I

CONTEMPORARY PROBLEMS IN ETHNOLOGY
SEX ROLE COMPLEMENTARITY

by Christine M. Sakumoto Drake

A major criticism of many anthropological studies, particularly those conducted before 1970, is that roles of women have been alternately treated as insignificant, mentioned in passing, or completely ignored. The exceptions have been relatively few; the works of Margaret Mead are often cited among them. However, there are ethnologists who—while they have not taken sex roles as a central focus—have been careful to present detailed data concerning the roles of women as well as those of men. Edward Norbeck can certainly be counted among these scholars. The care he characteristically demonstrates in the treatment of major aspects of culture and society extends to his coverage of sex roles as well; life histories and discussions of statuses of both women and men are examined in his studies of Japanese society, as one can see in Changing Japan (1976).

The increasing concern with the societal positions and roles of women has spawned proposals for a systematic examination of these critical elements of social organization. One set of theoretical constructs appears to be emerging as a dominant perspective in a number of current works that fall into the category termed “women’s studies”: the basic notion that in most societies, women’s activities occur largely within a “domestic” sphere, which is set apart from and often in opposition to the “public” sphere of men’s activities. The problems involved in using this fundamental division in anthropological analysis provides the central focus of this paper. It deserves attention as a pervasive assumption of many anthropologists dealing with the status and roles of women and men. This paper is essentially a criticism of the above-mentioned theoretical perspective; it argues for the greater utility of ideas of sex role complementarity in understanding what I believe to be interrelated rather than sexually dichotomized roles.

A volume edited by Michelle Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere (1974) is constituted entirely of articles that subscribe to the woman-domestic/man-public differentiation and accept a “structural model” based on

Christine Drake is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Lafayette College.
it as a framework to "identify the implications for female power, value, and status in various cross-cultural articulations of domestic and public roles" (Rosaldo 1974:35). I feel this is fundamentally an artificial analytical construct that obscures the significance of reciprocity and complementarity in the activities and contributions of women and men. I have no objection to categorizing economic activities with reference to the independent operation of economic groups controlled by men and women; indeed, I have found this traditional analytical frame of reference useful. My criticism focuses rather on the woman-domestic/man-public dichotomy insofar as it fosters notions of total independence and separateness, with little or no consideration of the areas in which the sexes are interdependent and in which their roles are interrelated. In order to lend support to my ideas, I will provide specific illustrations from two horticultural societies, the Iroquois and the Hopi. The selection of these societies as examples is largely a matter of convenience: in a longer paper (Drake 1976), I have used them as an ethnographic base for the examination of the relationship between the variables of matrilineality, matrilocality, and relative economic contribution on the one hand and the status and power positions of women in horticultural societies on the other.

The present study is therefore limited to a critique of the theoretical framework as it applies to horticultural communities. At the outset, an antithetical view—with which I concur—may be presented. Eleanor Burke Leacock has posited the idea that in "primitive communal society—which includes both foraging and horticultural types—there is no essential conception of a "public world of men's work" set apart from a "private world of women's household service"; since the division of labor between the sexes is reciprocal, wives are not attached to their husbands in a dependent economic relationship (Leacock 1972:33). She says:

Since in primitive communal society decisions were made by those who would be carrying them out, the participation of women in a major share of socially necessary labor did not reduce them to virtual slavery, as in the case of class society, but accorded them decision-making powers commensurate with their contribution.

IROQUOIS WOMEN

A revitalization of interest in the position of women in Iroquois society has been spurred by the concerns of feminist anthropologists. Attention is once again being drawn to Murdock's (1935:302) statement: "Indeed of all the people of the earth, the Iroquois approach most closely to that hypothetical form of society known as the matriarchate."
While the existence of actual or antecedent matriarchies is no longer seriously entertained (Bamberger 1974; Richards 1957; Webster 1975), ample consideration has been given to the unusually high status and positions of power enjoyed by women among the Iroquois—observations that extend from some of the early written accounts to contemporary studies (Beauchamp 1900; Brown 1970, 1975; Carr 1884; Goldenweiser 1915, 1967; Hewitt 1933; Jenness 1932, 1934; Lafitau 1724; Quain 1961; Richards 1957; Speck 1945; Stites 1905).

