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Michele Dominy, Series Editor

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Women as Unseen Characters

Male Ritual in Papua New Guinea

Edited by Pascale Bonnemère

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Chapter 8

Of Human and Spirit Women: From Mother to Seductress to Second Wife

Polly Wiessner

I am taking away his heart.
I am pulling up his cordyline plant.
I am taking out his essence.

Let his heart droop,
Let his essence droop.
Let his cordyline droop.

I am putting his heart into the fire.
I am putting his essence into the fire.
I am putting his cordyline into the fire.

Heart burned to ash,
Essence burned to ash,
Cordyline burned to ash.

(Traditional Enga magical spell from the upper Lai valley to take possession of a young man's heart and soul recited while breaking off fern tips and throwing them into the fire)

The peripheral position of women in the exotic religious ritual of Highland New Guinea has captured the attention of anthropologists for the past three decades. For parts of the eastern Highlands and Highland fringe areas, men are seen as manipulating cosmology and relations with the spirit world so as to appropriate female powers of reproduction with the ultimate goal of domination (Allen 1967; Goedeler 1985; Herdt 1981, 1984a). Underlying these interpretations is an implicit assumption that a major axis of competition exists between men and women, and that ritual is part of the struggle through which men control, repress, or dominate the opposite sex. There is also the sense that cosmology in the hands of males is immutable. In western areas of the Highlands, however, the situation is different. Here the realms of male and female are held distinctly separate on the basis of body ideology and gender roles, one the one hand, and yet defined as complementary, on the other, so that the strongest currents of competition flow within the sexes, not between them. Such complementarity offers both men and women a hand in altering ritual and aspects of cosmology.

An ideology of separation and yet essential complementarity for production and reproduction (A. Strathern 1979) stretches back in time far beyond the reach of historical traditions. Among the Enga, two myths establish a good part of the cosmological framework structuring male-female relations. According to the first, there was a time when the world was inhabited only by the immortal sky people, who lived a life similar to that of humans but in a perfect world. One day a sky woman gave birth to a son on the slopes of Mount Mongalo in western Enga. When the baby cried, her husband told her not to breastfeed the child but to wait until he fetched the water of eternal life (ratiga euimale) from the sacred spring high on the mountainside. The woman waited and waited, growing impatient as the baby cried. The husband reached the spring and filled the gourd, but before he could return home, the mother had fed the child with breast milk. As a result, they descended from paradise to earth and were burdened with the realities of life, including hard work and mortality. The humans who descended from sky to earth organized themselves in a segmentary lineage system that mirrored that of the sky people (Meggin 1955b).

Mortal men, unlike the immortal sky people, were enfranchised by the procreative power of women, a trait that could burn out the physical and intellectual power of men. A second myth tells of what man did to tame these female fires and make male-female relations possible once more. It begins with a pair of "hot" women, mother and daughter, who crossed a certain bridge regularly to go to their gardens. A man undermined the bridge, and when the two crossed, the bridge collapsed and the two women plunged into the river and were carried downstream. The mother, who was fished out before she became sufficiently cooled, became the forebear of western Enga women, while the daughter, carried further downstream and rescued in eastern Enga, was better cooled and less dangerous to men. Had the plan worked entirely, women would pose no threat to men, but as it was the procreative powers and substances of women were imperfectly cooled. Women remained hot enough to require separation from men, but were cooled enough so that cooperation and reproduction could take place with the aid of ritual protection. The map of rigidity of male-female Enga contamination beliefs and taboos conforms to how long the ancestress of a particular area was submerged.

Variants of such myths to legitimize separation between the sexes are found throughout the western Highlands (Frankel 1986; Goldman 1983). Given their prevalence and yet diversity of expressions and meanings, their origins are most likely ancient, and the conditions under which such notions developed
beyond our reach today. Nonetheless, they laid down an ideology that structured virtually every area of life in Enga and in surrounding Highland societies. They allocated private roles and biological reproduction to women, and public roles and responsibility for production and reproduction of the social order to men. Women were regarded as naturally complete for fulfilling their reproductive roles; by contrast, men were regarded as incomplete. To mature into handsome and effective adults, young men had to be endowed with the power to withstand the effects of sexual contact with human women and re-born or initiated into a corporate group of men (see also Bomemère, this volume; Godelier 1986). In these endeavors, they sought the company of peers and the transformative charms of an immortal sky woman.

In this chapter, I will use material from Enga historical traditions to trace patterns of cooperation and competition, from the time of the introduction of the sweet potato until the present, as well as to identify obstacles confronting men and women as they sought to accomplish their respective tasks (see Table 1). I then discuss the role of the immortal sky woman (spirit woman) in assisting men via three major circulating cults. In chronological order, these are (1) the male initiation in the kepihe cult, where the spirit woman came as surrogate mother to the boys; (2) the sanqai/sanilu males' initiations, in which the spirit woman came to the bachelors as seductress and bride, and (3) the female spirit cult, in which the spirit woman came to married men as co-wives. These cults were practiced in Enga consecutively but with overlap, the sanqai being added to the ritual repertoire after the introduction of the sweet potato and the female spirit cult in the early twentieth century. I will propose that the changing role of the spirit woman was the result of triadic interaction during a period of rapid social and economic change, interaction between men and other men via the spirit woman, men and women in daily life, and women and other women, including the spirit woman. Interaction in each of these spheres was affected differently by economic change and contributed differently to alteration of ritual and cosmology.

A historical perspective on female participation in male cults makes it possible to address a number of issues central to this volume from an angle that complements papers grounded in the ethnographic present. The first concerns the differences between initiation, bachelors' cults, and female spirit cults. These three types of male ritual are usually described for different societies, but are they mutually exclusive? Do they have diverse cosmological underpinnings, or can they draw on a common fund of cosmology, coexist, and be aimed at developing different relational configurations important in various phases of the life cycle of men? Second, is male ritual and female participation as described in the ethnographic present “tradition” aimed at reproducing the status quo of gender relations, or might such ritual be part and parcel of a process of change? If so what is the role of women in bringing about such change? Third, when do women play a purely symbolic role in male ritual and when do they appear in flesh and blood?

