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Article abstract

In a recent article, Marylin Strathern (1987) suggested that feminism and anthropology exist in fundamental tension, stemming from the different ways they constitute their subject matter as "other," and from their divergent conceptualizations of experience. Whereas anthropology attempts, if incompletely, to bridge the gap between self and other, the authority of feminism resides in the maintenance of that gap – here, between women and men. However I argue that not all feminist writing can be seen in this light. In the postmodern situation feminism and anthropology clearly intersect, for both employ forms of deconstructive practice to expose and possibly critique the contexts in which "others" (including the writers themselves) are embedded.

Anthropology, Feminism and the Postmodern Context

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> *Though it is true to say that the dominant power group at any given time will dominate the intertextual production of meaning, this is not to suggest that the opposition has been reduced to total silence. The power struggle* intersects *in the sign.*
>
> Toril Moi, Sexual/Textual Politics.

In a recent article, Marylin Strathern (1987) suggested that feminism and anthropology exist in fundamental tension, stemming from the different ways they constitute their subject matter as "other," and from their divergent conceptualizations of experience. Whereas anthropology attempts, if incompletely, to bridge the gap between self and other, the authority of feminism resides in the maintenance of that gap - here, between women and men. However I argue that not all feminist writing can be seen in this light. In the postmodern situation feminism and anthropology clearly intersect, for both employ forms of deconstructive practice to expose and possibly critique the contexts in which "others" (including the writers themselves) are embedded

Dans un article récent, Marylin Strathern (1987) suggérait que le féminisme et l'anthropologie existent dans une tension fondamentale provenant des différentes voies que constitue la matière de leur sujet comme «autre», et de leurs conceptualisations différentes de l'expérience. Alors que l'anthropologie tente, imparfaitement, de combler l'écart entre soi-même et l'autre, l'autorité du féminisme en la matière réside dans le maintien de cet écart - ici, entre femmes et hommes. Quoi qu'il en soit, je soutiens que tous les écrits féministes ne peuvent être compris dans ce sens. Dans la situation postmoderne, féminisme et anthropologie s'entrecroisent clairement, tous deux emploient des formes de pratiques déconstructives en exposant et en critiquant possiblement les contextes dans lesquels les «autres» (incluant les écrivains eux-mêmes) sont placés.

In a recent article, Marylin Strathern (1987) characterized the relationship between anthropology and feminism as "awkward," despite their shared concerns. What they share, she suggests, is an interest in difference: the anthropologist, to make sense of it; the feminist, to promote awareness of how seeing things from a position that includes the interests of women makes a significant difference to social analysis (1987:286). The awkwardness stems from their divergent relationships to their subject matter. While acknowledging that neither anthropology nor feminism is monolithic - there are almost as many "feminisms" as there are brands of anthropology - she subordinates these internal differences to what she considers broadly diagnostic traits: the distinction between feminist and anthropological conceptualizations of experience.

To the feminist, personal experience "becomes the instrument of knowledge which cannot be appropriated by Others. It can only be shared with like persons" (1987:288). "Others" here are nonfeminist men, those whose authority to determine women's experience needs to be exposed, and once exposed, destroyed. Seeing things this way explicitly reverses what de Beauvoir (1974) described as the "otherness" of woman in respect of patriarchy, more concretely

imagined as "men." Strathern writes: "because the goal is to restore to subjectivity a self dominated by the Other, there can be no shared experience with persons who stand for the Other" (1987:288).

An anthropological conceptualization of experience is most evident, she suggests, in certain "poststructuralist genres" of ethnographic writing. Here the gap between self and Other exists only to be bridged, however incompletely, in the ethnographer's experiences of the alien culture: by her living the alien context, becoming part of the data. Here again, Otherness is deliberately sustained, "but the Other is not under attack. On the contrary, the effort is to create a relation with the Other. ... Under attack ... *is that part of oneself embodied in the tradition to which one is heir*" (1987:289, emphasis mine). The ethical ideal is achieved by a pluralistic form of writing in which neither the author's voice nor the subject's is submerged by that of its alter (1987:290; see also Rabinow 1986:254-56).