Many examples are offered in evidence of high status and power among Iroquois women. Of particular concern here is the fact that their activities, roles, power, and influence extended well beyond the private or domestic sphere, into sectors that were clearly public or extra-domestic. Within the Iroquois longhouse, a structure that housed as many as twenty families, the head matron was responsible for the coordination of activities. As the recognized matrilineal head of the families comprising the household unit, she held authority within that unit. In addition, the prevailing pattern of matrilocal residence provided a means for the consolidation of power of the women (Brown 1975:242): “influential matriarchs who held a chiefly title tended to group their female relatives around them in the same longhouse” (Noon 1949:29). Martin and Voorhies (1975) have demonstrated that when production and distribution rights are transferred through women (matrilineal descent system) and when such women are localized (matrilocal residence), their status is greatly enhanced. This situation is reflected in the solidarity between women of the household, which in turn holds important implications for community-wide, public interests: “the matrilineal family, conditioned by factors of residence, personal friendship, and willingness to work, formed the basic cooperative group in economic, ceremonial, and local administrative affairs” (Quain 1961:257).

Women exerted control over the food supply (Quain 1961:248) since women’s work groups, or mutual aid societies, were the basic productive units in both the cultivation and the distribution of food resources within the household and in the community at large. It is their control over extra-domestic food distribution that is most telling in drawing relationships between control of distribution and positions of power. Jenness (1934:136) informs us that “the authority possessed by the matrons . . . would seem to constitute them the ultimate ‘powers behind the throne’ in the political life of the Iroquois”; he further attributes their prestigious position “to the important place that agriculture held in their economic life, and the distribution of labor.” Women could compel an end to warfare and hunting activities and influence decisions in the councils by their refusal to supply the requisite food. They were also
capable of applying more direct constraints against warfare or other public activities that primarily concerned their male counterparts when these did not meet with their approval: they often delivered messages concerning public affairs through male chiefs, and various sources report that these were given serious consideration in deliberations of the council. Carr (1884:230), drawing from Lafitau (1724), writes that a separate deliberative council of women advised the sachems of their own recommendations; the women’s council met first, and matters deemed of sufficient importance were brought to a general council of sachems of the several groups of the League. The important considerations are that the matrons were not reticent to have their opinions publicly aired and that they played important roles in the public sector of Iroquois society.

The most frequently cited measure of the unusually high position of Iroquois women is their importance in the selection of sachems, the only civil chiefs in the society. Together, the several sachems of the different groups of the League composed the Council of Elders, the highest ruling body of the League. Goldenweiser (1967:571) states: “when a chief died, the women of his tribe and clan held a meeting at which a candidate for the vacant place was decided upon.” It can be said that women carried authority in this decision-making process, a claim that is supported by the fact that they possessed the ability to depose personnel who did not, in their opinion, meet with required standards (Goldenweiser 1967:571-572). The principle of matrilineal descent acted as the preliminary eliminator of pretenders to the office of the sachem; candidates were limited to the members of the matrilineal family of the deceased sachem (Quain 1961:267). The significance of matrilineal ties was pervasive in political organization: “in order to succeed to important titles or to participate in public life, it was necessary to live in the community in which one’s maternal family had influence” (Quain 1961:263).

Women’s roles extended to other extra-domestic activities as well. They could not occupy positions of hereditary chiefs or sachems themselves, but they were eligible for one public office, the Pine Tree Sachemship. This was the “highest status to which an individual could rise independent of birth,” and it was “a purely honorary title bestowed upon men or women who were considered models of intelligent cooperation” (Quain 1961:268). Also, the matrons of influential families owned and conferred titles through the important naming process: “long before a child was old enough to show much personal interest in his career, he was assigned to a lifelong series of names which in themselves determined his ultimate status and political function” (Quain 1961:244). The naming process exemplifies one of the more or less formal influences by women in determining the future public positions of males within
SEX ROLE COMPLEMENTARITY

their matrilineal group. In addition to their role in the naming process, women were responsible for selecting one person who "acts as representative" for his/her matrilineage and women "are often in this position themselves" (Lafitau 1724:294).

