Exclusivity: Research in Practice

An Interview with Professor Gilbert Herdt

In early 2013, Crystal Abidin had the opportunity to interview Gilbert Herdt, Professor and Director of the Human Sexuality PhD Programme at The California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco. Prof. Herdt is well known for his work on the ‘Sambia’ people (a pseudonym) of Papa New Guinea, having traced the sexual phrases of males and their creation of sexual meanings and practices. His current research focuses on Sexual Orientation, Marriage Rights, and LGBTQ Youth, and how research and policy are helping young people’s lives. Among his many accolades, Prof. Herdt was a recipient of a Pre-doctoral Fulbright Scholarship to Australia and the William Simon Henry Guggenheim Memorial Fellowship. He is also a fellow of the American Anthropological Association, the International Academy of Sex Research, and the Royal Anthropological Institute (UK). In addition to his numerous authored books, Prof. Herdt has also recently published his first textbook, Human Sexuality: Self, Society and Culture (McGraw-Hill, New York, 2014) for undergraduate education.

Hi Gil, thank-you very much for talking to us today. For readers outside your discipline, could you give us a brief background on your research?

I have studied cultural and clinical anthropology and, in Papua New Guinea, attempted to understand the role of initiation rituals in the emergence of boys’ and girls’ sexual and gender identities. In the USA, I have also endeavored to understand how processes of identity formation, such as ‘coming out’ as LGBT, has been reflected in the lives and relationships and well-being of people, particularly as culture has changed and provided a positive context for their development.

Your groundbreaking work on the Sambia people has received much critical acclaim. How did you get to know of the Sambia given their elusive culture and geography? Were there any particular concerns with accessing the Sambia and portraying them to the public?

As I have written before in my publications, prior to my taking up a Fulbright scholarship to Australia and entering the PhD program at ANU, I had already been in correspondence with anthropologists, especially Maurice Godelier, linguists such as S. Wurm, missionaries, and government officers to help me identify a community in the remote Eastern Highlands that was continuing to stage traditional initiations in the early 1970s. I have always used pseudonyms in reference to place names and individual names and have endeavored whenever possible to protect the true identity and location of the Sambia.

Since the time that your work was published and gained repute, and in the time that you have gone back to work with the community, do you think that the academic interest generated by your work has impacted the Sambia in any way?

This is an interesting question that is difficult to answer in a direct way because I am not aware of the attitudes of some of the Sambia living in scattered urban centers in PNG where they would have the greatest exposure to such information. However, from my contact in the village and from what I know with Sambia friends in urban areas such as Port Moresby, I do think that the Sambia have developed a kind of self-consciousness regarding their ritual sexual practices that may reflect some of the influence of my work. I am writing about that in my current work.
What do you think the consequences of academic work on relatively unknown cultures are?

Always a difficult question to answer objectively because the world is globalizing and there is such a vast triangulation of information today. That said, I believe that even anthropologists’ work, which is relatively little known in the public today, does have an influence on certain culture areas and the attention garnered by that work. Clearly, the current controversy surrounding Napoleon Chagnon’s work is an example of this kind of thing; though in my opinion, he did not use as much care as necessary to protect and defend the individuals and communities involved in his decades-long project.

Any thoughts on the academic climate with regards to research on ‘exclusive’ groups of late?

Not sure what you mean by ‘exclusive’ groups but if you mean by this exotic communities, then, yes: anthropology has moved away from exoticizing people and toward humanizing them, which is a good thing. That said, I still believe that one of the great contributions of anthropology is to provide eye-witness accounts of people’s languages and cultures and circumstances in their own context and, today, in the face of massive structural violence.

Do you foresee any upcoming areas of research within ‘exclusive’ communities that are currently gaining traction?

In my active professional field, human sexuality, there is extensive research and education and policy formation occurring with regard to transgender people, both in the USA and such countries as Australia, but also globally. This is in part a reflection of change away from static structures toward more fluid perceptions of human sexuality across the life course and cultures.

What excites you the most in terms of current developments in sexuality studies?

The emergence of sexuality, gender identity, and reproductive rights. This is the future of sexuality education, research and policy formation.

What have you been up to lately?

I have taken on a new job as of January 1, 2013! I am founding a new doctoral program in human sexuality, the first of its kind, at the California Institute for Integral Studies in San Francisco. It is a dream come true for me because of my dedication to help create sexual literacy in and for the public, and to deepen the cultural competence and relevance of sexuality training. In this respect, I have also published my first textbook as of last month, *Human Sexuality: Self, Society and Culture* (McGraw-Hill, New York, 2014), and am very excited to see how some of my ideas are received in undergraduate education.

Where do you see yourself in ten years?

Well, if I am still on this earth, I hope to have gained a bit more wisdom, have completed my long-planned series of books on the Sambia to culminate my project, and to take up painting again. I stopped painting when I was 21-years old when I entered graduate school. It’s time for me to take time to smell the roses.
Any advice for early career researchers who are studying ‘exclusive’ communities?

Follow your dream.

Any last words?

Live long and prosper.