



Introduction

Buina, a three-year-old girl, had fallen ill in the night. She was daughter of Tove, the “father of the village,” meaning he had claim to the land on which the village was built. Her temperature soared and she started to convulse. The full resources of the small community were quickly marshalled. Her parents rubbed her body with nettled leaves, a common remedy thought to “bring the spirit back to the body.” Aspirin was administered and healers were summoned. There was talk of who might have worked sorcery against this child.

These facts were recounted to me in the morning, and, after several hours of no further news, I walked over to the main village to see if there were further developments. The sun was now at its highest point of the day. It was the dry season, so the sky was clear with the expectation of clouds and rain only in the evening. As I crossed the shallow ravine which separated the small hamlet where I lived from the larger village, the unusual quiet disarmed me. I hesitated, and, instead of going directly to Tove’s house, I walked over to the visitor’s platform on the edge of the feasting ground. I sat down unsure of what to do.

A great roar of anguish quickly ended my uncertainty. It was Tove. A powerfully built man, he stumbled from the house where he had watched over his precious daughter, sobbing and gesticulating. He ran from one end of the feasting ground to the other, hurling himself to the ground, rolling in the dust and throwing dirt over his head and body.

In contrast, the diminutive mother, Kuini, was calm. Fighting to contain her own emotions, on unsteady legs she started to patrol the length and breadth of the village. Her eyes darted from one point to another in the greenery that marked the periphery of the settlement. Her child was to be gone from her sight forever, as the Ömie say, but she hoped to check its movements with her voice. She repeatedly cried out in a commanding tone, “Buina! Judine va’one.” (Buina! Go to Judine.)

It took me a few days to understand what I had seen and relate it to what I had been learning about the Ömie world. Judine is the name of a totemic tree, a *marure*, on Kuini’s father’s land where she had grown up. The mother was fulfilling her obligation to the spirit of her daughter, guiding it home. But in doing so, she was defying not only her own husband but all the men of the

community. The men, including Tove, had repeatedly stressed to me in several different contexts and discussions that women have no right to claim *ma'i ma'i* (totemic entities including select animals, birds, trees, and geographical features). This was particularly true of the *marure*, the large, named, imposing tree of the hunting ground, said to be the abode of ancestral spirits. Thus, women could not speak any totemic names as their own, an act which signifies claim to the land with which the totem is associated.

This event, tragic as it was, was the only occasion in my time living in the village of Asapa that I heard a woman voice a *ma'i ma'i* name in such a manner. I came to understand Kuini's actions in relation to the Ömie assumption that all deaths are the result of sorcery. The mother's urgency in directing the spirit of her deceased child to a site inhabited by her own ancestral spirits, was due to the fear that if a spirit of a victim of sorcery lingered, even that of a small child, it could cause others harm, sickness, even death. The whole community was in danger while the spirit lurked about, unsettled. Both the parents and those whom the couple had already named as having worked sorcery against their daughter were equally at risk. Circumstances had forced Kuini to name her father's *marure* in a public setting in opposition to the male edict, while other women had made similar claims to totemic trees in my presence only out of the hearing of men. More than once while walking along from a garden or even after a session talking in my small *kipa* (sago palm stalk) walled house, I found myself jostled and pulled by a woman wanting to orient my line of sight with the direction of her pointing arm. "There, there . . . you see in the middle of that mountain directly across . . . near that empty spot . . . the tall one, on the side . . . that is my totemic tree," she might say.

I came to the land of the Ömie to study gender at a time when the topic was new to the discipline. Papua New Guinean ethnography, at that time, couched female–male relations in terms of group membership and male domination. Confined within the limitations of the descent model, the nature of women as social beings was judged entirely in terms of her status within the group, primarily whether she could transmit membership in the group to the children she bore. The developing focus on gender had introduced other elements into the discussion: pollution beliefs concerning what we understand as a natural function of female humans, parturition and menstruation; the ability of women to choose a marriage partner; the role of women in exchange, meaning the implications of being exchanged in marriage between groups of men as well as her role in often elaborate exchange cycles of pigs and shell wealth. I settled in the village of Asapa, which had a population of just over two hundred in the mid-1970s. It is in the Mawoma River Valley to the southwest of an active volcano, Huvaemo (Mt. Lamington), which rises to a height of just under two thousand meters.¹ The valley floor sits at five hundred meters above sea level and is covered by dense forest, broken by steep ridges and foothills

and a network of swift streams. It is bordered on the south by the Guava Range which rises to 2,500 meters and to the east of Huvaemo by a line of extinct volcanoes known as the Hydrographers Range. Huvaemo, as a geographical feature, dominates the local landscape and even that of the whole of central Oro (Northern) Province. When viewed from the airport to the northeast, near Popondetta, the province's only town and capital, it appears to rise out of a wide, flat plain.

