

[Original Paper]

## Feminism : How have early gender studies of 'egalitarian societies' been misleading?

Nobuko Ozeki<sup>1)</sup>

### INTRODUCTION

Since the rise of the women's movement in the 1960's, traditional thought on gender hierarchy has been questioned by feminists. Some feminists focused on 'egalitarian societies', for they thought they might explain the origin of gender hierarchy. For example, Rosaldo says, 'Feminists have with good reasons probed the anthropological record for evidence which appears to tell us whether "human nature" is the sexist and constraining thing that many of us were taught'.

However, there are many problems in the anthropological record. Have 'egalitarian societies' existed in the way that Morgan's study of the matrilineal Iroquois suggests? Even recent studies of gather-hunter societies, which are claimed to be 'egalitarian societies', are not free from the problems associated with methods<sup>2</sup>, methodologies<sup>3</sup> and epistemologies<sup>4</sup>.

I shall examine how studies of 'egalitarian societies' have been misleading, focusing on studies of the !Kung societies in Africa by Lee & Leacock (1982) and Shostak (in Lee & DeVore 1976, and 1983).

Firstly, I shall look at the issues of male bias, Western bias, equality/inequality, and economic factors in the studies of the !Kung societies. Are they really 'egalitarian societies'?

Secondly, I shall examine Lee's claim that the foraging mode of production is primitive communism<sup>5</sup>. Was he misled by the notion of 'egalitarian societies'? Does women's economic power lead to women's emancipation as Engels suggests? What are the pitfalls of material determinism from the standpoints of gender studies?

Finally, I shall consider how gender studies might be conducted if it is true that studies of 'egalitarian societies' have been misleading.

(J.Aomori Univ.Health Welf.3(1):43–47, 2001)

I shall look at four issues, which have been the main concerns in gender studies, with reference to the studies of the !Kung societies, and examine why studies of 'egalitarian societies' have been misleading. Let us start with the issue of male bias.

Richard Lee says that the !Kung are a fiercely egalitarian people<sup>6</sup>. He gives several reasons why he calls the !Kung egalitarian. He talks about child-care.

Lee suggests that over 90 per cent of the work involved in caring for young children is borne by the mother, but the !Kung women do not consider themselves to be oppressed. They keenly desire children. They are excellent mothers and often complain that they do not have as many children as they would like<sup>7</sup>.

The problems of his assertion are as follows. In the first

place, if Lee claims the !Kung to be egalitarian, child-care should be shared equally with the father. Marshall (1976) reports the burden on women in child-care. The !Kung believe a child needs milk until he is three or four years old at least. When the mother goes looking for food, she has to carry the baby in her kaross, and for most of the way she has another child as well on her shoulders<sup>8</sup>. However, Lee does not analyse the women's responsibilities for child-care, and why the !Kung fathers rarely take sole responsibility for the child. Lee says that fathers are attentive and loving and spend part of their leisure hours playing with and holding the young infants<sup>9</sup>. In short, Lee thinks that child-care is a woman's job but a leisure activity for a man. Lee seems to take it for granted that child-care is a woman's job. Most feminists would not agree with Lee's analysis of child-care.

---

1) Department of Nursing, Faculty of Health Sciences, Aomori University of Health and Welfare

Secondly, it is reported that there is a space of about 3.7 years between children<sup>10</sup>. According to Lee, a woman goes to the bush by herself to give birth, and decides whether she wants to keep the baby or not. If she does not want the baby, she buries the baby with the afterbirth. Lee suggests that in this way the women exercise control over their own reproduction<sup>11</sup>. This statement contradicts Lee's previous statement that women want as many children as possible. When Marshall interviewed the !Kung women about infanticide, they tried to avoid the topic. It seems that Lee ignored the women's emotions and the severe environment in which the women are placed.

Anthropology has been developed primarily by white Western males<sup>12</sup>, therefore, anthropology has been male biased. Lee's interpretation of the !Kung women is no exception. His claim that the !Kung are 'egalitarian societies' is unsound.

Let us look at the next issue, that is, Western bias. Lee says that !Kung men hunt and !Kung women gather<sup>13</sup>. His notion of the sexual division of labour sounds too rigid to describe the daily work of the !Kung. Draper says that in practice, adults of both sexes seem surprisingly willing to do the work of the opposite sex, and it often appeared to her that men, more than women, were willing to cross sex lines<sup>14</sup>.

