EXTRA-MARITAL SEX FREEDOM AMONG THE KUIKURU INDIANS OF MATO GROSSO

by

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Most of this paper will be devoted to the system of extra-marital sex partners found among the Kuikuru. However, it seems desirable to describe first something of the cultural setting within which this system operates.

The Kuikuru are one of three remaining Carib-speaking groups in the Upper Xingú region of Mato Grosso, Brazil. They occupy a single village and are completely autonomous, as is true also of the other tribes in the area. The Kuikuru village, as of October, 1953, consisted of 9 large multi-family houses, with a total population of 143. The average number of persons per dwelling was 16; the range was from 7 to 24.

The nuclear family is the basic socio-economic unit of Kuikuru society, and an average of 4 nuclear families live in each communal house or ‘maloca’. In a number of cases two or more nuclear families, linked together by kinship bonds, form a functionally integrated extended family. For the most part, however, the simple nuclear family provides for its own economic needs with relatively little assistance from other nuclear families.

Not only is the incidence of extended families small, but there are no lineages, moieties, sibs, or other unilineal descent groups. Thus there is no significant consanguineal kin group intermediate between the nuclear family and the community.

The Kuikuru village as a whole is not exogamous, nor are the communal houses. Two people living in the same house may marry provided they are not related within the bonds specified by the incest rule. Village endogamy, although it is not prescribed or even

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preferred, is appreciably more common than is marriage with someone of another village. Among all living Kuikuru adults, 71% of the males had married Kuikuru women, while 78% of Kuikuru women had likewise married men from their own village.

Polygyny is practiced, but few men have more than one wife. Plural marriages are not very stable; secondary wives are often divorced not long after they are married. Post-marital residence is matri-patrilocal, and this rule applies whether the marriage takes place within the village or between people of different villages. The matrilocal phase of post-marital residence, during which the groom lives in his bride's house, is short, averaging perhaps a month or two. After this, the couple removes to the groom's house, where they continue to reside indefinitely.

In the absence of unilinear kin groups of any kind, a core of close consanguineal relatives, bilaterally reckoned, constitutes the only exogamous unit in Kuikuru society. The relatives who make up this exogamous nucleus include, for a male Ego: both grandmothers; his mother, mother's sister, and father's sister; his own sister, and both female parallel cousins; his daughter, brother's daughter, and sister's daughter; and his own granddaughters. For a woman the exogamous nucleus of kin consists of the corresponding male relatives.

The system of kinship terminology of the Kuikuru does not readily fall into any of the commonly recognized types. It has features of both Dakota-Iroquois and Hawaiian kinship terminology. It fits the Dakota-Iroquois pattern nicely except for the fact that cross cousins are classed with parallel cousins as brothers and sisters. There is evidence in the form of vestigial terms, now seldom used, to indicate that cross cousins were once distinguished from siblings and parallel cousins.

Interestingly enough, even though cross and parallel cousins are not now distinguished terminologically, marriage between cross cousins is permitted, while marriage between parallel cousins would be considered incestuous. Prior to carrying out field work with the Kuikuru I had the naive impression that in primitive societies people who called each other brother and sister or mother and son, even if this relationship was only 'classificatory', were thereby prohibited from marrying or from having sexual relations with each other. Among the Kuikuru, however, this is certainly not the case. When asked what kinship relation their husbands were to them, two Kuikuru women replied: "brother". One man had as his extra-marital sex partner a woman who was classificatory "mother" to him, and there were probably other similar cases.

There was some difference of opinion among informants as to whether first cross cousin marriage is desirable or not. There were
at least two instances of it in the village, and some Kuikuru said it was a good type of marriage to contract. But several others told us that it is better to marry someone more distantly related than a first cross cousin. Other than this, the only marriage preference expressed to us was that it was better for a man to marry a woman from another tribe. However, as we have already noted, this is not the usual practice.

With this brief introduction to Kuikuru social organization out of the way, I will now give an account of their system of extra-marital sex relations.

Adolescents of either sex are not supposed to engage in heterosexual activity until they have passed through a period of puberty seclusion. For girls this period begins with the onset of menstruation and lasts about 3 to 6 months. For boys the time of seclusion is more variable, and its duration may be 2 or 3 months, or as much as a year or two. When young Kuikuru finish puberty seclusion they are considered ready to engage in sexual intercourse. Marriage frequently follows the end of seclusion for girls, but boys usually delay marriage for several years.

Married or not, all young adults enter into an elaborate pattern of extra-marital relations which they will continue for the greater part of their lives. Almost all Kuikuru adults, young or old, male or female, married or single, have one or more extra-marital sex partners. Such a partner is called an ajois. The relationship of ajois is not one of complete promiscuity, but is formalized in the sense that the ajois of an individual are relatively fixed and are known to almost everyone else. This form of sex freedom may be said to be institutionalized in that it is socially recognized and considered normal behavior by everyone, including the legal spouses of the persons involved. Because of this attitude, adultery, as a crime, cannot be said to exist in Kuikuru society.