The Mawoma River originates on the southern slopes of the volcano and flows northwest into the Kumusi River, just as it exits the deep Wawonga Valley, in the foothills of the Owen Stanley Range. Ömie speakers also live at the mouth of this valley, but their dialect is different from that of the Mawoma Valley Ömie and culturally they have more in common with the other inhabitants of the Wawonga who speak distinct but related languages. One practice which unites all the inhabitants of the Wawonga is the wearing of long fiber skirts by women of all the language groups. Women of the Mawoma Valley wear painted bark cloth wrapped around their waists, termed *nioge* in the Ömie language, like their Orokaiva neighbors to the north and the linguistically related Managalasi to the southeast. In recent years, the Ömie have developed an art form—bark cloth painting—based on this traditional skill, sold in the global Indigenous art market (Rohatynskyj 2015, 2017a). Another major traditional cultural distinction between peoples of the Mawoma Valley and of the Wawonga Valley, is that while the Mawoma Ömie had in the past practiced an elaborate male initiation ritual along with some peoples of the Managalasi Plateau called the *ujawe* (bird or egg house), neither the Wawonga Ömie nor any other inhabitants of that valley had ever done so.² The Wawonga Valley harbors three different language groups within a linear distance of just over nineteen kilometers. Of course, in walking from one end of the valley to the other this distance grows given the steep ascents and descents traversed. There are grass airstrips, intermittently open, at both Emo River in the Wawonga and at Asapa in the Mawoma Valley. The terrain, between the latter village and the main vehicular road in the province, running east–west from Buna on the coast through Popondetta to Kokoda at the foot of the famous Kokoda Trail, is only moderately challenging.³

One of the reasons for deciding to undertake ethnographic research in this part of Papua was that although having a long history of contact with the outside world, there were no extant full-scale ethnographies concerning the Ömie nor their linguistically related neighbors. The other reason was an interest in examining how linguistic and cultural identity was maintained by small intermarrying communities living in proximity. This was the goal of the project mounted by my university which enabled my research. The structure of the project, having individual researchers working with neighboring linguistic communities, gave me an opportunity to conduct research in the Wawonga

Valley for several months prior to undertaking work in Asapa. I had the opportunity to learn from Wawonga Ömie speakers and also to participate in my colleague's work with the Ai'i, a Barai-speaking group at Emo River, near the site of mythical human emergence. The importance of the comparative perspective gained will become apparent in following chapters.

I returned to the Ömie once in 1990 for a visit of a few months, and since about 2013 I had been following their progress as Indigenous artists, both online and in the press. The work of Ömie Artists, Inc., a cooperative of largely women, bark-cloth painters, organized with the aid of well-placed Australian advisers and with an Australia-based agent, can be found in the collections of major international museums and has been exhibited in exclusive commercial art galleries globally.⁴ At a few points in this book I will refer to aspects of more contemporary Ömie life drawn from information provided by this organization. Otherwise, the focus of the ethnography is the period between May 1973 and February 1975 when my initial research in the Wawonga and with the Mawoma Valley Ömie took place.

The Differences between Women and Men as Seen by Women and Men

My research plan when I first settled on the Mawoma Valley Ömie was quite simple. It was to observe, document, and ethnographically explore social and cultural differences between women and men as they were enacted and developed into overarching statements of value. Straightforward as this plan was, what I learned about how Ömie saw these differences as the months went by, was both surprising and puzzling. For example, a striking feature of the event of the child's death just recounted is that the responses of the father and the mother to their loss are completely incongruous. The father totally abandons himself in enacting a stylized form of extreme grief; the mother remains controlled, rational, doing what is required. This cannot be taken as evidence of a normative gender-determined difference in temperament or emotional disposition. After living in the community for many months, I observed that both men and women are likely to give way to violent grief upon the death of a loved one. Rather, the disparate responses of the parents reveal a unique affinity between same-sex parents and children which results, among other things, in the repatriation of spirits of the dead to the same-sex parents' totemic site. So, Kuini was directing the spirit of her daughter to a totemic tree on the land of her father about which he had taught her. It would be right to assume, in the Ömie world, that the *aru'ahé* (spirit) of deceased males inhabit the vicinity of the father's totemic sites. But the spirits of males do not usually find themselves as far away from the home of their fathers as those of females. Women,

frequently, leave their natal homes in marriage to live sometimes several days walk from those lands and totemic sites they learned about as children.

In those early months of my stay in Asapa, partly due to the event recounted, I began to envision my research on gender as a reconciliation in ethnographic terms of the distinct positions of men and women on what distinguished them from each other. I understood my role, then, as relating their versions of gender difference in a coherent manner in terms of the gender theory of the day within the ethnographic context of Melanesia. As an initial effort toward this goal, I formulated a set of propositions about gender difference from each of the perspectives of Ömie women and men.

Women: Women have right to the totemic trees that their fathers taught them. In this way, women are like men.

Men: Women have no right to any totemic entities. Men and women are fundamentally different from each other in relation to the *ma'i ma'i*.

Ethnographer's Comments: It is evident that the relation between men and women is a contentious one concerning the relative capabilities of women in terms of the *ma'i ma'i* and the land rights they express. Their disagreement on the issue of women's capabilities clearly highlights an element of confrontation as part of male–female relations. The recognition that male capabilities as social persons are determined by full access to land and the power of the ancestors of that land, and women enjoy no or restricted access, suggests fundamentally contrasting capabilities and ways of being in the world. If the word of Ömie men is taken, then the difference between men and women is absolute and categorical. If the word of women is taken, then the situation does become one of degree of difference, but women's capacity to act in the world is only minimally improved, barely changing the hierarchical relationship. A contentious relationship between women and men was certainly not unusual in Papua New Guinean ethnography available at the time of the research. Further, as I will discuss in Chapter 2, a comparative framework based on confrontation and not complementarity was not alien to early studies of kinship organization within the discipline.

