

# How Are People Made?

Gender, difference and ethnography  
in an Amazonian indigenous society

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**Sex, Lies and Ethnographies** “– What kind of questions did Margaret Mead ask you? Did she ever ask you what you did at night?”

“– Yes, she asked us what we did after dark. We, girls, would pinch each other and tell her that we were out with the boys. **We were only joking but she took it seriously.** As you know, Samoan girls are terrific liars [*laughs*] and love making fun of people but Margaret thought it was all true.”

“– **So you answered Margaret Mead with lies?**

“– **Yes, we just lied and lied.**”

[*Margaret Mead and Samoa*, a film by Frank Heimans, 1988]

Spoken in Samoan, the above dialogue unfolded between the 86 year old A’apua’ Aka’amu, an adolescent back then in the 1920s, and her interviewer. The film centres on the polemic over Margaret Mead’s ethnographic description of teenage Samoan girls in 1928 and Derek Freeman’s refutation (Freeman 1983) in which he assigns himself the role of faithful translator of the Samoan universe. Caught between truths and lies, female sexuality in Samoa emerges in wildly contrasting forms in the two authors’ accounts. Were the Samoan girls sexually at ease, (Geertz 2001:49) in stark contrast to American adolescents of the period, or living under constant and careful surveillance?

Reading between the lines of the formal script, the situation that emerges provides rich material for anthropological reflection. Mead is usually confined to the margins of feminism’s ‘linear’ narrative (Costa 2001: 152), cited either as a historical reference or as an author whose ideas have been refuted by counterexamples from the very peoples she studied.

The Arapesh are usually cited as evidence of a fact that Mead would never willingly admit: namely, that the differential and, we could add, *essential* polarity of the sexes and male dominance were universal cultural principles (Rosaldo 1974: 18-19) and even structurally necessary (Héritier 1981: 49,52) from whichever perspective we might choose to analyze kinship systems (Viveiros de Castro 1990: 27).<sup>1</sup>

The film's narrative is assembled through a series of interviewees – biographers, anthropologists, journalists, relatives and friends – interspersed with images of Mead and Freeman in paradigmatic scenes among the disputed natives, or speaking at tributes, lectures and interviews. In a fairly subtle fashion, the editing steadily erodes Mead's popular and academic prestige. Was the latter simply the result of an ethnographic lie?

In the end, the Samoans 'steal the show.' The accounts are conducted and edited to confirm Freeman's own ethnographic version: everyone – chiefs, a renowned Samoan intellectual and Aka'amu herself – disagree with Mead's writings, albeit each in his or her own way.

During an anthropology class, a chief picks out Mead's mistake in describing Samoan sexual life. He emphasizes his authority as a member of the culture concerned and someone who grew up in Samoa. The specialist in Samoan studies is equally forthright: for her, far from capturing Samoan thought, Mead's analysis merely expresses what the anthropologist herself thought about sex, projecting her own desires and depicting the natives as though they were 'inhuman' and 'animals.'

Aka'amu's own account, on the other hand, belies the idea that Mead had misinterpreted the conduct of Samoans. Incited by the interviewer – and presuming the accuracy of the translation provided in the film – Aka'amu says that she only replied to the researcher with 'lies' and more 'lies.' Prior to this point her recollections suggest some affection for the anthropologist.

Another chief, one of Mead's former assistants, claims that the Samoans' only wanted to provoke laughter and enliven their stories. Nothing they recounted went beyond 'wrong stories' told to captivate the young researcher.

Produced during a recent period of academic history when the post-colonial critique of power, domination and fragmentation of the world

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<sup>1</sup> Héritier analyzes Arapesh social organization as a system founded on a formal analogy between children and women who, as less responsible groups, need to be guided by men (Héritier 1981: 52).

demanded a redefinition of anthropological practice and knowledge (Moore 1999a: 1, 5) the film's content leaves much to ponder. We observe the dispute for ethnographic authority between two ethnographers and simultaneously between these academics and the people they studied, as well as the *truths* and *lies* told by anthropologists and natives alike in order to tease us or capture our attention.

