



Men and Women

Hunters and Gatherers

*orig. answer issue
of gender*

WE LIVE IN A "MAN'S WORLD." World leaders are predominantly men. Families are usually run by men. Men earn more than women. Sons are preferred over daughters. Men have more options than women. In many countries women are relegated to the home. In many societies women become adults only through marriage, when they are "given away" by a father to a husband. Even in the United States, after years of feminist efforts, women are often "token" public officials.

Did men always exert power over women? Was there ever a time when women were more powerful than men, or when men and women were equal? Has male power existed throughout history? Is male domination universal, part of human nature? Has the power of men and women changed over the long course of human history? These are some of the questions asked in this chapter.

questions

THE LONGEST VIEW OF MEN AND WOMEN

When we ask how the power of men and women has changed, we must take the longest view of human history. We must look at the most basic changes in human history to see how they affected men and women. To do this, historians require the help of archeologists. This is because historians normally study only written

records of human activity, and writing goes back only five thousand years, to the first cities, where writing was invented. Archeologists dig beneath these ancient cities for the silent records—the pieces of broken pottery and huts, the charred animal remains, the fragments of human bone, the painted shells, the stone axes and digging sticks. These actual pieces of the past reveal something about the earliest human societies before the invention of writing and city life.

An archeological dig resembles a trip back in a time machine. The further you dig, generally, the earlier the society you find. After a sufficient number of repetitions, archeologists discover (in reverse) general patterns of human development. In this way they have distinguished three stages of human development: hunting-gathering, followed by farming, followed by city life. Archeologists are even able to give approximate dates to these different stages of human development. Thus, they have determined that the first cities were created about five thousand years ago, and the earliest farming villages go back about ten thousand years.

We can summarize all of human history, then, in very rough terms. First, all humans were hunters of wild animals or gatherers of wild plants and insects. Then, gradually, after 8000 B.C., humans began to grow their own food and tame wild animals. A third stage of human history began around 3000 B.C., when the first cities appeared, generally in areas that had begun the agricultural revolution five thousand years before. The urban revolution was based on improved agricultural practices, including the use of a plow drawn by animals. The efficiency of the plow allowed society to become more specialized. Not everyone had to farm to eat. A larger population was also possible. Cities were both larger and more specialized than agricultural villages. We might even add a recent fourth stage to this outline of history. In the last two hundred years the world has experienced an industrial revolution that has increased productivity and changed human life every bit as much as the agricultural revolution did ten thousand years ago and the urban revolution did five thousand years ago.

It is safe to say that no changes in human history have been as important as these. Obviously, not all hunters, or all farmers, are alike. But the differences between hunters and farmers are much greater than the differences between any two groups of either. And while there are still farmers in city societies (since people have to eat), the lives of these farmers have been transformed by city markets, governments, tools, culture, and communications. Farmers today are very different people from those who lived before the development of the first cities five thousand years ago. If the power of men is universal, then, we should expect it to have remained relatively constant from hunting to farming to city society.

HUNTERS AND GATHERERS: SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOR

It is a common practice among hunting-gathering societies to assign different tasks to men and women. These separate assignments go far beyond what is required by

the differences in size or strength between men and women or the need of women to carry and nurse infants. In fact, some jobs are thought of as "masculine" in one society and "feminine" in another. There are certain generalizations, however, that are almost universal among hunters and gatherers.

Everywhere men hunt large land and water fauna, trap small animals and birds, hunt birds, build boats, and work with wood, stone, bone, horn and shell. Everywhere women gather fuel and food, fetch water, prepare drinks and vegetable foods, and cook. Most of women's activities are performed close to the home and involve monotonous tasks that require no concentration and can easily be interrupted and resumed. Male activities may require long absences from home and travel over great distances, not possible for women burdened with children. Male tasks may be dangerous, because men do not bear or rear children, and may be more highly valued in order to motivate the expendable male to perform them. Men do women's jobs more than women do men's jobs.¹

While small bands of men followed the larger wild animals, women gathered grains, seeds, nuts, fruits, roots, eggs, grubs, small animals, and insects. Women's work was steady and regular. Men's work was more spectacular, but less reliable. In a society that lacked the means for preserving food, gathering was more reliable than hunting.