### Table 1. Chronological Scheme of Events Discussed in Text

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Prehistory</td>
<td>Early archaeological evidence for Enga: Yaka cave in eastern Enga, hunting and gathering at ca. 1,300m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10,000</td>
<td>Kutepa rockshelter western Enga, hunting and gathering at 2,300m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000–4000</td>
<td>Pollen evidence indicates forest clearance for horticulture in eastern Enga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>250–400</td>
<td>Introduction of sweet potato to Enga and beginning of Enga historical traditions</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Historical traditions (generations before present)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Event Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>8+</td>
<td>Population shift from high altitudes to lower valleys</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Beginning of early <em>Te</em> cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>Kephe</em> cult first practiced by horticulturalists of western Enga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Sangai</em> bachelors' cults arise in central Enga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Beginning of Great Ceremonial Wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Sangai</em> spread to western Enga</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 (ca.1855–85?)</td>
<td><em>Kephe</em> cult imported into central Enga, called <em>anu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ban on rites dropped from <em>anu</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emergence festivals added to bachelors' cults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 (ca.1885–1915)</td>
<td><em>Te</em> cycle expanded to finance Great Ceremonial Wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Sangai</em> spread to eastern Enga, called <em>anu</em>, courtship entered <em>sangai</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>male cult expanded to coordinate <em>Te</em> cycle and Great Ceremonial Wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female spirit cult imported into eastern Enga, used to plan <em>Te</em> cycle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 (ca.1915–45)</td>
<td><em>Te</em> cycle begins to subsume Great Ceremonial Wars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Tega saka</em> spirit becomes part of <em>sangai</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>First contact with Europeans, 1934</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Last Great Ceremonial War fought, 1938–41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><em>Te</em> cycle subsumes Great War exchange routes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 (ca.1945–75)</td>
<td>Female spirit cult spreads</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Enga and Their History**

The Enga are horticulturalists who inhabit the western Highlands of Papua New Guinea (Brown 1977; Fehr 1964; Lacey 1975; Meggitt 1965a, 1972, 1974, 1977; Tiyaga 1982; Wohlt 1978; Waddell 1972). They number over 200,000 today. Their position as the largest single linguistic group in Papua New Guinea, nestled in the heart of the western Highlands, gives a mis-
Cooperation and Competition: Production

Just prior to or after the arrival of the sweet potato, production schemes differed greatly from those of subsequent generations. Men appeared to have shoudered the better part of the work load; they hunted, made war, and did a good part of the garden work and all the wood work—chopping firewood, fencing, and house building. Women cultivated taro together with men, planted other crops, gathered forest products, and were responsible for the time-consuming work of producing bark twine and net goods. Pig husbandry receives little mention in male or female work routines. Such a division of labor would have given men a heavier work load. Dependence on taro agriculture was heavy in the fertile valleys of eastern Ena, while hunting and gathering played a more important role in the west. The western population was divided by race, with shifting horticulturists who led a precarious existence in the valleys and groups who claim to be primarily hunter-gatherers in the higher altitudes. Relations between the two were characterized by intermarriage and exchange of forest produce for agricultural ones, on the one hand, and tension and misunderstanding, on the other. It was in areas where hunters and horticulturists met that contamination beliefs and taboos were the most rigid.

After the sweet potato was accepted as a staple, the productive base of eastern and western Ena became more homogenous. Expanding networks of ceremonial exchange increased demands for pig production and with it, women's work loads. Still, division of labor nurtured a strong complementarity between men and women: men had to clear gardens before women could plant; men had to fence gardens securely or women's efforts would be lost to the pigs. Women cared for children under five to six years of age; men took the boys into the men's house when they reached seven or eight and looked after them until adulthood. Responsibility was further clarified by the fact that men and women held magic formulas to accomplish their respective tasks.

Women's life stories of the twentieth century do not describe their increasing work loads as appropriation of female labor for male gain. Rather, they express family ambitions for production comparable to those of their husbands, detailing their plans and strategies for building a pig herd to increase the wealth of their families and forge networks of exchange. Women say that it is their efforts in production and exchange that make ordinary husbands into big men. Competition between husband and wife only enters the picture when the question of the husband marrying a second wife arises. Only after years of marriage does women's sexual jealousy succumb to their economic ambitions to increase the family workforce. At that time mature wives of successful men take the initiative to select co-wives and raise the pigs to help pay the bridewealth.
Exchange

After the introduction of the sweet potato, exchange flourished as vast networks linking different valley systems were constructed in response to population redistribution (Wiessner and Turn 1998). In eastern Enga, a cycle of ceremonial wealth distribution, the Te cycle, grew out of the efforts of big men to expand their spheres of influence in order to keep control of the trade. The early Te cycle was conducted on a small scale among clans along trade routes; however, it introduced a powerful new system of finance: concentration of relationships so as to allow families to gain access to wealth beyond the bounds of kinship reckoning (see map).

In central Enga, a very different system of exchange was constructed via the Great Ceremonial Wars. Here, tribes and clans who had been displaced in wars that occurred after the introduction of the sweet potato engaged in tournaments to display force, forge alliances, and boost the exchange of massive proportions that followed. These tournament wars, fought periodically over three to four generations (ca. 1860–1940), built networks that linked four major valley systems and put displaced groups back on the map of trade and exchange.

In western Enga, similar integration was achieved through the kepele cult, which united entire tribes or pairs of tribes for communication with the ancestors. Kepele cult performances of western Enga tribes were linked into a cult network extending from the Porgera valley, down the Lagaip valley, and on into Kandep. Within this network, ritual experts, rites, participants, and invited guests circulated widely.

In the last half of the nineteenth century, the costs of the Great Ceremonial Wars in terms of organization, wealth, and time spent in fighting rather than production became formidable and thousands participated (see Table 1). Big men of central Enga then drew on the Te cycle to provide finance for the Great Wars and to reinvest the wealth flowing out of them. Rapid growth took place in both networks, and organization became formidable. In response, big men turned to ritual for support. The kepele cult, which had formerly been imported and performed on a small scale in central Enga, was expanded into a performance that could be used to unify tribes at the western terminus of the Te cycle, coordinate the Te cycle with the Great Wars, and display readiness for exchange to other clans. Despite these efforts the Great Wars were difficult to sustain. As participants in the Great Wars gained more experience with the Te cycle, they opted to discontinue the wars and replace their networks of exchange by the extensive Te cycle routes. By first contact, some 30,000–50,000 participants engaged in the Te cycle, circulating tens of thousands of pigs and valuables. Successful manipulation of these vast exchange networks by big men created economic inequalities of a magnitude hitherto unknown in Enga history.

Exchange was thus at the heart of interest in Enga society, engaging the attention of men and women alike. Like other realms of life, it was structured by a division of labor. Women produced pigs and net items for exchange and wove the networks along which wealth flowed. Men assisted with aspects of gardening and pig production, produced or procured other items for exchange, and engaged in the complex politics of coalescing individual contributions from outside and within the clan for clanwide ceremonial exchange events. Men dominated the public domain of ceremonial exchange and reaped name and fame for themselves and their clans. However, wealth from the influx of wealth to the family, private admiration of their efforts, possibilities to arrange advantageous marriages for their children, and, above all, an abundance of wealth to channel to their own kin.

The focus of competition in exchange was largely between men and their rivals, both fellow clansmen striving for the status of big man and big men in other clans who had their own designs for the flow of wealth in the region. Nonetheless, exchange did generate some contention between the sexes. Women were expected to direct wealth to and from kin in their natal clans, while men had to juggle pigs to meet requests from their own clansmen, wife's kin, mother's kin, and other alliances.

