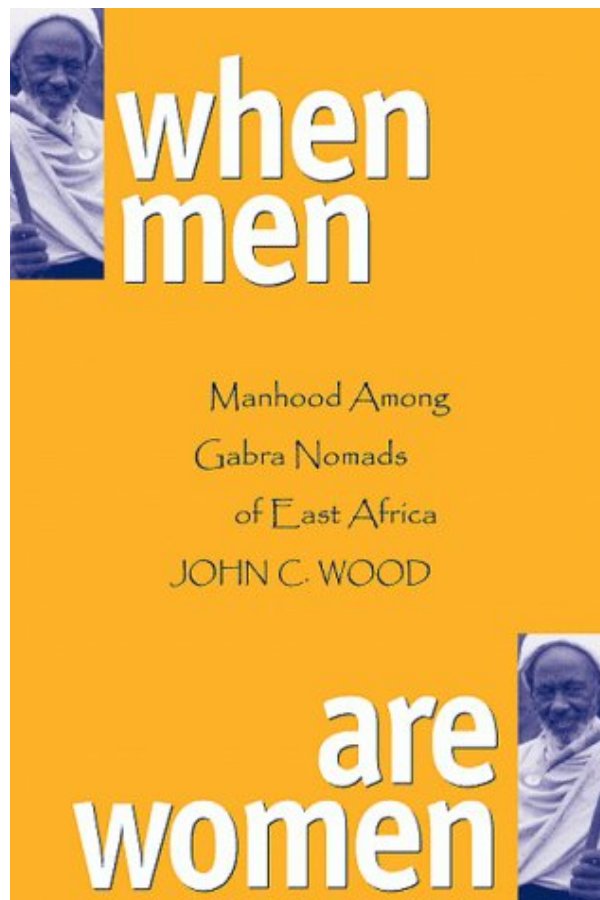
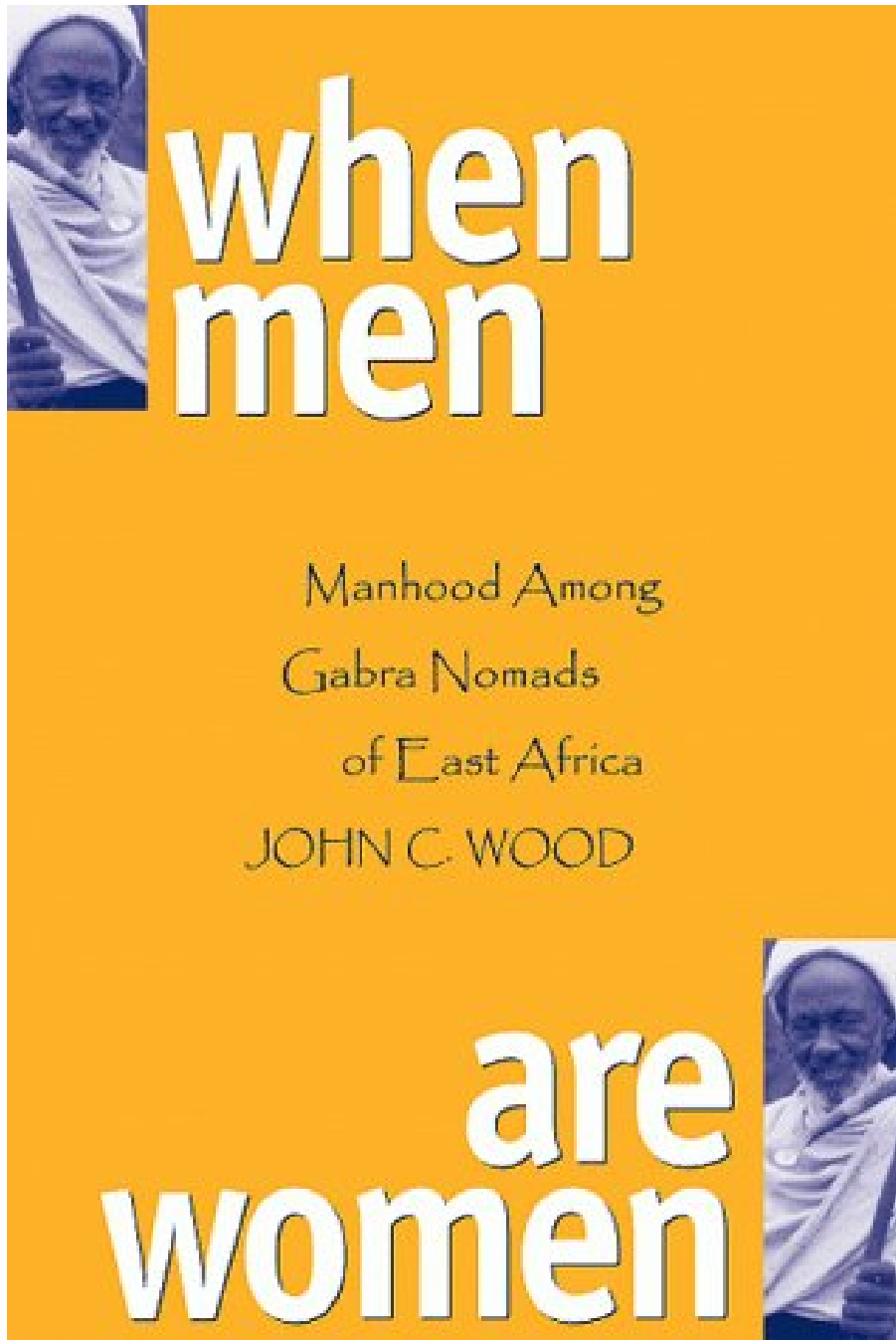