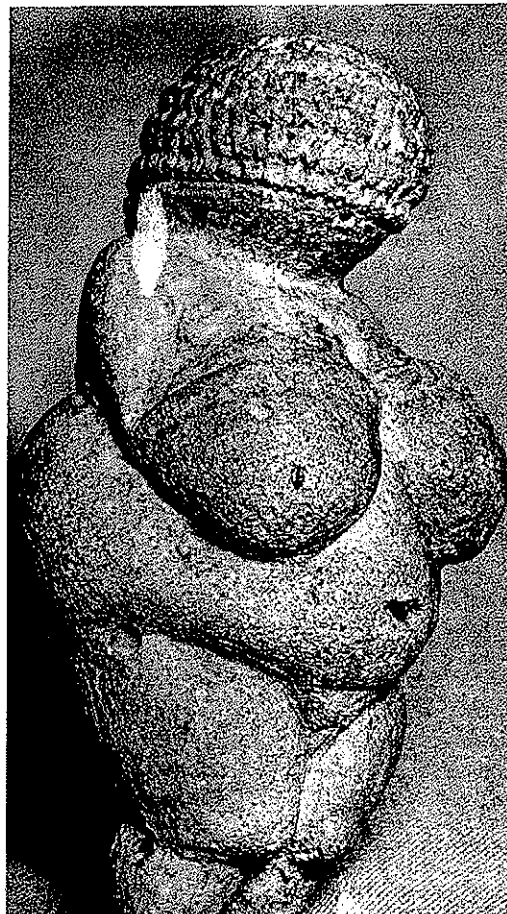
Every generalization has its exceptions. The Agta of the Philippines are a hunting-gathering society in which the women hunt game animals, fish in the streams, and exchange goods with the lowland Filipinos. Especially among the more remote Agta in the mountains of northeastern Luzon, women use bows and arrows or machetes to hunt wild pigs and deer. They go out in small groups, sisters together or with their brothers, sharing the work of stalking, killing, and dragging the carcass home. Some Agta men laugh at the idea of women hunting. They say it is done only by the older generation or those in the more remote mountains. Their attitude might be an indication that the practice is ancient, or that it is unusual. In any case, Agta men also hunt, and there are many societies in which men also participate in the gathering.

The one thing that women alone do is produce life from their own bodies. Childbirth must have seemed like magic to early men. The oldest human art testifies to the importance of female fertility in the minds of these hunters and gatherers. The oldest statues that archeologists have found are statues of women, or, more accurately, of womankind, since they emphasize sexual features. Typical of these is the Venus of Willendorf, with full breasts, pregnant belly, and large buttocks and thighs. This statue, made fifteen thousand years ago, and the many others like it seem to have been objects of worship. Many such statues have been found near what appear to be altars next to charred bones, suggesting animal sacrifice. Their emphasis on fertility must have had religious meaning for hunters and gatherers.

It seems very likely, then, that in the oldest human societies the gods were not



Paleolithic Venuses like these are the oldest sculptural representations of the human form. They testify to the religious importance of female fertility in the Old Stone Age when the deities may have been goddesses. The Venus of Willendorf (bottom) is the one with the braided head. The rough, squatting figure (top left) is one of many found in excavations at Jarmo (Iraq). The Venus of Lespugue (top, right) was found in France. (Naturhistorisches Museum, Wien; Oriental Institute, University of Chicago; Musée de l'homme, Scala, EPA)



gods at all, but goddesses. The most magical and mysterious of human experiences was the giving of life, and that was woman's work. The fertility goddess enshrined woman's magical "labor" and her regular daily work: producing life and sustaining it.

GODDESSES ON EARTH?