Accounts from shortly after the introduction of the sweet potato indicate
that a good portion of the wealth exchanged came from home production, with supplementary wealth raised from a small circle of close affinal or agnatic relatives. As exchange networks grew, the limited labor forces of households could not meet growing demands. Families had to rely increasingly on wealth obtained on credit from a wide range of affinal and maternal kin. Under these circumstances, men entrusted more and more of the private arrangements to their wives and other close female relatives. Negative connotations of females stemming from contamination beliefs were thereby eroded by the supportive action of women as wives, sisters, daughters, and aunts as diplomats in exchange. By the 1930s, some women in eastern Enga were able to assume public roles in the Tē cycle in their own right after the death of their husband. Among these was a woman named Takuime, a Tē leader of renown who traveled with men from one end of the network to another to organize the Tē, presenting the wealth reaped from her efforts in her own name on the ceremonial grounds with the full support of her clanspeople (Kyakas and Wiessner 1992).

**Tribal Politics**

Just as cosmology stipulates separation and inequality between the sexes, the descent of the sky people to earth lays down the fundamental divisions for the organization of men—tribes (pniaries), clans, subclans, lineages, and men's houses. While the separation between men and women created unequal, incomparable, and complementary units, the division of men by the segmentary lineage system produced equal, comparable, and competitive units. Men, as potential equals, competed with other men for spouses, men of different household units competed for lineage leadership, men of different lineages for subclan leadership, and men of different subclans for clan leadership. Clans competed with other clans over exchange, land, and other matters, and tribes competed with other tribes in the Great Ceremonial Wars. Men had much to negotiate in order to hold together corporate units in the face of internal competition and to mediate conflicts between different corporate groups. Women, who often married in from enemy clans, were excluded from segmentary lineage politics. They did not attend clan meetings where matters of security were discussed, nor did they speak at public forums where other clanwide decisions were made. Women often despised initiatives of men to incite warfare, but their objections were not even heard at home. When wars escalated, women retreated to live with relatives in other clans, taking the children and pigs with them. In domestic politics women had no formal “legal” path through which to air complaints, but they did have a strong recourse via protest action (M. Strathern 1972). Protest action involved anything from burning the house to stabbing a co-wife to running home, leaving the husband to tend pigs, gardens, and children. Women's protest action was accepted as women's nature, and runaway women were coaxed home or eventually coerced to go home by their own relatives, but were not expected to pay compensation to cancel the effects of their protests. Protest action had the potential to bring about change precisely on these grounds—it was attributed to women’s nature, and therefore the protagonist was “not guilty” and her action not canceled by compensation.

Throughout the span of Enga historical traditions, politics thickened in a way that affected men to a much greater extent than women. With the redistribution of population after the introduction of the sweet potato, corporate groups had to seek new ways to reestablish the balance of power. An increase in population growth rates caused groups to grow to an unmanageable size and split more frequently than they had in the past. As exchange networks expanded, conflicts of loyalty between obligations to fellow clansmen and obligations to exchange partners in other clans were accentuated. Differential success in manipulating networks ruptured the equality of men, brevity jealousy and social tension. It was no wonder that men sought the help of the spirit woman.

**Enga Religious Ritual**

At the center of the Enga spirit world were two sets of supernatural beings: the immortal sky people (nabakali) and their mortal descendants, the ancestors (pati) (see Brenman 1977; Meehan 1953b). The sky people were regarded as keepers of the cosmos, responsible for natural events like weather, thunderbolts, and landslides, as well as protectors of individuals. Should men or women fail to conform to moral codes, the sky people would abandon them, laying them open to death. By contrast, the sky beings, who were not directly attached to specific human corporate groups, the ancestors (pati) were composed of all deceased male and perhaps female tribal members. They were believed to directly affect the welfare and prosperity of their descendants if appropriate communication was maintained through ritual. The Enga ritual repertoire to communicate with the sky people and the ancestors was not static; throughout the course of history, cults were imported and exported within Enga and between Enga and neighboring groups in attempts to emulate the successful, confront new problems, set the course of change, or mediate its effects.

As in other realms of life, male and female participation in ritual followed the division between private/public and domestic/corporate. Women practiced love magic to secure husbands, carried out joint rituals with their husbands upon marriage to assure family fertility and prosperity, conducted menstrual rites to further their husbands’ success in hunting, warfare, and exchange, participated in healing ceremonies for their children and close relatives, and conducted individual fertility rites to promote the growth of gardens and pigs.
When ritual moved from such private concerns to group prosperity and reproduction, men took over on two accounts. First, with a norm of patrilocality, residence, only men had a direct connection to their ancestors. Second, the pool of ancestors was composed of potentially dangerous ghosts of deceased tribesmen. Contact with such male forces was believed to be able to contaminate pregnancy and produce deformed offspring.

Men assembled periodically for public ritual to placate and please the ancestors and enact essential relations of unity and cooperation, thereby countering the disruptive forces of competition. Women were excluded from cult space and cult rites, though they worked together with men to provision the cults, host intermarriage and other invited spectators, and, very importantly, participated in the festivities to celebrate the completion of a successful rite. In the majority of ancestral cults, female procreative power was represented by female ancestral stones. In addition to ancestral cults, a variety of cults for the sky people were also in the hands of men. Those notable among these were cults for the spirit women, who believed to hold the power to transform men: the mola, the saogai, and the female spirit cult. These cults will be the focus of this chapter.

**Spirit Women in Male Cults: The Mote Rites for Boys**

Enga women were considered to be naturally equipped for their roles in life, but men needed further processing in order to (1) grow, mature, and withstand the debilitating effects of sexual contact with women, and (2) be integrated ritually into a cohort of “brothers” in order to manage a social order fraught with complexity and conflict. Prior to the introduction of the sweet potato, male ritual appears to have been much less elaborate in most parts of Enga. Boys of central and eastern Enga were taken from the women’s house to the men’s house with little fanfare, where they were educated by their elders. Small individual rituals were practiced in the seclusion of the forest to promote the growth of hair, bodies, and clear skin. Only in the high country of western Enga, among groups that claim a tradition as hunters, did spirit women visit young men in the context of male corporate ritual: the mola rites or boys’ initiation in the kepelo cult. Here two sky women, Yongulame, the morning star, and Kuluame, the evening star, came to the boys as second mothers, giving them the water of life to symbolically wean them from mother’s milk, reversing the adverse effects of breastfeeding, and initiate the stage of physical, social, and spiritual growth that turned boys into men.