Inevitably this evokes the perennial debate over ethnography's capacity to represent the other, a particularly fierce issue when the film was made (Clifford 1986:10). Any pretension to produce an anthropological synthesis of the *other* was pronounced suspect (Moore 1999a:5).

Gender studies in particular found themselves at the cutting edge of anthropological theory and practice at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>2</sup> This period was committed to exposing power hierarchies, lending voice to minorities and investing science with a practical meaning, only this time in favour of all those who had been overlooked by anthropological writing and oppressed by colonial relations – inseparable and synonymous phenomena in the view of some authors.

The secondary role of women is denounced as a 'pan-cultural' and universal fact (Ortner 1974: 67). Domination and hierarchy between the sexes were not natural as they seemed, but stemmed from symbolic constructs so universal they assumed the appearance of naturalness (idem: 69). And if so, they could and should be abolished.

This observation led to an enduring distinction between 'sex' as a biological and anatomical fact, and 'gender' as a cultural phenomenon related to universal identities and hierarchies (Collier & Yanagisako 1987). Critical approaches such as Errington's (1990 *apud* Moore 1999b: 153) and her triadic model also included 'Sex' (in upper case), in addition to 'gender' and 'sex' (in lower case), as a construction of bodies specific to Euro-America.

However, in the wake of these academic debates, *sex* as an internally diverse social construct remains a kind of primary reality; a singular reality that takes binary bodies and anatomical differences as a matrix for the di-

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2 Here I recall Clifford's paradoxical analysis, which denounces ethnography's 'partial truths' yet takes as a 'fact' that "feminism had not contributed much to the theoretical analysis of ethnographies as texts" (Clifford 1996:20). For a discussion of this point, which extends well beyond the scope of this article, I refer the reader to the book by Behar & Gordon (1995).

versity of cultural configurations.<sup>3</sup> Every symbolic action is based on this fundamental and, in some ways, indisputable dyadic difference.

How can we universalize this connection between a given physiological conception of the difference between bodies and the symbolic production of differences between these bodies on the basis of this primal difference? In relation to power and domination, how do we evaluate the diverse tasks and positions assumed by men and women in the wider world, subdividing them into traits and pre-selecting meanings and places associated not only with difference between the sexes but with deep-set inequality?

By introducing this article with a digression from its main theme – an ethnography of the way in which an indigenous Amazonian population produces people and, as we shall see, something more besides – I wish to emphasize the extent to which these questions are inseparable from its written production. Gender studies during this period led to singular perceptions about *sex*, the *body* and *power* – notions clearly associated with what these works understand as *domination*.

Given this scenario, a form of producing knowledge focused on universal questions of a practical kind could, perhaps, equally distort those others who anthropology is responsible for *representing* adequately. But what does it mean to represent someone adequately or subject anthropology to a practical meaning? How do we authorize some associations and de-authorize others?

We are faced with a set of ‘anthropologies’ so diverse that the profusion has already been compared to Borges’s Chinese encyclopaedia.<sup>4</sup> Accepting Wagner’s proposal that “every human being is an anthropologist” (1981: 36) and the equivalence this engenders between researchers and the people researched, we can creatively multiply our encyclopaedic entries and taxonomies even further.

In a recent text Ortner (2006) argues that anthropology *can* and indeed *must* actively pursue its own ‘transformation.’ Adopting a concept of *culture* that is itself transformational may, she argues, be the solution for anthropologists to respond to the challenge of transforming society without provoking ‘rupture’ (ibid: 40). And in this way we produce another encyclopaedic entry

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3 For an exploration of some of the implications of Yanagisako & Collier’s work, such as their critique of the myth of egalitarian primitive society and their relapse into a new universalism, see Howell & Melhuus (1993:51).

4 Here I refer to Pontes (2004:202-203).

on what anthropology and culture are and what they can do.

In a thought-provoking article inspired by Wagner's reverse anthropology, Gonçalves (1996) argues that we should make positive what he calls the 'obsession for culture' impelling all anthropology's schools of thought. 'Culture' is **'the'** point of discord that nonetheless unites the entire fragmented field. Hence by producing and disputing a diverse range of metaphors, each of these schools 'invents' and 'reinvents' the notion of 'culture' and simultaneously the multiple 'cultures' found in the outside world, as well as those within the discipline itself, insofar as the anthropologist's own culture is included in this process (Gonçalves 1996:172-173).