Comparing the two epistemologies, one perceives an uneasy tension between feminism and anthropology, a tension that feminist anthropologists, especially, feel hard pressed to resolve. To a scholar's feminist half, the Other is "men" with whom communication is neither possible nor desirable; presumably, culture here is irrelevant, all women are alike. But to his or her anthropological half, the Other is a group of alien humans with whom communication, understanding, is the goal. Here, it seems, the gender of an alien Other is (or should be) insignificant to the ethnographer: since both I and my informant are culturally constructed selves, we tacitly endorse worldviews shared with our respective male and female counterparts (1987:291).

For all its penetration, there are problems with Strathern's formulation, and it is my aim in this paper to explore some of these in a preliminary way.[1] Schizophrenic feminists may be more figments of her rhetoric than victims of insoluble paradox, ironically, one that she herself must thus contain. Despite Strathern's sensitivity, the vision of culture she espouses here seems too absolute. And not all feminist conceptualizations of women's experience can be neatly reduced to her dynamic. In short, anthropologists are aware of (cultural) differences between women and men within specific contexts, and increasingly, feminist constructions of the Other are both informed by poststructuralist insights and transcend the delusion of automatic gender alliance. Sometimes, feminism and anthropology happily intersect even if they fail to merge.

The kind of feminism Strathern critiques appears to be a specific form of radical feminism, one that insists on the universality of women's subordination but, so doing, exhibits an unfortunate tendency to conceptualize women in ahistorical terms. Women are essentialized, not biologically, but socially: subordination stems from ways in which women's bodies, procreative abilities, and economic contributions are, and have always been, socially constructed. However, if socially and culturally constructed, they are also mutable, and for most radical feminists this means that the distance between self and male Other can be overcome.

The version of radical feminism that fits best with Strathern's model is what Alcoff (1988, following Echols [1983]), refers to as "cultural feminism," an unfortunate label. Cultural feminists — whose corrective contribution to the feminist movement in its early phase should not be underestimated — stress discovery of woman's positive essence, her fundamental (even innate) difference from man, and tend to denigrate masculinity rather than specific male roles or practices (Alcoff 1988:411). Some, like Mary Daly (1978, 1987) or the early Adrienne Rich (1979, 1977), have advocated developing and maintaining a female counterculture to enable women to reclaim their own bodies and bond with other women in opposition to men. These are works committed ideologically to preserve and valorize gender differences, while reversing valorizations that privilege men. As frequently pointed out, they are generally written by white, Western women (Alcoff 1988:412; Hawkesworth 1989:534; cf. Flax 1988:640), unencumbered by the simultaneous oppressions of race or ethnicity and class. By adopting such a thoroughly essentialist definition of "woman," however different from definitions of womanhood attributed by men, such writers objectivate women and reproduce the very cultural assumptions they, and other feminists, seek to overcome. And in Strathern's 1987 paper they seem to have provided a "straw man" for what contemporary feminism is all about.[2] If so, it is, I believe, an impoverished view.

Jane Flax, in an article titled "Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory" (1988) posits that Western culture is undergoing a fundamental if very gradual transformation, a change, one might say, of Foucauldian "episteme." The shift she envisions is away from an Enlightenment or humanist

epistemology based on a "knowing" self — that stable, coherent entity which is factual, finite, while nonetheless transcendant, capable of reason providing privileged insight into its own processes and the positive "laws of nature," whose language is a transparent vehicle for truth rather than constitutive of truth — towards a postmodern epistemology that is essentially relational and deconstructive (1988:624-25). The postmodern self is not an autonomous, rational, noble or ignoble savage from whom a veneer of culture and historical context can be peeled away. Rather, it is a product of those historically specific social relations in which it is, at the same time, irreducibly enmeshed (cf. Geertz 1973). The postmodern epistemology is deconstructive in that it seeks to expose concepts as ideological or culturally constructed rather than natural, or simple reflections of reality (Alcoff 1988:415); in this it encourages scepticism, doubt, the questioning of basic assumptions. All forms of feminism, Flax (1988) suggests, are postmodern, though some, it would seem, are more fully postmodern than others.[3] However deconstructive of, for example, language (see Daly 1987), cultural feminists come close to espousing a humanist view of self, a self readily extricable from its social (yet not biological) context, able to alter that context rationally and at will. In their view, women must be "restored" an autonomous selfhood once assigned only to men.[4]