Historical information on the pre-sweet potato kepelo cult is sparse; it can be deduced only from descriptions in cult-origin myths and the content of rites performed in the twentieth century. The kepelo had its roots in a cult to assemble dispersed “hunting and gathering” tribes of the high country in western Enga and initiate young men into the secrets of the spirit world. Whether it had other objectives in earlier times is unknown. After the arrival of the new crop, when groups inhabiting the high country acquired land from relatives and settled in the lower valleys, they brought the kepelo with them. Subsequently it was restructured. Rites directed at the sacred ancestral stones were added and emphasis was placed on agricultural fertility (Wiessner and Tano 1998). In the course of the kepelo’s development, much of the original meaning of mola rites seems to have been forgotten.  

By the eve of first contact with Europeans, the kepelo cult was an impressive event (Gibbs 1975). It was called when poor environmental conditions prevailed, indicating that the ancestors were discontented. Word was sent out to each clan to bring specific materials and foods from their own areas for the construction of the tribal cult house. On the appointed day, the clans converged on the cult site in full ceremonial dress, singing and dancing. Men from each clan or subclan bore designated material for building the cult house, a perimeter post representing their group, and special foods for the feast. The cult house was jointly constructed by all tribemen. Upon completion of the house, a large feast was held for contributors and their families. The house was then left to “age” for a few months to a few years until the main phase of the kepelo was called.

Before the main phase, word was sent out to celebrants and guests to plant gardens, fatten pigs, gather materials, and to assemble boys for mola rites. Requirements stipulated that every male provide one pig, and one pig only, to express the potential equality of all men. The sacred area for the cult was fenced off to separate male celebrants and sacred rites from the gaze of women, children, and invited guests from near and far. The kepelo ancestral cult house was repaired and decorated, and additional houses were built. When the celebrants and spectators had arrived, the majority of the pigs that had been brought for the ceremony were killed out and chucked in public view. For the larger ceremonies of the twentieth century 300-500 pigs were provided. Pork for sacred and secular consumption was carefully separated and sacred pork was prepared very differently for each category of celebrant—boys, adult males who had attended the mote, ritual experts, and old men who would soon join the ancestors, endorsing social divisions within Enga society.

The large pig kill marked the onset of five days of ceremonies. Men took pigs or the specified pieces of pork inside the sacred area and steamed them in pits for the various rites. One pig was specially slaughtered for a ritual expert, who retired to a small hut, the taguna andu, and filled a gourd with the “water of life” to be given to the boys. This fluid was composed of the condensed breath of the ritual expert who blew on a cool stone as blade and let the droplets roll into a gourd container where it was supplemented by pork fat and sugar cane juice. The boys were told that this gourd was filled by the spirit woman who sat lusc-
rating and feeding a baby in the tapaua noke. Meanwhile, women, children, and visitors remained outside the sacred area singing, dancing, feasting, trading, arranging marriages, or engaging in other social activities.

At the same time that tribespeople assembled, boys between the ages of approximately eight and fourteen were brought by their fathers to special noke shelters built within the sacred enclosure. They were not permitted to go out during the three-day rites even to urinate or defecate, a restriction designating an infantile state. Their diet was limited to the juice of sugar cane and a few sweet potatoes given to them by their mothers beforehand. When all the preparations had been made, the noke boys were lined up by clan/tribe and height/age. Age groups were indicated by features of dress: wig styles, feathers, and so on. A ritual expert then appeared on the scene to lead them to the noke house. His face was concealed by a mask fashioned from a dried gourd with two holes cut out for the eyes and one for the mouth, his head was covered by a foul, disheveled wig, and his neck was bedecked with strings of dried bones. As he flicked his tongue in and out of the mouth hole of his mask, the young men were separated from the little boys, quite a few candidates fled in terror, returning to attend the noke when they were considerably older. Canoe belts were then tied around the waists of the boys while the ritual experts recited spells.

In the evening, the boys were led to the cult house. Before entering the house, or once seated within it, they were given the “water of life” from the gourd prepared by the ritual experts. The names used in some kepale houses to describe the stages of filling the gourd and drinking from it depict symbolic weaning from the mother. The filling was called wane maro pila, “the pregnant woman is expecting”; the completion of this process wane maro pula, “the baby is born”; and the drinking of the sacred liquid by the boys wane maro pula na pulesa, “the mother’s breast milk is drying up.” The spell recited while the boys drank was intriguing in that it mentions different body fluids—blood, menstrual blood, and semen—recalling similar themes in initiation of many Highland fringe societies. Whether semen ever played a role in the noke of the past is not known. In partaking of this water of life given to men by the spirit women, boys were cleansed of the effects “human” breast milk and close contact with women, factors that nurtured in early childhood but started later in boyhood. Some of the harm that had occurred when humans became mortal was reversed.

Inside the ritual house, the boys sat in total darkness, fearfully anticipating the temblower events to come when they made contact with the spirit world. Outside the cult house, experts whistled to signal the presence of ghosts and augur their lean. Sacred words of wisdom were chanted to herald the arrival of the sky women: “You two girls, dawn and night, evening and morning, would you bring the everlasting fire, bright as gold, would you bring it home please” (Lacey 1975: 134). After some time, two beautiful sky women entered the cult house. By the light of their torches, they briefly revealed to the young men the sacred bark paintings—sun, moon, man, woman, rainbow, cassowary, dog, and specific sky beings—and a woven image of a rainbow python coiled around the ceiling of the noke house. The boys’ hearts were said to jump and tremble in fear at the sight of such strange objects. In all testimonies that we collected the fact that these were really men dressed as women is only mentioned as an aside at the end.

During some performances, the boys exited by a back door, where they passed by a man of wisdom and knowledge holding the following symbols: a piece of ginger (pano or hoake) so that their enemies would taste them like ginger and suffer a long time before they died; a green plant (pano) so that the young men would own the most fertile part of the land; a piece of pork liver (pano pungu) so that they would be rich men; and a piece of possessive magic (pano wina) so that they would be skillful hunters. They were to take a deep breath and smell each object (Lacey 1975: 133–34). Boys were then sworn to secrecy concerning everything they had seen and done during the ceremony. After the boys emerged from the noke, their cane belts were cut off by the ritual expert and planted beneath the roots of other trees, so that, as the roots grew, they would become firmly fastened in the ground. Such measures were believed to protect the boys from untimely death from illness, “since trees usually only die when chopped down or uprooted, not from disease.” As far as we could determine, the symbolism of noke rites was known to ritual experts and some elders; the boys only experienced awe and fear at the revelations.

After the noke, some ritual experts allowed the boys to witness the feeding and mating of the ancestral objects; others only permitted those who had attended to noke several times to do so. The sacred objects representing the ancestors consisted of stones in shapes reminiscent of male or female genitals and a basketweave figure fashioned to look like a man (yaputa). The yaputa was paraded to the kepale site and placed in the cult house, while the sacred stones were unearthed from their resting place in the ground. Next the yaputa (or the male ancestral stone) was made to simulate copulation with the female stones, while spells to promote fertility were recited. After copulation, the yaputa was fed with pork fat and the sacred stones were greased in it.