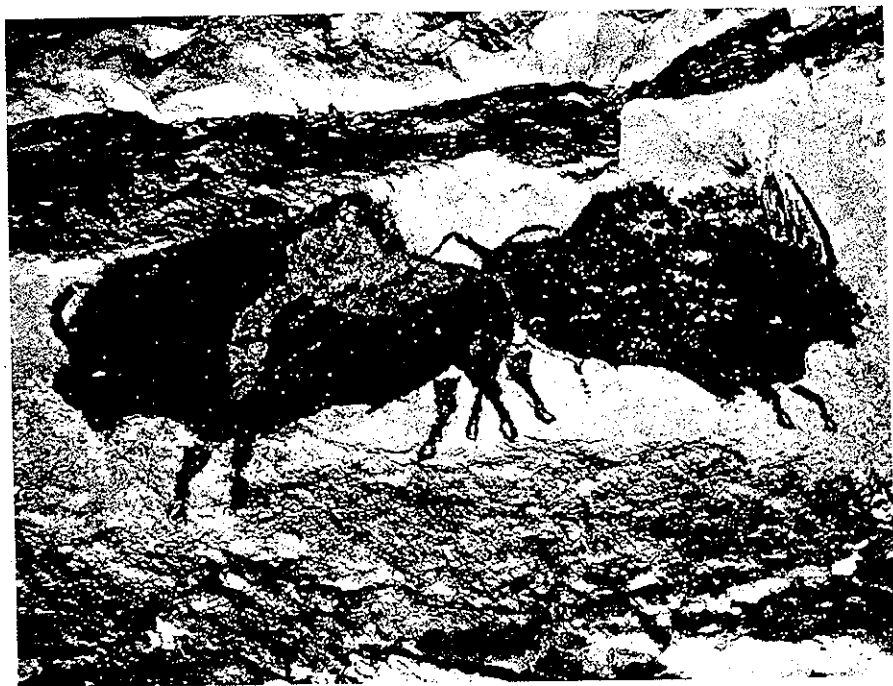
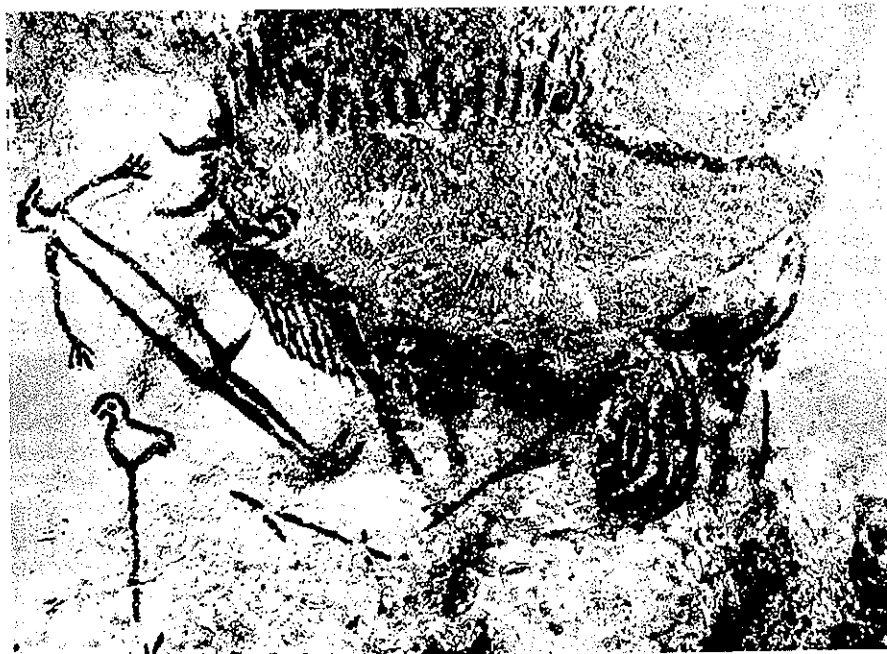
A hundred years ago some European thinkers imagined that the first human society was a "matriarchy" (literally, a world of female power, or "mother-power"). They reasoned that if goddesses were worshiped, women must have been treated as goddesses.