Although a focus on social relations is characteristic of feminist approaches generally, when "woman" is dualistically portrayed as "not man," as in the cultural feminist scheme, the social relations productive of selfhood are limited to those of gender — themselves merely assumed, rather than critiqued. This is not generally the case with Marxist feminism, which, despite the current debate surrounding the appropriateness of its quasi-positivistic categories for conceptualizing women in all places and times (see Benhabib and Cornell 1987), has yielded fruitful insights on the historical intersection of social forces — economic, political, ideological — by which women in particular contexts have been and are being oppressed. But what I want to focus on here is another line of approach, by no means antithetical to Marxist feminism, and in some ways inclusive of its understandings, though not, perhaps, in ways that all Marxist scholars would approve. I want to return to the issues of selfhood and subjectivity, currently a lively arena for feminist writing (e.g. *Signs* 12(4), 1987; Bordo 1988, 1989), and one in which anthropology and feminism speak clearly to each other's concerns. For, as with contemporary ethnography, in this arena what is "under attack" by feminists is, reprising Strathern, "that part of *oneself* embodied in the tradition to which one is heir" (Strathern 1987:289).

Inspired by such diverse theorists as Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan, and Derrida, poststructuralist views of the self generally deny that individuals are autonomous entities having presocial, essential characteristics. Rather, a subject or self is constructed by a discourse. As used by Foucault (1972, 1977, 1980), the term "discourse" refers not simply to speech acts, but to a body of interlinked statements, verbal and practical, bound by rules and characterized by sets of regularities, that both constructs and is reflexively constructed by social and personal reality (Foucault 1977:199-200; Abu-Lughod 1986:186). As Foucault writes

> *discursive practices are not purely and simply ways of producing discourse. They are embodied in technical processes, in institutions, in patterns of general behavior, in forms for transmission and diffusion, and in pedagogical forms which, at once, impose and maintain them (1977:200).*

There are clear political implications here: by weaving together knowledge and power, a discourse defines reality, determines "truth," indeed, makes coercion redundant, unnecessary. Power thus internalized as knowledge effectively forces an individual back on him- or herself and ties her to her own identity in a constraining way (Foucault 1982:211-212). Discourse is, in this sense, related to (though not synonymous with) the anthropological idea of culture when characterized as implicit, diffuse, resolutely local, subtly informative of human being. The apparent consistency or coherence of cultural concepts is, as Talal Asad (1986) submits, compelling: culture shapes selfhood in specific ways. Selves are not, by this view, underdetermined, but, in a sense, overdetermined, constructed by their encompassing social discourse and cultural practice. [This was a central point in my recent paper (1988) on the construction of "woman" in rural northern Sudan, and in Combs-Schilling's provocative analysis of masculinity and the Moroccan state (1989)].[5]

Accepting a postmodern view of selfhood obliges the anthropologist to realise that while she and her female informants might share a common biology, they do not (necessarily) share a common gender. The task for the feminist anthropologist is to comprehend not only her own gendered self, but the gendered selves of her informants as well. Though

the parallel processes may yield radically different results, it is hoped that a deconstruction of self might be accomplished through reflection on construction of the other. This, of course, is what anthropology has always done in providing a "mirror for man." (What "man," and where?) But this is also, I think, what postmodern feminists are attempting to do from within Western capitalist discourse: to constitute that entire discourse (and not only or specifically men) as an "other" which requires critique — an artful re-description designed to expose its systematic plausibility; to see womanhood and manhood as problematic, requiring re-contextualization, not reduction to essences.

The problem for feminist analysis, much as Strathern points out, is that the analyst herself is embedded in the very social relations and cultural constructs she seeks to comprehend. Any understanding of her determination by a social context must always be after the fact. Several writers, like Alcoff (1988), de Lauretis (1984), Irigaray (1985), Butler (1990) (or in a literary way, Virginia Woolf) propose that a strategy for partially overcoming this handicap is to decenter, or dislocate, one's selfhood, one's subjectivity; paradoxically, to take up a critical stance outside the discourse from within.[6] Here one uses one's position, one's history and "natural" language, as means — lenses — through which to view that position in a different light and, so doing, to broaden one's horizon, skew hegemonic categories. Here writing is a political act.

