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'MALE' AND 'FEMALE' IN DEVELOPING SOUTHEAST ASIA

edited by
WAZIR JAHAN KARIM

ROUTLEDGE

'Male' and 'Female' in Developing Southeast Asia

Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Women

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'Male' and 'Female' in Developing Southeast Asia

Edited by
Wazir Jahan Karim

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This book is dedicated to Sir Raymond and Lady Rosemary Firth whose pioneering research on anthropology in Malaysia introduced Southeast Asian ethnography to the future generation of anthropologists.

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Notes on Contributors

Rosemary Firth is currently retired. She completed two periods of fieldwork in Kelantan, Malaysia, in 1939–40 and 1963. She has taught at the Institute of Education, London University after the war. Her special interests have always been giving anthropological insights to lay audiences, especially in the fields of family life, women's affairs, nutrition and health. Her publications of main interest are, *Housekeeping Among Malay Peasants*, (Athlone, 1966), 'The Social Images of Man and Woman', Biosocial Aspect of Sex, *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 1970, Supplement No. 2 and 'From Wife to Anthropologist' in *Crossing Cultural Boundaries, The Anthropological Experience*, ed. Solon T. Kimball and James B. Watson (Chandler, 1972).

Jean Francis Illo is a research associate of the Institute of Philippines Culture, where she heads the Women's Studies programme. She is author of *Irrigation in the Philippines: Impact on Women and their Household; The Case of the Aslong Project, 1988* (Population Council, Bangkok), and co-author of *Women and Men in Rainfield Farming Systems: Case Studies of Households in the Bicol Region, 1988* (Institute of Philippines Culture) and *Fishers, Traders, Farmers, Wives: The Life Stories of Ten Women in a Fishing Village, 1990* (Institute of Philippines Culture). She has also written several articles on women and rural development.

Mark Hobart is currently Senior Lecturer at the Department of Anthropology, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London. He has conducted extensive research in South Bali, and amongst his books are; *Ideas of Identity, the Interpretation of Kinship in Bali* (Universitas Udayana, 1980), *A Balinese Village Remembered* (University of Gadjah Mada Press, 1991) and *The Growth of Ignorance: A Critique of Development* (Routledge, In press). He has also contributed numerous chapters in books, including 'Is God Evil?', ed. Parkin (Blackwell, 1985) and 'Anthropos through the Looking-glass: Or How to Teach the Balinese to Bark' in *Reason and Morality*, ed. Overing (Tavistock, 1985).

Felicia Hughes-Freeland is a Lecturer in Social Anthropology at University College of Swansea, Wales. She has conducted extensive fieldwork in Java and Bali and has published articles on different aspects of Indonesian culture and social change with reference to Javanese performance. She is currently writing up her research, which has so far been expressed in an ethnographic film entitled *The Dancer and the Dance*, and is also working on a project about television and social change.

Wazir Jahan Karim is Professor in Anthropology at Universiti Sains Malaysia and currently Convenor of the Women and Human Resource Studies Unit. She is author of *Ma' Betisek Concepts of Living Things* (Athlone, 1981), editor and co-author of *Emotions of Culture: A Malay Perspective* (Oxford University Press, 1990) author of *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam* (Westview, 1993) and co-editor and co-author of *Gendered Fields* (Routledge, 1992) . She has also published several articles on the Ma' Betise and the Malays, and is currently working on the anthropology of goods and consumption.

Otome Klein-Hutheesing, a former sociologist from the Netherlands, retrained herself as an anthropologist to do fieldwork amongst the Lisu of Thailand. She is author of *Emerging Sexual Inequality among the Lisu of Northern Thailand* (Brill, 1990) and has contributed a chapter to *Gendered Fields*, eds. D. Bell, P. Caplan and W. J. Karim (Routledge, 1991). She has also published several articles on women and rituals in Malaysia, and is currently researching on AIDS in Northern Thailand.

