen and blood, and to transact in a male way. To be a woman is not only to possess breasts and a womb but to be able to menstruate, to carry a child, to breast feed it, to pass on blood and milk and thus transact in a female way.

### *Gendered acts, gendered persons: the substantialization of gender*

Clearly, a strong connexion is made between gender as a bodily attribute, and the ability to engage with others and act in gendered ways. Men and women are not only distinguished by their bodies, but also by their ability to transact in particular ways, and the two are assumed to be inextricably intertwined.

As many authors have shown in the context of caste, there is a strong tendency in India towards a *substantialization* of attributes of persons and things (see, for instance, Busby 1995; Daniel 1984; Marriott & Inden 1977; Osella 1993; cf. Vasavi 1994), and gender is no exception. Thus a person's gender is not only understood first and foremost as a matter of definitive bodily differences, but these differences are effectively demonstrated and constituted by a capacity

to transact, or interact, in a gendered way, to pass on particularly gendered substances. The inability so to do necessitates a re-evaluation of bodily gender, and even a physical refashioning, as the case of the *hijras* makes clear.

Gender difference in Marianad is performatively marked out in all areas of life: in appearance, attributes and work. The relations of production in this fishing economy separate women and men as different kinds of worker, with different jobs, different responsibilities, different spaces of operation, in a way that complements their separation as different kinds of people in the kinship system. Gender difference is made obvious in everything that men and women do, and in everything that they appear to be, but this demonstration of their differential capacities to act in turn feeds back into, and is evidence of, their different *bodily gender*.

Thus, as Osella (1993), for example, has noted of a Kerala agricultural village, gender differences between women and men are understood through idioms of bodily difference. Women are conceived to have much more natural 'heat' than men in their bodies, evidence of their greater power, or *shakti* (see also Wadley 1980). Women are also thought to be more open and permeable than men, and therefore to be more susceptible to possession (Osella 1993: 424).

Just as caste-related attributes in India are taken to rest on substantial differences between kinds of people, so too, I would argue, are gender attributes. In fact, in some contexts the two may be related, such that the difference between the genders becomes assimilated to the idea of differences between two castes. Thus Trawick notes:

Males and females form opposed interest groups, just as do different lineages. The strong feelings joining members of one sex are said to have a bodily basis, just like the feelings joining sibling to sibling ... or parent to child ... or wife to husband ... Females are said to be of one caste (*inam*). Their bodies are the same (1990: 204).

To be male is to be capable only of acting in a male way, of passing on male substance, of taking the male part in procreation, while to be female is similarly to be capable only of female interaction and transaction. It is to this interaction, the meeting of both male and female in exchange, that I now turn.

### *Transactions between husbands and wives*

Thus far I have focused on the strength of gender *differences* marked out in performance and in the understanding that men and women have quite different capacities. An emphasis on such differences is quite widely reported in the South Indian ethnography. In Marianad, gender differences are strongly marked in discourse and practice. As one woman put it:

Women are very different from men ... Women don't go to sea, don't go fishing. Men are of the sea, women of the land. They bring fish, we sell fish. Women look after children, men don't. They drink, we don't. You just watch and see how different they are – in every way.

In the context of this emphasis on difference, what becomes most interesting is the ways in which women and men are brought together, so that difference and separation are dependent upon co-operation and interaction, and women and men become most fully gendered in their cross-sex relations with each other.

The marital relationship in the fishing community consists very much of an ongoing series of exchanges – of fish, money, clothes, food and sex. The strong



sexual division of labour means that men and women have quite separate areas of operation, and engage in these transactions in quite specifically gendered ways, so that to owe money and to bring fish to the household are archetypally male, while to handle the household's money, to cook and to feed others are archetypally female. Men and women, understood as absolutely different in their capacities to engage with others, most clearly *demonstrate* this difference through transactions with each other. There is here, then, a particular emphasis on conjugality and the marital relationship.