A pattern of conflict and confrontation between the sexes had already been established in the 1950s and 60s, as a distinctive feature of the cultures observed by anthropologists undertaking ethnographic research among some peoples of the New Guinea Highlands. The phenomenon was termed “sexual antagonism” (Langness 1967; Meggitt 1964; Read 1952) and involved tense and disconcerting, to the ethnographers, interactions between males and females, claims and enactments of domination on the part of men especially in exclusively male initiation rituals, extreme male fears of menstrual pollution and the like. Marie Reay, one of the few women in this cohort of researchers, is cited as reporting of the Kuma of the Wahgi Valley, that men claim that “‘women are nothing,’ and women retaliate, ‘men are no good’” (Meggitt 1964:

205). Some twenty years later, however, the concept of sexual antagonism, among other things, was criticized by a new cohort of researchers for labeling disparate phenomena under the one term (Herdt and Poole 1982; Strathern 1988). Nonetheless, a generation of highly respected expatriate anthropologists had identified and conceptualized a unique quality in the relations they observed between men and women in some Highlands societies. From the perspective of the present, the concept of “sexual antagonism” must be seen as a reaction, shaped by Western sex/gender mores of the day, on the part of early researchers. These men, and a few women, were attempting to explain sex/gender relations in some Papua New Guinea Highlands societies which appeared jarringly different from the ideal of cooperation and complementarity typical of their home societies. For example, part of the psychological anthropologist L. L. Langness’s (1967) explanation of sexual antagonism rests on an inability of men and women “to meet each other’s needs” in marriage. There is a poignancy in Langness, a middle-class American, drawing upon his own cultural standard of female–male relations, the definition of a successful marriage as partners meeting each other’s psychological and social needs, to describe the apparent sexual discord confronting him at his field site in the New Guinea Highlands.

Further Differences

As my research progressed among the Ömie a further statement about differences between the sexes, but in this case agreed to by both men and women, emerged. Men and women asserted that each takes the *anie* (plant emblem) of the same-sex parent because they have the body of that parent. In this way, brother and sister are seen as members of different kinship/political groups due to their physical sexual identity. Such a practice challenges over a hundred years of anthropological theorizing that the family includes siblings of both sexes, and that the larger kinship unit (lineage, clan) is bisexual. Both the plant emblem and the pattern of taking the same-sex parents plant emblem were conceptualized by F. E. Williams (1925, 1932), the government anthropologist for the Territory of Papua between World War I and World War II, among groups neighboring the Ömie. I am following his terminology and define the Ömie plant emblem (*anie*) as either a tree, shrub, or grass, that is associated with a group of people living together.⁵ Sex specific plant emblem identification reported by him among the Sogeri Koiari echoes the Ömie parallelism of the spirit of a deceased female being directed to the totemic site of the mother, even though the mother’s claim to such a site is contested by males, and the expectation that the spirit of a deceased male will find shelter at his father’s totemic site.

However, it must be noted that Williams's (1932) article about sex affiliation is limited ethnographically compared to my Ömie material. His research was undertaken at a time when group membership was taken as the key feature revealing the definition of women and their status in a particular setting. Williams provides little information about totemism, aside from identifying the importance of the plant emblem and he was able to gain no meaningful insight into community ritual life. His ethnography was undertaken well before gender became a fully fledged topic of ethnographic research. Even so, what he describes is radical. He carefully avoids association of sex affiliation with the concept of descent, but still the image conjured up by the practice of sex affiliation defined as sex-specific group membership is of all men and all women standing opposed to each other as members of distinct political/kinship groups. This carries with it on the part of both men and women the realization that the relationship between them is modeled on the one between competing, localized groups of men. In this way, it holds out to women, a promise of equality with men.

Ömie men and women agreed that their physiological differences require membership in the same local group as their same-sex parent, ostensibly making physiological difference the only criteria for group formation. This is indicated by taking the plant emblem of that parent's group and suggests sex/gender parallelism and symmetry. But they disagreed on women's rights to *ma'i ma'i* with either women being completely disadvantaged or almost completely disadvantaged in comparison with men. The two statements promise different capabilities both ritually and in social life. In the end, the two statements, one on the basis of the plant emblem and the other on the basis of the totemic entities, are contradictory. The harsh limitations placed on women's ability to act in the world and the promise of equality often seen as inherent in daily life is a contradiction often noted in sex/gender relations in Papua New Guinea (Godelier 1986).

