
In this article, Elliston presents several common misconceptions about homosexuality in anthropology. Elliston argues it is often hard to distinguish between "sexual activities" and "sexual identities" (Elliston 1995:849). Part of what is clouding this distinction is that the term “homosexual” has evolved into a reference to identity, rather than to the behaviors themselves (Elliston 1995:849). This idea reflects a Euro-American view of homosexuality as a state of being, and creates an analysis through a Western lens that doesn’t accurately apply cross-culturally.

Additionally, Elliston finds fault in Gilbert Herdt’s use of “homosexual.” Herdt defines “homosexuality” as “a lifelong practice” (Elliston 1995:852). What’s problematic here is that homosexuality, even in a Western sense, doesn’t imply lifelong homosexual behaviors. Furthermore, Herdt suggests that homosexuality refers to an “identity state.” Elliston argues that for the Sambia, homosexual behaviors, which she terms “semen practices” (Elliston 1995:850), signify an “exchange of substances, not in relation to an essentialized and internally consistent, individuated core persona” (Elliston 1995:853).

While Herdt describes these acts as “erotic,” Elliston discusses “semen practices” as rites of passage from boyhood to manhood (Elliston 1995:854). The “semen practices” are perpetuated through violence and fear of the older members. This creates an “age-graded hierarchy” as the elders threaten the older youth who in turn threaten the youngest members into participating in the ritual (Elliston 1995:855). Also, semen is seen as “lifeblood,” essential to the growth of children, as well as the protection of men from the impurities of women (Elliston 1995:856-857). Therefore, these “homosexual” acts of semen exchange between age divisions are not erotic in the Western sense.

This article reinforces an idea presented in the MacDougall article, stated by Malinowski: that we must “grasp the native’s point of view, his relation to life, to realize his vision of his world” (MacDougall 1998:93). This is essentially the point Elliston is making. We perceive “ritualized homosexuality” in terms of how the Western world defines homosexuality. However, it must be interpreted through its meaning to the people who are practicing it, within the “natives’ world.”

Wow! excellent summary of one of the most difficult articles on the syllabus.

References Cited:

Elliston, Deborah A.


MacDougall, D.