

Feminist anthropology in The Netherlands: The Group and its advocates

by Wilhelmina van Wetering

Much of the debate on the contributions of feminist anthropology in The Netherlands has been conducted in newspapers and periodicals. Professional journals usually restrict themselves to publishing articles with a strongly partisan bent. Criticism only surfaced in small groups, or in gossip and streaks of black humour. In this article an attempt is made to evaluate the achievements of feminist anthropology in The Netherlands. After more than a decade of militant feminist work in anthropology, the 1986 conference organized by the LOVA (Landelijk Overleg Vrouwen in de Antropologie = The National Platform for Women working in Anthropology) seemed a good point to gauge some of the claims for success and accomplishment. Attention is especially given to LOVA's assertion that feminist anthropology has achieved a major break-through. The nature of this break-through; its qualities and reach, are discussed in this paper.

'Blessed art Thou amongst women': female ritual healers in Roman Catholic Minas Gerais (Brazil)

by Lisette van den Hoogen

In most publications on women in the realm of Roman Catholic faith, sexual repression, subordination and passivity are highlighted. In this contribution, however, attention is focused on women's active participation in healing rituals, their creative role as symbolizers and their deftness in manoeuvring to gain access to sources of ideological power. A special relationship to the supernatural is one of the few roads to power and prestige open to women in a small town of Minas Gerais. Following orthodox precepts by verbal acquiescence and exemplary behaviour, some women during the last decades have achieved a legitimation of traditional healing practices hitherto condemned severely by the clergy. The net results of these efforts on the balance of power between the sexes is hard to ascertain. Overt or radical forms of change are not advocated, let alone tolerated. In many ways, the female healers often confirm and underpin the status quo. Yet, within the bounds of given constraints, they enhance the prestige of womanhood by a vivid demonstration of a way to convert powerlessness into power. For individual female clients they often achieve practical advantages.

Is classical anthropology 'viricentric'?

by Louise O. Fresco

Feminists claim that classical anthropology is fundamentally viricentric, that is, focused on male thought and behaviour. As a result, they argue, women have been systematically overlooked or misrepresented as passive, dependent beings. In fact, according to this view, women have only become 'visible' in anthropological literature since the 1970s. This article examines to what extent this general claim is correct. It looks at three well known anthropological studies, by A.I. Richards, S.F. Nadel and P. de Schlippe, who are not particularly reputed for their positive or negative views on women. A close scrutiny of their work demonstrates that these authors do not only examine women's domestic roles in detail, but also put great emphasis on their productive and political contributions and provide quantitative assessments of women's labour inputs. Moreover, they do not suggest in any way that culture is a 'male product' or limit themselves to male respondents. Female headed households, intra-household resource allocation and female solidarity feature prominently in these studies, and therefore cannot be considered recent feminist inventions. Although many counter examples can be found in the colonial literature, it is concluded that the assumption that classical anthropology as a whole is sexist and viricentric, is unfounded.

Clitoridectomy among the Masai, an interpretation

by Irene D. Ubbink

The second wave of women's emancipation and the sexual revolution in the sixties had also heightened the consciousness of women in the West on their autonomous sexual rights. During the same time-period a more general interest developed in the position of women in Third World countries and female circumcision was a topic of debate brought to the attention of a greater public. With feminist groups in the forefront it was generally condemned as an expression of a masculine attempt to control female sexuality, without discriminating however – and this is a point of criticism – between either the different forms of female circumcision or the specific social organizations in which they occur. This present article is based on an essay in which the meaning of clitoridectomy among the Masai is specifically interpreted against the social, political and cultural background of their tribal organization. It is the author's conclusion that the general argument for condemnation as mentioned above has no validity in the case of the Masai.

Feminist anthropology and the sociology of development

by Caroline Dissel and Peter van der Veer

This article deals with the relation between feminist anthropology and the sociology of development. The authors argue that in the Netherlands a feminist variety of applied anthropology has evolved, in which western ideas about individualism, autonomy and equality are accepted without reserve. According to the authors, it is an important task of anthropology to criticize the ideological nature of these ideas. Because the distinction between anthropology and ideology is blurred in favour of activist slogans and programmes, feminist anthropology should be seen as a form of anti-anthropology.