

Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America

ISSN: 2572-3626 (online)

Volume 15

Issue 1 *Remembering William T. Vickers*
(1942–2016)

Article 6

6-15-2017

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Recommended Citation

Langdon, E. Jean (2017). "William Vickers and Gender Studies of the 1970s," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 6, 21-25.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol15/iss1/6>

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William Vickers and Gender Studies of the 1970s

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Bill Vickers originally presented the article published here in the symposium “Women and Change: The Ecuadorian Perspective,” that was organized for the 78th Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association in 1979. I also presented a paper on the same theme. At the time, we were the only anthropologists to have done long-term field research among the Western Tukanoans, Bill among the Siona-Secoya of Ecuador (Vickers 1976, 1989) and myself among the Siona of the Putumayo River dividing Colombia and Ecuador (Langdon 1974, 2014). Bill never stopped visiting the Siona-Secoya until his health failed shortly before his death and his lengthy output of publications and reports attests to his understanding of various themes that have appeared in anthropology since his original fieldwork in 1972. His primary research focused on detailed subsistence patterns and ecology, and his ecological knowledge proved to be an instrument to defend territorial rights. The depth of his fieldwork and long-term engagement with the group enabled him to address a series of other themes during his life as well.

In this paper, he addresses the debates on women’s roles and status that were emerging in the 1970s and later consolidated into theories on the body, gender, production and relationships stimulated by Marilyn Strathern (1988) and Joana Overing (1986, 1989), as well as the latter’s students (Belaúnde 1992, 1994, 2000; McCallum 1999, 2001). The feminist movement of the 1960s was motive for renewed interest in these topics, giving a political focus to research that went beyond the nature/nurture debate of the culture and personality school of the 1930s (Mead 1935). Throughout the social sciences, psychology, history, and the humanities new questions were being asked. This growing literature in the 1970s became known as the “new scholarship about women” (Howe 1982), and academic debates examined women’s education, their lower economic, political and social status in industrialized societies and searched for determining factors.

In anthropology, there was a call for research that focused specifically on women and female perspectives. Ethnographies describing the female experience and sociality multiplied and challenged the male bias in which men were perceived as the central actors and primary source of cultural knowledge and experience. These new studies coupled political concerns with daily practices, ideologies, and symbolic meanings present in rituals and myth. Their contribution was fundamental for the new analytical models that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s, as well as for the examination of women’s gardening activities, plants, and ontologies in ethnobiology (Daly et al. 2016).

One issue that engaged anthropological gender discussion of the decade was the search for factors determining female status. Throughout the 1970s, research focused on this question and resulted in a diversity of proposals. Such questions as to whether women were universally subordinated and the possible factors determining their status with respect to that of men were explored (Quinn 1977; Sanday 1973). One important question in debate was women’s association with nature (Ortner 1974) as a key factor determining their universal subordination. Exploration of the nature/culture binary led to the recognition that such an opposition entailed an occidental philosophical construction (MacCormack and Strathern 1980). The concepts of status, prestige, and power resisted a purely materialist explanation, and research agendas began to explore the symbolic aspects of women’s daily activities and ritual roles in order to understand the interplay between symbolic structures and social life (Ortner and Whitehead 1981; Sanday 1980). Allied to the question of female status were a

series of studies that questioned the assumption that modernization was a force of liberation for subordinated females (Leacock 1975).

During this period gender relations in Amazonian and New Guinea highlands groups were considered to be characterized by sexual antagonism and male domination. Researchers cited as evidence the hostile and antagonistic interpersonal relations expressed in gang rape and “a concern with female pollution, a preoccupation with male sexual depletion, and elaborate male ceremonial activities, knowledge of which must be kept secret from women . . .” (Quinn 1977:296). Concurrently, ethnographic research among South American lowland groups was undergoing a new surge (Jackson 1975; Overing Kaplan 1981; Seeger et. al 1979), and the women undertaking ethnographic research with a focus on the female roles and ideology demonstrated the complexity of such generalizations (Bamberger 1974; Dole 1974, 1979; Hugh-Jones 1979; Shapiro 1972, 1973; Siskind 1975; Murphy 1972; Murphy and Murphy 1974). Discussions about these issues animated debates at the annual Lowland South American meetings at Bennington College organized by Ken Kensinger. This led to group-sponsored symposia on themes in lowland South America at the Annual Meetings of the American Anthropological Association. In 1982 the Bennington group sponsored one on sexual ideologies, and the papers were subsequently published *Working Papers on South American Indians* edited by Kensinger (1984). The Bennington gatherings laid the groundwork for the subsequent formation of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America (SALSA).