As my research progressed another significant difference between women and men was revealed. Men of fifty and older recounted to me a complex ritual they had undergone as children involving long-term seclusion in an underground structure, being overfed copious quantities of white, male foods, and ritual tattooing. The structure was termed the *ujawe* (egg house) and the inhabitants emerged from it mimicking hornbills breaking out of their nests.⁶ The men said the purpose of this ritual was to make men out of boys. The Ömie *ujawe* whose enactment was recounted to me by Ömie elders has similar characteristics to some of the "man-making" rituals encountered in the "sexual antagonism" societies already mentioned. Further, in discussing Ömie knowledge of procreation a version common in the region was given, men provide semen which envelopes the blood of the mother to form a fetus. But also, more thought-provoking statements were made, such as the sexual iden-

tity of the fetus in the womb is determined by the strength of the blood or semen, the one overcoming the other.

And most crucially, as was mentioned timidly by one man while a group of us were talking, sometimes a woman can make a child all by herself, that is without sexual intercourse. But this child can only be female. Everyone present agreed to this as did others I canvassed on the issue later. People in general said a woman giving birth to a female child without sexual intercourse does not happen often, but it does happen. Parthenogenetic reproduction, reproduction without heterosexual congress, had entered the ethnography of Papua New Guinea as a mythic ideology of male domination used to explain the elaborate male initiation rituals practiced by some of the same societies described as exhibiting a high degree of sexual antagonism. What Ömie sex affiliation seemed to indicate is that both men and women have the capability to reproduce parthenogenetically to people their world.

Parthenogenetic reproduction on the part of both sexes comprises a radical alterity to our “facts of life,” understood as sexual intercourse between male and female being necessary to the production of both male and female children. It suggests an ontological disjuncture between two types of sexed bodies each capable of self-reproduction. The practice of sex affiliation joined to the characteristics identified in certain Papua New Guinea societies like the Ömie, such as sexual antagonism, ritual enactment of male parthenogenesis, dramatic differences in the capabilities of the male and female person, elaborate precautions against sexual pollution and so on, suggests a definition of male/female based not on complementarity and cooperation in reproduction, but rather on competition between two entities self-sufficient in the reproduction of their single-sexed groups. In a word, the Ömie practice of sex affiliation suggests an alternative nature to the one accepted as a Western reality and assumed in all studies of sex/gender in Melanesia thus far.

Although the opposing positions of men and women on the question of whether women have rights to the totemic trees of their fathers could be placed in the theoretical framework of the time as enactments of inequality and sexual antagonism, the proposition that each sex takes the plant emblem of the same sex parent could not. The claims to parthenogenetic reproduction on the part of men, which were emerging in a series of ethnographies of that period, were taken as claims to male superiority and treated as part of an experiential world that had little to do with the facts of actual human reproduction as observed in kinship and social relations. The only resource positioning sex affiliation in a larger theoretical and comparative context, available when I was first attempting to understand this practice, represented it as a rare and problematical form of descent (Needham 1971). But the Ömie material simply does not lend itself to being analyzed as a descent system. A complex system of land based totemic entities, the *ma'i ma'i* and the *anie*, seems to provide

group cohesion, generational continuity, and critically, the differentiation of male and female in social life. In a word, when I completed my initial research among the Mawoma Valley Ömie, I was at a loss as to how to relate what Ömie women and men said about the differences between them in terms of the then current Papua New Guinean ethnography and disciplinary frameworks. My ethnographic research provided me with a clear sense of a radical sex/gender difference, but I could not find a conceptual language for its analysis and even a minimal description of the phenomenon seriously challenged disciplinary orthodoxy.

An Ongoing Feminist Project

But the situation today is quite different. I locate the transformation in the anthropological framework for the analysis of sex/gender cross-culturally from the time of my initial research to the present, as commencing with the feminist assault on the nature/culture divide. This project had to do with nullifying the notion that our view of nature constitutes a universal that can function as a basis for cross-cultural comparison. In the 1970s, feminist anthropologists addressed the culture/nature dichotomy in a series of collected essays. This examination culminated in laying to rest the idea that the opposition between culture/nature constitutes a universal of human experience by demonstrating its recent history in Western thought and its inapplicability to the study of other cultures (McCormack and Strathern 1980). Yanagisako and Collier's (1987: 35) clarion call to feminist anthropologists soon followed, calling on ethnographers to demonstrate that there is no universal nature of women based on our naturalistic definition of the facts of sexual difference. Yanagisako and Collier conclude their much cited and reproduced essay as follows:

Both gender and kinship studies, we suggest, have foundered on the unquestioned assumption that the biologically given difference in the roles of men and women in sexual reproduction lies at the core of the cultural organization of gender, even as it constitutes the genealogical grid at the core of kinship studies. Only by calling this assumption into question can we begin to ask how other cultures might understand the difference between women and men, and simultaneously make possible studies of how our own culture comes to focus on coitus and parturition as *the* moments constituting masculinity and femininity. (1987: 49)

Further, in a development outside of anthropology, Butler (1990) put into question a dichotomy created by the introduction of the concept of gender itself, the dichotomy between gender and sex. Gender difference had been in-

troduced as a particular cultural and social elaboration based on the purportedly immutable, physical, and thus universal difference between sexed bodies. Butler argues that it is the social and cultural elaboration of gender that shapes the nature of the physical difference, making sex itself a gendered category. In a later work, Butler (1993) writes of the “materialization” of social meanings through repetitive acts of inscribing norms upon sexed bodies and here she touches on the ontological aspects of my concern with Ömie sex affiliation. These efforts produce the “effect” of a material difference which involves forms of violence and resistance in the process of imposition. Butler (2016: 295) stresses the relativity of the “facts” of sexual difference:

We still have to ask, under what conditions, and through what linguistic or visual medium, do biological facts appear as such? If there is an organization that precedes and conditions that appearance, or that requires that appearance, the “fact” might be said to represent in a condensed form that entire organization.