These rites were repeated during the following days until the ancestors were believed to be content to sleep, leaving human affairs to proceed unhindered and with prosperity. At some cult sites, skulls of deceased male tribal members were deposited in a tribal skull house within the kepale site. Later, during the kepale ceremonies, the skulls that had accumulated were placed in a pyre between layers of edible plant foods, pig fat, and firewood, to be ceremonially cremated. When cult rites were concluded, some of the cult houses were destroyed; it was believed that the good will of the ancestors had been evoked and fertility
would prevail. Young men who had undergone nate rites, clered by the power of the kepile, danced on tree branches and performed a number of stunts before the crowds of spectators.

Ideally then, nate rites separated boys from their mothers around the time when they would have moved from the women's to the men's house. Once given the water of life and introduced to the secrets of the spirit world, they could enter a second stage of growth to become productive members of society who participated in communal ritual for the reproduction of the tribe or clan. Nonetheless, the bond with the mother was not severed, just altered. Nutrient mothers continued to protect their sons from often harsh fathers until adulthood (Kumbon 1998, Moggitt 1965a) and assured that boys developed close bonds with their maternal kin. Later in life maternal kin provided what were perhaps a man's most supportive exchange partners.

The nate was continued until approximately the 1960s, when contact with missionaries led to the discontinuation of the entire kepile cult. However, the importance of the nate seems to have gradually waned with a ritual shift away from the theme of separation from the mother to one of constructing appropriate paths to marriage and the complementarity of male-female relationships that were so essential to the success of men. It was in this context that a female spirit was called on, as seductress and bride in sangai bachelors' cults, to assist men in quite a different role.

**Sangai and Sandalu Bachelors' Cults**

Prior to the introduction of the sweet potato and for many generations after in some areas, young men conducted private rites of growth, sangai, and yomendi, but no communal rites were held outside the limited sphere of the nate. The early history of sangai bachelors' cults is vague, though claims that they were instituted over the past seven to eight generations are supported by records in detailed historical poetry, which tell when and where from each clan purchased the sangai. When information from sangai poetry of clans from different areas of Enga is compiled, a very coherent picture of its diffusion through Enga over the past seven generations emerges. It appears that sangai bachelors' cults may have first been crafted in central Enga, though one cannot rule out the possibility that elements were imported from the south or west (see Wiessner and Tunn 1999). The purpose of the sangai, to promote the growth and maturity of young men, is one and the same as that of former private rites; however, several crucial elements were added. Sangai rites were communal, not individual, involving all young men of a clan or subclan. Sangai bachelors' cults were hierarchically organized: boys moved up the age hierarchy by attending several cult performances held at one- to two-year intervals until they were considered ready for marriage. Physical, mental, and social transformation was believed to be achieved via first marriage to a spirit woman, who seduced them from bachelorhood into adulthood. Both female powers and male community were deemed necessary to fashion successful men. Thus, hand in hand with increasing emphasis on agricultural cultivation came the careful cultivation of men.

Enga sangai origin myths are variants of the following. A despised, ugly bachelor is scorned by his peers, who are on the way to perform rites of growth. When he arrives home dejected and sad, an elder in the clan advises him to go to a certain place in the forest. During his journey he comes across a perfectly kept house, and realizing that nobody is home, he enters and waits to see what will come. As he sits there, he suddenly feels something like an earthquake and hears footsteps of somebody walking around at the back of the house. He remains very still with eyes wide, wondering what will happen next. Suddenly the most beautiful woman he has ever seen appears in the doorway and looks straight into his eyes. Bliss, such as the quake of the earth at her footsteps and flashes of lightning with her smile, indicate that she is a sky being (gabakalich). She goes to the courtyard, cuts a cluster of pandanus nuts, steams them for him together with sweet potato, and tries to seduce him. The sexual details of this scene are graphic. Overcoming his pollution anxieties, he gives in with pleasure. In the morning she is gone. The same thing happens the following two nights, except that after the third night she remains. In the morning, she dresses him with the finest parapara cloth and transforms him into a being as magnificent as she. She then joins his clan brothers, who marvel. From here on he is called Linya, a name commonly given to sky people who are protagonists in myth.

Meanwhile, another miserable, rejected bachelor with a long neck and ugly face notes Linya's transformation and follows him day and night to learn his secret. Overcome with pity, Linya tells him to follow the same bush track. The same thing happens, but this bachelor refuses her, saying that he had come to be transformed, not seduced. She runs out of the house and stays away all night. The next night the same thing happens, and on the third, angered by her advances, the bachelor shoos the spirit woman. The dream sets off a violent storm and Linya realizes that something is amiss.

He rushes to her house and weeps over her body in despair. She instructs him to cut some bamboo containers and arrange them in two clusters of four, one male and one female, separated by a cluster of two, one male and one female. When this is done she tells him to pull out the arrows and fill the containers with her blood, plug them with clay and leaves, and bury them in a swampy area. Then she instructs him to bury her and return later to harvest yape plants from her grave, one of which will grow by her head and the other by her feet. She teaches him the procedures and spells for caring for these sacred objects and for passing them on so that future generations of young men can be similarly transformed. With a faint smile, she dies. The narrator of one version ended with these words: "So the sangai [sacred objects used in the sangai] originated from a woman, and therefore they are regarded as persons. Be-
cause the [spirit] woman made men, they [the sacred objects] always helped all men, the ugly and the handsome alike, so that they would be healthy and good-looking.32

Following the instructions of the spirit woman, the sacred objects and accompanying poetry were transferred from clan to clan via sale and purchase, permitting the transformation of all men.33 The purchase of *sungai* rites was an intentional move on the part of clan elders to emulate clans whom they perceived as prosperous and having a particularly promising cohort of young men. On the assumption that their success stemmed in part from bachelors’ cults, they encouraged senior bachelors to assemble pigs and other valuables and undertake the journeys to execute the purchase. Once the payment was made for the sacred objects, either the senior bachelors attended a performance of the seller’s clan to learn the rites and accompanying poetry or senior bachelors from the seller’s clan traveled to the buyer’s clan to teach the same. With each transfer, verses were added to *sungai* poetry to record the transaction and tell of the transformative effects that the sacred objects had on those who acquired them.

*Sungai* bachelors’ cults essentially represented seduction into marriage and adulthood by the spirit woman through which all men could become transformed into physically, mentally, and socially competent adults. Through the power of the spirit woman, biological inequalities and those of family standing were erased, and all men were regarded as equals. Analyses of *sungai* poetry indicate that ideals of transformation vary with time and place. Poetry of groups removed from the major exchange networks focuses on physical transformation, while that of clans within the sphere of the *Te* cycle and Great Wars emphasizes ability to produce and manage wealth (Wessner and Tumu 1999).