The closeness of husbands and wives, and the importance of the marital bond, are daily demonstrated by their practice of eating from the same plate. In this manner, husband and wife not only symbolically share substance by eating the same food, but are considered literally to exchange body fluids, or saliva, in the same way that in sex they exchange semen and sexual fluids. Particularly interesting in the wider Indian context is that they eat together at the same time, rather than the wife after her husband. To eat together from the same plate, then, not only symbolizes closeness but also a greater emphasis on equality than is usually found in the region.

The closeness between husband and wife resulting from, and demonstrated by, their sharing of food and sex is expressed powerfully in the notion that they are 'one body' (*oru sariram*). This is a widely expressed understanding in Marianad which not only accords with the Church's teaching that husband and wife become one flesh, but also seems to be a deeply felt truth. 'Everyone would say that husband and wife are one body', explained one woman. 'It's not just because the Church says so, you feel it too, like that'. Men, too, understand the relationship through this idiom. As one put it, 'That's how it is after marriage, each is half: they are one body'.<sup>4</sup>

The bond between husband and wife is emphasized even more than that between mother and child. Osella has described how femaleness in a Kerala agricultural village is inseparable from motherhood, not only in relation to giving birth but, more importantly, in the nurturing, protective role of the mother.

All women can act as mothers to all younger women, men and children: feeding and caring for them, praying for and protecting them ... This quality of *amma*-ness [is] common to all mature females (1993: 260).

In the fishing community, motherhood, in the sense of bearing children, is an important demonstration of a woman's female capacity, and there is no doubt that most mothers are extremely loving and protective of their children. Nevertheless, the emphasis on nurturing and mothering as a generalized capacity is not strong. Women quite willingly wash, dress, feed and care for their own or sisters' children, but they see no need to extend this nurturing role to others, to men or other adults: it is not a defining feature of their femaleness. More important evidence of their female capacities is their ability to sell fish, to run the household, to manage the money that comes in and to engage with their husbands in ongoing exchanges of food, money, clothes and sex. Women assert their femininity not through mothering, but through their relation to their husbands: through their sexual relationship, the gendered exchange that it implies, and the production of children. The latter – motherhood rather than

mothering – is bound up with an understanding of the marital relationship as one of productive and reproductive potency.

As we have seen, husbands and wives in Marianad are represented as one body. This not only points to the constant exchange of substances between them, but is also a powerful image of husband and wife as a unit, a single enterprise. Each brings distinct, differently gendered capacities: together they form something like a whole. Each side complements the other, and their capacities joined together enable them to engage in an ongoing exchange that results in a house, wealth and children. We have seen that gender is closely related to the ability to act in male or female ways: this potency is most clearly demonstrated in cross-sex interaction, in procreation and reproduction. Men, then, need women if they are fully to enact their gender and be fully effective as a person in the world, just as women need men. Their absolute, categorical difference makes them like two halves of one whole, each inadequate without the other. Male needs female, female needs male, in order to *reproduce* in the widest possible sense.

The importance of the difference between male and female, and of their necessity each to the other, can be seen to run through all aspects of life in Marianad. For their union to be creatively powerful, it is necessary that:

[M]ale and female are opposed cosmic forces, as different from each other as black and white, as powerfully charged as earth and sky in a lightning storm (Trawick 1990: 253).

### *Gender and person in Melanesia and South India*

Gender in South India, I have argued, is a fixed and categorical bodily difference bound up with the capacity for procreation. Men and women are definitively male and female, but they most effectively demonstrate and enact this gender difference in transactions with each other. The importance of exchange, and of substantial connexions between persons who are not bounded individuals of the Western (stereo)type, makes for a fruitful comparison with another ethnographic region in which gender, personhood and exchange are major issues: Melanesia.