However difficult, such decentering is heuristically possible. For if subjectivity is determined, it comes to be so not by some ineffable, perhaps even reified force, but by experience, "the continuous engagement of a self or subject in social reality" (de Lauretis 1984:182). In other words, and as Bourdieu (1977) suggests, selfhood is formulated in the dynamic between human agents and cultural meanings, in the interaction between an individual and her humanly constructed environment of objects, spaces, others: through practice. Equally, it is through active engagement, critical, thoughtfully reflective, yet analytically distanced, that an understanding of that social reality and her own commitment or dysphoria can emerge. A self analytically decontextualized becomes available for reconstruction as consciousness or conscious subjectivity. According to Alcoff (1988:425) this too is accomplished "through the process of reflective practice." But what is "reflective practice"? Although more politically informed — concerned with neither an empathetic nor masterful discovery of "the" meaning of a text, but with understanding the ways by which meaning becomes possible, by which the socially constructed becomes real — reflective practice nevertheless bears a methodological resemblance to the interpretive dialectic: the tactical alternation of moments of engagement with moments of distanciation familiar to a hermeneutic anthropology. In essence, it describes the practice of anthropological fieldwork, intimating those subtle changes in one's consciousness made possible through participant observation, our most powerful yet most underrated tool.

Take, for example, the work of Luce Irigaray, specifically, her book, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (1985).[7] In two chapters, "Women on the Market" and "Commodities among Themselves," she begins to unravel the tightly woven logic of capitalist patriarchal discourse. And she does so not by applying Marxist concepts and methodology, but by using a persuasively redescriptive tactic to deconstruct the insights of Marxist scholarship as they intersect with her situated knowledge of womanhood. Irigaray, like any good anthropologist, places her "informants" in their social and cultural milieus. Her informants, those who provide exegetical information about the discourse from a position firmly within it, are Claude Lévi-Strauss and Karl Marx, though the latter, she hints, was the better able to distance himself from his selfhood's constraints. The specific process of attributing meaning to objects which Marx described so subtly as fetishism and ascribed to the labour construct of value, is shown through Irigaray's work to underlie capitalist culture (and its self-analyses) as a whole, to be an integral part of a comprehensive symbolic system informing gender, language, the natural environment, religion, all subject-object relations. Woman, who is in that context both object and subject, sign and exchanger of signs, can make use of her position to subvert this imagined world.[8] For Irigaray (1985:191), a feminist critique can "no longer avoid that of discourse, and more generally of the symbolic system ... in which it is realized." Thus Marxism and the priority it assigns to production are deprivileged, not abandoned; like other Western social science models, Marxism is itself considered a product of capitalist discourse, however useful it may be for cultivating awareness of that system's more insidious "statements" and processes.

Differences between feminism and anthropology clearly exist, but in a postmodern context they are

less profound than Strathern implies. Here it is possible to speak of both a feminist anthropology and an anthropological feminism. The difference, it seems to me, lies in the forms, not the postulates of our engagement: in which discourse we use to deconstruct our worlds, and how. Anthropological feminists like Irigaray distance themselves from their context(s) — realising that any such distance can only be partial — in order to see themselves embedded in that discourse and become critically aware of its constraints. They seek an internal distance from which to critique and view themselves as "other." This is not, I stress, a specifically "masculine" place, nor one utterly and fundamentally determined by some naive and ahistorical notion of female biology.[9] Many such places are possible, together yielding a plurality of alternate voices.

Feminist anthropologists also distance themselves from their contexts. Yet they do so ostensibly to investigate the embeddedness of other women in other discourses; they try to engage an alien context as a means to apprehend both it, and reflexively, their own. They too seek a distance from which to critique and view themselves as other; yet, however incompletely, they seek this position by engaging those beyond their own milieus.

Both are paths to feminist consciousness, a consciousness that is never fixed, never achieved once and for all, but is and must be continuously interactive, dialectical. Both are basically intersubjective processes, pluralistic, sensitive to the shifting horizons of the self and the other/self (cf. Bakhtin 1982; Todorov 1984). And ultimately, both are interpretive in a redescriptive way: they are political readings informed by experience that become available to reinform experience, to create the conditions for change — yet without, I think, supplying a coherent, universalizing vision of the world. Still, "to insist that a plurality of 'readings' is possible is not to say that any reading is possible, or indeed that it is not necessary to read " (Cousins and Hussain 1984:11).