I would like to raise two questions about Lee and Draper's assertions. First, does 'the sex line' exist in the !Kung society? Second, why was Draper 'surprised' by the fact that men are willing to cross the sex line? It seems that Lee and Draper projected Western concepts of socio-sexual relations on the !Kung societies. Both of them seem to be influenced by Victorian assumptions about the sexual division of labour. The relationship between competitive male markets and peace-loving female homes was not abandoned in later functionalist schools of thought<sup>15</sup>, and even now, Victorian assumptions are still deeply rooted in our thoughts.

For example, Leacock seems to be influenced by Victorian notions. There are debates on the sexual division of labour of 'egalitarian societies' among feminists and anthropologists. Leacock holds the view that men and women are equally 'autonomous'. They are encouraged to participate in different activities, but women hold decision-making power over their own lives and activities to the same extent that men do over theirs<sup>16</sup>. Leacock shares Engels' view that the division of labour was a pure and simple outgrowth of nature, it existed only between the sexes...each was master in his or her own field of activity; the men in the forest, the women in the

house<sup>17</sup>. Leacock suggests that the !Kung women have autonomy over their gathered food. However, Collier & Yanagisako say that Leacock is not free from the problems inherent in using concepts based on the hierarchical structure of our own societies<sup>18</sup>, and also failed to investigate the social and cultural factors shaping women's decisions<sup>19</sup>. The !Kung women have to feed their husbands, children and other kin. They have obligations to pay back for somebody's favour. Leacock seems to be misusing 'autonomy' when she should be using 'obligation' or 'duty'.

In sum, Lee, Draper and Leacock were not aware of the Western bias. Their analyses of the gender relationships of the !Kung are Western biased and lack an understanding of aspects of socially constructed gender in the !Kung's context.

Let us look the issue of equality/inequality. Collier & Rosaldo suggest that gender in very simple societies is best understood through an examination of how marriage organizes obligations, and of how such obligations shape political life<sup>20</sup>. I shall examine marriage in the !Kung societies.

Lee says that a husband has to move to his wife's family and prove his hunting ability by providing meat. The husband also has to show to her family how well he treats his wife. The bride service and age differences (14-15 for women, 22-25 for men) at marriage are two of the factors that explain why women comprise the core of !Kung living groups. Mother-daughter bonds predominate in the society. Young girls also are in demand, due to the existence of a small percentage of polygamous marriages. The girls' parents exercise a good deal of control over their son-in-law. These are the explanations for why Lee states that the !Kung are egalitarian.

Let us look at the problems of Lee's assertion of the egalitarian nature of !Kung marriage. In the first place, a newly married man can have direct privileged access to both female sexuality and the products of female labour<sup>21</sup>. He does not have to worry about food on a daily basis, for his wife gathers food for him. The husband firstly distributes the best meat to his parents-in-law, and in return he can get help from them to control his wife. He gains more than his wife does by marriage.

Shostak's work (1983) gives us a clear view of a !Kung woman. Nisa tells us about her memories of her early marriages. Nisa did not want to marry the first husband Tashy, but her mother told Nisa that she had to marry him, otherwise they would not be able to eat meat. Another example is that Nisa's descriptions of the way girls learn about sex and of her

relationship with her husband Tashy suggest that relationships between the sexes are not egalitarian<sup>22</sup>. Shostak's work suggests clearly that the !Kung society was not an 'egalitarian society'.

The second problem with Lee's study of the !Kung marriage is that men's oppression is ignored. If sons-in-law are controlled by parents-in-law as Lee suggests, how is it possible to call the !Kung egalitarian societies? Lee does not pay much attention to men's oppression.

In sum, Lee states that the !Kung marriage is egalitarian. However, his study is not detailed enough to analyse whether equality exists or not, for it lacks deeper analyses of the meanings of marriage and men's oppression.

Let us look at the final issue, that is, economic factors. Lee reports that women's work - gathering wild vegetable foods - provides about two thirds of all the food consumed by a !Kung camp<sup>23</sup>. Draper adds that women derive self-esteem from the regular daily contribution they make to the family's food<sup>24</sup>. These assertions give us the impression that the !Kung are egalitarian. However, we need to analyze these reports carefully. In the first place, women are obliged to feed the family every day, but men do not go hunting every day, for they do not have obligations to feed the family every day. Second, men distribute their meat throughout the group according to rules favouring members of the senior generation<sup>25</sup>. Women's gathered food does not have the same value as the men's meat, for the men's meat becomes available for exchanges, gifts, and the manipulation of social relations. This leads us to think that sexual asymmetry is at the base of productive relations in the !Kung.