Western Tukanoans, including the Siona-Secoya, provided important evidence to challenge generalizations about sex antagonism current in the 1970s. Both Bill and I recognized the complementarity and equalitarianism of sex roles based on reciprocity (Langdon 1978, 1984a; Vickers 1975). However, ethnographic research specifically focusing on the female experience and gender among the Western Tukanoans did not begin until the 1980s with Irene Bellier’s (1986) doctoral research, followed later by Luisa Elvira Belaúnde (1992).

The article reproduced here is the second of two articles that Bill wrote on female status. The first (Vickers 1975) was in response to Janet Siskind’s (1973a, 1973b) support of the universality of sexual antagonism in the Amazon and the relation between sexual favors and hunting prowess—females trading sex for meat. Through the documentation of individual hunting yields, he demonstrates that hunting yields do not play a role in sexual relations among the Siona-Secoya. Comparing the amount of meat shot by each hunter with the distribution of unfaithful wives, he found that the difference in yield between a good and bad hunter is slight, a positive increment of about 11 percent, and superior hunting ability does not necessarily ensure a faithful wife. He concluded that the assumption of the universality of trading meat for sex among tropical forest hunters should be questioned and subjected to more quantitative research.

It is within this context that the dual goal of Bill Vicker’s paper on sex roles can be situated: it examines the status of women in Siona-Secoya communities and analyzes the impact of development on their status. The first part of the article challenges the “male-dominance syndrome” from a comparative approach and then specifically examines gender relations among the Siona-Secoya. Citing detailed ethnographies on the Yānomamö, Siriono, Mundurucu, Tapirapé, Akwē-Shavante, Mehinaku, Jívaro, and Western Tukanoans he argues that the issue of female subordination is not as clear cut as argued by some authors. Male domination does not express itself uniformly in the different groups, although there is a tendency for women to have higher status and suffer less aggression in matrilineal societies. He presents important data with regard to gender relations among the Siona-Secoya in which reciprocity and cooperation prevails over a conflict model and in which male and female roles and activities are not radically separated, as is the case the Eastern Tukanoans (Hugh-Jones 1978, 1979; Langdon 1982). Although the Siona-Secoya are a patrilineal and patrilocal society and their traditional leaders are male, there is no evidence of female infanticide and children’s play groups include both boys and girls. He also describes adolescent girls’ puberty rituals, bride service, and childbirth practices, including the male couvade, that support Belaúnde’s (1992) thesis and later writings on the body, commensality, substantiality, and sociality among the Airo-Pai, a Western Tukanoan group of Peru (Belaúnde 1994, 2000).

If traditional gender relations among Siona-Secoya are primarily characterized by reciprocity and cooperation, the second part of the article demonstrates that increasing interethnic contact has had primarily a negative impact upon women’s roles, as I have argued

for the Siona of the Putumayo (Langdon 1984b). By the 1970s, the Western Tukanoans were integrating into the market economy and petroleum extraction was developing in the region. Siona-Secoya women were suffering sexual abuse and rape by military personnel, river traders, and others. Interethnic marriages were increasing and were apparently less successful than those with Siona partners. Finally, Bill observes that missionary efforts to prepare the youth for new leadership roles, those of teaching and health-promoters, followed the male bias of Western society. Today such conclusions are quite obvious, as studies on the importance of gender have multiplied. But at the time of Bill's initial research, such considerations were only beginning.

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