What I would now like to suggest is that the sort of deconstruction of subjectivity that Irigaray and other anthropological feminists perform is, like anthropology itself, hardly unique to Western cultures. In other societies, too, women, using their history and their language, displace themselves within an encompassing discourse in order to place themselves, in a limited sense, outside of it. And many techniques used by Western feminists to cultivate in their readers an awareness of hegemonic constructs, to critique such constructs' apparent naturalness — like Irigaray's (1985) "inappropriate" use of hyphenation and parenthetical infixes to draw attention to and subvert the implicit valuations of words — such techniques are obvious here as well. So too is the requirement that the works be "read" from the standpoint of an absence: that we appreciate their silences, what they do not articulate, cannot explicitly say.

My example is the *zar* spirit possession cult in northern Sudan, which provides, for the possessed who are willing to appropriate its subversive implications, an oblique critique of women's position and the construction of womanhood in village society.[10] It does so by enabling women to reposition themselves within their ambient world when they take on alien selves during trance, a process I consider akin to anthropological fieldwork. Moreover, beyond the experience of trance, *zar* permits displacement in three interrelated ways: through the anti-language current among adepts, the elaboration of spirits' characters, and the structure of the possession curing rite. Space does not permit a complete discussion of the cult's redescriptive potential (see Boddy 1989); here I will expand briefly on one of its aspects, its anti-language.

Zar anti-language takes words that have everyday significances resonant with the construction of women's selfhood, and plays with them, shows them to be problematic and ambiguous by infusing them with new, but not unintelligible meanings. For example, a woman's husband is known as her "doorman" (*bowabi*) in the lexicon of the *zar*.[11] The occupation of doorman (*bowab*) is a traditional one for men in northern Sudan most of whom, owing to a dearth of arable land, must seek employment outside of their villages in order to maintain their families within.[12] Indeed, the roots of the practice reach deep into the past, whether Ottoman or pharaonic, when Nubian slaves — some of them eunuchs — were conventionally stationed as guards before the homes and harems of Egyptian nobility. But if the expression affirms the local reality, its potential to redescribe a woman's position is equally clear. For in contrast to quotidian formulations, it implies that her husband is **her** servant, it asserts her nobility and worth. And in the bargain it slyly challenges his sexuality. More subtly, it also alludes to the several thresholds that a husband patrols: his wife's vaginal meatus, conceived of in the infibulated woman as a kind of door,[13] the opening to the womb or "house of

childbirth" (*bayt al-wilada*); and the *khashm al-bayt* or "mouth of the house," signifying both the courtyard door behind which she should remain, and a subtribe: the offspring that she produces. Beyond this it refers to the bride's ability to "open her mouth" (speak to her husband, engage in sexual intercourse) that is awakened in the wedding; to the threshold between worldly being and spiritual afterlife, birth and death; and, more immediately, to the gateway of trance that links the parallel human and *zar* domains in the natural world. At each of these levels her husband wields control. He activates her fertility, performs the rites that link humans to God on her behalf,[14] provides for her spirits' demands. Several other such anti-words exist; their use in everyday conversations cues women to think in non"traditional" ways about traditional issues.

The characters of spirits patently subvert villagers' ideals and play with local meanings; the *zar* curing rite astutely parodies the wedding, the ceremony in Hofriyat that states most clearly what womanhood is and ought to be. All told the *zar* is a form of subordinate discourse (Messick 1987), or better, "insubordinate" discourse,[15] which reformulates hegemonic constructs from a feminine perspective. Such perspective is at once rooted in quotidian discourse and, because distanced from that world (here, in an allegorical way), encompasses it; *zar* is metadiscursive. In this respect it resembles postmodern feminist writings like Irigaray's. And like such texts it constitutes a form of cultural resistance: *zar* is less a vehicle for political action than for the cultivation of an incipient feminist consciousness that seeks, however cautiously, to expose the contradictions in women's lives and open up new ways to think about cultural practice. *Zar* creates a space, provides an internal remove from which the Sudanese woman engaged with alien others can re-view 'that part of herself embodied in the tradition to which she is heir.'

