

SEX ROLES AND SEX SYMBOLS  
IN TIKOPIA SOCIETY<sup>1</sup>

Raymond Firth

Professor, London School of Economics. London, England.

Most anthropological studies of women's roles nowadays want to make some point of evaluation. Many are concerned to show the structural inequalities in women's position as compared with that of men, and men's discrimination against women in the control of resources and exercise of power. This paper too is evaluative but in a different way: my aim is to show how in a society with relatively few natural resources but a male-oriented power structure of some sophistication, simple models of inequality, discrimination or exploitation are inadequate. Any anthropological account of sex relationships is bound to be colored by the position and experience of the observer. But I contend that even allowing for some male bias in my reporting and analysis, the empirical data from Tikopia reveal how a concept of a complex set of interrelated variables is the best way to look at the intricate system of sex roles, statuses and symbols in the community.

Much of the empirical material referred to in this essay has already been presented in my studies of Tikopia kinship, economics and religion.<sup>2</sup> But it is a general conclusion, hardly to be challenged, that the mass of ethnographic writing until quite recently has fallen short in its examination of the position of women. In the light of this fact, it has seemed pertinent for me to ask myself how Tikopia women have appeared in my accounts of the society. Three questions come to mind at once: has there been in my publications an under-reporting of Tikopia women's activities, attitudes and ideas? Has there been an under-valuing of the significance of Tikopia women in the life of their society - apart from their obvious domestic roles? Has there been an under-recognition of the degree to which Tikopia women have been dominated by men in social and economic as well as political and religious affairs?

Answers to these questions must be to some extent a matter of interpretation, but they can be judged primarily by the quality of the evidence and the manner in which it has been submitted. A more difficult question, with the answer much more a matter of opinion, is what has been the significance of certain institutionalized procedures traditionally reserved for women - or for some women - in social and ritual fields? Are these to be seen as a female assertion of role, a positive contribution to the totality of social behavior and concepts; a kind of balancing mechanism to offset the major roles taken by men; or a kind of consolation prize, a patronizing, sketchy simulacrum of privilege without real power? In

brief, complementarity, compensation or concession? Here the interpretation depends partly on what concept the analyst has of the degree and quality of male control in the overall situation.

In summary response to the three questions I have posed earlier, I think that my descriptions have given ample evidence of Tikopia women's activities, and done justice to their significance, while making clear that they were consistently overshadowed by men in the structures of power and decision-making. But where my treatment has been deficient is in the portrayal of women's ideas and feelings about all this; not that I failed to record women's opinions as I heard them, very freely expressed both on public occasions and in more private informal situations. In most set interviews men were my informants, but I had many discussions with men in which their wives or daughters also participated, and a few interviews in which senior women talked with me alone. I spent much time in Tikopia households just listening to the flow of conversation with men or women in the lead according to occasion. In addition, I was a house-guest, for ten days in 1973, of my friend Ishmael Tuke (then Headmaster of Alangaula School, Uki) and his wife Lily, daughter of a very old friend of mine (who appears as Vaitere in some of my earlier publications (1964 [1930]: 115-16), and later became Pa Niukapu). From all of this I got a great deal of female opinion. But the views of women, while apparently freely expressed, did seem to be offered within the general framework of ideas presented by men. I had no feeling that any particular critical views of Tikopia women were inhibited by their consciousness of male structural dominance, but rather that the criticisms they did have were levelled at matters of detail rather than at matters of principle, or if they referred to broad principles, did so in terms of the common stereotypes. Women's jokes about men paralleled men's jokes about women; women, like men, stigmatized the theft of food in times of shortage by women as well as by men, and women of commoner stock spoke in low resentful tones, as did their menfolk, of the expropriations by men of chiefly families. On personal relations with men and on the qualities of men in general, Tikopia women could be scornful, even bitter - as I indicate later. But on the institutional structure and political and religious ideology they seemed to share the men's patterns of ideas and values. Since men were the leading actors, teachers and transmitters of knowledge in those spheres it was primarily from men that I got my major formulations and evaluations. What I failed to do - partly because of pressures of time in covering so many aspects of this institutionally and ideationally complex society - was to seek out the women's views more positively and more systematically. Looking back, I see that I should and could have done this in three areas in particular: their views of the asymmetry between the institutional roles of men and their own; of the nature and validity of their own institutional roles; and of

the significance of their own peculiar sphere of female experience, pregnancy and childbirth. Put another way - how far did they see their role in reproduction affecting their role in production? From occasional fairly frank discussions with women, e.g. about their miscarriages, I have no reason to think that anything I have written distorts their views. But my evidence is not sufficient to allow me to present any very convincing generalizations about Tikopia women's views from direct deep inquiry.