In sum, Lee and Draper are concerned simply with the amount of food which men and women produce. However, it is not the amount of food, but the value of the food which causes sexual asymmetry. From the economic point of view it seems to be doubtful that the !Kung are egalitarian societies.

Having looked at the problems of the studies of the !Kung societies, it might be wrong to claim the !Kung to be egalitarian. However, Lee holds the view that communal sharing of food resources among the !Kung lends strong support to the theory of Marx and Engels that a stage of primitive communism prevailed before the rise of the state and the break-up of society into classes<sup>26</sup>. Was Lee misled by notions of 'egalitarian societies'?

According to Engels, the absence of private property made

men's productive work and women's housework of equal social significance, but the rise of private property and production for exchange led to women's domestication and subordination. However, our examination of the !Kung societies suggests that women's subordination existed before the rise of private property. This evidence may indicate that Lee, Engels and other material determinists might have been misled.

Engels holds the view that women can be liberated by participating in socially productive work. Let us look at an example of why this theory does not work. The Chinese Communist Party used the work of Engels as a basis for their political reform. Chinese women believed that they would be emancipated by participating on an equal footing with men in bringing about the proletarian revolution and that after that revolution, when all people would be workers and private property abolished, women would be economically independent, participating in wage labour and emancipated from capital as well as from men.

However, Chinese women are still subordinate to men. Firstly, women did not enter social production on the same footing as men, and did not attain equal status, promotion and pay to men. Kuhn & Wolpe say that women's place in wage labour is that of a reserve army<sup>27</sup>. Secondly, women's salary was usually paid to the family head, that is, a husband or the father-in-law. Thirdly, women had to do domestic work and childrearing without men's help after long hours of wage labour. Men did not help women at home because of Confucian ideas. Some single women such as university lecturers and government officers were liberated from economic dependence on men, but they were still not liberated from ideological subordination. Gamarnikow et al. suggest that despite women's full entry into the labour force, they were not only under-represented at the top of professional and political pyramids but that patriarchal power was alive and flourishing<sup>28</sup>. As the Chinese case shows, Engels' theories might have liberated some men from exploitation by other men (e.g. the peasant men were liberated from their landowners) but did not liberate women.

This case shows that material determinism is not enough to explain gender hierarchy. Even if, as Leacock suggests, women have control of access to resources, the conditions of their work and the distribution of the products of their labour<sup>29</sup>, they will not be equal to men until they can get 'adult status'<sup>30</sup> in the social sphere. How can women solve the problem of ideological subordination?

Let us look at human knowledge<sup>31</sup>. Harding suggests that the experience on which the prevailing claims to social and natural knowledge are founded is, first of all, only partial human experience only partially understood; namely masculine experience as understood by men<sup>32</sup>. She concludes that human knowledge is male biased, and women are excluded from human knowledge. Since the male experience is taken to be the human experience, the resulting theories and concepts (i.e. human knowledge), distort women's social life and both women and men's thought and as a result, discriminate against and subordinate women. Harding holds the view that the questions about women that men have wanted answered have all too often arisen from a desire to pacify, control, exploit, or manipulate women<sup>33</sup>.

How can we create new knowledge which includes women and men? First, it might be useful to reanalyse traditional notions such as 'men/women', 'patriarchy' and 'sexuality'. We need to analyze how our notions might be influenced and biased by traditional thought. Second, postmodernism as a methodology might be a useful way to study gender. For example, Shostak's *Nisa* tells us how she was socialized and became a !Kung woman, and how she felt about her sexuality, marriage, and life. Shostak presented the !Kung woman as a person. This approach can achieve what Stanley & Wise (1993) suggest. They say that emotion is vital to systematic knowledge about the social world, and that any epistemology which fails to recognize this is deeply flawed<sup>34</sup>. Gender studies should be heading in this direction rather than probing 'egalitarian societies'. We might then be able to create new human knowledge.

### CONCLUSION

We have examined studies of the !Kung societies. Lee's studies are male biased and Western biased. His analyses of equality/inequality and economic factors do not suggest that the !Kung are egalitarian societies.

However, Lee, Leacock and some other feminists were misled by notions of 'egalitarian societies', and supported Engels' view that early societies were sexually egalitarian, and that male supremacy arose with the growth of class. As the example of China shows, material determinism is not enough to explain gender hierarchy.

