

# behavioral sciences

From our reporter at the 71st annual meeting of the American Anthropological Association in Toronto

## Female husbands

In at least 20 African societies there exists a unique form of marriage that is unknown in other areas of the world. In these societies a woman may marry another woman according to the rules and ceremonies of her society and take on the legal and social roles of husband and father. In these marriages the wife chooses or is assigned male partners who father children for the female couple but who are neither legal nor social fathers. The phenomenon, known as woman marriage, has no homosexual connotations explained Denise O'Brien of Temple University. Rather, she says, it occurs for social and economic reasons.

O'Brien analyzed data from eight of these societies and isolated two types of female husband. In one case the woman is acting according to custom as a surrogate for a male kinsman. She takes the place of a deceased father or brother and becomes father to his children and husband to his wife or wives. In the second case the woman takes a wife because she wants to. A barren woman, for example, might take a wife in order to prove that she is socially qualified for the role of parent. In addition to social prestige, a woman can gain wealth by taking wives (bridewealth received from the marriage of daughters born to the wives, payments from men who act as sexual partners to the wives). Also, says O'Brien, female husbands who work like to have a wife at home to feed the kids and take care of the house.

## The Evil Eye

Place a drop of oil in a bowl of water. If the oil spreads, the Evil Eye is present. This is one of a multitude of still believed-in myths and superstitions that attempt to explain the sources of evil in the world. While collecting data on folk beliefs related to health and medicine Leonard W. Moss of Wayne State University and Stephen C. Cappannari of Vanderbilt University found that belief in the Evil Eye is deeply seated in the folklore of southern Italy and Sicily and is one of the oldest continuous quasi-religious constructs in the Mediterranean Basin.

The Evil Eye is believed to be a powerful force possessed by certain persons—especially unusually thin persons. It is blamed for loss of crops, wasting of animals, rotting of pork, souring of wine, moulding of food, disease, sterility, abortion and mental disorders. Counter-magic, exorcism and patterned rituals are devised within this system of belief and provide for a focus on animosity against the abuser of the Evil Eye. As a method of social control, say the authors, belief in the Evil Eye is an awesome weapon. If men believe a thing is real and act accordingly, the consequences of their actions are real.

## Altered states of consciousness

Institutionalization of altered states of consciousness (usually for religious or spiritual reasons) is virtually universal in human societies, says Erika Bourguignon of Ohio State University. In a worldwide survey of 488 societies she found one or more types of such institution-

alized states in 90 percent of the groups. The most common states are possession and trance. In the first, one or more alien personalities is believed to take over some of the psychological functions of the individual. In the altered state called trance, the individual remains himself but interacts with some powerful spirit. Trance is brought on by fasting, sensory deprivation, mortification or drugs (especially in American societies). Possession, however, does not usually employ drugs. It appears spontaneously or is brought on with singing and dancing, and it often involves learning of appropriate behavior. Bourguignon's study points out that trance is typically male behavior and is more common in simpler societies. Possession is usually female behavior and is more common in complex societies.

## The third sex

The incidence of hermaphroditism, in which an individual has both male and female gonads, is estimated to be between two and three percent. In most societies these persons have two choices. They can pass as either male or female or, as among the Pokot of Kenya, they can be considered as physical deviants with no gender status. But says Barbara Voorhies of the University of California at Santa Barbara, there are a larger number of societies than we currently realize who classify human sexual characteristics into more than two types. She has found at least five societies that recognize a third gender. Among the Navajo Indians, for example, there is the *nadle*. A person can be born with this gender status (a hermaphrodite) or can select it as an alternate to masculine or feminine status. With this status comes various rights and duties that are exclusive to the gender. The *nadle* can take up male or female work, can dress as male or female, acts as mediator in disputes between males and females and can marry a spouse of either biological sex. This type of distinction, implies Voorhies, may be more logical than the either-or distinction which derives from a judgment about the appearance of a child's genitals.

## Women in anthropology

Anthropology, the science of man, is the study of men and women in their various societies and groups. The studies, however, seem to be carried out to a large extent by men, not by women. To illustrate this, the Committee on the Status of Women in Anthropology tabulated data on the number, rank and sex of individuals affiliated with college and university departments of anthropology. It seems that of these only 19 percent are female. This, the committee says, is decidedly unfavorable to women. Not only are women underrepresented, they are underrepresented in the higher tenured ranks (only 14 percent are professors) and overrepresented in the lower ranks (41 percent are assistant professors). This is not only discriminatory, say some female anthropologists, it can lead to one-sided and overly masculine interpretations of anthropological data.