I shall start as I did with South India, by considering procreation and indigenous understandings of the gendered body. In Melanesia, similar ideas about male and female substances involved in procreation lead to a different formulation of the gendered body, with different implications for the conceptualization of gender, person and exchange. While gender in South India is a fixed and stable attribute of the body, gender in Melanesia appears to be primarily performative, concerned with what people *do* (or how they do it) rather than what they *are*. Here, attributes such as gender cannot be known in advance but must be *drawn out*, or displayed, through the successful manipulation of relationships. The contrast is one which I relate, finally, to a difference in the understanding of the person: as internally divided and partible (Melanesia), or as internally whole, but with a fluid and permeable body boundary (India).

### *Melanesian bodies*

LiPuma (1988) has analysed the kinship system of the Maring in a way very similar to my own analysis of South Indian kinship, concentrating on

substantial links between people. A child is formed by the mixing of the father's semen and the mother's menstrual blood, and develops by the constant addition of these substances and, later, the mother's milk. Most of the substance of the child comes from the female side: bone, muscle, blood and hard tissue are all formed by the mother's blood and milk. The semen forms the lymphatic system (the 'grease' system) in all children, and the genitals and hair of boys. Boys are considered to be like their fathers, and girls like their mothers. Each receives from this parent his or her life force or 'spirit' (*min*). As in the South Indian Dravidian system, persons are understood to be co-substantial with their parallel cousins, and not related in this way to their cross cousins, whom they may marry (LiPuma: 158).

A similar division of male and female parts has been noted by Wagner among the Daribi:

The seminal fluid ... forms the outer layer of an embryo, the skin, eyes, teeth and hair, as well as the lymphatic system and genitalia of a man, and the lymphatic system and mammary glands of a woman ... Maternal blood ... forms the inner layer of an embryo, the bones, viscera and other internal organs, and the circulatory system (1977: 628).

In Sambia, semen is transformed in the womb into the fetal bone and tissue (Herdt 1984). The mother's blood becomes circulatory blood in the foetus and, in the case of girls, helps to form their own menstrual blood organ, the *tingu*. Weiner (1988) also notes of the Foi that the child is made up differentially of male and female substances; maternal blood and paternal semen give rise respectively to the flesh and bones of the child.

This understanding of procreation, positing differential male and female parts in the reproduction of the person, appears to be common throughout New Guinea (Knauff 1989: 206). Though the actual elements and the precise division of body parts may vary, underlying all the conceptualizations of kinship relations and bodily personhood in this area is a belief that a part of each person is *male* (derived from the father) and a certain part is *female* (derived from the mother).

At first glance, these notions appear very similar to South Indian concepts, but there is a crucially important difference. In Melanesia, the male and female substances are identified with separate parts of the body, while in South India they merge and are indistinguishable in the substance of the body, which is itself (metonymically) gendered by extension from the presence of the gendered substances semen and milk, evidenced by the genitals. In South India, then, one finds a definitively (wholly) male or female person. The person in Melanesia, though obviously identifiable on one level as male or female, nevertheless represents a mosaic of male and female substances, *internally* dividing up the body into differently gendered parts. Thus, there is an equivalence of men and women as both mosaically constructed, at the same time as a radical distinction is made between (gendered) male and female body parts. This has profound implications for the understanding of gender in this region, firstly as it relates to women and men, and secondly in the way gender symbolism operates. It also has interesting implications for the understanding of personhood and exchange.

*Men and women, male and female*

Melanesian procreation theories represent the body as internally divided into male and female parts, so that there is on one level an equivalence between men and women even as there is a strong distinction between male and female. The knowledge that the body contains both male and female parts allows a conceptualization of the person as non-gendered, or rather, in Strathern's (1988) terms, as *cross-sex*.<sup>5</sup> For Melanesians, a person's gender is not stable or obvious. Instead, a deliberate effort has to be made to present a person as gendered, as single-sex:

The corporeal body is presented as exclusively male or exclusively female for specific ritual effect: persons are not axiomatically conceived by these Highlanders as single sex. Rather, an alternation of sexual conditions, two modes of gender constitution, is displayed (Strathern 1988: 122).