The *sungai* spread from central into western Enga, where boys attended *mole* rites in their childhood and the *sungai* during adolescence. Around the time of first contact the *sungai* was remarkably similar across central and western Enga, and even into Ipili regions (see Biemak, this volume). Before coming into close contact with the spirit woman via the sacred objects, young men of the appropriate age in a clan or large subclan34 were separated from both mother and father. They retired to a secret place in the forest where they cleansed their eyes under a waterfall and purged their bodies and senses of all that was considered impure—prior contact with women, female fluids such as breast milk and menstrual blood, sights of pig or human feces, and so on. Only then were they permitted to enter the cult house, where they were disciplined by a strict dietary and behavioral regime and required speaking in measured, symbolic language. Senior bachelors presided over all events.

In the four days that followed, the bachelors tended their plots of *lolo* plants and conducted rites for the communally owned fluid, both of which represented the spirit woman.35 Mental capacities were developed during evening sessions to comprehend and memorize the *sungai* *iti pingi*, a lengthy praise poem for the sacred objects rested in obscure metaphor that taxed the very keenest of minds. Nights were spent by lapsing into short periods of sleep followed by discussion and dream interpretation, where young men placed visions from the subconscious into political frameworks of warfare and exchange. Verbal skills were trained by turning interpretations to metaphor and song. During the day, attention was turned to physical transformation—cleansing the body with the aid of leaves from the sacred *lolo* plant, wig-making, and preparing ceremonial attire for emergence. The young men of a clan or subclan who endured the rites, hardships, and dreams together left from the cult house with bonds of brotherhood and solidarity that would last throughout their lifetimes. They were assessed by elders as to whether they were ready for marriage and then retired to spend a few days in the seclusion of the men’s house.36

If bachelors remained faithful to the spirit woman through a series of cult performances extending over a period of five to ten years, they acquired the strength to withstand the effects of contact with women and the skills to accumulate enough pigs to pay bridewealth for a human wife. The *sungai* thereby provided a formalized and safe road to marriage among groups who held strong contamination beliefs, fear of sexual intercourse, and tense relations between the sexes. Possibly the themes of sexuality and explicit details of seduction are not repressed in the *sungai* origin traditions as they were in the female spirit cults of surrounding areas (Struthern and Stewart, this volume) as a means to alleviate sexual anxiety. Furthermore, through the *sungai*, every young man was defined as potentially equal to his peers, assured of the support of his fellow clansmen in raising bridewealth, and endowed with the capacity to excel and eventually become a big man. For elders, the *sungai* was as beneficial as for the participants themselves. It gave them a chance to instill clan loyalty, cultivate values appropriate to changing times, and exert control over the younger generation. It kept young men out of the marriage market until the age of twenty-five or thirty, freeing women for polygynous marriages with ambitious older men.

The *sungai* was also appreciated by old and young women alike, though they kept their distances from the secretive rites. Life stories indicate that women were proud to see their sons or boyfriends transformed into healthy capable adults during the *sungai* and to have them defined as equal to all other men. As mentioned earlier, women felt that they were the ones who made big men of their husbands through their productive efforts and private initiatives in exchange. Equality provided a blank slate on which women could make their marks; had men been defined as unequal to other men from the outset, it would have been more difficult for women’s work to leave a signature. With the approval of bachelors, elder men, and women alike, the *sungai* was acquired rapidly by most but not all clans of central and western Enga.

Around the end of the nineteenth century, an addition was made to previ-
ously secretive bachelors’ cults. In the atmosphere of the Great Ceremonial Wars, where public display of power and wealth was the order of the day, an emergency festival was added to mark the completion of the cult and display the upcoming generation to the public. Young men spent the final morning of the cult dominating ceremonial attire that made even the skinniest of lads impressive. Dressed to perfection, they proceeded in a dignified parade to the ceremonial ground, where they performed a dance and presented dream interpretations in song. Elder clansmen watched with pride, men from neighboring clans evaluated the strength of their neighbors, and young women were love-struck. When the emergency festival was over, people gathered to discuss upcoming exchange events.

By the fourth generation before the present, the sangai furnished an important occasion to gather people to discuss trade exchange. Clans of eastern Enga eagerly purchased the sacred objects and spells, experimented, and altered the cult substantially to fit the social and ideological landscape of their area. In eastern Enga, it was renamed sauuta. As the history of acquisition of the sangai by eastern clans is relatively recent, the intent behind purchasing the sangai—emulation of the successful acquisition of an event to assemble crowds to plan exchange—are well documented in historical traditions.

With the addition of public emergency festivals to the sangai, a formerly secretive cult used to negotiate relations within male corporate groups touched on domains in which females also had vested interests—courtship and exchange. Young women became more and more intrepid under the pressure of public competition to be first to claim their desired men from the sangai. They awoke at dawn on the day of emergency and crept through the forest to the seclusion hut where the bachelors were preparing food. Quietly hiding themselves in the bushes, they eavesdropped on the conversation and gaped at the half-naked bachelors. When the bachelors retired into the hut, the girls burst out of the bushes and sang songs at the outer gate of the fenced seclusion hut. After some time they entered the cooking area, where they began to sing and dance. The bachelors asked the senior bachelor to drive away the girls, so they could come out and get dressed, but the girls stood fast until they were given a burning stick to indicate they were favored ones and then sent home with a request to bring ornaments for the bachelors to wear upon their emergence. On their way home, the girls lit a large fire to let other girls know that they had been the first to arrive and that their advances had been accepted.

The bachelors, in response to the overtures of the girls, shifted their attention from the spirit woman to human women. On the night before their emergence, they performed love magic to attract the girls of their choice to the cult house. Senior bachelors who presided were not ones to blow the whistle on such activities, since they would be some of the next to come up for marriage. Love magic and courtship became a preoccupation of those participating in the sangai; some men said that during their seclusion they spent most of their time worrying whether any girls would come to court them, whether the ones they loved would come, or whether too many would come and thereby draw the disapproval of senior bachelors.

Once kindled, competition among women was hard to quell. Some time between 1913 and 1920, a decade or so before first contact, two Luyapo women in eastern Enga, Piasowauna and Lusaute, were overcome by jealousy, broke the solemnity of an emergency festival, pulled a man named Tuwing out of the dance line, and fought ferociously over him. Their actions were regarded as pretext action, the product of female nature, and so little could be done. Poor Tuwing was obliged to marry both. Over subsequent years, others followed suit and, before long, disruptive courtship during emergency festivals (enku akoko nyingi) became the norm. In these, girlfriends attending emergency sing-songs (lik john kana) respectfully watched the performance until they felt that the bachelors had had sufficient time to present themselves. Then they rushed forward, abruptly breaking the sanctity of the dance, dragging their boyfriends out of the line, and stripping them of some of their finery, which the bachelors had to reclaim privately at a later date if interested in the girl. Girlfriends and their supporters encircled the chosen man and danced around him, singing bawdy songs complaining that their boyfriends had been taken away from them for the sangai, or boasting of prior sexual relationships, for example:

Lyambuwanana from Apithimana,
I make love to her son at the back of the house.
I released him to attend the sangai.
Poko’s penis is not on the ground.
I am proud and happy because it is in me.