While lacking this direct inquiry, I still think it possible to give some indication of women's ideas of their own roles, drawn from their incidental comments, my long observation of their behavior in a variety of circumstances, and songs composed by Tikopia women. There is one qualification: my essay refers only to what may be broadly called the traditional Tikopia way of life, as I observed it during my visits in 1928-29, 1952 and 1966. During the last quarter of a century in particular, processes of modernization have become manifest in the behavior and outlook of Tikopia women, some of whom have been engaging in wage-labor abroad and many receiving education. From my experience among Tikopia as late as 1973, however, it seems that many traditional customs and attitudes remain and indeed are fostered by present-day Tikopia, so this essay is not a mere historical study. It is an attempt to present a synoptic account of the main social implications of sex difference in a largely male-oriented framework of relations. While it may help to sharpen some of the more general issues in the perspective of modern anthropological interest, it may also serve as a base-line analysis from which to examine the development of Tikopia women's roles and statuses in the future.

#### ROLE DICHOTOMY AND MALE PRIVILEGE

In studying Tikopia sex roles three features stand out markedly: the clarity with which the sexes were distinguished socially, right from the outset of the life of any individual; the dichotomy of social and economic roles of the sexes, with clear demarcation of most major tasks; and the definite asymmetry of leadership roles, with overt male privilege in political and religious spheres.

Observationally, distinction between the sexes was clear from birth through early years of childhood because children in Tikopia went naked when young, and their anatomical topography let them be classified at once. As they grew up, distinctions of dress and of hair style reinforced the division: girdle for males and skirt for females; (traditionally) long hair for males, cropped hair for females. Historically, a few girls grew their hair long, not seemingly in protest against their condition but in a rather

daring "tomboy" assimilation to the male norm. This action highlighted rather than obscured the sex differentiation because it attracted jeers from the young men.

Linguistically, the sharp sex distinction was conceptualized by use of the opposed terms tangata - male - and fafine - female - through all stages of the life process. Instead of the conventional English question "Is it a boy or a girl?" at birth, Tikopia asked the equivalent of "Is it a male or a female?" Male terms, for son, young man, husband, did diversify, but terms for daughter (mafine), young woman (fafine taka), and wife (nofine) all embodied some part of the "female" referent.

In economic and social terms, male and female children were treated alike as assets or liabilities: they were equally welcomed by their parents and other kin; and in former times if there was a threat to food supplies there was an equal possibility that they might suffer infanticide at birth.<sup>3</sup> But the dichotomy of their roles begins to be emphasized almost at once. In the special rites of the Fire by which the mother's kin traditionally celebrated the birth of a first child, the infant was formally urged to be diligent in the tasks of its own sex. Purely magical as far as the babe was concerned, since it was uttered the day after the birth, the long invocation listing the appropriate occupations reaffirmed the traditional sex values in economic terms. As the child grew, technical training increased the differentiation. Boys beat coconut sinnet husk to make cord, while girls beat barkcloth to make sheets and garments for both sexes; boys used pole nets on the reef and handled canoes in the open sea, while girls used a hand net on the reef and normally did not work canoes at all. In agriculture, while boys did heavy clearing and helped to break up the soil for planting, girls did more weeding; boys climbed coconut and areca palms while girls did not. In crafts, boys might have done woodwork, whereas girls plaited pandanus and coconut leaf mats. The skills thus learned were practiced throughout adult life, and some served as symbolic markers of sex roles in general. Thus in a myth of the origin of Tikopia, the primal pair were discovered in stereotypical occupations, the man beating out coconut husk and the woman plaiting a mat.

In recreation, there were many games common to children of both sexes, and young men and young women mingled freely in many kinds of dances. But just as in bodily adornment, such as tattooing, each sex had some distinguishing features, so also in games and dances there were types normally restricted to one sex - usually the male. Wrestling and singlestick were male games - though in 1929 I did see a couple of girls playing at singlestick in a mild imitation of the men. In dancing, a critical index was the use of wooden bats or clubs, which were manipulated only by men, usually in dance types

reserved for them. In the domestic sphere, spatial distribution reflected the sex differentiation, with an indication of a ritual tilt towards the superior position of men. Men occupied the "leading" side of the floor space, where traditionally the graves of male ancestors were marked by special floor mats and where ritual was performed; women occupied the "back of the oven," near the fireplaces, on the side towards the cookhouse. Eating and sleeping and most ordinary daily affairs showed male-female alignment or grouping in such terms. In former times, when the pagan religion operated, with its temples for worship of gods and male ancestors, females of any age tended to be restricted to secular dwellings for the most part, and to enter or occupy the more sacred houses for very limited purposes, whereas males of any age could move about much more freely and were exclusive participants in many rites. With a few significant exceptions, the major clan temples were male preserves.