In the ceremonial or religious domain, women were participants, having a say in the selection of the so-called "keepers of the faith" and sometimes acting themselves in this capacity; they also occupied positions in medicine societies. The "keepers of the faith" were "a select class appointed by the several tribes to take the charge of their religious festivals, and the general supervision of their worship" (Morgan 1972:184). The activities of women in this area were related to their distributive functions, for matrons were in charge of the feasts (Morgan 1972:186), which were an integral part of the ceremonial and ritual activities, including funerals or condolence ceremonies. The medicinal societies were primarily concerned with curing illness; individuals joined these societies either in fulfillment of a sacred dream or on the advice of a clairvoyant (Quain 1961:265). Some of these societies were limited in membership to males, others exclusively to females, while still others had memberships composed of both sexes. Women as well as men could be clairvoyants and interpreters of dreams.

Old women commanded peculiar respect: "the oldest woman of the clan, or the woman most respected for her wisdom and experience, was a most powerful factor in the affairs of the clan, and none, not even the chief, could with impunity disregard her advice" (Goldenweiser 1967:572). Her influence and authority—terms employed by Goldenweiser—extended to the children of her clansmen. This demonstrates how her influence and authority cut across the local group, since the children of clansmen "belonged to many clans and widely scattered districts" (Goldenweiser 1967:572). Referring both to these old women who were in a distinct age category that transcended the bounds of sex categorization, and to Iroquois women in general, Goldenweiser (1967:572) remarks: "Thus the entire social structure of the Iroquois was permeated by a maze of channels through which keen-witted women guided the affairs of the people.”

HOPI WOMEN

The Hopi are part of what Eggan (1950) refers to as the Western Pueblo complex, a cultural and analytical grouping that also includes Hano, Zuni, Acoma, and Laguna. A major contrast between the Hopi and Iroquois may be seen in the broad outlines of their respective cultural systems: among the Hopi, “all activities are subordinated to religion” (Dozier 1970:133); with the Iroquois, religious or ceremonial
activities, though important, are neither as pervasive nor as dominant. Dozier (1970:133) informs us that among the Pueblo Indians, “the subsistence economy received the full concentration of religious devotion and ritual.” Because their physical environment cannot guarantee the success of their subsistence activities, he says, “religious activity attempts to force nature to be more bountiful.” Dozier concludes that “activities marginal or unrelated to the basic subsistence economy receive little attention.” It is not surprising, therefore, to find that the ceremonial calendar traditionally dominates Hopi life in all its sectors. Given the subordination of all daily activities to religion, we are constrained to handle our discussion of the role of women with consistent regard to this referent.

For the Hopi, as for the Iroquois, the basic familial unit is the extended family organized on the principle of matrilineal descent; matri-local residence patterns are adhered to. The women provide the basis of stability and continuity in the Hopi household: “the household revolves about a central and continuing core of women; the men are peripheral, with divided residences and loyalties. They grow up in one household but live most of their adult lives in their wives’ households” (Eggan 1950:30). Within the household unit, women are the controlling figures:

They own the house, are responsible for the preparation and distribution of food, make all the important decisions, and care for the ritual possessions of the family. The oldest woman of the household enjoys the most respect, and the members of the unit look to her for instructions and seek her advice in times of trouble. (Dozier 1970:137)

Sons-in-law are expected to provide the economic support of the households of their wives, but are exempted from providing their all-important ritual support since in the latter duty their first obligation is to their own natal household.

It has often been stated that Hopi women are a controlling force in the “domestic sphere,” while the men’s activities are attuned both to the household unit (in providing for its economic survival) and to “wider interests” that extend “beyond these localized groups to the clan and associational structures in which they play an important and significant role, in contrast to their position in the household” (Eggan 1950:45). Schlegel (1973:451), for example, states:

The woman’s life revolves around the domestic sphere, and her domestic training begins early and is markedly increased during adolescence. The man’s life revolves around two spheres: the domestic, in which he participates principally as provider, performing almost all of the subsistence activity, and the public, in which he takes one or more ceremonial and possibly political roles.

I do not question the validity of the statement that Hopi women’s lives revolve around the household and are oriented to the domestic sphere; as
previously stated, my objection lies in the potential problem posed by this kind of analytical dichotomy when it is posed without qualifications: specifically, that emphasis is placed on the separateness of the sexes to the extent that one begins to assume that their respective activities bear little or no relationship to one another. I feel it is as important to view these roles and activities as reciprocal and complementary, and therefore vitally necessary, to the maintenance of the society as a whole.