Now there is little evidence about the ways of life of these hunters and gatherers thousands of years ago. Words like "matriarchy" for societies where women are in control and "patriarchy" for societies dominated by men are also very fuzzy. No society is ruled entirely by either men or women. Certainly, both mothers and fathers have some influence in any society. Neither sex can exclude half the population (the other sex) from all power, position, or influence. Even in societies where women are not allowed to have jobs outside the home, their influence on the children, the family, and home life is bound to be considerable.

We cannot assume that a society that worships female fertility gives real power to women. The evidence of a few fertility goddesses, even without signs of gods, is not enough. Imagine a fortieth-century archeologist trying to understand twentieth-century society with only the remains from a pornographic newsstand. While the archeologist might be right in concluding that twentieth-century men "worshiped" women (in some sense), an inference that women ruled twentieth-century society would not be correct. Therefore we should be careful about assuming that women were goddesses in hunting-gathering society simply because the few bits of evidence that we have indicate that the gods were women. We should be aware of the way in which women are sometimes put on a pedestal in order to be kept out of the real world.

EQUALITY RATHER THAN ANY "ARCHY": THE LESSONS OF ANTHROPOLOGY

On balance, the study of hunting-gathering peoples in the world today suggests that there probably was no ancient matriarchy because there was no "archy" (power concentration) at all. We are not likely to find a mirror image of the modern patriarchy in the Paleolithic world because hunting-gathering society was fairly egalitarian. There was little private property, and thus no one was richer than anyone else. Food was distributed to all because everyone was related, mutual support was expected, and to refuse support was unthinkable. There was relatively little variation in wealth or power, because everyone did much the same work,



hunting and gathering, and all worked together. This general level of equality carried over into the relations between men and women as well.

Thus, instead of looking for Amazons or women tyrants in Paleolithic society, we might more usefully examine the ways in which women exercised autonomy, exerted power, or generally expressed themselves. The question is not whether women were ever rulers. The question is what the quality of women's lives in Paleolithic society was. One way of attempting to answer this question is to observe how the relative equality of Paleolithic society prevented certain kinds of behavior that developed later in less-egalitarian societies. This is the approach of the anthropologist Kathleen Gough:

In general in hunting societies, . . . women are less subordinated in certain crucial respects than they are in most, if not all, of the archaic states, or even in some capitalist nations. These respects include men's ability to deny women sexuality or to force it upon them; to command or exploit their labor to control their produce; to control or rob them of their children; to confine them physically and prevent their movement; to use them as objects in male transactions; to cramp their creativeness; or to withhold from them large areas of the society's knowledge and cultural attainments.

Especially lacking in hunting societies is the kind of male possessiveness and exclusiveness regarding women that leads to such institutions as savage punishments or deaths for female adultery, the jealous guarding of female chastity and virginity, the denial of divorce to women, or the ban on a woman's remarriage after her husband's death.²

Anthropologists are divided on the question of whether women had greater status or freedom in hunting-gathering society than they do today. While "anthropology" literally means the study of humankind, most anthropologists have specialized knowledge of only a few societies. Their specialized knowledge of particular societies living in the world today is enormously useful in supplementing the finds of archeologists. But one of the strongest points of agreement among anthropologists is that human experience is immensely varied. Almost every anthropological example has an opposite.

A further difficulty with anthropological accounts is that virtually all hunting-gathering societies in the world today have had contact with agricultural and urban societies. There are no "pure" hunter-gatherers left. There were some such societies in the early years of anthropology (approximately 1870-1950). The reports of travelers and early anthropologists are thus valuable for their closeness to "uncorrupted sources." But these older accounts often have other weaknesses; they frequently reflect the expectations of their own society, dominated by white men. We

The violence and beauty of the male, Paleolithic hunt is captured in these cave paintings from Lascaux, France (Wide World; Granger)

will, therefore, look at a few examples of hunting-gathering societies of the recent past as interpreted by modern anthropology.