In this succinct statement, Butler defines the material facts of sexual difference as the product of a complex system of action and symbolization and not the other way around. It is not coincidental that these words of Butler’s are found in the conclusion to a recently published text (2016) written by Strathern in the 1970s, about the time I was undertaking my research among the Ömie. As noted by Franklin (2016) in the introduction, we see the beginnings in this text of Strathern’s unique contribution to Melanesian ethnography in viewing gender identity not as an essential quality of the individual, but as an aspect of social relations. Culminating in the concept of the androgynous dividual developed in *The Gender of the Gift* (Strathern 1988), one can trace a historical movement from an essentialist definition of men and women and concerns with domination and equality in Strathern’s work in Melanesia, to a self-conscious relational perspective which has enhanced anthropological understanding of social relations. Even though Strathern’s concept of the androgynous dividual provided a new perspective for me on the ethnography of the Ömie (Rohatynskyj 1990), it suggests a mutability between the sexes that simply is not present in Ömie-like societies. The incongruity between the nature of sex/gender relations invoked in the concept of the androgynous dividual and the real-life relations observed on the ground has also caused unease among several feminist anthropologists. For example, Jolly (2018: 6) points out that the concept of the androgynous dividual suppresses Indigenous philosophies that stress ontological differences between men and women. Wardlow (2006: 7) notes that it is impossible to imagine women’s oppositional agency within its terms.

A transformation had taken place concomitantly in the study of kinship as well. A concerted critique took place of the genealogical method which was first introduced by W. H. R. Rivers (1910) and had been used as the basis of

ethnographic research, more or less since. Rivers had simply equated the genealogical relations elicited from informants in diverse cultural settings with social relations. The most powerful recent codification of the critique of this approach, from several perspectives, is exemplified again in an edited collection (Bamford and Leach 2009). It draws together important essays addressing the changing thinking on kinship relations and the boundary between culture/nature in the last few decades. James Leach (2009) writes of knowledge as providing the basis of intergenerational linkages on the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea, while Bamford (2009) speaks of specifically cultivated trees as contributing to the actual physical make-up of offspring and providing intergenerational linkages among the Kamea, an Anga Group in the Gulf Province. All this is deeply enmeshed in a return to the study of the classic categories of anthropological research, in other parts of the world, having to do with dramatic variations from our naturalistic understanding of the nonhuman world, such as totemism, animism, and complex relations with the environment (Descola 2013; Ingold 2000; Viveiros de Castro 2015).

This trend has led to anthropological documentation not just of other cultures, but of other natures. Building on Lévi-Strauss's (1963) dictum of totemism as making use of empirically observable discontinuities between natural species to order social units, Descola (1996: 87; 2013) develops a typology of ontologies, based on the possible ways humans objectify and order their relations with the nonhuman. Ontology, in his approach, consists of social objectification of nonhumans consisting of a combination of modes of relations, modes of identification, and modes of classification and opens the possibility of understanding an *Ömie* nature that is radically different from our own. He identifies a totemic ontology as structured on similarity between humans and the other creatures of the world both externally and internally, while an animistic one, recognizes external difference but internal similarity. *Ömie* do not fit easily into any one of Descola's four types of ontologies for they live in a world that is both totemic and animistic. Further, Descola (1996: 88) states that totemism cannot occur in societies that lack descent groups. My findings show that *Ömie* both live in a totemic world and do not organize their groups based on descent. Nonetheless, his work provides a mechanism for my revelation of an *Ömie* ontology, the documentation of the social objectification of modes of relations, modes of identification, and modes of classification of the nonhuman world.

As I was being drawn into a renewed contemplation of the old problem of sex affiliation by *Ömie* performance on the global stage as Indigenous artists, I found myself liberated of restrictions by the dissolution of traditional reference points in the study of both gender and kinship. But still the notion that the sexes should be presented as parthenogenetic seemed uncomfortably preternatural. In retrospect, it seems to me that I had been waiting for someone to invite me to "take seriously" (Viveiros de Castro 2011: 133) what we

Ömie Sex Affiliation

A Papuan Nature

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learn about our interlocutors' worlds at the expense of our own assumptions about the natural world. Thus, I eagerly accepted Viveiros de Castro's (2015: 42) political declaration that the cardinal value of anthropology is to work to create the conditions for the "ontological self-determination of the world's peoples." I reasoned that if this value is acted upon then it means taking seriously Ömie men's statements that their "ritual" intervention is necessary in the "physical" transformation of boys into men. It means accepting at face value that sometimes a woman can produce a female child "all by herself." For my part, it means demonstrating that the relationship between the sexes among the Ömie is determined more by self-sufficiency in reproduction, conflict, and competition, than by the complementarity inherent in our assumption that male and female are equally engaged in the production of both male and female offspring.