In ceremonial and ritual spheres women tended to have roles separate from men. In achievement rites (a term I prefer in some contexts to transition rites - 1967a:76) there was no female parallel to male superincision, though there were celebrations for both girls and boys of "first" in sightseeing expeditions, and both sexes were allowed to receive protective or therapeutic "laying on of hands" by chiefs or elders. (Where the differentials came was in the details of performance). After marriage the reception of the bride by her new affines differed from that of the groom by his new affines. Among the detailed procedures, the bride was led by the hand by a woman of her husband's natal household to take the top covering off the earth oven; the groom was given a formal invitation by his father-in-law to come to the bride's natal household and made formal obeisance when he did so. Neither event had any direct equivalent in the treatment of the other sex. Again in symbolic terms, initial presentations from the household of the groom consisted of male property - pandanus mats and barkcloth. ("Property" is in the sense of being primarily associated in manufacture and use with respective sexes; as assets these items were treated as household or lineage goods). The birth of a child was an occasion for a very clear separation of roles. The Tipokia have no equivalent of a *couvade*, whereby a man symbolically simulates or shares a woman's labor pains. Concern for the parturient woman was paramount; she was tended by other women and the role of men was essentially supportive. The husband was normally present at the birth, ready with what I am sure the attendant women regarded as unnecessary advice, while the woman's brothers, in an unusual practice for a Polynesian society, were allowed to sit at her back to give her support with their hands and feet as she strained in the delivery. After the birth, the mother was smeared with turmeric and given other special attentions by her female kin and those of her husband. But if the special rite of the Fire was performed, males reasserted their formal roles and

it was the woman's mother's brother, not one of her female kin, who recited the invocation, and another of her male kin who held the flaming torch. In funeral ceremonies, procedures were similar for both females and males, differentiation for the most part being based upon rank rather than upon sex. Spouse-laments were composed and sung by husbands for dead wives, as by wives for dead husbands. In one particular, sex asymmetry and male privilege were traditionally manifest - a widow was expected to break through the hold in her ear lobe (used for flower decoration) as a token of fidelity to her husband's memory and indication that she would not remarry, whereas no such sign was expected of a widower. This was in accord with the traditional Tikopia practice of allowing polygyny but not polyandry.

It is evident that in some of the spheres already mentioned Tikopia role separation was accompanied by a scope of action permitted to males but denied to females. In discussing sex roles it is important for an anthropologist to describe situations in terms of such relative scopes of action permitted to males and to females, before evaluation as issues of "privilege," "discrimination," "exploitation," "sexism" can be seriously accepted.

In several aspects of marriage Tikopia society traditionally gave men a latitude not given to women. Either sex could take the initiative in courting, with complementary exchanges of favors, and either party could make or reject an offer of marriage. But final action was reserved to the man: if a woman proved obdurate in refusing marriage to him, or even if unwittingly she appeared to him or to his kin to be a suitable wife, she might be seized and borne off as a bride, with a considerable show of violence. Women could not resort to similar behavior, however. This asymmetry of roles in creating a marriage seemed to have been generally accepted by Tikopia women; subsequent flight from the husband or divorce were rare. There seemed also to have been general female acquiescence to polygyny, not uncommon among men of rank, though occasionally the objections of a wife either aborted a proposed polygynous union or broke it up some time after establishment.

In the political field, Tikopia women were severely restricted. All chiefs, executants and lineage elders were male, and all formal decisions were pronounced by them and primarily made by them. Women may have had some political influence, but they had almost no political power. Titles such as "Female Chief," confined to only a handful of women, were tokens of rank, but the sphere in which they were significant was ritual rather than political (1967a:63, 65, 86, 93, 100). In the religious field likewise women had only very limited scope for action. It is interesting that women could be spirit mediums, and as such could serve as a purported mouthpiece for male as well as female spirits. An implication from this might be that

the priestly role, requiring training and a conscious commitment could be controlled effectively by the society, whereas the trance phenomena of mediumship developed with much more spontaneity and lack of awareness on the part of individuals, and wherefore were not so easily reducible to rule by the society. Yet this interpretation is not wholly satisfactory, because on the complete conversion of all pagan Tikopia to Christianity all spirit mediumship, by women as well as men, ceased after a short interval. It seems then as if the phenomena were controllable after all by social norms and expectations, and the former freedom of action enjoyed by Tikopia female mediums had some positive male support, however, implicit, and was not merely an admission of failure of control. Yet any woman's role as spirit medium was minor in ritual affairs as compared with the roles of men. The "official" spirit mediums of the four clans, i.e. of the major clan gods, were always men. Women were of great importance in religious matters - they beat out the barkcloth and plaited the coconut leaf mats which provided offerings to gods and ancestors; they took part in most of the oven work which produced the necessary food accompaniments to ritual; they performed a number of tasks regarded as essential steps in sacred performances. But as they did these things or after they had done them, their menfolk recited the formulae, made the decisions about timing of events and quantity of supplies to be mobilized, and were credited with the power of control over spirits. Status in religious matters was almost completely a male prerogative.

#### PRAGMATIC AND SYMBOLIC SEX CONTEST

In the face of all of this male latitude in formal social action, and apparent male dominance in so many spheres, it may seem surprising to find, in the social world of the unmarried, an area of organized female challenge and contest. In tikopia, marriage was a watershed in social life. Once married, men and women were expected to behave soberly, to be circumspect in speech, to accept responsibility, and to discipline their sex lives. Adultery in a married woman was a very serious offense, and in a married man was disapproved, though not to the same degree. Before people married, however, they had considerable freedom, provided they fulfilled their normal economic and social obligations. The social world of the unmarried had a label on its own (te taka), expressing a whole set of ideas and emotions concerned with companionship of both sexes, dancing and other recreations, bodily adornment, expeditions and communal meals, sexual attraction, competition and intrigue. Friendship with embers of one's own sex and sweethearting with members of the other sex, were common modes of association. Most of the people concerned were young, but since marriage rather than physical maturity was the entry to full social adulthood, some bachelors and spinsters of various ages made up the company and

gave the peer grouping more than a purely age component.