Parsons (1939:20) notes that "ownership of Hopi fields descend[s] within the maternal family or clan, the clan mother having the duty to settle disputes." She makes no explicit statement about the nature of ownership of land by individual women. Women's participation in the cultivation of large fields is limited; only if planting falls behind schedule, or at harvest time when extra hands are needed to complete the labor, do they participate in the important agricultural work. It is evident that women's decision-making powers in Hopi society are largely confined to activities and relationships within the household and to affairs relating directly to members of their own nuclear family. They have an equal voice with their husbands in selecting ceremonial parents for their sons, and the choice is entirely in their hands where their daughters are concerned. Only women who occupy the position of head woman of a clan exercise prerogatives that extend beyond the household and their immediate families. Titiev (1944:19) notes that the head woman of one particular clan commands greater respect and "is also very influential in helping her brother, who is the head man of the clan, choose and train the ablest of her sons to be his successor." Parsons (1936:XXXVII) says that women clan chiefs and clan mothers are "important throughout the ceremonial life." On the whole, however, it would appear that by virtue of her rather limited economic contribution, a Hopi woman carries little weight in ceremonial or political decision-making. It is only when her high position within the matrilineal complex warrants it that she is able to participate more fully in extra-domestic affairs.

One factor, however, aids in redressing the balance of the critical roles of men and women. Eggnan (1966:126), noting that the household is "of more enduring importance to women" than to men, also states that "without a household to support him a man cannot carry out his ceremonial duties properly in Hopi society." This underscores the significance of the domestic labor provided by the women; the vital reciprocity illustrated here lends support to the idea that the Hopi indeed do not divide themselves into a world of men's work independent of that of women's work. The significance of women's control over food resources once again becomes evident. Parsons states: "food is a medium of exchange. . . . Among Hopi, in particular, there is a constant interchange of service and food." Furthermore, "all the crops are thought of as belonging to the women of the household" (Parsons 1939:24, 39). The person in
charge of any activity, whether it is harvesting or an initiation ceremony, is obligated to provide food for all participants, and is thus ultimately dependent on his wife, mother, or sister. Women depend upon men for economic support in the maintenance of the household and men depend on the household, controlled by women, for support in their important ceremonial duties. It has been noted previously that men return to their natal households for ceremonial occasions; it should be added that a wife is obligated to help her husband’s sisters and his other clanswomen on such occasions with tasks of corn-grinding, cooking, and piki (wafer bread)-making (Eggan 1966:126). Wives are also obligated, of course, to be the primary providers of the same services for their own brothers.

Outside the household unit, we do not find organized work groups of women equivalent to the mutual aid societies of Iroquois women. The need for these is obviated by the fact that labor contributions outside the household are minimal. The Katcina cult, together with several religious sodalities or associations, comprise the major aspects of the religious life of the Hopi; the Katcina cult is an integral part of all of the Western Pueblos, and children of both sexes are initiated into it between the ages of six and ten. Other ceremonial associations, in which membership is either assigned or voluntary, include curing or medicine societies, and those concerned with social control, rainmaking, the hunt, and war. Most of them are constituted solely of males, but a few have exclusively female membership. These associations are “owned and managed” by the lineage and clan organizations. The participation of women in these associations is limited compared to that of the men. Parsons (1939:947) notes that “where clanship, matrilineal clanship, prevails and figures in religion as among the Hopi . . . , women have a larger part and interest in ceremonial.” Specifically, “fetishes are kept or ‘handed’ within the maternal family and looked after by the women, and throughout the ceremonial life women have more functions to perform, both ritualistic and housewifely.”

CONCLUSIONS

In the two societies examined here, the activities of men and women overlap to a greater or lesser extent. Women in Iroquois society both act as a controlling element in the household unit and figure significantly in the making of decisions that affect the wider society, particularly in the area of political organization. Women in Hopi society exercise similar control in the household, but have more limited influence in the process of actual decision-making; however, those who occupy high clan positions are not without authority in the public sector, and women participate in the society-wide ceremonial life either through their own associations or through some of the men’s ritual activities that include
them. Their small role in making decisions affecting public welfare is linked to their limited economic contribution in basic subsistence activities.