These two modes are *same-sex* (gendered) and *cross-sex* (androgynous, or non-gendered), and it is these two terms, rather than male and female, which Strathern prefers as terms of analysis.

However, while persons in Melanesia can be conceived as androgynous, this is not to say that men and women are indistinctly differentiated, or that gender is ambiguous. In an earlier paper (Strathern 1978) as well as at various points in *The gender of the gift* (1988), Strathern makes clear that, for Hageners at least, sexual ascription on the basis of anatomy is unproblematic. It is also, however, relatively uninformative in itself, since both men or women can at times be apprehended as either male or female, while both are frequently regarded as neither, the focus being rather on their *internal* constitution as dual, or cross-sex.

Male and female can, in fact, be considered in many ways as analogues of each other, alike in that both are single-sex states (1988: 185).<sup>6</sup> There is in much of Melanesian ritual imagery a constant switching between the apprehension of something as male and its revelation as female, a phenomenon which seems very different from the fixity of gender in the Dravidian region.

This equivocation ... runs through much gender symbolism in the Highlands and in Melanesia at large. Men's houses may be equated with wombs. Penile bleeding may be identified as menstrual ... The Gimi flute, 'mother's penis', can also refer to mother's breast (Strathern 1988: 126).

Weiner (1988) similarly notes that objects and people among the Foi can switch from being seen as male to being seen as female. Analogous practices occur among the Maring:

In response to context, agents may identify an object as either male or female and react accordingly. In this sense, almost all objects have both male and female aspects, the aim of practice being to make smooth transitions between modalities (LiPuma 1988: 72).

The switching occurs in Melanesia because, in contrast to the Dravidian region, gender is not self-evident but an attribute which must be *made known*. It is not an intrinsic property of objects or persons, but a capacity which must be drawn out, or revealed, in interaction with others. What differentiates men from women among the Gimi, for example, 'is not the maleness or femaleness of their sexual organs but *what they do with them*' (Strathern 1988: 128, italics in original).

*Performance and essence*

In South India, men and women perform different activities and demonstrate their gender practically in many ways: such differences are related to a categorical gender difference marked on the body. In New Guinea, men and women can both demonstrate and *alternate* their perceived gender through doing or transacting with male or female things, while in India to be male is to be capable only of acting in a male way, of passing on male substance and taking the male part in procreation. To be female is similarly to be capable only of female interaction and transaction. The performative differences which I have described for men and women are seen as *arising out of* this distinct bodily difference. While performance and enactment, in India, feed back into the substance of the body, there is no doubt which is prior. A woman who acts as a man does not thereby constitute herself as a man, she merely becomes a bad woman. A man, even by playing the passive partner in a homosexual relationship, does not thereby become a woman: at the most, if he loses the bodily *capacity* to procreate with women he becomes a not-man, a *hijra*.

In Melanesia, however, there is a reversal of this causality. Here it is the effects which produce the cause; the *evidence* of gendered efficacy is in itself the revelation of gender. Nothing here is self-evident, and the capacities of objects or persons can only be known through their effects on others: people depend on these others for their own self-definition, for 'knowledge about their internal selves' (Strathern 1988: 119). While in South India being a man or being a woman almost always implies the automatic attributes of maleness or femaleness, in Melanesia it is merely a starting point, and much effort must be made to *draw out* the corresponding attributes or capacities. Thus what in Marianad is taken as axiomatic for women – the capacity to bear children – is in Melanesia an uncertainty which must be coerced:

The capacity must ... be made visible, be made to work, and it must be shown in the only form possible – as its own outcome... In Melanesia, people endeavour ... to make these capacities objects of knowledge for themselves (Strathern 1988: 220).

Such capacities are made objects of knowledge through performance, specifically through *interaction*, and the effects that the performance has on others. Sex cannot be taken for granted but has to be revealed or displayed, and this is done through successfully activating certain relations:

Thus ... much ritual attention is paid to sexual organs not because the organs sex the person, but because in his or her relations with others the person sexes the organs (Strathern 1988: 208).