The world of the unmarried was characterized by two leading principles, cross-cutting each other. One was the solidarity of each sex group. The young men (nga tamaroa) were separated by dress, labor tasks and future responsibilities from the young women (nga fafine taka), and the two groups operated independently in many respects. But the other principle was that of individual sex attraction, which drew young men and women out of their groups on a personal basis, and which ultimately led them to abandon altogether the world of the unmarried. Such abandonment was marked by scenes of formal farewell and regret on both sides.

As the principle of solidarity within the sex groups was cross-cut by that of personal attraction between individuals of each one, stresses often resulted. A most interesting manifestation of the operation of these principles and the way in which these stresses may have been partly resolved, or partly exacerbated, was given by the dance songs which emerged from the ranks of the unmarried. Many Tikopia, of both sexes and in many situations, composed laments and dance songs, the latter often being ironic or serious. But the dance songs composed by unmarried people, male or female, were often of the type termed tauangutu, which could be translated literally as "war of the lips," and which referred as a rule to members of the opposite sex, either specifically or in general. Commonly these songs were critical, used a lot of standard poetic phraseology, but were hard to interpret because they embodied many analogic references, some of which demanded a knowledge of the particular context in order to be understood. Tikopia songs were meant for action, not just to relieve the composer's feelings or be listened to. If a young man composed a tauangutu against women, or against some woman who had spurned him, he taught it to his companions, and it served as a theme song the next time young men of the locality formed a dance party. Commonly, young women were also present as spectators or as a conjoined party, and it was usually not long before they presented an ironic song of their own, danced in reply. Young men and women often danced together in a common group, to songs of a neutral kind, but any individual with a modicum of creative talent and a grudge to work off could raise a challenge to the other sex and easily transform a peaceful evening into one of an exchange of chanted insults.

There were several striking features about these song contests. There was the remarkable speed of response by one side to the other, often a counter-song being issued on the spot, soon after the initial tauangutu had been heard. There was a versatility of expression, often ingenious even though so much stock poetic material was available. There was the very clear image-delineation of the two sexes, as seen each through its own eyes and in the eyes of the



other. There was the very definite recognition of equality between men and women in song-making and expression of ideas, with the implied right of women to be as critical of men as the reverse. Tikopia had songs of affection - between spouses, from son or daughter to father or mother, between siblings... and so on, but no erotic love songs (see Firth 1936:517 - A sad song of regret from a discarded mistress). These tauangutu between the sexes (there are other kinds of tauangutu also) might almost be described as hate-songs rather than love-songs. They very often had an erotic content, but it was produced by images of vigorous scorn rather than tenderness.

Thus situations existed where women, and young women at that, were entitled to hurl abuse in song at young men, and to be repaid only in kind, although private retaliation was said sometimes to occur between sweethearts, one of whom had been outraged by the jibes publicly offered. The semi-formalized exchange of taunts had public approval and was not simply a covert convention of peer group relationships. On occasion the "war of the lips" reached district proportions, with the emphasis on the dancing rather than on the jeering. Then, in the sophisticated way that the Tikopia managed such affairs, with their conceptions of social balance, the seniors could take part; married men then danced in support of their daughters and other young female kin, and married women danced in support of their sons and allied young men. This might have had the effect of drawing the sting out of some of the songs and helping to preserve amity in district relations. But it emphasized the fact that here was an area where male privileges did not operate, and where women's candid opinions of men could be openly expressed.

A few examples of these jeering songs will illustrate the manner in which each sex characterised itself and the other. In general, the image which young men wished to present was that they swagger around taking the favors of the girls or rejecting them, while the girls soiled by loss of virginity, were voracious for sex and marriage. The image which the girls wished to present was that of pride in their own virginity, which was continually under pressure from the men, who were ridiculous in their timorousness, ugliness and feebleness of sex organs. In reality of course the situation was much more diversified; these "official" stereotypes for public production were underlain by much more complex appreciations of standards of beauty and sex attraction and the interplay of personal preference. But the stereotypes were there, for use in the never-ending game of providing sexual stimulus by irritation.

An old song by a man set out the main theme in common imagery:

You are proud of your canoe  
 So fine  
 You said you'll delight in voyaging abroad  
 But it travels wildly to and fro  
 The vessel yaws  
 When paddled to the deep-sea fishing ground

Here is a metaphor for loss of virginity. The girl boasts of her immaculate body, but in fact she has had relations with men on this side and on that; she has been to the area where men let down their fishing lines to the depths, that is, her depths have been plumbed in intercourse. A typical song from the girls' side was:

Men are the doubles of the large land crab  
 Crawling to the oven house (for scraps of food)  
 They tell lies that they're going for a stroll  
 And creep instead to a woman walking in the path

Here the themes of men crawling, and lying, are opposed to the male attitude that men are upright and frank in their pursuit of women. Another women's song stressed the urgency of sex for a man:

The girls get together and talk  
 And the lad is rejected  
 You sit swallowing your spittle in your dwelling

He is spoiling for a fight, he is getting angry  
 Rattling round inside with his desire to marry

Here the image is of the peer group of girls mocking an unsuccessful suitor, who can hardly contain himself because of his sexual desires. ("Marry" may mean the contraction of a proper union, but can also mean just copulation).