Instead of searching for the origin of gender hierarchy in 'egalitarian societies', we should focus on the interrelations of the sexes, classes, races and other hierarchical power relations in the context of history, politics, economics, ideology and social systems. *Nisa* is a good example. Postmodernism

as a methodology might be useful for creating new knowledge which 'has a human face and a feeling heart'<sup>35</sup>.

### NOTES

1. M.Z. Rosaldo, 1980, P.392.
2. A research method is a technique for gathering evidence, e.g. listening to informants, observing behaviour, or examining historical traces and records. (Harding, 1987, P. 2).
3. A methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed. (Harding, 1987, P. 3).
4. An epistemology is a theory of knowledge. (Harding, 1987, P. 3).
5. Leacock & Lee, 1982, P.55.
6. Lee, 1979, P.244.
7. Lee, in Leacock & Lee, 1982, P. 41.
8. Marshall, 1976, P. 166.
9. Lee, in Leacock & Lee, 1982, P. 41.
10. Lee, 1979, PP. 325 & 326.
11. Leacock & Lee, 1982, P.40.
12. Slocum, in Reiter, 1975, P. 37.
13. Leacock & Lee, 1982, P. 39.
14. Draper, in Reiter, 1975, P. 87.
15. Collier, Rosaldo, Yanagisako, in Thorne & Yalon, 1982, P. 32.
16. Leacock, 1978, P. 247.
17. Engels, 1972, P. 149.
18. Collier & Yanagisako, 1987, P. 37.
19. *ibid*, 1987, P. 38.
20. Collier & Rosaldo, in Ortner & Whitehead (eds), 1981, P. 316.
21. *ibid*, P. 283.
22. Shostak, in Lee & DeVore, 1976, P. 276.
23. Lee, 1979, P. 310.
24. Draper, in Reiter 1975, P. 82.
25. Collier & Rosaldo, in Ortner & Whitehead, 1981, P. 281.
26. Lee, 1979, P. 460.
27. Kuhn & Wolpe, 1978, P. 277
28. Gamarnikow et al., 1982, P. 15.
29. Moore, 1988, P. 32.
30. *ibid*, P. 234.
31. Knowledge will be defined as the product of knowing, i.e. 'any kind of meaning production, as the way in which we make sense of the world by learning various sets of conventions,...e.g. language, manners dress, music, films, mathematics, etc.' (Gunew, 1990, P. 14).
32. Harding, 1983, P. X.
33. *ibid*, P. 8.

34. Stanley & Wise, 1993, P.193.

35. *ibid*, 1993, P. 232.

(accepted:October 2, 2001)

## REFERENCES

- J.F. Collier & S.J. Yanagisako (eds), Gender and Kinship, (Stanford University, 1987).
- S. Gunew (ed), Feminist Knowledge, (Routledge, 1990).
- F. Engels, The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State, (Lawrence & Wishart, 1972).
- E. Gamarnikow, et al., The Public and the Private, (Heinmann, 1983).
- S. Harding (ed), Feminism and Methodology, (Open University Press, 1987).
- S. Harding & M.B. Hintikka (eds), Discovering Reality, (D.Reidel Publishing Company, 1983).
- A. Kuha & A. Wolpe (eds), Feminism and Materialism, (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).
- E. Leacock & R.B. Lee, Politics and History in Band societies, (Cambridge University Press, 1982).
- E. Leacock, "Women's status in egalitarian society: Implications for social evolution", Current Anthropology, Vol. 19, No. 2, 1978, PP. 247-275.
- R.B. Lee, The !Kung Sun, (Cambridge University Press, 1979).
- R.B. Lee & I. DeVore (eds), Kalahari Hunter-Gatherers, (Harvard University Press, 1976).
- L. Marshall, The !Kung of Nyae Nyae, (Harvard University Press, 1976).
- H.L. Moore, Feminism and Anthropology, (Polity Press, 1988).
- L.H. Morgan, Ancient Society, (Charles H. Kerr & Company, 1877).
- S.B. Ortner & H. Whitehead (eds), Sexual Meanings, (Cambridge University Press, 1981).
- R.R. Reiter, Toward an Anthropology of Women, (Monthly Review Press, 1975).
- M.Z. Rosaldo, 'The Use and Abuse of Anthropology: Reflections on Feminism and Cross-Cultural Understanding', SIGNS, Vol. 5, No 3, 1980, pp. 339-417.
- M. Shostak, Nisa; The life and Words of a !Kung Woman, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1983).
- L. Stanley & S. Wise, Breaking Out Again, (Routledge, 1993).
- B. Thorne & M. Yalon, Rethinking the Family, (Longman, 1982).