Judith Nagata is Professor of Anthropology at York University. Most of her research is concerned with various aspects of ethnicity and ethnic relations and religious change, both in North America and in Southeast Asia, particularly Malaysia, where she has spent many years conducting research on religion and ethnicity. Among the works resulting from these interests are *Pluralism in Malaysia: Myth or Reality?* (Brill, 1976), *Malaysian Mosaic: Perspective from a Poly-ethnic Society* (University of British Columbia Press, 1979), *The Reflowering of Malaysian Islam* (University of British Columbia Press, 1984), *Religion, Values and Development in Southeast Asia* (co-edited with Bruce Matthews; Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 1986). She is also the author of numerous articles on related topics of gender and class and of a volume on an American religious community, *Continuity and Change Among the Old Order Amish of Illinois* (AMS Press, 1989). More recently

she has been involved in research on Asian and Southeast Asian migrants in Canada.

Mayoury Nagosyvathn is trained in legal studies and has been appointed Counsellor of the Royal Supreme Court of the Kingdom of Laos. She has lectured at the Royal Institute of Law and Administration, then the School of International Relations, and the High School of Law in Lao PDR. She was Deputy-Director for the Ministry of Justice from 1975 to 1978, and Deputy-Director for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs from 1979 to 1986. Since then, she has devoted her research to Southeast Asia history, ethno-sociology, as well as gender issues. She has received several fellowships and awards including a Fulbright, Senior Scholar based at Harvard University (U.S.A) and a fellowship at the University of Hawaii. She has written several articles, and co-authored books with Dr Pheuiphanh including *A Present of the Past Fifty Years (1778 to 1828) of Diplomacy and Warfare Among Mainland Southeast Asian Polities: Politics Nemesis in Modern Laos, Thailand and Vietnam* (New York: Cornell University's Southeast Asian Program), *The Lao in Australia: Perspective on Settlement Experiences*, 1993 (Australia: Griffith University), *Studies on Lao History and Historiography* (with Kennon Breazeale, co-editor) forthcoming.

Stephen O'Harrow has been teaching at the University of Hawaii in Honolulu since 1968, where he is Associate Professor of Vietnamese Studies, Chairperson of the Vietnam Studies Committee, and Coordinator of the Hawaii/Vietnam Exchange Program. Trained as a philologist, O'Harrow is currently working on computerised language teaching and reference materials in Vietnamese. Beyond his linguistic work, he is especially interested in the historical role of women and gender dynamics in Vietnamese society.

Ingrid Rudie is a senior lecturer at the Institute of Anthropology, University of Oslo. She began her research on the Malays in Kelantan in 1965, and has since returned in the mid 1980s to update her research on Malay family and economics. Amongst her publications are *Ceremonial, School and Market. On the Reproduction of Gender in East Coast Malay Culture* (NORAS, 1990) and *Carved Flesh/Cast Selves: Gender Symbols and Sexual Practices* (with co-editors Tone Bleie and Broch Due; Berg, 1993). She has also published several Chapters including 'A Hall of Mirrors: Autonomy Translated over Time in Malaysia', in D. Bell, P. Caplan and W. J. Karim (eds), *Gendered Fields* (Routledge, 1993).

Penny Van Esterik is an Associate Professor of Anthropology at York University, Toronto. Her principal areas of interest include nutritional anthropology, particularly infant feeding, cognitive and symbolic theory, and advocacy anthropology. In addition to past fieldwork on Thai symbolism, religion, and cultural history, she has recently worked with an interdisciplinary team studying the determinants of infant feeding in several developing countries. This work, *Beyond the Breast–Bottle Controversy* (also translated into Indonesian), has been published by Rutgers University Press. She co-directs the Thai Studies Project and directs a CIDA-funded linkage programme between York and Thai Universities in the area of women and development.

Foreword

This volume is a result of a Workshop organised by the Universiti Sains Malaysia-based KANITA Project (Women in Development) and UNESCO on 'Research Methodologies, Theoretical Perspectives and Directions for Policy in Gender Studies in Southeast Asia', held in December 1989, in Penang. It puts together a selection of the papers presented at the workshop and a few from invited contributors.