NISA AND THE !KUNG

An example of woman's freedom from male possessiveness is demonstrated in a recent anthropological study of the !Kung of southern Africa. (The exclamation mark is used to indicate a "click" sound in the language.) The study, *Nisa*, by Marjorie Shostak, is particularly revealing because the author allows the !Kung woman Nisa to speak for herself. Nisa describes her struggle to separate from her husband, Besa, because he abandoned her when she was pregnant. Besa later returned and wanted Nisa to take him back, but she had already become involved with Twi. Nisa told Besa that she no longer wanted to have anything to do with him. "That's when Besa brought us to the Tswana headman to ask for a tribal hearing," Nisa told the anthropologist:

Once it started the headman looked at everything. He asked me, "Among all the women who live here, among all those you see sitting around, do you see one who lives with two men?" I said, "No, the women who sit here . . . not one lives with two men; not one among them would I be able to find. I, alone, have two. But it was because this man, Besa, mistreated and hurt me. That's why I took this other man, Twi, who treats me well, who does things for me and gives me things to eat." Then I said, "He is also the man I want to marry; I want to drop the other one. Because Besa has no sense. He left me while I was pregnant and the pregnancy almost killed me. This other one is the one I want to marry."

We talked a long time. Finally the headman told Besa, "I have questioned Nisa about what happened and she has tied you up with her talk; her talk has defeated you, without doubt. Because what she has said about her pregnancy is serious. Therefore, today she and Twi will continue to stay together."³

There are many things one might emphasize about this encounter. But here and in later meetings with the headman, Nisa's case clearly won out, and she was granted her wish to divorce Besa and marry Twi.

!Kung women have greater freedom and autonomy than the women of some other hunting-gathering societies. This may be because the !Kung women's gathering accounts for more than half of the food supply. They gather from among 105 species of plants, including nuts, berries, bulbs, roots, beans, leafy greens, and other fruits and vegetables. They also gather honey, birds' eggs, small mammals, tortoises, reptiles, and insects. The large animals that men hunt, including the occasional giraffe, account for 20-40 percent of !Kung subsistence. The !Kung live in a harsh environment. As is true of many Paleolithic peoples today, they have been pressed into the land that no one else wants. For the !Kung that is the semiarid area of

the Kalahari Desert in southern Africa. As do many other Paleolithic peoples, the !Kung have an understanding of their environment that allows them to live comfortably on two or three days of work a week, and much of their time is engaged in leisure. But the environments of these peoples are clearly not as abundant as they once were. One wonders if the more barren natural environments of today's hunters and gatherers has increased or decreased the freedom of women.

NORTH ALASKAN ESKIMO

One of the least-hospitable environments in the world is surely the Arctic. The Eskimo peoples who live in Arctic areas like North Alaska suffer periods of extreme deprivation, even famine. Among contemporary hunting-gathering societies, the Eskimo show the greatest degree of male domination and female subservience. This is probably because hunting provides almost the entire food supply of the Eskimo, and the men are the only hunters. Coastal Eskimo hunt seals and whales. Inland Eskimo hunt caribou. In both cases, the terrain offers little for women to gather. Instead, women spend their time preparing the food and making the clothing from the animal hides the men give them.

Some anthropologists speak of the compatibility of the two different lives of Eskimo men and women. But while well-made clothing is important for the men in a climate where winter temperatures go below 30 degrees below zero, women cannot live without men's food. Perhaps as a result of this need, men act as if they own the women. They demonstrate their prowess by seducing and controlling women. For them, women are pawns in their negotiations with other men. Friendships are sealed by lending or sharing wives, and the women are rarely consulted.

A glaring exception to this exclusion of women is the role that women sometimes play as shamans. Women as well as men can become shamans, the spiritual and healing specialists who keep the balance between the community and the forces of nature and the supernatural. Eskimo society assigns the job of religious specialist to those least useful for the hunt and those who seem least balanced for the normal world. In this way even Eskimo women sometimes exert considerable power in their society.