I would seriously doubt that the public/domestic dichotomy can be established as a "universal." For every society in which is found "a radical break between the life of men—as reflected in their politics, separate sleeping quarters, and ritual—and the life of the domestic group" (Rosaldo 1974:26-27), another society may be cited in which there is no such radical separation and in which the life of men and that of the domestic group are coextensive and interdependent. Even if—as Schlegel (1973:452) claims—the Hopi themselves see their spheres of activity as being divided into the public one controlled by men and the domestic one controlled by women, there are many ways in which these spheres interrelate; certainly reciprocal services are provided from one to support the other. The use that has been made of the public/domestic division has been toward demonstrating the separation of the sexes rather than areas in which they work cooperatively or in complementary relationships. I am not arguing for the adoption of a theoretical perspective that would simply refer to the reciprocal activities of the sexes; I am calling for a balance to be struck between the two conceptions.

Quain (1961:255-256), in his summary of the economic organization of the Iroquois, provides an example of what I consider to be a more balanced rendering of the Iroquois case:

Throughout the field of economic activity, therefore, cooperative habit transcended the demands of environment and the requirements of technology. Though technologies were in most cases congenial to individual operation, the means and ends were cooperative except for the prestige factor. In spite of sharp sexual division of labor backed by strong emotional attitudes, the economic activities of men and those of women supplemented each other. Women worked the fields and thus supplied the community with essential foods while men, by maintaining the peace, made it possible for women’s work to proceed. In the very difficult tasks concerned with agriculture and village building, men and women, each performing their share of work, cooperated for the common benefit of all. [Italics are mine.]

A similar case could be made for the Hopi, as is evident in Parsons’s (1936:LII) conclusion to her introduction of Stephen’s journal:

On the whole sex partnership is more complete among the Hopi even than in Pueblo circles elsewhere, and the position of the woman is superior.... Cooperation between men and women, the interests of old and young, provided for or safeguarded, a self-sustaining economy. [Italics are mine.]

In sum, I doubt that the conceptual dichotomy of women’s domestic world versus men’s public world helps to elucidate the dynamics of reciprocal behavior; indeed, it is my opinion that it ultimately obscures the importance of the complementary functions of men and women. The reciprocal con-
tributions and obligations of both sexes are unifying rather than divisive elements, and they illuminate the interrelationships between the economic contributions of both sexes and their corresponding positions in society.

NOTES

1. For similar conceptualizations, see Sanday (1973, 1974) and Schlegel (1972); for alternative—though not necessarily antithetical—operational definitions of the societal status of women, see D'Andrade (1966) and Sacks (1975).

2. Certain terms basic to the present discussion should be clarified. Concise definitions for the concepts of power and authority provided by Fried (1967:13) are useful: "Authority is taken here to refer to the ability to channel the behavior of others in the absence of the threat or use of sanctions. Power is the ability to channel the behavior of others by threat or use of sanctions."

3. The control over a basic resource, food, is underscored by Fried's observation that in simple societies men and women do not fight over land, but conflicts may arise over food: "No effective means exist in simple societies to restrict access of individuals to land. But with food, different amounts are found in different hands—based on differential skill, diligence, perseverance, luck, what have you" (Fried 1967:72). Thus, the control women exert over the production and distribution of food in horticultural societies is of critical concern.

REFERENCES CITED

Bamberger, Joan

Beauchamp, William M.

Brown, Judith K.

Carr, Lucien

D'Andrade, Roy G.
SEX ROLE COMPLEMENTARITY

Dozier, Edward P.

Drake, Christine M. S.

Eggan, Fred

Fried, Morton H.

Goldenweiser, Alexander A.

Hewitt, J. N. B.

Jenness, Diamond

Lafitau, Joseph F.

Leacock, Eleanor

Martin, M. Kay and Barbara Voorhies

Morgan, Lewis H.

Murdock, George P.

Noon, John A.
Norbeck, Edward  

Parsons, Elsie Clews  

Parsons, Elsie Clews, ed.  

Quain, B.H.  

Richards, Cara B.  

Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist  

Rosaldo, Michelle Zimbalist and Louise Lamphere, eds.  

Sacks, Karen  

Sanday, Peggy R.  


Schlegel, Alice  


Speck, Frank G.  

Sites, Sara H.  
1905 Economics of the Iroquois. Bryn Mawr College Monographs 1, no. 3.

Titiev, Mischa  

Webster, Paula  