Many of these tauangutu were tauvi, "bought" or "exchanged" (cf. the English expression, "to trade insults") by picking up themes alluded to in the earlier song. Thus a song from the mens' side referred to a girl who was "constantly watched by men," i.e. who attracted attention, and had many lovers:

Why not go and sleep in the sweethearts' house?  
 They (the lovers) troop along like soldiers.

Here the English word soldier was used to mean as we might say, "she has an army of lovers." Having listened to this jibe the girls retorted by claiming that young men found them irresistible, and pressed in at double the numbers envisaged by the young mens' song:

They come speeding along in two ranks  
 The sweethearting house of young men  
 They do troop like soldiers

Here were several series of songs and replies, sometimes multiples. A song from the young mens' side likened a woman to an automobile:

Woman who's been sitting there  
 Jump up then on to your vehicle  
Motorcar which goes carrying  
 Men, speeding in the interior of the land

Men look at it from afar  
 Young men look at it from afar  
 Your vessel with the wheel  
 That has gone round and round  
 At the side of the young men

Woman is a vehicle which carries men; young men look at it from a distance but refuse to enter it, though it rolls along invitingly near (it has carried too many men in its time). To this the girls replied in a kind of reverse analogy: a man draws near to a girl to be his sweetheart but she frightens him away - the opposite of young men refusing to mount the motorcar. After refusal young men go in darkness among the trees and are laughed at by the girls; their talk is like the wind which whistles:

You have drawn near to me  
 Hooray! the lad  
 Comes but has taken fright

Your vessel has gone in the dark  
 Has been snorted at, has whistled among the unmarried  
 But snorted at

To which song the men replied:

Ho! the canoe that has hastened around  
 Comes in the path, not invisible  
 But pendulous hither

Your white nose shell that you persist in  
 Setting up above  
 Has been laughed at by the young men  
 Let it drop and lay it down

Here the vehicle/canoe imagery is used again - the young woman has borne many lovers, as can be seen from her pendulous breasts as

she comes down the path. (Tikopia women till recently went bare to the waist.) Then the image is altered, to the symbol of virginity, the white shell which a maiden put at her nostril as a dance decorations; the young men know it is a sham, and laugh, so she may as well remove it. To this the girls made answer in proud assertion of superiority:

But the lad is a spook  
 Thrown to the spirits in the Rubbish Pool

I rejoice in my flower bud, stuck in my hair  
 I gesture with both arms for my nose shell

The theme of virginity was redoubled by mention of the flower bud symbol (bud in contrast to the opened flower). It was also re-emphasized by allusion to the movements of hands and arms in the dance, when the performer, proud of his skill, became the cynosure of all eyes. Since the dance was normally performed by a man, the girls were implying that as far as sexual purity went, they were more entitled to boast than he. The depreciation of men was further indicated by a mythological reference to a pool in the spirit world into which souls of no reputation were cast after death.

In a pair of songs on another occasion the imagery was borrowed in part from themes met with in the world outside Tikopia, after some men had gone off to work and handled new objects. The jeering song of the men ran:

We young men sit there  
 And we keep on laughing  
 The young girl with bent bow  
 A box of iron

Put aside your gun  
 He'll insert the little cartridge

The allegation here - probably no more than formal - is that the girl has become pregnant (by analogy with the bent bow). "Iron" to the Tikopia signifies hardness; it can be knocked about without damage, so the "box of iron" is the much-used vulva. In our vernacular, the girl is a "tough proposition." The "gun" was explained as a metaphor for the girl's skirt, presumably her defense; let her put it aside, for the man is about to plug the orifice with his "cartridge." The metaphors may be somewhat mixed, but the taunt is obvious - the girl is no better than an "easy lay."

The girls' reply to this was to accuse the men of seeking to seduce them, and to reaffirm their own fastidious preservation of their chastity.

They cry to me to give it to them  
 The pound notes so plentiful among the maidens  
 I won't give it away  
 I'll keep it for my rejoicing  
 In the dance of my peer group

That is the aromatic head circlet  
 That is there, and the maidens  
 Will not let it be given away

Like the men, the girls introduced a foreign notion into their imagery, but one which represented treasure. Unlike the Western ideology, in which womens' virtue is sold for money, these Tikopia girls saw an analogy to virtue in money, which to Solomon Islands wage-earners (at that period at least) was a precious thing. Men seek girls' treasure, which they will not yield. Then the imagery is changed back to the more familiar symbolism of young womanhood, the head circlet, which a lover might demand but which the song is not willing to grant.