The chapters are organised into three parts, theoretical, ethnographic and methodological, and essentially express the viewpoints of Southeast Asianists concerned with the applicability of contemporary feminist theory in Southeast Asia. While a number of the writers attempt to form a critique of Western feminist theory, by demonstrating its inconsistency with cultural data, either ideologically or empirically, some appear sympathetic to the writings of feminist anthropology by elucidating the way in which Western knowledge through colonialism and modernisation has made men more 'public', and hence more important. Economic and development theory borrowed from the West emphasises male–female categories of work and production, according them a differential value that has engendered both economic renumeration and statistical and national accountability.

Many writers also show that religions which originated in patriarchal states outside Southeast Asia, such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam and Christianity, have contributed significantly to gender differentiation and the formal dominance of men in public and political life. However, underlying most of these papers is the association of women's power with popular ideologies derived from folk traditions. Rather than seeing male–female relations as separate, distinct and hierarchical, writers show how interfused male–female relationships are and how domestic and public boundaries overlap in social systems which are ego-centred and non-corporate. Women fare better under systems which de-emphasise corporate forms of grouping and membership. If any kind of feminist perspective has to emerge, it is to show that Southeast Asian categorical distinctions of the public and private, formal and informal are not as important as they are made out to be in social theory, and that differences

in power between women and men suggest differences in domains of preference, perceived as complementary rather than hierarchical. In Southeast Asia, the history of inclusion of ideologies that formally preach patriarchy reflects a history of social tensions between popular bilaterality and religious orthodoxy. This introduces paradoxical statements and interpretations of gender relations within cultures.

Another point which is emphasised is the distinction between 'sameness' and 'equality', reflecting the Southeast Asian mode of thinking: that biology, physique and psychology are factors that make women different from men but in no way inferior to them. These factors have not reduced women's contributions to political, economic and social life, but, on the contrary, enable them to stabilise important institutions, which are being destabilised with economic development, modernisation and industrialisation. These pertain to the organisation of the family and household, the production and processing of food, the maintenance of health-care systems and the educational needs of children. The popular view that women are not the same as men and do different things does not generate a discourse that they are inferior or less important that men, at least not before they are told that they are by modernists, advocating Western models of change and development. Nevertheless, while tourism, prostitution, and production work in assembly lines, have placed a commercial value on women in ways more visible than before, there are signs and symptoms of resistance, a pull towards reducing hierarchies and differences through popular interpretations of gender relationships. In revivalist movements, for example, the external symbols of resistance seems to go contrary to notions of equality, yet the invisible message is anti-Western and anti-modern. Women became the ritual bearers of 'culture' emphasising a role more 'indigeneous' than 'commercial'. In modern economic activity, women are increasingly moving into the non-formal sector where they can continue with their entrepreneurial activities based in household production. This is a traditional way of recognising the household as 'public' and of linking the domestic with economic activity managed and controlled by women.

This volume will make an important contribution to the development of the theory and ethnography of Southeast Asia, particularly since publications on women and gender in this sub-region are still few to come by and, with the exception of one or two, continue to emulate predictions of Western theory that patterns of change and transformation are always hierarchical and irreversible, affecting women more adversely than men.

PART I

Theoretical Overview

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Prologue: A Woman Looks Back on the Anthropology of Women and Feminist Anthropology

Rosemary Firth

It is good to find the Women's Studies Unit at Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang presenting a collection of papers on gender relations from so wide an area and with such diverse viewpoints in this challenging new field.

Over half a century ago, my own Malayan fieldwork was probably one of the first published studies of women in Southeast Asia. But it was a study of women's roles, not a gender study in the modern theoretical idiom. The same is true of the work by other women anthropologists of that time. It is natural that each generation should approach old subjects in a style which differs from that of their elders. In this paper I shall take a backward look at anthropological work on women and by women in the last sixty years or so, which laid the foundation on which younger writers have built today.