This proposal for comprehending the vehement discussions in this field raises the hope that through them we can actually expand the possibilities for joint inventions and re-inventions. From this point of view, and despite considerable efforts to the contrary, perhaps there is little to be gained in obtaining any definitive answer to these controversies.

As Strathern suggests (2006a), any such 'solution' would close the book for good on a discipline where profound disagreement between anthropologists and anthropologies has formed a crucial dimension of their work and, for this very reason, perhaps a valuable source of identification in a widely diverse and contrasting field (ibid:200, 204). Uncertainty keeps the debate alive and means we can always be captured or re-captured by the proposals of many different 'others,' both within and without our discipline, as Strathern herself suggests.

With these doubts in mind, I turn now to the ethnographic core of this article. Focusing on ideas continually evoked in a dialogical and reflexive mode, it explores the ways in which a particular Amazonian people talks about and produces differences, particularly those of gender, sex and the diverse relational modalities associated with them, including relations between women. Given the polemic generated by Mead's work, it seems inevitable to question the extent to which *jokes*, *truths* and *lies* may be – and certainly are – contained in my ethnography, as in any other.

## **Native knowledge and transformation**

Practices associated with "homosexuality" among indigenous populations, especially between women, have received very little analytic attention.

Many of the discussions on models capable of explaining Amerindian soci-ality, typically associated with the androcentric conception of ‘cinegetic pre-dation,’ have also by-passed the question of gender (cf. Lea 2001:158; Århem 2007:514; Lagrou 2007:516; Langdon 2007:518).

Over two decades ago, Overing (1986) provided a critical reading of the studies central to the gender debate in the 1970s and 80s. In her view, these authors ignored differences between the systems of morality involved or the potential variations in conceptions of power and politics within the ethno-graphic contexts under study (Overing 1986:138). At the same time, doubts arose concerning the sources used as evidence for the conclusion that women were definitively consigned to a disadvantageous position everywhere on the planet: “(...) it is impossible to know from whence the evaluation comes: from men? Women? Or from the author(s)?” (idem:139).

My own ethnography is guided by these questions. Specifying and con-templating as many different sources as possible will allow us to pursue an ethnographic investigation of those domains usually analyzed as ‘male’ and as expressions of ‘power’ and ‘hierarchy,’ as well as others that have been sys-tematically ignored in many approaches.

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This study focuses on the Rikbaktsa, an indigenous population speaking a Macro-Ge language, numbering approximately 1,500 people distributed across more than 30 villages along the Juruena river basin in the far north-west of Mato Grosso state.<sup>5</sup> In somewhat imprecise terms, the Rikbaktsa can be described as being organized into ideally exogamic and patrilinear ‘moieties,’ each composed by an unequal number of clans. Though these

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5 This article is primarily based on my doctoral research, conducted since 2001 among the Rikbaktsa (cf. Athila, 2006) with funding from FAPERJ and the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research. While mostly a background topic in my Ph.D. thesis, the theme of gender was pursued more vigorously in my post-doctoral research based at the Federal University of Santa Catarina since 2008, part of a larger project on the Rikbaktsa concepts of beauty and transformation, one of whose inves-tigative lines was precisely their role in the sociocosmological understanding of female homoerotic relations. Currently this theme, along with other topics, is being researched as part of the Rikbaktsa Culture Documentation Project, entitled “Tsapyina: producing beauty and transmitting knowledge in-tergenerationally among the Rikbaktsa (Macro-Ge) of SW Amazonia,” coordinated by myself in con-junction with the Indian Museum (RJ). The total amount of time spent in the field over this period is sixteen months.

segments are intrinsically linked to the notion of exogamy, they cannot be defined as diametrically opposed or complementary due to various cosmobiological factors explained below.