**WHEN MEN ARE WOMEN: MANHOOD  
AMONG THE GABRA NOMADS OF EAST  
AFRICA BY JOHN COLMAN WOOD**



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## Review

“The writing is finely crafted and Wood’s knowledge of Gabra society is extensive and nuanced. I know of no study comparable to this.”

—John C. McCall, Southern Illinois University–Carbondale

## From the Back Cover

IN THIS FASCINATING EXPLORATION of the cultural models of manhood, *When Men Are Women* examines the world of nomadic Gabra people, a camel-herding society in East Africa. Gabra men denigrate women and feminine things, yet regard their most prestigious men as women. In Gabra society all men eventually become d'abella, or ritual experts with feminine identities. A d'abella does not look or act like an ordinary woman, but in many significant ways "he" is a "she": the d'abella is said, in prayers and blessings, to "give birth" to Gabra tradition, and since this tradition is given credit for both rain and fertility, the d'abella gives birth to life itself.

Wood's study draws from structuralism and psychoanalytic theory to probe the meaning, role, and significance of gender in Gabra society. *When Men Are Women* provides a multifaceted view of gender as a cultural construction independent of sex, but nevertheless fundamentally related to it. By turning men into women, Gabra confront the dilemmas and ambiguities of nomadic life. The Gabra provide illuminating insight into our own culture's understanding of gender and its function in society.

## About the Author

John Colman Wood is visiting assistant professor of anthropology at Emory University.

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In this fascinating exploration of the cultural models of manhood, *When Men Are Women* examines the unique world of the nomadic Gabra people, a camel-herding society in northern Kenya. Gabra men denigrate women and feminine things, yet regard their most prestigious men as women. As they grow older, all Gabra men become d'abella, or ritual experts, who have feminine identities. Wood's study draws from structuralism, psychoanalytic theory, and anthropology to probe the meaning of opposition and ambivalence in Gabra society. *When Men Are Women* provides a multifaceted view of gender as a cultural construction independent of sex, but nevertheless fundamentally related to it. By turning men into women, the Gabra confront the dilemmas and ambiguities of social life. Wood demonstrates that the Gabra can provide illuminating insight into our own culture's understanding of gender and its function in society.

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## Most helpful customer reviews

2 of 2 people found the following review helpful.

Very Interesting Piece of the Gabra Tradition, Probably Lacking One Crucial Insight

By Bonam Pak

I read the assumingly original paperback edition of 1999. It is based on altogether 22 months of fieldwork done between 1991 and 1993 among the Gabra camel-herders, who live in Kenya and Ethiopia. The book offers 225 regular text pages, including almost 20 monochrome pictures.

The title suggests a focus on gender studies. About a most unusual concept. It is not about men who dress like women. Not about men who behave like women. And not about men fulfilling any of the same functions as women. I don't blame you, should you ask, what may possibly be left. Well, John Colman Wood needs more than 200 pages to explain that, but in a nutshell: certain men supplement women, retaining the blurry distinction between addition and replacement. To use the vocabulary of the author. In prayers and blessings they are said to "give birth" to Gabra tradition, once they have become "d'abella". Which all men become, should they get old enough. In other words, the d'abella tradition is an institutionalized part of religion. Hence d'abella are not female, but women. Many rules apply to them which do not apply to anyone else. You may have figured out by now that reading a review does not enlighten as much as reading the book itself.

About men giving birth in this non-transgender context, please read *Pregnant Man (Social Orders)* about a similiar concept in medieval Europe. Which marks the final threshold of patriarchy usurping power from matriarchy by symbolically transferring the birth concept, which was necessary for legitimacy of power. John C. Wood does NOT go into this notion, which seems to be obvious as he explains that Gabra men denigrate women and feminine things, yet regard their most prestigious men as women. That's why I have subtracted one star from the otherwise well-written book.

You may also be interested in *Nigeria's Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society* and *Women Who Become Men: Albanian Sworn Virgins (Dress, Body, Culture)*, both of which deal with gender peculiarities in the battles of patriarchy.

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