The term Gender Studies is a recent innovation in anthropological discourse, while sex roles and relationships were a traditional subject of investigation even before Malinowski's study of kinship and sex in the Trobriands (1929). Ten years later, Phyllis Kaberry published her Australian *Aboriginal Woman, Sacred and Profane*. The introduction to that work makes it clear that she was concerned with the anthropology of women rather than with feminist anthropology. While women were the focus of her attention, her theme, she said, was 'one that involved a contrast and comparison of their activities with those of men, their cooperation and their shared beliefs'. In 1952 she published *Women of the Grasslands*, an original and witty study of the contradictions and complexities of attitudes and behaviour between the sexes in the Cameroons. Those women had no doubt about their importance in that society, in child-bearing, agricultural work and certain ritual practices, and they expressed it to her with some acerbity (1952: 150)

> A woman is an important thing . . . she bears a child, then takes a hoe, goes to the field and is working there; she feeds the child there . . . What work can a man do? A man can only buy palm oil. Men only build houses . . . Important things are women. Men are little. What are the things of men? Men are nothing, have you not seen?

And they reminded her of the four days of mourning for a woman, in contrast to only three for a man.

In 1937 Camilla Wedgwood published her studies of *Women in Manam*, New Guinea. In 1959 Audrey Richards published *Chisungu*, her study of girl's initiation ceremonies in Northern Rhodesia (Zambia). In this she made clear that the rites were an initiation into womanhood and its responsibilities, since the girls were already sexually sophisticated. The rites were said to change the girls from 'an uncultivated weed', in the men's phrase, to 'women as we are', in their own terms. A study of the unusual familial and economic roles of women in Jamaica was Edith Clarke's book *My Mother Who Fathered Me* in 1957.

For these four women, all unmarried and collecting their material alone in the field, it must have seemed the most simple and natural thing to do, to study women: a man would have found it a more difficult task. Successful women in those days often did remain unmarried, but we cannot know if this was a deliberate choice or the unexpected result of the way their emotional energies were directed.

About 1958 the wind began to change a little. UNESCO convened a meeting in Calcutta in January of that year to discuss the contribution which the social sciences could make towards better mutual appreciation of Eastern and Western cultural values. Special emphasis was to be laid on the 'revolutionary changes in the status of women politically, legally, economically and educationally . . . in country after country in the last fifty years'. The preface boldly declared (1963: 13): 'In this book, UNESCO is daring to ask for trouble- to study the roles of the two sexes is to do just that. Probably no other topic excites more argument and less agreement and probably on no other topic is the argument more heated and the disagreement more profound.'

The book was edited by Barbara Ward, who contributed a clear introductory preface for lay readers. The articles covered Burma, Ceylon (as it then was), India, Indonesia, Laos, Malaya, East Pakistan, the Philippines, China, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. They were written by anthropologists, sociologists, educationists and political scientists of note, as well as by some 'ordinary housewives'; in some of these papers the sharp note of perceived injustice and inegality first began to appear.

In 1968 Edwin Ardener wrote a paper on 'Belief and the Problems of Women'. First delivered in Phyllis Kaberry's seminar in London, it was appropriately published in a *Festschrift* for Audrey Richards in 1972, edited in turn by Jean La Fontaine. Commenting on a later reprint, Ardener noted (1975: 20) that 'of that galaxy of female talent, none of the women were of a particularly feminist turn of mind'. It so happened, however, that when in 1964 I consulted Audrey Richards on how I might present the result of my second visit to Malaysia, she wrote to me: 'Women are News! as Rose Macaulay says; so you might write a selling book on the position of house-keepers the world over.' I did not do quite that in the 1966 edition of my book, except in so far as I outlined some of the technological developments which had altered the way of life of those peasant fisherman and their wives, and to which they had to learn to adapt.