Another pair of songs focusses upon girls' breasts. The men began:

On, oh, there's moaning  
 A girls is roasted by the fire

She comes and dances furiously here  
 With her basis in soft dangling breasts

This was a slanderous accusation of pregnancy and abortion - hot stones from the fire are laid on the girl's belly to induce a miscarriage, a painful process. But despite this the girl appears in the dance with bravado. Her dangling breasts betray that she is no longer a virgin, and she should dance in a subdued manner. To this charge the girls retorted with a mixture of denial and pointed justification.

They grow and stand up  
 As ornaments of maidenhood  
 They stand there rejoicing  
 Now you slander breasts indeed!

You are the thing  
 Who lived thereby at another time!

In other words, firm young breasts are our prized tokens of virginity, but even if they begin to sag, it was from such dangling breasts that you young men suckled as babes! (As far as I know,

the young men found no reply to this!)

A final example gives a pair of songs in which insults were exchanged using somewhat different imagery. The men sang:

The girl seeks a reputation  
But the sago rib grating  
Gives what sort of a dried areca nut?

The girl looks down  
Now it's nicely smooth  
But it's thin, it's thin  
The vessel of the maiden

The theme here is the girl's pride in her sexual equipment, but its inadequacy from a male point of view. Areca nut, each the size of a top thumb joint, is sometimes dried and preserved on a little grating of sago pinnule stalks; it comes away somewhat shrunken. The analogy here is to the clitoris in its bed of pubic hair. By comparison with male genitalia, the song implies, what has a girl to boast about - a tiny shrunken nut which anyway is hidden beneath her smooth contours when she seeks to admire it? The counter-song of the girls uses the tu quoque theme quite ingeniously, catching up the smoothness jibe and re-interpreting it.

A man is an iron slab  
Just a platform, that's all  
And he wants to get a reputation

Laughed at by women  
Your girdle at the waist  
Why doesn't it incline inwards?

The essence of the taunt in this song is that if women have no sex member of any size at least they have "curves" in general. By contrast men have no buttocks, a ridiculous slabby profile, flat as a canoe platform.

The symbolism in many of these songs is crude, and the boasts and taunts are stock assertions, not intended to be taken literally. Sometimes the jibes got too near the bone, especially when the singers and audience realized that some one person was being aimed at, and ill feeling was aroused. But for the most part the exchanges of insults were good-humored, and both sides were quick to appreciate clever repartee. From the point of view of sex role definition, the songs clearly helped to establish some stereotypes, and mark off the opposition between self-image and other-image. They were also part of the process of sex mobilization and sexual arousal leading to pairing off and sweethearting in which the

stereotypes were dissolved and ignored to a considerable degree. Looked at from the women's viewpoint, the songs established very clearly that in this sphere of relationships they were equal to men. Moreover, this equality was no informal accident of occasion but a publicly recognized, institutionalized practice, backed periodically by the the participation of senior men.

The interpretation of this female freedom of insult and challenge in the face of so much male dominance, or at least so much greater male scope for decision-making, is not so clear-cut. It may be argued that this sphere of freedom and contest was very restricted - only recreational, and verbal. It may also be held that it was cathartic - females were given an outlet for expression here just because they were denied so many other outlets in social, political and ritual spheres. So, the argument might run, the expressions of ridicule uttered by women against men in the songs represented only a bogus equality, a kind of tolerance by men of behavior which would never be permitted to recur once women were settled firmly into the domesticity of marriage and children.

In my view, there is something in the catharsis argument, but it applies to men as well as to women. The world of the unmarried was a relatively free world. Men, like women, gave up much of this freedom when they married. Not only were married men expected to comport themselves with dignity and refrain from the gallivanting, gross talk and intrigue of their bachelor status, they also had to assume much heavier social and economic obligations than before, ones which were even more onerous than those assumed by married women. Moreover, such obligations were towards women as well as towards men, affines in particular. So the recreational field of the "war of the lips" with particular reference to sex antagonism was a period of license for men as well as for women, before the sober claims of marriage descended. For women too, as well as men, marriage brought a new status.

#### COMPLEXITY AND ADJUSTMENT IN WOMEN'S ROLES

An adequate description of the roles of Tikopia women as daughter, mistress, wife and mother, and of those of men as son, lover, husband and father is impossible in this essay. But a brief indication of the position of married women will bring out some of the major features of sex roles in maturity. What I hope it will demonstrate is that Tikopia notions of sexual equality have been no sham, and that the avenues for women's expression provided by recreation before marriage reappeared in other more serious social spheres after marriage. These spheres were primarily domestic and transactional, it is true, but they were pervasive.

A critical feature in Tikopia social life was the high status accorded to a married woman. This was encapsulated by the stock expression: "te fafine avanga e tapu" - a married woman is taboo. This meant that no one should commit adultery with her - an offense against her husband - but it also meant that no one should offer her violence of any kind. Though husbands sometimes do beat wives, the reverse also occurred, and such conduct was generally regarded with disapproval. The significance of the traditional expression was brought out most clearly by the role of a married woman as peace-maker. If a quarrel broke out among men, and weapons seized, the intervention of a married woman could be sufficient to alleviate the situation. If she grasped the weapon or the arm of a threatening man, this action immobilized him, and I have heard of an incident in which such an action was specifically given as the reason why a man did not pursue a quarrel. For one of the contestants to strike the married woman in such circumstances would be to go against all the canons of propriety, and I have heard of no cases in which this occurred.