THE PYGMIES OF ZAIRE

Not all contemporary hunters and gatherers live in sparse environments. The Pygmies of the central African rain forest live in a Garden of Eden that is abundant in plant and animal life. Today most of these short forest people have been absorbed by the agricultural villages of the Bantus who have infiltrated the forest. Some hunters and gatherers remain, however, in the less-accessible areas of the tropical rain forest. One of these groups, the Mbuti Pygmies, is revealed in an engaging anthropological study by Colin Turnbull called *The Forest People*.

The first time I ever visited a hunting camp I heard its many sounds some fifteen minutes before I finally walked into the clearing. First I heard a sharp, hollow tapping sound. Then the whole orchestra of children's voices, loudly gossiping women and chattering men blended with the hammering and occasional shouting and snatches of song. In the camp there was only a handful of people; but they were all busy, and when Pygmies are busy they are noisy.⁴

The Pygmy men have a religious festival called the *molimo*, from which the women are excluded, but there is a legend that the *molimo* was once "owned" by the women, and women still sometimes take over the singing from the men. "The woman is not discriminated against in Mbuti society," according to the anthropologist.

She has a full and important role to play. There is relatively little specialization according to sex. Even the hunt is a joint effort. A man is not ashamed to pick mushrooms and nuts if he finds them, or to wash and clean a baby. A woman is free to take part in the discussions of men, if she has something relevant to say.⁵

Womanhood among the Mbuti is the same as motherhood. The Mbuti do not refer to gender when they refer to children. All children are *miki*. Grandparents are all *tata* (elders). The words do not distinguish between male and female children or elders. Similarly, adults refer to others of their own age without referring to gender. The only time the Mbuti distinguish between male and female is when speaking of parents. The identity of a woman is different from that of a man because a woman is a mother.

Both men and women see themselves as equal in all respects except the supremely vital one that, whereas the woman can (and on occasion does) do almost everything the male does, she can do one thing no male can do: give birth to life.⁶

This fact is reflected in Mbuti rituals. More important even than the *molimo* is the *elima*, the puberty ritual that initiates womanhood. Women conduct the *elima*. They choose a young man, signify their choice by whipping him with a sapling, and then invite him through an obstacle course of ritually protective older women. Among the Mbuti, the women choose the men. The home and dwelling of the family is also more the property of the woman than of the man.

Among the many vignettes of daily life that Turnbull recounts, there is one story of the interaction of a husband and wife that suggests much about the relationship of men and women and of both to the larger society. It begins as an account of how women repair or change the family dwelling.

These changes are usually made by the women, since the hut is considered the woman's property. This is one of the strongest points a woman has in arguments with her husband. I have seen a woman turn around and start methodically pulling all the leaves off the hut. Usually the husband stops her halfway. In this case, however, the husband was particularly stubborn. He waited until she had taken all the leaves off, then remarked to the camp at large that his wife was going to be dreadfully cold that night. There was nothing for her to do, without losing face, but to continue; so reluctantly, and very slowly, she started to pull out the sticks that formed the framework of the home.

By this time the camp was agog, because it had been a long time since anyone had seen a domestic argument carried quite this far. The poor woman was in tears, for she was very much in love with her husband, and the final step, if he did not stop her, was for her to pack her few belongings and walk off, having completely demolished their home first. Then she would return to the home of her parents. It is the nature of a Pygmy never to admit he is wrong, and the husband was beginning to feel anxious. Things had gone too far for either of them to patch up the quarrel without being shamed in the eyes of all those who were watching to see what would happen next. He sat silent, hugging his knees, looking as miserable as his wife. Then he brightened up suddenly and turned around to see how far the demolition had gone. Only a few sticks had been pulled out. He called to his wife not to bother with the sticks, it was only the leaves that were dirty. She looked at him with a puzzled "Ayiiiiii?"—and then, understanding, asked him to help her carry the leaves down to the stream. This they did, and together they gravely washed every single leaf and brought them back. While she joyfully put the leaves back on the hut he stoked up the fire and then went off with his bow and arrows to see if he could find some game for a special dinner.