In 1970 I was invited to give a paper on 'The Social Images of Men and Women' at a symposium on 'Biosocial Aspects of Sex'. Stressing the influence of upbringing and social expectations on the different behaviour of men and women in such matters as dress, hair style, bodily movement in sitting and carrying and using implements, I suggested that a world in which the sexes were not so differentiated, but regarded as similar and equal would lack the variety of much in art, myth and religious expressions. As Marilyn Strathern succinctly put it later, 'In many cultures notions about difference and similarities between the sexes are put to use . . . as a kind of language for talking about other things . . . as a source of symbolism' (1976: 49).

Issues such as these were not brought to the fore at the time Raymond and I first went into the field. A husband-and-wife team was indeed so unusual that there was a little precedent for any division of labour in field enquiry. If I had any model, it was that of Audrey Richards. I had met her in London at the London School of Economics and read her first book. It was a research study published before she was in the field among the Bemba. In the opening paragraph she boldly stated (1932: 1) 'Nutrition as a biological process is more fundamental than sex. In the life of the individual it is a primary and recurrent physical want, while in the wider sphere of society it determines the nature of social groupings and the form their activities take.'

In 1939–40 and again in 1963 I studied the position of women in Kelantan and their relation to men; since Raymond was recording fish catches on the beach every day it seemed logical that I should find out how fish are cooked and eaten within each household. From there on followed much else about the domestic life of women. Audrey's model, however, did perhaps deflect me from immediate concern with women's

roles and women's self-perception, although I was indirectly concerned with this.

In my own professional gender relations, my studies and those of Raymond were complementary. They were of equal value, and seen so by us, fitting in to each other both factually and theoretically, as my book has shown.

Our joint work might have been regarded as parallel to the gender relations among our Malay friends. In many ways we conformed to their gender patterns as time went on. But our aims and resources were very different, and in some spheres I occupied a special category, in which I was allowed to behave outside a Malay woman's normal gender role. At festivals of marriage or religious celebrations men did a great deal of the cooking. Notably, in the domestic finances of these peasants, it was the married woman who had charge of the family cash, and had a distinct voice in the family expenditure, including capital expenditures by the man, as for a boat or net. It is notable, too, that in Kelantan peasant women were much freer socially than their sisters in western Malaysia – particularly in that early period, except perhaps in Negeri Sembilan.

In 1972 I published a personal description of what it was like to do fieldwork overseas for the first time, and what sort of relations developed between the two of us as we worked. After the war, many married couples went into the field together, and divided their work in different ways, as must have seemed appropriate at the time. Sometimes this meant working in adjacent areas, sometimes on adjacent problems in one area: for example, the Freedmans in Singapore, the Berndts in Australia, the Strathems in New Guinea, and the Ardeners in Nigeria. The intellectual climate in which they worked differed from that of the pre-war group, when the profession was still very small, and women were not expected to combine marriage and family life with a profession of their own. But when these couples returned home they often found that both partners could not easily get academic jobs. The earlier friend in feminist anthropology to see univerals of gender inequality in every culture studied was possibly a reflection of this Western experience of discrimination. I have been made aware of some personal strains myself, where there were tensions between private and public obligations or conflicts of loyalty in the family. On the whole I would hazard a guess that cooperation rather than conflict becomes the rule for anthropologists in marriage partnership. In some instances wives did better than husbands. Anthropologists learn flexibility and adaptability in the field, where they observe different codes of behaviour in all aspects of domestic life, so that it is easier for them, perhaps, than for some others to make personal adjustment within the

culture of their own families.

Womens' liberation as an aggressive egalitarian movement began in the 1960s in America, whence it later spread to Britain. An early result in the United States was to stimulate a lecture course on women at Stanford in 1971. This produced in 1974 the classic collection *Woman, Culture and Society*, which was edited by Rosaldo and Lamphere. Not long after, an important conference on 'New Directions in Social Anthropology' was held in Oxford. Appropriately enough, it gave rise to a 'fringe meeting' of the Association of Social Anthropologists; this meeting was itself an innovation. It was a seminar *on* women *by* women in anthropology; it resulted in 1975 in the collection of essays edited by Shirley Ardener, with papers on female militancy in Africa, diplomats' wives, gypsy women and nuns. A whole new series followed under her editorship.