Ties established through married women were of critical importance in Tikopia affairs. The constraints of relationship with affines, which did much to ensure the peaceful conduct of social proceedings, arose equally through the marriage of man or woman. But highly significant relationships depended specifically upon maternal bonds - the relationships of tama tapu, "sacred children," to the male members of their mother's natal lineage. Such relationships were the basis for a continuing series of transactions, of considerable economic importance, throughout the whole lifetime of the tama tapu. For ritual leaders the tie with the mother's lineage allowed them to call upon gods and ancestors of that lineage in a special protective role. And conversely, if there were competition among candidates for chieftainship an electing chief might strive to secure the election of his own tama tapu, with the idea that political and even spiritual benefit might accrue from this tie through a woman of his lineage.

More generally, marriage offered a Tikopia woman a sphere of authority which she could call her own. Convention dictated that husband and wife should defer to each other in domestic matters. But control of household arrangements tended to be very much in the wife's hands, and she bore a considerable responsibility for hospitality towards kinsfolk and other visitors, and consequently for her husband's reputation. In the disposal of household resources, though the ostensible decision was usually taken by the husband, the wife's opinion was usually freely given, often influential and sometimes clinching.

A Tikopia woman, especially a married woman, had also another type of authority role. She was normally masikitanga, paternal



aunt, a status representing not only a father's own sister but also female sibling of any lineage male of the father's kinship grade. As such, a woman had a special aura, a kind of sacredness, for her brother's children. They had to avoid using her personal name, should not curse her or use indecent talk in her presence, and generally treat her with much respect. To some extent she was assimilated in role to the father, and might even have been addressed as "father" if one's own father were dead. It appears that sometimes a ritual leader made his sister the repository of his sacerdotal knowledge if he thought that he might die before his son reached the age of discretion; the boy then was instructed by his paternal aunt in the names of power necessary to his proper performance of ritual invocations.

The pervasiveness of female roles in Tikopia affairs is illustrated by the special provisions for women to carry out critical ritual tasks in the great pagan religious cycle which may be termed the "Work of the Gods." The tasks were of a type normally assigned to women - plaiting mats, fetching baskets of sand to renew grave coverings, plucking large leaves to make oven-cover pads, carrying baskets of fish from reef netting. But the technology was sacralized, raised to a higher plane, by regulations based upon a different conception of women's role than the ordinary one. The women engaged in these tasks were conceived as representing in their own persons a set of spirit manifestations - they were not just ordinary human beings, they were female deities. As such, they were regarded as endowed with dread powers, and thus were not to be interfered with. Hence a prime rule for other participants engaged in the ritual on such occasions was that they must not attempt to talk to the women performing the particular task (1967b:142-43, 241-44, 389-90, 400), and on the whole, as I myself observed, this rule was strictly followed.

The significance of the conceptions of female deities in a religious system dominated by men offers an intriguing problem. Unlike the female deities of some other religious systems those of the Tikopia tended not to be maternal, benevolent or cherishing, but rather fierce, potentially malevolent, protective if appealed to with due precaution, but sexually aggressive and dangerous to health. They corresponded to a symmetrical principle of spirit interference with humanity - just as women were in danger from the sexual assaults of male deities in canoe yards and other sacred places, so men were in danger from the seductions of female deities in similar locations. The symmetry of spirit sex roles was not complete, however. Whereas no male god concerned himself with female occupations, in Tikopia belief, some female deities were regarded as validly invoked for success in male occupations such as canoe voyaging and sea-fishing.

I have given a tentative interpretation along two lines of such

Tikopia conceptions of female deities in a field where men controlled religious ritual (1970:189-98). On the one hand, the worship of these female deities by men would have constituted a kind of compensation to women for their virtual exclusion from religious office and power. They were allowed in the imaginative sphere of spirit status and spirit action some of the authority and dominance denied to them in the pragmatic sphere of ritual. On the other hand, the attributions of sexual aggression and malevolence to these female deities indicated a recognition by Tikopia men of the destructive forces of sexuality and an attempt to displace responsibility for these as far as possible by insisting that symbolically women bear their share of liability.

#### SUMMARY

In reply to my initial query: do the special spheres of women's roles and interests in Tikopia indicate complementarity, compensation or concession by men, I opt for an interpretation in terms of complementarity. Superficially, Tikopia men enjoyed greater advantage in economic, political and ritual operations, but it is not clear that women suffered to any measurable extent in real terms, i.e. in food, housing, property, opportunities for expression in social or recreational matters. Much depends in this interpretation on the values attached to the concept of responsibility. Ostensible decisions have not rested in Tikopia women's hands, but if the taking of decisions is regarded as a burden, demanding though, energy and judgment on often difficult issues - and it seems evident that some Tikopia leaders saw matters in such light - then Tikopia women may well have been content with the general distribution of roles. Privately and domestically they had a considerable freedom and used their opportunities with gusto. Publicly they were in more subordinate positions for some institutionalized procedures, but had their specific niches for others, and behind the scenes they exercised a great deal of authority.