The number of ajois a person has varies with his age, sexual inclinations, and with his personal desirability. The average number of ajois per adult Kuikuru, according to our information, is 4. The range, however, is from 0 to 12. Those who had no ajois were old or unattractive, or were persons who in other spheres of social life as well retiring and unenterprising. The largest number of ajois were credited to young people. Thus an individual's sexual activity, as indexed by the number of ajois he possesses, appears to decline gradually with age, as might be expected. However, the oldest man and the oldest woman in the village, who were 58 and 59 years old respectively, were still said to have two ajois each.

There seems to be no tendency for newly-weds to "keep unto themselves" more than older married couples. In fact, within three
months of the time they were married, the youngest Kuikuru bride and groom were credited with a total of 23 ajois between them.

The rules of exogamy already described, which define how far, genealogically, a person must go in order to find an eligible spouse, are operative in regulating ajo relations as well. This means that any person whom one is eligible to marry is also a potential partner in an extra-marital affair, and vice versa.

Among the Kuikuru sexual intercourse never takes place within the house, even when it occurs between legal spouses. It is engaged in only in certain grassy or wooded areas outside the village. These areas are easily recognizable because they have been carefully cleared and the grass tamped down.

There is frequent cooperation between close friends in arranging a rendezvous. On one occasion, for example, a young man and his wife stopped at our tent. They were soon joined by another man, shortly after whose arrival the girl left to go to the lake. Not long after she had gone, one of her ajois appeared and sat down along with the girl’s husband and the other man, who happened to be a particularly good friend of his. A few minutes later the husband in turn got up and started walking back toward the village. No sooner was he out of earshot than the latecomer was informed by his friend that his ajo had gone off to the lake. The man lost no time in heading in that direction.

Extra-marital trysts may take place at any time of day, but appear to occur most frequently in the afternoon when a woman is on her way to the lake to bathe or draw water, and when a man has left the village to gather firewood for the night fire.

An ajo relation between two people, although of course primarily a sexual matter, involves certain other niceties between the pair. Ajois may sometimes be observed grooming each other, although not in the presence of the spouse of either party. There is also a custom of gift exchange between ajois. A man occasionally gives his ajo a bead necklace, while she in turn provides him with cotton thread for arm ligatures or knee wrappings. Other presents are given as well. In one instance a man asked us for a mirror which he somewhat sheepishly told us was intended not for his wife, as we had surmised, but for another woman who we later discovered was his ajo. Once we observed a young man proudly displaying two highly prized shell necklaces that he had borrowed from a couple of his lady friends.

A casual gift of something so trivial as a few kernels of roast corn may actually constitute an overture to sexual relations. One woman, to whom I very innocently offered some corn, hesitated and nodded in the direction of the tent where my wife was, as if embarrassed that I should be so bold as to proposition her in the very presence of my spouse.
Occasionally, half in jest, an older man may try to exact payment from a younger one for alleged sex favors bestowed on the latter by some younger female relative of the former. But normally, ajois relations are entirely the concern of the two persons directly involved; as a rule no third party arranges the affair or profits from it in any way.

Although married brothers frequently have access to each other's wives, there is no evidence that this relationship is based on the principle of wife lending, in which a husband has the prerogative of making his wife available to any man he chooses regardless of his wife's desires in the matter. Rather, a man and his brother's wife may initiate a clandestine sexual relationship on their own, just as any other pair of ajois would. The "deceived" brother is of course not deceived at all, but he will not openly admit or recognize this affair in any way. As was pointed out to me, a Kuikuru husband, knowing as he does that his wife is going to have an ajoi anyway, would ordinarily prefer it to be his own brother than some other man.

Even though all sexual relations take place in private, most adults know pretty well who everyone else's ajois are. This is no mean statistic to carry around in one's head, since according to our tabulation, which undoubtedly is not complete, there were 58 pairs of ajois in the village.

Both men and women are generally quite willing to divulge the names of all the tribal ajois; all, that is, except their own and their spouse's. Characteristically, a person disclaims having any ajois himself, and feigns ignorance of any that his spouse might have. Sometimes the person being questioned about his sex partners merely acted self-conscious and said nothing. But there were exceptions. One woman laughingly told us the identity of her husband's ajo. On the other hand, one man modestly told us the name of one of his own ajois, but acted as if he were not aware that his wife had any. As a matter of fact, she had 11.

Informants were not only free about saying who other people's ajois were, they were also ready to reveal related information. For instance, when asked about the relative desirability of Kuikuru men as sex partners, the three women being interrogated talked the matter over and agreed on a consensus rating of the best male lovers in the society.

Knowledge of ajois relations is not something the Kuikuru feel ought to be concealed from children, and they make no effort to do so. In fact on one occasion we overheard two men quizzing a 4-year-old boy in regard to the extra-marital sex partners of various members of the tribe. The youngster tried earnestly to recite them when asked, as if he were reciting a catechism.
The extra-marital affairs of their parents seem in no way disconcerting to children. I well remember being told very casually by a 6-year-old girl that her father had just gone to have sexual relations with his ajoi.