In retrospect 1970 seems to have been a turning-point, after which came a regular stream of writing – some would call it a flood – by women on women. Looking through the bibliographies only of some fifty books I had collected during my own teaching career between 1961 and 1978 I realise that no one person could easily be familiar with the whole of the literature on this subject. But in studying some of it again for this article, one thing has struck me which may be of some interest.

Thirty years ago the word gender was not found in the indexes of textbooks, encyclopedias or specific works on women, females or sex roles. Only very recently did it appear on the title-page of two collections I know, published in 1980 and 1989. Hence, its use in theoretical discussions on feminist anthropology is very recent. The first use which I can find is by the sociologist Ann Oakley (1972), and she takes the precaution of giving it a dictionary definition (from Webster's Third New International Dictionary): '**Sex**, the two divisions of . . . human beings respectively designated as male or female.GENDER . . . any of two or more subclasses . . . that are purely arbitrary but also partly based on distinguishable characteristics such as . . . sex (masculine, feminine . . .).'

Even in a paper written in 1973 Marilyn Strathern had found it useful to begin a definition of cultural stereotypes of males and females as *gender* as distinct from the physiological basis for discrimination as *sex*. However by the time her paper was published, in 1976, considerable literature had been published on women since then, which, she noted, had changed all that. In the collection she edited with Cormack in 1980, as in the collection of Jolly and MacIntyre in the Pacific area, in 1989, *gender* appeared boldly on the title-page.

I have not been able to keep in touch with recent indigenous scholarship

in Southeast Asia and the concern of local scholars in the Third World not to be submerged by feminist approaches or Western paradigms of womanhood. But I can see the importance for social scientists, there and elsewhere beyond the West, in developing new theoretical viewpoints from local indigenous fieldwork.

In this prologue I have done little more than cast a rather hasty eye over the development of the early work of some anthropologists in the disputatious field of gender relations during my own working life. I was invited to give a personal view, and it must be clear that this is all I have done. It is a partial, as well perhaps as a one-sided view. In an attempt to bind together what I have said, I offer one final commentary on the problem at issue.

Structuralist analysis derives from the belief that binary thinking underlies all human mental functioning; from this basis 'gender studies' developed from the realisation that women had become a new analytical category. Lifted from the closed world of academic discourse, it is easy to see how such theories provided valuable ammunition in political and personal debate about the rights and duties of men and women in the real world. Early American writers on women's roles bore a strong political message. Questions are asked, Rosaldo and Lamphere affirmed (1974: 1; cf. H. Moore 1988) 'Not simply out of abstract intellectual curiosity, but because we are searching for ways in which to think about ourselves. Along with many women today, we are trying to understand our position and to change it.'

Fortunately, in my opinion, in the United Kingdom the tone of this kind of writing has recently become less strident – perhaps because of real changes in the position of women; while theoretical writing has developed a wider focus on positive images of identity, looking at complementarity and cooperation as well as conflict (Harris 1978). Change in perception of gender identity over the life-span is also described in Gaynor Cohen's collection, *Social Change and the Life Course* (1987), which has an exceptionally useful list of references.

An Islamic community cannot be the easiest place in which to develop feminist thinking or dispassionate gender studies; but from what I can read in these papers emerging on Southeast Asia, Southeast Asian women and men remain as innovative and flexible in thought and action as I noted in my first visit to a changing Malaysia in 1963. Some anthropologists believe that they should be more concerned with observing society than in trying to change it. It is clear to me in respect of sex roles and gender relations that, in doing the first, they have indirectly had an important influence on the second. And that is as it should be, I believe.

Notes

1. In the domestic field there was much more equality and cooperation than in the public and political. Men caught the fish, it is true and women took part in the salting and drying of fish for domestic use and for sale (see Rudie's comments on Kelantan women, as concerned with both food and money projects, in this volume).
2. Raymond and I wrote up our materials in consultation. But owing to publication difficulties and war obligations, my book was published first, his not appearing until three later than mine.