The pretense was that she had been taking the leaves off not because she was angry, but because they were dirty and attracted ants and spiders. Nobody believed this, but everyone was glad the quarrel was over. For several days women talked politely about the insects in the leaves of their huts, and took a few leaves down to the stream to wash, as if this was a perfectly normal procedure. I have never seen it done before or since.⁷

Turnbull's account of a domestic squabble sounds almost too familiar. But it reminds us that this is a world in which men and women have to get along. Perhaps even more among the Mbuti, where the issue concerns a few sticks and leaves, than among ourselves, in a world layered with things, domestic and social peace depends on relative equality.

FOR FURTHER READING

While the theories of an ancient matriarchy have been generally discredited by modern anthropology, the classic works are still worth reading. If one does not go all the way back

to J. J. Bachofen's *Mutterrecht (Mother Right)* of 1861, it might be interesting to look at Henry Lewis Morgan's *Ancient Society* (1877), which was adapted by Friedrich Engels in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1884) and generations of Marxists ever since.

Among recent considerations of this issue by anthropologists, there is a good collection of essays in *Woman, Culture, & Society*, edited by Michelle Zimbalist Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere. Ernestine Friedl's *Women and Men: An Anthropologist's View* is perhaps the best recent presentation of the problem. Other valuable recent studies include *Sexual Meanings: The Cultural Construction of Gender and Sexuality*, edited by Sherry B. Ortner and Harriet Whitehead; *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, by Rayna Rapp Reiter; *Female Power and Male Dominance: On the Origins of Sexual Inequality*, by Peggy Reeves Sanday; and *Matrilineal Kinship*, edited by David M. Schneider and Kathleen Gough. Perhaps the most sweeping testament to male domination by an anthropologist is still Lionel Tiger's *Men in Groups* (1969).

Historians can only borrow from the work of anthropologists and archeologists when they discuss primitive society, but sometimes historians contribute a useful overview that connects prehistory and history. One such stimulating effort is Gerda Lerner's *The Creation of the Patriarchy* (1986), which updates the vision of Morgan and Engels. Another is Elise Boulding's *The Underside of History* (1976). Evelyn Reed's *Woman's Evolution: From Matriarchal Clan to Patriarchal Family* (1975) remains very loyal to Engels. Some of the most interesting writing on Paleolithic and Neolithic society is that of Jacquetta Hawkes, especially her *Prehistory and Man and the Sun*.

Specialists in art and mythology have also produced some interesting, if speculative, works about Paleolithic society. One is Joseph Campbell's *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*. Another is Erich Neuman's *The Great Mother: An Analysis of the Archetype*. From a very different perspective is S. Gideon's *The Eternal Present: The Beginnings of Art*.

There are a few books that have had a popular, but not an academic, following. Often they have engendered controversy. One thinks of Merlin Stone's *When God Was a Woman*, Elaine Morgan's *The Descent of Women*, Elizabeth Gould Davis's *The First Sex*, and Elizabeth Fisher's *Woman's Creation*.

Finally, to remind students that our concentration on the issue of gender is certainly not the only way of studying Paleolithic society, we mention two good general texts, Brian M. Fagan's *People of the Earth* and John E. Pfeiffer's *The Emergence of Man*, and the beautifully written firsthand account of one hunting society, Colin M. Turnbull's *The Forest People*.

NOTES

1. Frances Dahlberg's introduction to *Woman the Gatherer* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), p. 13.
2. Kathleen Gough, "The Origin of the Family," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, no. 33 (November 1971). Reprinted in *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Rayna R. Reiter (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 69-70.

3. Marjorie Shostak, *Nisa: The Life and World of a !Kung Woman* (New York: Vintage, 1981), pp. 255-256.
4. Colin M. Turnbull, *The Forest People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1961), p. 130.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 154.
6. Colin M. Turnbull, "Mbuti Womanhood," in Dahlberg, *op. cit.*, p. 206.
7. Turnbull, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-133.