Gender in Melanesia, then, could be said to be *performative*, in comparison to South India where gender concerns essences, the body and bodily substances. If gender in Melanesia is performative, however, it is not the performativity which Butler (1990; 1993) has identified as at the heart of Western gender: namely, the *reiteration* of gender performance which sculpts so many 'styles of the flesh'. Melanesian gender performances are more akin to displays, the revelation of gender made manifest for a moment, but lost as soon as the after-image fades. There is here no cumulative *sedimentation* of gender through performance which forces the appearance of stable essences; rather, there is a constant *movement*

from the apprehension of persons or objects as gendered or non-gendered, male or female.

Thus Strathern, discussing the interdependence created between husband and wife in Melanesia, notes that it is an inherently unstable image:

For this joining to occur, a composite, androgynous entity [husband or wife] has had to be reconceptualized as singular, and in being differentiated from another as incomplete (1988: 185).

Such a reconceptualization, which allows 'male and female [to] be opposed, as discrete reference points for the relationship between them', can occur only 'at certain moments' (1988: 184, my emphasis), for it temporarily displaces the other possibility; namely, that each is self-contained and non-gendered.

Nothing could be further from the case in Marianad, where husband and wife exist in a permanent relationship of complementary opposition, each always and only singly gendered. Here, there is no alternative, androgynous state. Even the child, which in Melanesia 'substitutes' for the cross-sex relation of his parents and is thus androgynous, is, in South India, always (more) male or (more) female, with more substance from or relationship with father or mother, the resulting genitals metonymically gendering his or her entire person.

#### *Persons and relationships: further comparisons*

The discussion so far has concentrated on the comparison of gender: I have distinguished between a system of performative and alternating gender and a more fixed and essentialized one. The comparison has, however, inevitably touched on differences in the conceptualization of persons and bodies, and it is to these I now turn.

The distinction I have drawn between the permanent gendered state of persons in South India and the movement between states characteristic of Melanesia is intimately related to another distinction: between the focus on *relationships* and the focus on *persons*. Melanesians are concerned with 'the capabilities of relations, not the attributes of things' (Strathern 1988: 173): things or persons are merely nodal points in a web of relationships. The body, then, has no inherent properties or capacities: 'the body's features are a register, a site of ... interaction... It is a microcosm of *relations*' (1988: 131). As such, the body can never be stable:

If the body is composed of relations, if it shows the imprint of past encounters, then the relations are not in a state of stasis... These internal relations must either be further built upon or they must be taken apart and fresh relationships instigated (1988: 131).

If in Hagen it is relationships which in some very real sense make persons, in Marianad it is emphatically persons who make relationships. A concern with the 'capabilities of relationships [rather than] ... the attributes of things' becomes rather a concern with the capabilities of *persons*, and the corresponding attributes of the *things associated with them*. For South Indian persons are not totally separate, bounded individuals, but engage with others and are connected to them through flows of substance which they exchange with each other. Such substances, however, always refer to the persons from whom they originated: they are a manifestation of persons rather than of the relationships which they create.

Thus men and women in Marianad are able to produce as separate entities: a man produces fish, and a woman sells fish and handles money. Despite the fact that each may have had a necessary input into the work of the other, that relationship is eclipsed in the focus on the relationship between person and product: the fish belongs to the man while he handles it and the money is associated with the woman. Both can then give such objects to each other as aspects of themselves and hence build a connexion between them which did not previously exist.

Men and women thus do not need each other to activate their own gender or gender capacities. Where they do need each other is in realizing the potential *power* of those capacities. Men can produce semen on their own – they do not need a woman or a relationship to ‘extract’ this evidence of their male capacity. They do, however, need a woman to exchange it with in order to join it with female substance and so release the power of reproduction. Similarly, women can menstruate and thereby evidence this female capacity within themselves, but it is efficacious only when conjoined with male semen.