Owners of a beautiful feather art, produced in accordance with rigorous native standards, the Rikbaktsa apply a particular concept to their artefacts – as well as a wide variety of quotidian and ritual life situations, including interpersonal relations – namely, ‘beauty’ (*tsapyina*). I return to this concept later. For now suffice to note that this concept is closely related to the notion of change or, to use a term now commonplace in indigenous ethnology, ‘transformation.’

Here, though, a degree of caution is needed. Although the dictionary definition of transformation implies the transition from one state or form to another, declaring that one thing transforms into another does not necessarily mean it abandons everything associated with the earlier state. In our case we could add that although the relations with the previous form are irremediable, the final form can be neither predicted with certainty nor conceived as structurally identical to the preceding form.

Furthermore, transformation here may involve identity categories and kinship classifications, as well as attributes related to other sets of knowledge that each indigenous people defines as essential for the reproduction or production of new beings, persons and even things. In passing I note here that categories named in an apparently exclusive form – *beings, persons, things* – may demonstrate continual communications, fusions and confusions, as indeed normally applies among the Rikbaktsa.

So how are persons, other beings and things created, produced or reproduced? What forms of knowledge do the Rikbaktsa bring to bear on this question?

Denominating this corpus of ideals and practices *knowledge* rather than *beliefs* is a central premise to my argument. But instead of disqualifying the notion of belief entirely, I endorse Latour’s condemnation of a particular use of the term. In the discourse of ‘modernity,’ the so-called ‘pre-moderns’ may possess *beliefs* and even *culture*, but this is only possible precisely insofar as they are denied any form of *knowledge* about the world (Latour 2001:352). As a category of accusation, calling something a *belief* is, in this case, deciding that it involves something other than *knowledge*. Narratives about the world are thereby ordered into a hierarchy in which just one – the narrative

produced by ‘modern science’ – is legitimized and authorized (ibid).

I look to avoid this kind of hierarchization by referring to the Rikbaktsa ideas and practices relating to reproduction as a *knowledge system*. In this spirit I propose to take seriously their answers to the question of how people are made. That is, from some of their diverse perspectives, through the experiences we were able to share, and insofar as I was able to make these responses dialogue creatively and persuasively with our own conceptions and inventions concerning reality (Wagner 1981:144).

Bearing in mind the Samoan example, we still have to entertain the possibility that everything I took so *seriously* was little more than a *joke*. Yet, would this discovery actually matter in ethnographic terms, given that joking only invents something capable of affecting the person making the joke and, where light-hearted encounters are concerned, the person to whom the joke is directed?

### ***Making people: on bodies and differences***

The Rikbaktsa tell numerous stories of women’s self-reproductive capacities and their sexual autonomy, acquired through erotic games between women or by using a variety of artifices. Whether voluntary or the result of harassment, these relations and their associated attitudes – including the power to determine paternity – can best be understood through an analysis of the native knowledge systems relating to conception, filiation and the production of differences and, in particular, as part of the continual dispute between men and women, social segments and even metaphysical beings over authorship of these processes. This approach means investigating the raw material used by men and women to construct their differences (Yanagisako & Collier 1987:15), the nature of this contrast, and the forms in which it takes concrete shape.

For this reason I prefer not to use the terms *homosexual* or *homoerotic* relations to refer to the relations between women, and I explain why. Of course I do not wish to remove completely any sexual connotation. Its just that here and there to use these terms caused me a certain discomfort. It was as if *sex*—the *act* as well as the categories *masculine/feminine*, in combinations and distinctions that have been exhaustingly elaborated in Anthropology—were not adequate for transmitting the world of ideas and experiences that are the

backdrop to any better understanding of them<sup>6</sup>. This text is also an attempt to reflect upon my initial concern and to make it more productive. My aim is to bring together other perspectives which may not be dissociated from the sexual relation itself, at least among Amerindians and maybe elsewhere also.

In the Amerindian context, this analytic endeavour entails comprehending the ways in which these collectivities understand bodies or, more precisely, the corporality of beings and things. A notion fast becoming a paradigm among the ethnologists of tropical South America is that the *body* is not something opposite to or dissociable from the qualities we usually attribute to the *soul* or *spirit* (cf. Seeger et al. 1987). Instead it is inevitably composed of both affections and substances (Viveiros de Castro 2002:380).