Viveiros de Castro makes it easy to set aside conventional qualms about the radically alternative nature of human reproduction to which Ömie subscribe. But also, his formulation of an Amazonian perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998) offers a promising possibility for discussion of the unique way Ömie women and men differ from each other in their own terms. Comparison of the ethnography of sex/gender between Melanesian and Amerindian ethnography has yielded a determination of substantive ethnographic difference as well as markedly distinct ethnographic approaches (Gregor and Tuzin 2001). Strathern (2005: 138–47) provides a very tentative discussion of a parallelism between practices of some Papua New Guinean peoples with Amazonian perspectivism. She pointedly selects ethnographic material from two non-unilineal communities for her discussion of this possibility in Papua New Guinean ethnography: people of the Murik Lakes in the Sepik and the Ömie. I will argue in a Chapter 5 that conversely an adherence to a unilineal model in Ömie-like settings preempts the possibility of identifying sex affiliation. In considering Amazonian perspectivism in Melanesia, Strathern (2005: 140) cautions that the Melanesian material simply does not provide information concerning the perspectives that humans and animals have on each other. Strathern (2005: 145) also carefully differentiates between ontologically and epistemologically informed viewpoints. Knowing the world from a particular body in a particular place given a particular set of affects and capabilities is well entrenched in feminist discussions (cf. Haraway 1991), but it is different from accepting that these affects and capabilities determine the world to be known. Even if a parallelism between the Ömie material and Amazonian perspectivism is categorically dismissed, the close study of the ways of being in the world of men (and women), certain animals, and a variety of spirits, and their interaction, supplies a template for exploring a Papuan totemism and animism which had historically suffered a conceptual impoverishment at the hands of previous generations of anthropologists. For example, F. E. Williams

(1925), the anthropologist who identified the plant emblem among the Orokaiva, an immediate neighbor of the Ömie, was self-consciously preoccupied with whether the plant emblem could, as a totem, be defined as an ancestor and thus be seen as emblematic of descent groups in principle. Such a fundamental entanglement of genealogical notions in the study of both totemism and animism in this instance could be said to have hampered a rich and nuanced appreciation of both. Conversely, I will argue that the careful reading and appreciation of the mesh of interrelations between the ontological beings that populate the Ömie world(s), will shed some light on the early, intuitive association of the “primitive” denial of paternity with totemism (Frazer [1890] 1914; Lévi-Strauss 1963: 2).

The delegitimization of traditional anthropological frameworks for the definition of sex/gender difference and the closest relations that people make, along with permission to entertain seriously another nature from our own, provide the *kairos* for the writing of this ethnography. The relativization of a universal physical nature enables me to explicate the significance of Ömie sex affiliation to Papua New Guinean ethnography more generally.

Structure of the Argument

Aiming at a new explanation of these issues, I will follow the template set out by Viveiros de Castro (1998) for his argument about Amerindian deixis, the relativity of positions of disparate bodies as subjects and thus claimants to the superiority of culture. However, my task requires the expansion of the number of entities to be considered from his trio of subjects (humans, spirits, and animals) to several more (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470). It must be recognized that sex/gender differences create two distinct subject positions. Also, there are two distinct kinds of spirit beings which both promote and constrain human agency. The content of the Ömie categories of men and women both as physical and social beings will be addressed through their comparison as different “ontological beings” drawing on a particular notion of personhood that is open to the action of spiritual entities acting through persons (Mazard 2016). This conceptualization grows out of a concern with the unseen intentional entities that surround human beings addressed in the “ontological turn” literature and is inspired by an essay dealing with human interaction with the environment critiquing the genealogical model (Ingold 2009). Melanesian ethnography has long recognized the social consequences of the difference in “biological equipment” deployed by each sex, a phrase used by Descola (2013: 142), in discussing embodiment in animist settings but often has stopped comparison there. The melding of these three approaches promises a dynamic understanding of social life with persons taking on and discarding associations of several types

with spirits of the dead, bush spirits, totemic entities, and the sexually charged powers of reproduction in the course of time and through the life cycle. The conceptual shift to this approach promises, by the end of Chapter 4, a clear accounting of Ömie women and men as ontological beings which surpasses in accuracy conventional descriptions of Melanesia as the site of Western, naturalistically defined human bodies trapped and buffeted by the irrational values and practices of a Melanesian cultural milieu.

Also, the idea of different ontological beings can be used reflexively to talk about the ethnographic encounter between me and Ömie men and women. It is important to understand the relationship which allowed ethnographic research to proceed for in many ways it shaped the knowledge that was allowed me by the community. From my perspective there were two ontological types represented in this trio: simply women and men. From the perspective of Ömie, there were three: women, men, and a European or white person. The fact that the white person was a woman was noted but, in most instances, although not all, it was secondary to the racial identity. An appreciation of this categorization can be used to explain the conditions under which research was undertaken on the eve of national independence and the motivation of the Ömie in agreeing to self-consciously present their culture to me. I will return to this in Chapter 1.