This kind of interpretation may seem lame to any ardent feminist, and it may be inadequate to characterize the present-day situation of Tikopia womanhood. But in traditional Tikopia society, unlike modern Western society, women were not competing for the same jobs as men. They had no need to insist that their menfolk help with the cooking, and with looking after the children, because this was what all men already did (with the exception of the four chiefs, who did not cook). Their female career was already at hand, dovetailed closely in with that of their menfolk, with whom they shared not only Kinder and Küche (children and kitchen) but also fishing, agriculture and dancing. So the notion that men's roles included taking certain basic responsibilities for politics and ritual did not seem any more odd or outrageous than that they should include taking care

of housebuilding and management of canoes. Power in such a closely knit type of society is apt to be very diffuse, and the personal representations of it in chiefs and other leaders may exercise their decision-functions only as final voices after much subliminal discussion. In these subliminal areas of decision-making Tikopia women were very important, and their views interlocked with and modified those of their menfolk. Whatever might seem to be the ideology of male supremacy in Tikopia, the reality was operative in terms of complementary sex roles. The idea "acceptance" of power is itself complex. It can include elements of positive consensus as well as those of passive endurance or acquiescence, but generalization as to just how these elements are arranged is apt to involve some deep-seated assumptions on the part of the investigator.<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Some of the basic material for this essay was presented in a seminar on "Interpretations of Tikopia Society" in February 1977, in the Department of Anthropology, University of California, Berkeley. I am grateful to the members of the seminar, especially to Mary Judd, who gave a paper on the position of women in Tikopia, for helpful discussion. In its present form the essay has benefited much from presentation to a discussion group in the department of Health, Education and Welfare in the Institute of Education, University of London, in January, 1978. This seminar was under the direction of Rosemary Firth, to whom I am indebted for some of the lines of argument in the opening paragraphs, as well as general comment.

<sup>2</sup>Detailed references would be out of place here. But it may be useful to point out that much descriptive material is contained in a chapter on the "sociology of sex" in the original edition of We, the Tikopia (1936, 1957), omitted for reasons of space from the paperback abridged edition (1963). That chapter included vernacular texts of several tauangutu songs as well as translations. This present essay, focussing on the sociological problem of roles rather than on ethnographical detail, gives no vernacular song texts, and I have allowed myself rather more liberty in translation in order to bring out more clearly the meaning of the songs to Western readers.

<sup>3</sup>See 1936:169, 415, 529. In these references I stated that the decision about the fate of a neonate lay with the husband if the woman was married, though midwife and other women might have a voice in the decision. In discussions with women about pregnancy histories in 1952, however, I gathered that the views of women of the household might in fact be decisive. In one case the decision to bury a female neonate was taken by the mother's two adult daughters, they would have been ashamed, it was said, for their mother to have

been suckling an infant when they were already grown up. (Tikopia appear to have been conscious of such discrepancy.) But later, a male child born from the same woman's thirteenth pregnancy was saved from infanticide by the wife of the eldest son of the family; moved by compassion she prevented her sisters-in-law from disposing of the babe.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Firth, 1969:375-6; 1975:34; and Bloch, 1975:3. In modern Tikopia society, with the spread of education and enlargement of employment opportunities, acquiescence in male control of economic and political situations is likely to seem less defensible, and views about it must be more diversified. But I would guess that problems about control of economic resources and political machinery by chiefs and their immediate kin will probably loom larger for some time than problems about the rights of women. In 1966 I asked a Tikopia man who as a modernist was critical of the rule of the chiefs what he thought of the prospect of Tikopia women being members of any inter-island council that might be set up. He agreed with the view that members of such a council should be men who had some schooling, but about possible women members he said rather gloomily, "I think only at the period when we are all dead!"

#### REFERENCES CITED

Bloch, Maurice, ed.

- 1975 Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society. London: Academic Press.

Firth, Raymond

- 1936 We, the Tikopia: A Sociological Study of Kinship in Primitive Polynesia. (reprinted, 1957; paperback abridged, 1963). London: Allen & Unwin.
- 1964 Essays on Social Organization and Values. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology no. 28. London: Athlone Press.
- 1967a Tikopia Ritual and Belief. London: Allen & Unwin.
- 1967b The Work of the Gods in Tikopia. London School of Economics Monographs on Social Anthropology nos. 1 & 2, second ed. London: Atholone Press.
- 1969 Extraterritoriality and the Tikopia Chiefs. In Man, n.s. 4:354-78.

Firth, Raymond

- 1970 Rank and Religion in Tikopia. London: Allen & Unwin.
- 1975 Speech-making and Authority in Tikopia. In Political Language and Oratory in Traditional Society. Maurice Bloch, ed. London: Academic Press. pp. 29-43.