These bodies are made from tenuous distinctions between physiology, substances, affects, thoughts, dreams, postures, aesthetic notions, social relations, contacts with metaphysical beings and, consequently, history too. With fairly unclear boundaries separating these components, Rikbaktsa bodies are characterized by an extreme 'permeability' (Athila 2006) that potentially subjects them to intense transformations in the sense discussed earlier.

These happen throughout life, meaning that the status of someone's 'body/person' is continually at risk (ibid:380). In turn this condition implies the incompleteness of bodies, which must be gradually fabricated by moderating innumerable interactions with beings and things, guided by parameters based on learning how and through which stimuli they will or will not be 'affected' (Latour 2004:205-10).

Since it is equally permeable, the person's social status is potentially dynamic, both in relation to the mechanisms determining their belonging to social groups, and in terms of native notions of reproduction, paternity and, consequently, kinship. Categories change because people marry or fail to marry, but above all because 'bodies/persons' change their constitution

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6 My worry over revealing of and writing about this discomfort came about on the eve of my presenting a paper on the not very conventional Rikbaktsa ideas about sex and reproduction at the 2008 meeting of the Brazilian Anthropological Association in a forum called "Sexualities, Ethnic/Racial Cultures and Identities". The Rikbaktsa ideas ended up not appearing so special after all. My worry was that my field is the anthropology of Brazilian Indians and not any form of political militancy, I might be accused of depoliticizing Rikbaktsa relations by "desexualizing" them. I got some comfort from Fonseca's report based on Costa's work (2002 apud Fonseca 2004: 18). Fonseca proposes the non-existence of "man and woman", but of "concrete persons negotiating their relations on specific political and social bases" (Fonseca 2004: 18).

substantially over time.

As we shall see, paternity and the way in which each body is acquired with its own properties and membership of specific social groups, reflect a dynamic of social experience that is reconstructed or reaffirmed on an everyday basis. Everything can be 're-worked' from someone's most distant generation to the present.

The ideas proposed here contrast with the usual notion of reproduction and the naturalized sexual dimorphism which most of the 'west' has hegemomically assumed to be the only form of producing bodies and persons. While the binary model has been identified as inadequate to describing homosexual relations (Rubin 2003: 167-8), I propose to extend this critique to those relations required for the production of beings as a whole, including babies, which can encompass heterosexual relations and many other kinds.

Seen from this viewpoint, sexual relations lose some of their primacy in terms of explaining reproduction, becoming one more relational modality among so many others. Sexual relations are neither necessarily central nor exclusive to the production of new persons. This applies precisely to the Rikbaktsa case too where relations in general are responsible for the genesis of 'bodies/persons' and their various attributes and differences, including those assigned to gender.

The indigenous corpus of stories on the generation of beings allows us to abstract an interesting range of plausible configurations. These beings are created in pairs, threes or various other combinatory and transformative relational possibilities. A variety of combinations can contribute towards the creation of new beings: *woman* and *man*, *woman* and *things* (such as plants, seeds or artefacts), *animals*, *things* and *men* or *women*, or even different species of *animals*, *women* and *metaphysical beings*. Odours and other substances, such as the presence or absence of sunlight, blood, straw or maize flour, can catalyze and contribute to this complex equation with 'people' as its end product.

Here I should add that the Rikbaktsa profess and practice multiple paternity, which works to multiply these possibilities to an even more surprising degree. From this we can surmise that the generation of new or other beings, when nurtured by some form of difference, need not depend on just two entities, still less entities conceived as essentially in diametric opposition. Generation also occurs through mixtures and transformations of pre-existing things and beings, many of them themselves hybrids, just as the new beings

to be created will be hybrid. To an extent this fact also explains the relatively small distance between those beings inhabiting the wider cosmos and those faced in everyday interactions.

### ***Disputing people: Pandora's box***

Women occupy a prominent place in the primordial period described in Rikbaktsa mythology: while the men stayed at home and took care of the food, the women headed off to the forest to collect wild foods and gather produce from the swiddens. This story is told daily by men and women in a number of different versions that also vary in size and detail. Here for the purposes of this article I shall try to summarize them in more or less structural fashion.