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1

Introduction: Genderising Anthropology in Southeast Asia

Wazir Jahan Karim

The Gender Debate in Western Theory

Reviewing some of the earlier perspectives on gender in history, social scientists usually begin by making some objective observation on the position of women in the past. The Morgan view (1871; 1962; 1963) that societies originally maintained structures that were matriarchally defined was rejected by social and cultural anthropologists mainly because empirical evidence did not support his notion of matriarchies as preceding other kinds of social systems. More importantly, his underlying assumption, that women in matriarchally ordered structures assumed more power and control than men, contained serious limitations. Further evidence of the power of the mother's brother over land and other forms of property threw light on women's symbolic rather than real power, provoking the thought that matriarchy was merely a conceptual formula for anthropologists looking for convenient labels to classify societies.

However, his ideas, rephrased in Engels's (1884), *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* and Marx's theory of the social division of labour, encouraged social scientists to renew their faith in the idea that patriarchal trends in social organisation, ordered by Western modes of capitalism and industrialisation, have indeed emerged and encouraged trends towards women's 'devaluation' in society. What is seldom discussed is the way and extent to which systems might be 'equal' or bilateral in form. Conversely, patriarchal trends may exist in tension with folk traditions which define women's position in ways similar to that of men. In this context, to what extent are the newly emerging patriarchal trends 'structural'? What newly emerging systems of values are apparent that can assure the social scientist that these trends actually transform gender relationships in ways which are long-lasting and

permanent? How have gender relationships been denuded in ways which have adversely affected women, and what is the evidence to show that social change has affected women more than men? These are some of the issues which will be raised in this volume on gender.

The perspective that macro developments from outside produce effective change in relationships between men and women has contributed to much binary thinking in the social sciences, where so-called 'egalitarian societies', said to contain gender relationships of symmetry, have been compared and contrasted to 'class-structured societies' containing relationships of gender asymmetry or inequality. To illustrate, E. B. Leacock (1978, 1981a,b,c), writing on the Montagnais-Naskapi, a foraging community, highlighted its egalitarian features in relation to the sexual division of labour. She maintained that the autonomous nature of relationships between men and women was gradually eroded when the society was brought under the control of French missionaries like Le Jeune, who imposed male and female differences in behaviour and organisation according to the European values and norms of the time. Consequently, a patriarchal trend was manifested and maintained through male domination. These structural transformations over time are explained by researchers' providing an external view of women's power in society, usually defined in terms of formal and public venues of decision-making where autonomy and personal freedom is safely guarded. But power can be invisible, informal, non-bureaucratised and alienated from the system of privileges and rights sanctioned by the State. These are the ways women and less privileged classes have articulated their 'power' in Southeast Asia. With women, added strategies of power are 'silence' (in contrast to public protests) and withdrawal (in contrast to affirmative action). These 'intangibles' are always interpreted as sources of women's strength in communal relations. Non-cooperation in political and religious activity is also feared by men, since most of them realise that they cannot assume important formal offices without the support of wives and important members of the female community. Though it is important to objectify folk experience of power through externally prescribed definitions, it is equally important to know if these interpretations coincide with cultural constructs of the same thing. In discussing 'change' in gender relations, are we as social scientists able to understand how societies alter or modify their own gender constructs in the long term ? Can one confidently state that the resulting changes reflect permanent hierarchies between men and women? With urbanisation and industrialisation, to what extent do pre-existing perceptions of gender guide current folk notions of women and their

relationships with men?

The view that colonisation or industrialisation radically brings about male domination cannot provide adequate answers simply because it maintains the underlying assumptions that social rules invariably lead to an inequality that becomes a permanent rule for future social discourses between women and men. One way in which anthropologists have attempted to overcome this patronage of Western wisdom is to accept social inequality as a fundamental social construct in all cultures (Gough 1965, 1975; Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974; Reiter 1975; Raphael 1975). Since basic biological and sexual differences already exist, cultural systems merely serve to interpret and elaborate upon rules of relationships between men and women. Thus cultures only differ in the extent to which gender is used as a rule, formal or symbolic, to sort out hierarchical forms of relationships between men and women.