Wealth and children in Marianad are thus *created* by the joint effort of both spouses. Unlike Hagen, where work or children simply reveal or substitute for the relationship of their parents, in Marianad these are new entities. A child does not simply stand for or concretize an already existing relationship; he or she is an entirely new person, a person who has reference to his or her origins in both parents, but is ultimately more than the sum of their parts. Persons here are not ‘microcosms of relationships’: they stand complete in themselves, yet *connected* to others through flows of substance.

### *Permeable and partible persons*

The distinction which I have made between persons in Melanesia, composed of relations, and persons in South India, separate and yet connected, can be imagined in another way by considering the distinction between the flow of substance and the detachment (or attachment) of parts.<sup>7</sup> In Melanesia, as discussion of procreation theories made clear, persons can be considered to be mosaically constructed, having body parts which can be identified as of either gender. Thus:

a unitary identity sets the stage for the revelation that it covers or contains within itself other identities ... In gender terms, the single sex figure will have parts or appendages ‘belonging’ to the opposite sex (Strathern 1988: 122).

Such parts or appendages can also be objects *outside the boundary of the skin*, yet are nevertheless considered part of the person. The perception of Melanesian bodies as *internally* divided, creates an apparent homology between internal and external relations or parts. Thus the person, ‘composed of relations’, appears to extend beyond the skin boundary to include objects and persons considered at any one time to be objectifications of such relations. It is easy to see then how transactions appear as the extraction, and absorption, of parts of the person: ‘In being multiple [the Melanesian person] is also partible, an entity that can dispose of parts in relation to others’ (Strathern 1988: 185).

This contrasts strikingly with the Indian case. Here, persons are not internally divided: though they contain substances from both mother and father, these

substances are not separably identifiable in the body. Rather, the whole body is apprehended as male or female according to the evidence of gendered capacity given by the genitals. Here there are no disposable parts, and persons are co-extensive with their skin boundary. Nevertheless, the person is not rigidly contained. As ethnosociological accounts of the person in India have made clear, the boundary of the body is considered *permeable*, so that substance can flow between persons, and connexions can be made (see, for instance, Busby 1995; Daniel 1984; Marriott & Inden 1977; Osella 1993). The Indian person is not partible, but rather could be called 'permeable', having 'fluid boundaries' (Daniel 1984).

This distinction is made clearer by considering an example which at first appears to be a 'flow of substance' in Melanesia: the transmission of semen. In the Indian case, semen is an unambiguously male substance, an emanation of the male body which can be transmitted to others. In Melanesia, however, it seems that there can be no flow of substance which is in any simple way apprehended as a flow of maleness from a person.

If internal divisions in the Melanesian body make external objects seem parts of the person, the detachability of external objects gives a potential detachability and objectification to internal parts. Internal and external parts are both equally to be understood as objectifications of relationships between the person and others. Thus the flow of internal substances such as semen or blood is no different from the flow of valuables: both are objectifications of relations, and both must be detached from the person before they can be transacted.

An intrinsic distinction cannot be maintained between semen and wealth: semen is as much objectified as its analogue ... In both cases men define themselves as exchanging aspects (parts) of their own identity (Strathern 1988: 209).

Such substances or goods are rendered as detachable parts through the operations of gender: they are imagined, for example, as female parts of a male body. In this sense, then, the substances of the body are no more an intrinsic part of the person than their wealth or children, and they are no more automatically gendered by their association with a man or a woman than is any other object or relation. As Strathern notes, 'semen is not axiomatically an extension of men, and is thus not innately male' (1988: 213). The difference from the Indian case could not be more clear.

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The contrast I have drawn between Melanesia and South India is a contrast in the understanding of both gender and person. It is not only a distinction between fixed and categorical gender, and gender which is performatively and contextually defined. It is also between gender firmly attached to the bodies and persons of women and men, and gender which is a property of relations rather than persons – relations which can be both internal and external to the body. It is, finally, a contrast between an internally divided and partible person, a 'microcosm of relations', and a bounded but permeable, fluid person, connected to others through flows of substance.