After a series of experiments and different stages, a woman finally creates a new being from her skin folds, her body heat and an angico seed (*urik*), identified as the first plant to germinate after a swidden site is burnt. She leaves the creature inside the house.

This being was, in fact, a tapir. It grew quickly after repeatedly being abused sexually by another woman who discovered the being inside the house. Numerous secret intercourses later, by now fully grown, the tapir began to have sexual relations with all the women on a daily basis, choosing the headwaters of the rivers for their rendezvous while the men assumed they were busy with their routine tasks.

Discovered by the men, this became the point of discord separating the first segments of men and women. From then on both sexes reproduced themselves independently via other partners. The people living today all originate from one of these 'reproductive lines,' though they are also related to other reproductive lines whose histories are simply no longer known, though people presume their existence.

Though brief, this description contains some essential points. Ancestrally, men did not *steal* the *natural* reproductive capacity of women. Men and women continued to reproduce themselves through a variety of means, as occurs even today. Indirectly induced by female agency, men created or transformed the creation of the future Rikbaktsa – what they call the 'second generation' – from a few women who turned back into fish-women as they ran away and were captured with an old net.

The myth ends with the status of the world's things and people

perceptibly transformed from pre-existing peoples and substances, becoming new beings and, principally, introducing new distinctions among what was previously a single people. Enemies and hostilities were created as a result of female actions involving self-reproduction or at least a form of reproduction that dispensed with men.

Life became more difficult, hunting more laborious, game and other resources now keenly disputed between the Rikbaktsa and other 'peoples.' Some of the world's worst ills stem from these female self-reproductive and extra-conjugal acts. At the same time, the implicit outcome of these events was that men began to hunt and make war (before the incident neither activity was undertaken since they did not know how to make bows and arrows) while women themselves took over domestic activities.

We can note that female self-reproductive experiences and their sexual relations with the being created in the process still nonetheless *generated* the world as it is today. Things were in one form and shifted into another because the state of the world was transformed, like the many other Rikbaktsa stories that tell of so many other transformations of the world and its peoples, not necessarily linear and accumulative. *Transformation* through interaction figures as a condition for being in the world and for the events that define it. As a consequence, the current order of things always allows for new transformations.

And indeed both Rikbaktsa daily life and their rituals, while heavily punctuated by the division of tasks between the sexes, display little orthodoxy and an extreme reversibility and intercommunication. A reversibility that runs counter to the establishment of fixed or incommunicable hierarchies between peoples, things and spaces, as I have argued elsewhere (cf. Athila 2008).

The mechanism producing *differences* forms part of an intrinsically asymmetric game that never reaches a zero-sum state. It is never known for certain who will occupy the potentially advantageous or disadvantageous positions of this asymmetric relation, or for how long. This both impedes the fixation of hierarchies (Overing 1986:141) and complicates the establishment of equality or complementarity between distinct genders or social segments. Instead what exists are 'nebulous' intersections (cf. Lea 2001:173) between almost everything functioning to configure these domains in an oppositional way.

Men can make featherwork artefacts both in the 'men's house' (*mykyry*)

and in their own houses. Rituals take place in simultaneous and coordinated fashion on the village clearing and inside the dwellings. Careful and synchronized coordination between these domains is indispensable, including intersections that involve different genders and diverse social segments (cf. Athila 2008). Women are not usually present in the men's house, but there is no explicit ban on them being there or any penalty applied when this custom is breached.

Hunting itself is conceived in terms of a profoundly specialized heterogeneity, involving time and many people, different genders and degrees of proximity and kinship. Finding, killing and making an animal edible or simply preventing undesired retaliations often demands specific rites. There are foods, drinks, substances and beings with which one should have or should avoid contact, and carefully prepared arrows that take a long while to make and become effective.

Hence women take part in the rites for treating killed prey and in the regular festivals of the ritual cycle by organizing tasks and carrying out the essential work of producing and distributing food and drink, but they also imitate animals and metaphysical beings, dance and play aerophones. Their performances occur during particular moments of the festivals and separate from the men. They wear the paint designs of their own social group, which means these will be different from those of their husbands, if the norms of exogamy are respected. Headdresses and armllets belong to the spouses or other relatives, but may also be acquired through exchanges or payments for taking part in the process of making other featherwork or eclectic artefacts.