Initially, it is important for a number of reasons to establish the cultural and historical context of the Ömie people as they are depicted in the ethnography. The language group they belong to has not been subject to extensive ethnographic research even though it straddles the Owen Stanley Range and the historically important Kokoda Trail. Providing this information is a matter of the ethnographic record. But also, and more importantly, doing so speaks to two questions which are evoked by what is to follow. The first is, how is it that the Ömie practice sex affiliation while their nearest neighbors do not? The second is, what was the experience of the Ömie with the outside world prior to the ethnographic encounter? I can speak only of the factors that might be taken as determinative of the practice of sex affiliation without providing a definitive explanation of its occurrence among the Ömie and not among their immediate neighbors, but I am able to identify several themes developed throughout Ömie history that speak to the nature of my ethnographic encounter with them. Chapter 1, "Ömie Neighbors, Contact History, and the Ethnographic Encounter," first locates the Ömie ethnographically as members of the Koiarian language family who share an origin myth and significant cultural similarities. Until recently, the only ethnographic publication concerning the mountain dwelling Koiarians was by the government anthropologist, F. E. Williams (1932), in which he identified the practice of sex affiliation among the Sogeri Koiari who live just above present-day Port Moresby in Central

Province. It is the rarity of documented instances of the practice that raises the question of why here and not there. Further, the process of actual European contact in the first decades of the twentieth century is reviewed as the penetration of alluvial gold miners into the river systems of Oro (Northern) Province followed by administration personnel attempting to control relations of miners with each other and with Indigenous peoples. Ömie of the 1970s remembered this history as extremely violent but also as a period of glorious battle with their traditional enemies, the Orokaiva (Uve) to the north. Chapter 1 concludes with an analysis of the Story of Evi which was presented to me early in the research period as a test of the nature of the relation between the Ömie and the ethnographer. The ethnographer was seen as a representative of ontological beings whose nature and capabilities were shrouded in millenarian expectation.

The next three chapters provide the ethnographic evidence for the Ömie radically different ontology of sex/gender. They consist of material yielded through the application several decades ago of three conventional approaches historically used in Melanesia, to study the consequences, socially and culturally, of our naturalistic definition of sex/gender within other cultures. Chapter 2, "Female and Male Persons in a Poly-ontological World," follows in the tradition established by Margaret Mead of comparing capabilities of the sexes, both psychological and physical, and the community objectification of these capabilities. Her report of significant sexual variation in temperament between three Sepik societies was the first unsettling of biological determinism in male and female as social and cultural beings by a Papua New Guinean ethnography (Mead 1963). But also, this chapter enumerates and describes the forces that people the Ömie world, in the form of recognized ontological entities who act through, against, and with people to attain ends and which in a variety of ways form the basis of personal identity. Ömie nature objectifies men, women, animals, plants, and two types of spirits as significant beings. Perhaps a better term to use in relation to these entities is "intentional beings." Ömie recognize the ability to act with intent and purpose in spirits of various sorts and animals, and even plants, as well as in human beings once they are capable of speech and are aware of their surroundings. I am shying away from assuming that all these entities equally have a soul, or share any other such internal state, as such an equivalence was never expressed to me by anyone in the community. This chapter introduces the terms of the comparison and opens the possibility of understanding Ömie women and men in their own terms.

Chapter 3 "Ömie Totemism" deals with the issue of woman in relation to the group which has been the historical mainstay of understanding the social implications of sex/gender in political and social life. Having rejected descent as a possible organizing principle of the group, I give a full account of

the uses of *ma'i ma'i* and *anie* by both men and women through the life cycle, introducing the concept of *agane* (following, kin) and male competition for social prominence. Women are limited in agency in this sphere. The chapter ends with the formulation of the *totemic nemeton* which represents the great man as a holographic image encompassing a set of relations contained in the local group through the analogy with the *marure* (the imposing tree of the hunting ground) and metonymic relations with various totemic birds and animals.

Chapter 4, “Myths, Metaphors, and the *Ujawe*,” deals with symbolic and mythic material which has traditionally been seen by ethnographers as providing the clearest guidance concerning the origins of things and their ways of being in the world. The Myth of Mina and Sujo is presented as a set of vignettes starting with the making of Mina’s vagina by Sujo and then the birth of their child who eventually grows into a wallaby to be hunted by the larger community. This myth has been central to the ideology of Ömie Artists, Inc. during their existence as it is interpreted as recounting the origin of male and female and of bark cloth. From my perspective, it provides an important insight into the understanding of how Ömie conceptualize the process of reproduction and, with the end of fully grasping this element, I consider some aspects of ritual relating to the process of women’s fertility. I provide a full description of the ritual of the *ujawe* as recounted to me by the cohort of initiated men and identify a cosmological parallelism between men and women as sex-specific nurturers in the process of sex-specific reproduction. This chapter culminates with an unequivocal discussion of a radical Ömie sex/gender alterity as it builds on the disjunctions between female and male both as individual beings and as members of social groups documented in the previous chapters.