Competing groups composed of girls and their supporters fought over the bachelors, sometimes leaving them totally naked. Elders looked on with growling disapproval, but allowed this disruptive courtship to become an integral ending to sangai performances for a number of reasons. One was that the juxtaposition of rites that separated the sexes, on the one hand, and ones that blantly touched on sexuality, on the other, was not foreign to Enga bachelors’ or ancestral ritual. For example, the sangai origin myth involved graphic sexual seduction, and in fertility rites sacred stones were made to physically copulate. Another was the fact that women were playing an increasingly active role in exchange and so tolerance for their expression of preferences in marriage was considered. Finally and significantly, were the practical considerations: such drama drew large crowds for subsequent discussions to plan upcoming trade exchange.

The enku akoko nyingi moved westward to make inroads into the strict pollution beliefs and taboos of western Enga. Most men of western Enga report that it reached their clans in the 1960s, some forty to fifty years after the first incident.
though a few clans in the far west never adopted female courtship or emergence ceremonies into their kepelo performances (see also Wohlt 1973; Gibbs 1973).

As human women assumed a greater role in the sanggi, the spirit woman withdrew, and only fragments of her presence remained in sunga lore of eastern clans. For example, on the basis of his interviews with knowledgeable men of eastern Enga in the 1950s and 1960s, Schwab (1993: 27) cites fragments of sanggi tradition given to him by elders stating that the sanggi originated from a woman. However, these elders were unable to elaborate and knew nothing of the spirit woman. Meggitt’s informants (1964) were apparently also not aware that the sanggi centered around celestial seduction.

It should be noted that changes in kepelo-cult cosmology occurred as the sunggi spread throughout central and western Enga, linking women to fertility and prosperity. While the diffusion of the pre-sweet potato kepelo cult was linked to the journey of a mythical rainbow python, the spread of the post-sweet potato kepelo cult was attributed to two wandering women, mother and daughter. These women seduced or were seduced by men they encountered, taught them the magic spells of fertility, and later turned into sacred cult stones. With these alterations in kepelo cosmology and the spread of the sunggi, the spirit woman withdrew from her role as mother in the mote of tribes adjacent to the major exchange networks. For example, at the kepelo cult house near Laiagam, where the wandering women delivered the cult, the mote was used only to train future ritual experts. At other cult houses in the Lai valley, founded by the wandering women, the kepelo cult (called motee in central Enga) was substantially altered, and the mote initiation totally discontinued. In the initial stage of motee cult-house construction, two human women, one representing the mother and the other the daughter, rode the kingpost for the cult house as it was carried in great ceremony from the forest to the sacred site. Human women had penetrated what was formerly male ritual; the “hot” vaginas of women rode atop the central symbol of male corporate groups.

The Female Spirit Cult

The spirit woman did not abandon men in adulthood, nor did she cease to seek her transformative charms. Around the end of the last century, when the Toe cycle had just become linked to the Great Ceremonial Wars, big men in pivotal clans at the western terminus of the Toe cycle were making elaborations in the kepelo/motee cult, using its performances as occasions to plan and time the Toe cycle (Wiesner and Tuma 1998). Big men from clans at the eastern end of the Toe cycle then sought similar ritual means to enhance the prosperity and reproduction of their groups and to stage public events that would gather people to “talk Toe.” Hearing of new developments in the southeast in the form of the female spirit cult, big men of the Saka valley were eager to try it.

According to historical tradition, the spells for the cult were first brought by a woman named Kangala from the Mendi area, who married a big man of the Saka in the fifth generation before the present. However, the cult was first performed when the sacred stones, which served as a reservoir of the female spirit’s power, were imported by Kangala’s fellow Paukaka clansmen. Shortly after, the female spirit cult was acquired from the Tambal area by the Yambarrene Watenye clan under the initiative of Paikaia, a prominent organizer of the Toe cycle. When sacred plants sprang up in the spot where he had defecated after a large feast, and sacred cult stones appeared in the earth, Paikaia summoned ritual experts from Tambal to perform the cult. Subsequently, big men from other clans in eastern Enga followed suit. In an extreme case, men from a Yatawara clan at Wepenamanda made a night journey to steal the sacred stones of a nearby Wainini clan in the late 1950s or early 1960s. They proclaimed that the stones had appeared at their place and summoned ritual experts from the Tambal area to orchestrate their first performance. As it was common belief that such stones could wander, nobody suspected theft.

The female spirit cult presented the immortal sky woman to men neither as mother nor as seductress and first wife, but as second wife, who came to men as a bride, but remained a virgin with a closed vagina, giving men protection against the menstrual fluids of human females. She brought health, fertility, and wealth to them and their families. Two cult houses were constructed for the rites and fenced in, one male and one female, and adult male celebrants divided into two opposing but complementary moieties representing males and females. Its central theme was that “male and female must be both separated and indissolubly linked” (A. Strathern 1970b: 49).

Superb descriptions of cult performances and analyses are given in the publications of Strathern and Stewart (A. Strathern 1970b, 1979; Strathern and Stewart 1998a, this volume); it is not necessary to elaborate here. Enga appear to have simply imported the cult opportunistically and followed the instructions of ritual experts; only a few knew the meaning of specific actions performed, though the role of the female spirit was acknowledged. In some cases the female spirit cult appears to have been conceptually merged with cults for the ancestors. What does draw many remarks in descriptions of performances, however, is the emergence parade at the end of the cult, when men broke out of the cult enclosure’s outer gate and danced to the ceremonial grounds in full dress, each holding a magnificent pearl shell before his eyes. Not only physical attractiveness was displayed by these married men, but also power and wealth. Subsequently the men returned to the enclosure and reemerged carrying bags of pork for the feast. Great crowds gathered for this event, knowing that the host clan had performed the cult with two goals: to ensure the health and prosperity of its members and to provide a public forum for those who would follow.

Through the female spirit cult, an immortal sky woman brought all the benefits of a second wife to families without generating sexual jealousy. She also
reinstated potential equality to all married men at a time when inequalities had become prominent. Women approved of her efforts and raised the pigs to help men purchase her powers, just as they raised pigs to pay bridewealth for second wives. They also readily accepted her wealth—the pearl shells that first entered the Tce cycle about the time the female spirit cult was imported. It is said that some women fell in love at the mere sight of a beautiful pearl shell, and so these new valuables became an essential component of bridewealth by female demand. Unfortunately, European patrols entered Enga before the female spirit cult had spread widely, and so it is difficult to know what the future would have held for the immortal sky woman in her new role as second wife.