If few men are available and the women wish to perform, the latter can dance and play the instruments alongside the former, a practice that contrasts curiously to most Amerindian women, who are prevented from seeing or playing aerophones, typically associated with men. A male and female 'owner' exist for each regular festival, but women also organize their own festivals to dance, play instruments and drink chicha (made from maize, several underground roots or tubers, or wild fruits). Men take no direct part but do help women to recondition the aerophones and artefacts, practice melodies or watch their performance in a non-prescriptive role.

Female performances, whether held during independent rituals or the regular festivals, cannot be explained androcentrically without considerable analytic friction. Nothing justifies seeing their performances as an imitation

or simulation of an originally male form of behaviour, like a kind of transvestism. Likewise it would be mistaken to attribute their meaning to a ritualization of sexual antagonism.

Women participate in the political domain in various forms, especially as the principal mediators in the potentially awkward quarrels that sometimes flare up between men. At domestic level, they must look after their children, but fathers also have to take extreme care with them. During the funeral laments after a child dies, fathers are systematically held responsible as much as the mothers for any failure to look after their children properly.

Rikbaktsa practices relating to menstruation and to female reproductive capacities demonstrate that rather than being considered inherent to the female body, these attributes can be acquired, modulated or inhibited. The temporary or definitive suppression of fertility, delaying the onset of menstruation and growth of a girl's breasts, and the choice of the future child's sex are just some of the ways in which the Rikbaktsa strive to manipulate the production of their bodies, including their attributes and the sources or raw materials used in their making.

Dietary practices and everyday social behaviour directly interfere in the capacity to produce children – or, more specifically, to produce living children with whole bodies. While transformations are always a risk for anyone, bodies in the process of being formed, such as those of children, are more prone to becoming mixed. This can lead to undesired generative mixtures. Everything from relations with different social segments and distinct types of beings and things, to postures, diet and dreams can contribute to the formation of a body with singular characteristics, as well as to its unsuccessful creation or annihilation.

Some myths focus on the disputes over the paternity of a young infant. In these narratives, metaphysical beings called *Haramy* and *Morebe* meet, interact and eventually participate in the generation of the newborn by imprinting the child with various attributes. These beings also appear in other stories and encounters that can prove harmful or even fatal to the Rikbaktsa, and are continually cited in relation to quotidian events in the past and present.

Women and their newborn children who stay alone at home while the rest of the group leaves, for example, to take part in ritual mourning in another village are a particular target of this type of approximation. In one myth, as well as finding herself alone, the woman was making porridge (*zaro*)

and *chicha* (*tummy*), something that should not be made post-partum, evincing an ‘ugly’ (*batsisapy*) attitude. Soon *Morebe* arrives at the house, leaving his bow and arrow at the doorway in line with the *Rikbaktsa* custom. He asks about the child’s father and name insistently, but the infant had still yet to be named. *Morebe* casts doubt on the paternity, refuting any similarity between father and son, and finally assumes the prerogative of the paternal group, giving a name to the child, *Spizoita*. People also say that the child became adept with a bow and arrow.

Dreams and experiences with other types of beings which women – but also men – may have in the first days after a child’s birth can generate specific attributes, both as a form of parallel naming and a kind of nickname, *sutsukwy*, possessed by everyone. For example, people say that if the mother dreams of *Morebe*, the child will be a skilled archer; if she dreams of a jaguar, the child will like raw meat, and so on.

These kinds of events eventually produce the warrior bodies of mature men and women, endowed with particular valued skills, as well as leading to the majority of illnesses and deaths. Everything depends on maintaining control and ensuring that interactions follow their correct course.

Female “homosexual” practices should be understood in this context where bodies, persons and an infinite number of entities – a multitude emerging from minimal differences – are compelled to engage in relations capable of transforming them. These *Rikbaktsa* stories and myths contain references to forms of relationship that do without men and resort to other materials – seeds, skin folds and other beings – to generate new humanized beings, such as the tapir, or other *Rikbaktsa*, or certain attributes of these beings. As we shall see below, this sometimes happens in everyday life too.