Notes

1. This paper is an initial attempt to grapple with some of the issues raised in the debate over the relationship between feminism and "postmodern" epistemology, specifically, whether a postmodern turn is harmful to contemporary feminism or compatible with its aims. I intend to expand and develop the argument elsewhere in addressing, with reference to anthropology, the plethora of writings that has appeared since Strathern's paper was published. See, among others, Butler 1990; Diamond and Quinby 1988; Fraser and Nicholson 1988; Gordon 1988; Hawkesworth 1989; Jaggar and Bordo 1989; Mascia-Lees, Sharpe, and Cohen 1989; Nicholson 1990, Poovey 1988; Scott 1988; and Stacey 1988, in addition to those I have used within.

2. Belief in women's inherent peacefulness or nurturant capabilities, while promoting their positive self-image, nonetheless also promotes unrealistic and culture-bound expectations about what constitutes "normal" female behaviour (Alcoff 1988:413). Strathern's implicit focus on essentialist feminism appears to extend her debate with Annette Weiner in another form. See, for example, Strathern (1981).

3. On this point, see Hawkesworth (1989:535) concerning feminist empiricism.

4. Again, see Weiner (1976) for what would seem to be an example of "cultural feminism" within anthropology.

5. Combs-Schilling (1989) suggests that one reason for the resilience of the Moroccan monarchy (spanning, with brief interruptions, some 1200 years) is the successful cultural linkage of the king with both archetypical manhood and everyman, as encoded in canonical rituals and secular ones such as defloration at first marriage. Male selfhood in Morocco is thus overdetermined by the image of the monarch which is in turn determined by and identified with the image of the Prophet Mohammed, whose blood-descendant the monarch is.

6. Feminism and feminist activism must assume a space for subjectivity, for developing (and acting upon) a consciousness of oppression. Some such space may be provided by contradictions between self concepts and experience that results from social engagement or practice. See de Lauretis (1984, 1989), and Boddy (1988, 1989).

7. Despite its difficulties. For a discussion of these see Moi (1985); for clarification of Irigaray's "essentialism," see Schor (1989).

8. In a related vein see Jane Gallop's discussion of Lacan (1985). Gallop writes, "Woman's ambiguous cultural place may be precisely the standpoint from which it is possible to muddle the subject/object distinction, that distinction necessary for a certain epistemological relation to the world" (1985:15).

9. As Fuss points out, Irigaray's tactic is a form of "essentialist deconstruction." She notes, "for Irigaray, the very possibility of a radical deconstruction is based on the simultaneous displacement and *redeployment* of essentialism — a 'thinking through the body'" (1989:80, emphasis in the original). This reclamation of essence is not the same order as that originally proposed by cultural feminists earlier de-

scribed, but one which acknowledges "essence" to be ideological: socially and historically constituted (see de Lauretis 1989; Schor 1989). This is, I think, a sophisticated and indeed useful "repatriation" of a concept that has been so thoroughly and justly critiqued in the feminist literature to date.

10. The discussion that follows is based on my field work in "Hofriyat," a village of Arabic speaking Muslims located on the main Nile in northern Sudan. I gratefully acknowledge the support of the Canada Council (Doctoral fellowship) for research undertaken between 1976 and 1977, and of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (Postdoctoral fellowship) for my return visit in 1983-84.

11. Barclay (1964:198) also observes that the *zar* term for husband is *bowab*, noting that it is used by spirits to summon a woman's spouse when speaking through her body during trance. In Hofriyat, however, a possessed woman out of trance refers to her husband as *bowabi*, "*my* doorman." Her use of the possessive here is crucial.

12. This is also the case for Nubian Egypt. See Kennedy (1977).

13. All women in the village where I worked, and the vast majority throughout northern (Arabic speaking) Sudan, have undergone the operation known locally as "pharaonic purification" (*tahur faraowniya*), otherwise described in the literature as pharaonic "circumcision." In this operation, performed before pubescence, the external genitalia are removed completely or pared away (excision), and the wound stitched together (infibulation) leaving a pinhole opening for the elimination of urine and menstrual blood. The resilient scar tissue that forms is metaphorically considered the "door" to the "house of childbirth."

14. See Lewis (1986:106) and Boddy (1989 *passim*) on the complementary relationship between *zar* and Islam in Sudan. See Combs-Schilling (1989) on Morocco where men perform Islamic rituals on their families' behalf.

15. The term was suggested by Pauline Aucoin.

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