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Review of *Women of the Forest*, by Yolanda Murphy
and Robert F. Murphy

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own country before they go off to earn their stripes. Then, much of what happens would not be such a shock to them, and economic and rationalistic explanations might be given for behavior. A vision of the peasant family as a reflection of the holy family is not an explanation.

Women of the Forest. By Yolanda Murphy and Robert F. Murphy. New York: Columbia University Press, 1974. Pp. xii+236. \$10.00 (cloth); \$3.45 (paper).

Judith Shapiro

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Women of the Forest is a study of sex roles and sex identity in a tropical forest society of central Brazil, based on field research carried out in the early 1950s among the Mundurucú Indians of the upper Tapajós River region. The authors first analyze the patterns that still prevailed in the few surviving traditional Mundurucú villages and then go on to consider the effects of the colonial situation.

The central theme of the Murphys' book is the disparity between the Mundurucú ideology of male dominance and the actual social positions of women and men. According to the Murphys, what is most essential about the relationship between the sexes is their independence from one another. In traditional Mundurucú villages, men and women work separately, eat separately, and even sleep separately. Groups of related women and their children reside in extended family dwellings; adolescent and adult men live together in a men's house. The major subsistence activities are carried out by groups composed of members of the same sex. The men of the village hunt together and women cooperate in the processing of manioc flour, the most important and time consuming of female tasks. Each village has a shed where much of the work of manioc processing is done. This serves as a social gathering place for women, a counterpart to the men's house.

This pattern of sexual separation in Mundurucú society is such that men exercise little influence over the activities of women in the course of daily life. Marriage for the Mundurucú woman means neither isolation within a nuclear family nor a particularly close bond with an individual man; her life continues to revolve primarily around the other women with whom she lives and works. The sexes relate to one another less in terms of dyadic bonds than as collectivities.

In the light of this form of social organization, the emphasis on male control over women in Mundurucú ideology is seen by the Murphys as a kind of just-so story with which men beguile themselves into feeling superior. The Murphys claim that women do not share men's ideas about the relative position of the sexes and are generally unimpressed with the paraphernalia of male ritual activity. This approach, while perhaps oversimplifying the situation, is nonetheless a refreshing departure from the common anthropological tendency to refer collective representations to one kind of collectivity: the society as a whole.

The image of the Mundurucú man that emerges from this book is one that Sigmund Freud and Erving Goffman might have worked out together: a figure conflicted and insecure about his own sexual identity, struggling to manage impressions for an audience that can easily see backstage. Women, on the other hand, are represented as truly strong. They are, as the Murphys put it, "firmly grounded in social reality—they are masters of the practical" (p. 112). Their relationships with each other, though narrower in scope than those of the men, appear to be more cohesive and enduring. Above all, like women in any society, they play the major role in the only human activity that the Murphys see as having intrinsic meaning—the creation of new life.

In their attempt to correct a stereotype of male dominance and female subordination, the Murphys go rather too far in the other direction. The result is, at times, too close for comfort to our own culture's ideologies of abject males and all-powerful females. I sympathize with the authors' interest in seeing whether a comparative consideration of two very different societies—our own and the Mundurucú—can shed light on universal dimensions of male and female experience. I also appreciate their willingness to go out on a limb and say the kinds of things that anthropologists will express informally but are unwilling to commit themselves to in print. But some of their generalizations—those concerning women's reproductive role, for example—are open to question. Evaluating the relative "meaningfulness" of various human activities is not an easy task. Meaningful to whom? and within what kind of perspective? We are told that Mundurucú women themselves "are resentful of the continued cycle of pregnancy and birth, regarding it as an encumbrance and physical handicap" (p. 161). It is important to keep in mind that the type of status a woman gains by virtue of being a mother and the personal experience that motherhood represents vary considerably from one society to another.

I would agree with the Murphys that there are certain universal problems in the establishment of male identity that can be related to the fact that women both bear children and generally play the predominant role in their early socialization. I am, however, uncomfortable on the path that leads from this point to the notion that culture is "a sort of collective fetishism" (p. 232) required primarily by men, since it is they who are justified by symbols alone. I do not think that differences in world view between men and women should be put in terms of an opposition between culture and practical reason.

The Murphys present an interesting and sensitive account of how Mundurucú involvement in rubber tapping has affected the relative positions of the sexes. They show that women, far from being passive and conservative, as they are often described in studies of culture change, have played a crucial and very active role in the coming of the new order. This new order, based on a highly individualized pattern of labor and of patron-client relationships, involves a closer bond between husband and wife and the emergence of the nuclear family as the central residential

and economic unit. Traditional patterns of intrasexual cooperation have dissolved and the men's house has disappeared.

Is it possible to determine in which system the Mundurucú woman is better off? The problem here, as the Murphys note, is that "we really do not possess the criteria for evaluating the relative status of the sexes" (p. 201). One solution is to let the people spoken about speak for themselves. "Instead of asking ourselves who has it best, we should be asking Mundurucú women" (p. 201). The answer here is that Mundurucú women prefer the new way—they like having access to trade goods; they like having their husbands around to help them in domestic tasks.

The Murphys do not, however, find the actors' own perspectives a satisfactory stopping place—and in this I fully agree with them. They are concerned with aspects of the acculturated Mundurucú woman's position of which she may as yet be unaware—for example, the consequences of her increasing dependence on her husband.

Though the Murphys note the difficulties of speaking about the relative status of men and women objectively, pointing out quite rightly that subordination and dominance are far more intricate issues in regard to sex than in regard to class, they do make use of certain objective variables as indicators of status. Thus, given a situation in which the roles of the sexes are strongly differentiated, women are better off when they exercise control over an important sector of production (in the Mundurucú case, manioc processing) and participate in solidary relationships with members of their own sex. An additional factor that should be considered in this context is control over extradomestic exchange, which one anthropologist has recently judged to be the most important single indicator of status in hunting-gathering and horticultural societies (Ernestine Friedl, *Women and Men: An Anthropologist's View* [New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1975]).

There are several other interesting issues touched upon by the Murphys—for example, how hunting and warfare relate to male dominance—which cannot be discussed here. Suffice it to say, in conclusion, that *Women of the Forest* is a valuable and thought-provoking contribution to the comparative study of sex roles. It is also written by social scientists who do not leave behind their sense of style, humor, and irony when they go about their professional business.

Uses of the Sociology of Education: The Seventy-third Yearbook of the National Society for the Study of Education, Part II. Edited by C. Wayne Gordon. Chicago: National Society for the Study of Education, 1974. Pp. xviii+518. \$10.00.

Leo Rigsby

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We are told in the preface that the board of directors of the National Society for the Study of Education made the decision to prepare a volume