Both Melanesian persons and Indian persons have been characterized as 'dividuals' (Marriott & Inden 1977; Strathern 1988) in contrast to the 'individuals' of the West, and both have similarly been seen as making connexions through



the exchange of parts of the person, following a model derived from Mauss (1990). But the similarity of the terms used obscures quite fundamental differences between the two regions. Substance may connect persons in India and in Melanesia, but it is substance as a *flow from* a person compared with substance objectified as a *part of* a person, and it is a person who is internally whole and permeable, as opposed to a person who is internally divided and partible. By elaborating the comparison of the two regions with each other, rather than each with the 'West', I hope I have illuminated the processes of gender and exchange in both, as well as contributed to a sharpening of our terms of analysis.

#### NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> While the fact that the Mukkuvar are Catholic is clearly important in certain contexts, it is a particular, local form of Catholicism which shares much with local Hinduism in relation to the ideas about gender, personhood, substance and exchange which form the main subjects of this article. See Busby (n.d.) for an elaboration of this argument, and Bayly (1989) and Mosse (1986; 1994), for discussion of the 'Indian' nature of local Christianities.

<sup>2</sup> Although *hijras* are found more commonly in the north, many of the *hijras* with whom Nanda (1990) worked were from Tamil Nadu. In general I move rather vaguely in this article from referring to Marianad, to referring to South India, sometimes simply referring to 'India'. Clearly, the further from Marianad, the less certain I can be about the applicability of my argument. My belief is that these ideas are relevant to the whole of India, but that their relevance is greater within the Dravidian region.

<sup>3</sup> It might be said that the same is true of barren women. However, barrenness can never be known unequivocally: if a woman has breasts and menstruates, there always remains the possibility that she might become pregnant and give birth. Some misfortune may prevent her from *demonstrating* her female capacity, but the capacity itself cannot be definitively denied.

<sup>4</sup> The idea that husband and wife become one body can also be found in Hindu ideas and religious texts (see, for example, Inden & Nicholas (1977); Leslie (1991); Malamoud (1989); Smith (1989)). The comparative emphasis on equality between the spouses in the fishing community can, however, be seen in the idea that *both* husband and wife are half bodies: in the examples above the notion is invariably phrased as *the* wife becoming on marriage the half body of her husband. He remains by default a whole body which encompasses hers.

<sup>5</sup> This is not strictly a comparison with Melanesia: it is a comparison with Strathern (1988). My grasp of the Melanesian ethnography is not sufficient for me to be able to pick a clear path through the different perspectives of those working in the region: since Strathern (1988) is an overview of the area and, though not without its critics, is perhaps the most influential recent synthesis of the available material, I hope a comparison between her analysis and my own in South India will be considered in itself worthwhile.

<sup>6</sup> Strathern makes clear in earlier work, however, that male and female are differently valued, in Hagen society at least, a fact which is somewhat obscured by an analysis in terms of same-sex and cross-sex only.

<sup>7</sup> I am grateful to Henrietta Moore, whose lucid comments on an earlier version of this article made this distinction clear to me.

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## **Personnes perméables et divisibles: une analyse comparée du genre et du corps en Inde du Sud et en Mélanésie**

### *Résumé*

L'anthropologie récente de la Mélanésie a développé une compréhension du genre et de la personne à travers une compréhension de l'échange et au moyen de la notion de personne divisible. Cet article met en relief le concept de personne divisible par le biais d'une comparaison, non pas avec l'Occident mais avec l'Inde du Sud, où la personne a été aussi caractérisée en contradistinction avec l'individu occidental circonscrit. En Inde, les définitions de genre sont fixes et stables, fondées sur des différences corporelles entre femmes et hommes et avec une importance particulière accordée à la capacité de procréation. En Mélanésie, les définitions de genre sont performatives, changeantes et définies par le contexte. Ce contraste est lié aux différences entre les notions de personne et d'échange de substances ou de parties des personnes dans les deux régions.

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