With this basic assumption safely formulated, some researchers set about explaining it in terms of institutions which have long been embedded in the complex history and social systems of different populations. Reiter (1975: 11) introduces her volume of cross-cultural studies on women by stating that the 'subjugation of women is a fact of our daily existence, yet it neither began with modern capitalism nor automatically disappears in socialist societies'. Gough (1975) asserts that differences between the status of men and women exist even in foraging cultures and are equally prominent in so-called matriarchal or matrilineal societies like the Hopi of Arizona, the Nayar of Kerala and the Minangkabau of Sumatra. She states that, in such cultures, women and children invariably fall under the greater or lesser authority of male kinsmen from the matrilineage (eldest brother, mother's brother, eldest son). She concludes that 'there is in fact no true "matriarchal" as distinct from "matrilineal" society in existence or known from literature, and the chances are that there never has been' (1975: 54).

This theme is further developed by Rosaldo and Lamphere, who agree that 'all contemporary societies are to some extent male-dominated' and that 'sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life' (1974: 3). The notion of persisting forms of male domination and patriarchy throughout history is often demonstrated through detailed ethnography using structural or symbolic analysis.

This line of thinking again runs contrary to the rigorous inquiry into gender symbolism, which has been a stronghold of social anthropologists concerned with linking empirical data with perspectives of gender. Such insiders' writers show that variations in folk constructs on ideas of 'male' and 'female' and the likely relationships between women and men do

not necessarily live up to Western universalisms of sex and gender based on notions of hierarchies and oppositions between culture and nature, public and private. Through symbolic analysis, MacCormack and Strathern in a collection of articles argued against the 'putative universality of the nature–culture categories' applied to male–female relationships (1980: vii). MacCormack in her critique of this feminist approach in anthropology argued that the 'genderizing' of anthropology should be done in the context of the relativity of ideas and morals on which anthropology was built. She asked, 'Might we then conclude that both men and women are nature and culture, and there is no logic compelling us to believe that at an unconscious level women, because of their naturalness, are opposed and subordinate to men?' (1980: 17).

The symbolic analysis of gender in anthropology, however, did not transcend the structuralist framework, since relativisms established in cultural analysis assumed that change was less important than cultural consistency (Harris 1978; Strathern 1980). Influence on gender analysis produced a period of disenchantment with cultural relativity and an attempt to renew universalistic notions of women's subordination in Western theory (see Caplan 1989).

The volume by Ortner and Whitehead (1981) rejected the structuralist line and stated that a new symbolic mode of analysis should be developed – one which allowed gender to be observed in the context of prestige systems. Reviewing a variety of prestige-systems in different cultures, these authors argue that kinship, motherhood and the mother–son bond enhance the prestige of men rather than women, and that this heightens with advancing religious orthodoxy (1981: 1–128). I would argue to the contrary that this does not clearly happen in Southeast Asia and that the flexibility of interpretation over prestige gives women and men sufficient leverage to operate power to the advantage of the 'self'. While it is evident that the indigenous milieu of gender relations rests uneasily on Indic–Buddhist and Islamic traditions in cultural history, male dominance in these areas of orthodoxy has not necessarily removed women from other public religious activity – in particular folk spiritualism, which expresses the heart and soul of the Southeast Asian. How important is State politics and formal religion to women? Are women in Southeast Asia like Western feminists, making an argument for equality in all spheres of male dominance; or do they see these spheres as alternative paradigms of power and prestige, complementing those they already have?

In this book, authors have avoided the stereotypical definition of 'power' as a social derivative of the 'State' and 'powerlessness' as a social derivative of 'people' at the grass roots. In Southeast Asia we know this