**Historical Perspectives on Female Participation in Male Ritual**

Returning to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter: what does a historical perspective add to our understanding of female participation in male ritual as discussed by Pascale Bonnefmère in the introduction to this volume? First, it shows that types of male rituals—initiation, bachelors' cults, and female spirit cults—may not be as different as they first appear to be, but can be expressed drawings from the same fund of cosmology to build relational configurations critical to men in certain life stages or in specific socioeconomic contexts. In the Enga case, all three types of male ritual drew on Enga belief that the original progenitors of humans, the mythical sky people and sky women in particular, could come to the aid of individuals. When they appeared depended heavily on the needs of a variety of relationships. Prior to the introduction of the sweet potato, it apparently sufficed to have the assistance of celestial women in separating boys from their parents and integrating them into a community of men who cooperated in reproducing relations with the spirit world. After the introduction of the sweet potato, when the center of the economy shifted toward intensive agricultural production and ceremonial exchange, men's needs were altered. A spirit woman was then called on to facilitate the transition from bachelor life to adulthood by bonding men into a cooperative cohort and recreating order at a time when competition was threatening relations between men. The spirit woman also eased the path to marriage in a society that was fraught with fears of female contamination, on the one hand, and yet required cooperation between the sexes to forge exchange networks, on the other. When the complexities of exchange networks became so great that they could only be mastered with the help of a female kin, a spirit woman was called on in adulthood to reinforce cooperation within and between the sexes. And so, driven by the needs of men and the actions of women, spirit women moved from the role of mother to seductress and bride to concubine for married men. Their presence in rituals at any one stage in the life of men did not preclude their return to assist in another. Had contact with Europeans not occurred, it is likely that all three types of male rituals involving female spirits would have been practiced contemporaneously in some parts of western Enga.

Second, a historical perspective cautions against assuming that male ritual as experienced in the ethnographic present is "tradition" aimed at reproducing the status quo. It underlines the importance of asking the question whether ritual might also be part and parcel of the process of change. While some studies (Barth 1967) indicate a conservative role for male ritual, Enga male ritual was used to preserve the status quo in some areas of life and to bring about change in others. Females were instrumental in both processes. On the conservative side, male ritual was used to reproduce the potential equality of men, even after blatant social inequalities had emerged. Women supported these efforts. Mothers were proud to see their sons transformed into equals to all other men via initiation and bachelors' cults. Young women felt that, if their prospective husbands were equal to other men, then their own hard work in building family wealth and reputation would show. On the progressive side, male ritual was important in ushering in new norms, values, and attitudes. Items such as pigs and pearl shells gained prominence, value, and meaning as exchange items owing in part to their prominent positioning in male cults. Women cooperated in efforts to value items by producing or acquiring outstanding pigs and other items for ceremonies or demanding them as part of bridewealth (Wiessner 2001). Through qualities praised in bachelor cult poetry, ideals were shifted from equality of all men to initial equality of men to be broken later in life through economic and political achievement. In twentieth-century bachelors' cults, young women assisted their boyfriends in their quests to excel by gathering the finest decorations they could find for them and bringing them to the bachelors' cult house so that they would stand out from the others in the emergence ceremonies. Last but not least, women's aggressive and entertaining courtship within the context of bachelors' cults and exchange did much to soften barriers between the sexes.

Looking at Enga ritual through time makes it possible to see in which contexts women enter male ritual symbolically and when they participate in actuality. Throughout the course of history, women were represented symbolically in all Enga male ritual and participated indirectly by provisioning cults and celebrating their outcome. However, direct female participation in male ritual did not occur until the Great Ceremonial Wars and the Tce cycle became so complex that men had to work together regularly with their wives and agnatic female relatives to manage family exchange ties. This cooperation did not erase the essential separation between the sexes, which was grounded in contamination beliefs. Nonetheless, it did strengthen appreciation of the contribution of females to the fertility and prosperity of men, giving men confidence in the goodwill of women. Subsequently, as a result of female initiative and indirect male consent, women entered male ritual in flesh and blood. The most as-
The Fate and Future of Female Spirit Cults

The kepela and mara were discontinued with Christian influence. Though the idea of the immortal rainbow python, so prominent in kepela mythology, has reappeared in some modern religious movements, all aspects of mara rites seem to have disappeared. By contrast, the sangai, which did not conflict with Christian principles, had a much slower decline. Some clans of Enga continue to hold the sangai today, usually in the context of an event to gather crowds for election campaigns. In these, it is probably fair to say that the fundamental concept of marriage to a spirit woman has vanished. As far as we could determine, key concepts from the female spirit cult never really penetrated eastern Enga before missions entered the area, and so few traces remain today.

Though specific female spirits of the past may have vanished, the recognition of a female force in Enga religious beliefs continues today. Philip Gibbs (personal communication, April 1990) has noted a strong move in Catholic church circles toward a devotion to the “Blessed Mother,” with many connecting her to the spirit woman of the sangai or other female sky people. He has also sensed a revival of female “spirit” in a more secular sense of women’s creativity in taking control of their own lives. With local churches making more effort to integrate Enga tradition and Christianity, new permutations of the female spirit and female spirituality will appear just as they have in the past.

Chapter 9
Relating to Women: Female Presence in Melanesian “Male Cults”

Bruce M. Knauft

It seems so obvious that one has to wonder why it hasn’t been done sooner. In highly selected ways, of course, previous writings have considered the presence and spiritual imagery of women in the so-called male cults of Melanesia. But not in the same way as in the present contributions. This chapter attempts to assess the distinctive contributions of the current volume, to contextualize them in larger historical and theoretical terms, to specify some comparative insights raised by the contributors, and to apply these insights—critically and reflectively—to the male rituals and initiations that I documented in 1980–82 and again in 1998 among the Gebusi of Papua New Guinea’s Western Province.

Appropriation of Women

During the first three decades of writing about ostensibly “male” cults in interior New Guinea—from the early 1950s to the mid-1980s—images of femininity figured prominently in the objects, myths, and beliefs that attended these rites. Nevertheless, primary emphasis was placed on the ways that men usurped, manipulated, and trumped femaleness for their own ritual and social interests. In the process, Melanesian men were seen to appropriate and transform female capabilities for their own reproduction, solidarity, and political control. In received wisdom, Melanesian male cults entailed the exclusion, disparagement, and domination of women by men. This oppositional view of female exclusion and gendered antagonism did illuminate selected and important aspects of ritual and gender relations in Melanesia. But it also contained biases that can now be put in their own cultural and historical context.

Classic perspectives on ritual and gender in Melanesian anthropology were