Having provided an exhaustive description of sex affiliation through the detailed ethnography of Ömie sex/gender relations, Chapter 5, “Ömie Sex Affiliation: Comparisons and Instances,” identifies and discusses one declared and one undeclared instance of the practice in the ethnographic region. It draws comparisons between the Ömie and the ethnography of speakers of the Anga family of languages, primarily, the Sambia. On this basis, I identify the critical elements of the concept of sex affiliation as well as suggest the nature of the ethnographic milieu in which it may be found. The Conclusion, “Sex Affiliation in Papua New Guinean Ethnography,” takes up the theme introduced by my declaration that only now, at this historical moment, am I able to fully describe and analyze my Ömie material. It returns to a feminist critique of the construction of the basic concepts used to investigate others’ worlds and provides a brief history of Melanesian ethnography’s struggle with a Papuan radical alterity. I end with a few observations on the understanding of ontology and cultural change.

Notes

1. Mt. Lamington erupted on 21 January 1951. The Orokaiva village of Sangara on the northern slope of the volcano was destroyed, as was the government station at Higtaturu and the Anglican Mission station at Sangara. The final death toll is given as 2,942 by Johnson (2020: 199) including most of the Sangara people and expatriate Mission and Administrative personnel and their families at the two stations. The damage from the volcano was mostly on the northeastern slopes as the volcano is asymmetrical in structure tilting to the northeast, possibly because of underlying geological structures, with the crater and avalanche alley oriented in that direction (Johnson 2020: 221, Figure 7.11.). Mt. Lamington was not recognized as an active volcano until this eruption. According to a map representing the limits of devastation of the eruption, Ömie territory was less affected by “complete devastation,” but the village of Asapa stood very close to the limit of “heat effect and partial destruction” (Johnson 2020: 133 Figure 4.6). However, according to my Ömie interlocutors at least one of their settlements was destroyed and a considerable number of people were killed in the eruption according to genealogies provided. Most gardens had been covered in ash, and creeks and rivers were polluted. As a result, the whole population evacuated to the refugee camps along the Buna-Kokoda Road. Of ethnographic interest are the various myths discussed by Johnson (2020: 233–34), collected both before and after the eruption. Both the anthropologist Cyril Belshaw in his study of the aftermath of the volcanic eruption and Mrs. Amalya Cowley, the wife of the district officer, just before the eruption, provide stories about a man and woman wanting to have intercourse on the mountain and the tragic consequences of such an act. Mrs. Cowley gives the name of the man as Sumbirita and the woman as Subtita. This is interesting in that Ömie tell many stories about high mountains, the domain of the totemic snake, where it is forbidden to have sexual intercourse or the land will shake, rocks will fall, etc. Versions of the myth told by Orokaiva well past the event, speak of Sumbiripa and his wife Suja being trapped in a hole on the mountain and eventually perishing (Johnson 2020: 272). The key Ömie myth recounting the origin of woman as a sexual being that I collected speaks of Mina (female) and Sujo (male).
2. Unfortunately, this ethnography has been muddled by the inclusion of the Ai’i, at Emo River in the Wawonga Valley, in Herdt’s (1984a) “ritualized homosexuality” complex, based on a contribution by Schwimmer (1984). None of Barker’s research supports such an inclusion and Schwimmer does not provide a verifiable source for the information he publishes. I think I would have made a strong argument for the inclusion of the Mawoma Valley Ömie and not the Ai’i, in such a complex at the time, given their abandoned *ujawe* ritual complex. Fortuitously this error called my attention to the value of comparison between the Ömie and the several Anga groups, of which Herdt’s Sambia are one. I will return to this topic in a later chapter.
3. The Kokoda Trail was first cut to provide access to the north coast of Papua from Port Moresby at the turn of the twentieth century through what is Mountain Koiari land. It provided a means of access into the old Northern Territory through “The Gap” in the Owen Stanley range which itself sits at about 2,500 meters. It was the scene of the dramatic defense of Port Moresby, largely by Australian troops, from the Japanese invasion at Buna on the north coast between July and November 1942 during the war

in the Pacific. It has since become a popular destination for ambitious trekkers from around the world and has been the site of a celebrated race.

4. I learned of the existence of Ömie Artists, Inc. when some members of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania discussion list were commenting on the novel that the noted Australian author, Drusilla Modjeska, had written set in the late Colonial Period and into the present involving a set of Papua New Guinean and expatriate characters. The novel, *The Mountain* (2012), was partially inspired by her work with Ömie Artists, Inc. and other Northern (Oro) Province peoples she had come to know. Their web site is cached <http://www.omieartists.com/> (archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6T6bZUDYD>). As of July 2018, Ömie Artists© was no longer functioning. I thank Andrew Baker, of Andrew Baker Art Dealer, Brisbane for this information.
5. Both the neighboring Managalasi speakers to the southeast of the Mawoma Valley Ömie (McKellin 1980) and the Barai-speaking Ai'i in the neighboring Wawonga Valley to the west (Barker 1979; 1990) use plant emblems associated with local groups, but not in the manner of the Ömie in signifying sex affiliation.
6. This translation of the name of the seclusion structure is based on the word *u* meaning egg, and the word *uge* meaning bird. *Jawe* means house. The accepted translation is thus either bird or egg house.