When asked if they themselves have ajois even the smallest tots often name one or two other youngsters of the opposite sex as their supposed sex partners. Occasionally children may be seen playing at intercourse, but this is usually between youngster of the same sex. Actual sexual intercourse between young people who have not yet undergone puberty seclusion is probably rare.

The ajoi system serves as the basis for a great deal of gossip and joking. To cite one example, considerable hilarity was occasioned in a group of 8 or 10 adults who were sitting around our tent when they spied one of the oldest men in the village awkwardly walking toward the lake as fast as he could go in pursuit of his ajoi, an equally ancient female.

One person often chides another openly about his or her ajoi, even if the latter is considerably older or on a higher generation level than himself. Joking of this sort is sometimes carried to the point of teasing. The chief's married daughter, who had assured us some time before that she had no ajois, was once teased by two men about her having had relations with a young man from another tribe who had been visiting the Kuikuru village. She vehemently denied every accusation, and, as they continued, came to the verge of tears.

The Kuikuru did not at first reveal to us the existence of their system of extra-marital sex partners. But once they knew that we had become aware of it, they lost no time in trying to bring us into the system, in name if not in fact. This attempt, indeed, became the basis of a good deal of friendly humor between the tribe and ourselves. They jokingly assigned 5 or 6 ajois to my wife and to me, and soon everyone in the village knew the names of our alleged ajois as well as they knew the actual tribal ones. They never tired of trying to get us to name our supposed sex partners, and enjoyed it immensely when we counted them off on our fingers, Kuikuru style.

The chief's wife was said to be one of my ajois, and one day when I was in her house an elderly man came up to me and with a perfectly straight face asked me for my red plaid shirt in payment for favors purportedly granted to me by this woman. She was his classificatory daughter.

Although the ajoi system is the source of much good fun in the society, it does sometimes lead to tension between spouses. There were indications that privately husband and wife occasionally quarrel and even scratch or bruise each other because one is unhappy about the extra-marital adventures of the other. It is important to point
out, however, that no matter how angry a husband might become because of his wife's transgressions he would never think of quarreling with her lover or even of accusing him to his face.

Marital disputes over ajoie, when they occur, seem to be limited to the first year or two of married life. By the end of this time if the couple is still living together they have generally become reconciled to each other's extra-marital affairs.

One instance did come to light in which a man went so far as to divorce his wife because of what he considered an excessive number of infidelities. He complained to us that she had had relations with half the men in the Upper Xingu, and for that reason he had got rid of her. He had subsequently married another woman who, even though older and less attractive, was a harder worker and according to our records had only one ajoie.

In general what a man seems to value most in a wife are competence and industriousness in housework. It is not surprising that sexual attractiveness should not be the primary consideration, since regardless of whom he marries, a man is free to establish a liaison with any desirable female in the village who is not too closely related to him.

The divorce rate appears to be relatively high among the Kuikuru. Divorce may result from dissatisfaction with one's mate as a provider or a homemaker, but often the cause seems to be nothing more specific than that husband and wife simply do not get along well together. The frequency with which divorce occurs in Kuikuru society seems to be in large part a result of the ease with which it can be accomplished. All that a person has to do is unfasten his or her hammock and move it to the other end of the house or to another house; the marriage is thereby dissolved.

There remains the question, what about children born out of ajoie relations? If an unmarried woman becomes pregnant, and she is not successful in producing an abortion, she will bury the infant alive shortly after it is born, preferably at some distance from the village.

If a married woman is going to have a child which she believes has been fathered by an ajoie rather than by her legal husband, she goes to the village plaza and makes a public declaration of this fact. The men of the village are then supposed to beat the man allegedly responsible for making her pregnant. This, at any rate, is the idealized procedure. We could learn of no instance in which any such public denunciation had actually been made. In practice, of course, the average Kuikuru wife would ordinarily have no way of knowing just who the biological father of her child was. But at least in this
way the Kuikuru can preserve the myth that whether he be wise or not, every man knows his own father.

It is not surprising that no festive sex orgies occur among the Kuikuru. It would seem that ceremonial license would be superfluous in a society in which sexual freedom ordinarily prevails — where, in a manner of speaking, every day is a holiday.

The pattern of very free sexual relations appears quite consistent with the rest of Kuikuru culture. Permissiveness is characteristic of much of their way of life. There are very few strict rules of conduct, and no formal mechanism for inflicting punishment should these be broken. In short, relatively few demands are made by the society in general or by particular individuals on the behavior of other individuals. It would appear congruent with this socio-cultural pattern for a person to feel free to seek as many sex partners as he desired, and for that person’s spouse not to feel that he or she had the right or authority to require marital fidelity of his mate.

Resumo

O autor estuda a organização social dos Kuikuru visitados por ele em 1953, considerando especialmente as relações sexuais extra-matrimoniais entre estes índios do alto Xingu. Observa que “quase todos os Kuikuru adultos, moços ou velhos, homens ou mulheres, casados ou solteiros, têm um ou mais parceiros sexuais extra-matrimoniais”. 