However, while “homoerotic” games can be creative, this is neither an exclusive nor a necessary attribute of the type of relation I am looking to describe. Consequently relations that exclude men can take place simply for fun, either as part of all-female erotic games or especially with the branches of a particular tree, the *bamy sarapa* (‘tree name’ + ‘branch’), used as a makeshift wooden penis.

Some women are notorious for owning or having once owned a *bamy sarapa*. Comments on the topic are usually made by third parties in intimate contexts, since almost everything involving relations between women is shrouded in secrecy. Relative secrets insofar as they are continually eroded by

collective suspicion.

This situation has much in common with a myth in which an unmarried woman convinces everyone that she has a boyfriend, though her partner is actually a *bamy* branch. Inside her house the woman has sexual relations with the *bamy*, which wears male ear adornments and a moriche palm tanga. Although everyone overhears and suspects what is going on, nobody can gainsay her version since they are unable to see the *bamy*.

This story was told to me by a man one day when we went to the forest, accompanied by a few other women, in search of a *bamy* branch suitable for the practice. Purely for demonstrative purposes, since I had told them I was curious to see a *bamy*. Obviously this provoked a lot of laughter and new stories.

In terms of methodology, here it is worth recording not only my lengthy experience among the Rikbaktsa, sharing day-to-day and ritual tasks with them, but also the gradualness with which they transmit their knowledge among themselves, something replicated in very similar fashion with researchers. Knowledge is never linearly or wholly transmitted. Aside from practical experience, knowledge acquisition requires the person wishing to learn to show some degree of prior knowledge about the subject, meaning that any conversation with the same or another person only proceeds when the apprentice determines the point of initiation. In this way new elements are added over time.

This was precisely the case with female homoerotic relations. The night before I was due to leave the village after my first field trip, the older women joked, saying they wanted to sleep with me in the hammock. I noted this teasing in my diary as a curious incident at the end of a stay of 40 days. The theme resurfaced about a year later when, out of the blue, a woman to whom I was particularly close suddenly told me about an older woman's unwanted sexual approach, which had resulted in her becoming sick.

From then on this sensitive topic became one of the touchstones of my dialogues and experiences among the Rikbaktsa. As I gradually showed that I knew something about the topic, other women, and a few men, confirmed stories I'd already heard or told me new ones as we busied ourselves with our everyday activities.<sup>7</sup> Some male informants told me that married women didn't have *bamy* branches, "only those who don't like men." However all the

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<sup>7</sup> Consequently I have opted to conceal the names and villages of these informants, indicating merely their sex and the role they played in the events concerned.

women cited in these stories were married, irrespective of their age.

Women sometimes have erotic relations with each other as they perform tasks together, such as gathering fruits in the forest. As one woman said to me in Portuguese, they “*ficam fazendo besteira na sujeira*,” “play around in the dirt.” Hence women – in pairs or groups – may take part in homosexual practices just for fun. In extreme and singular cases, this kind of erotic diversion may lead to the actual generation of a person, as attested by the existence of one man in particular, still alive, who is said to be a “son of the women,” made at the base of a particular tree shown to me when we went to the forest.

But this type of relation is not always entirely consensual. A young woman told me that an older woman – now deceased – once lifted up her clothing when they went together to the swidden. At the time the younger woman did not react. Returning home she became sick. As an unprompted coda to her story, she said that a man who had been hunting in the forest almost shot two women who were having sex, thinking it was an animal moving about. For this reason various Rikbaktsa leaders warned against the practice.

Another woman confirmed the story of the girl harassed in the swidden, adding that her assailant had been a hermaphrodite. She also had a penis (*irikdo*) and had sexual relations with her husband – with whom she had children, I should add – using her penis. She also mentioned two other women who had penises as well.

Busby (1997:261) observes that Indian hermaphrodites are considered “neither men or women.” But among the Rikbaktsa there seem to be no problem with women having a penis or *bamy sarapa*. All are women, married with children and enjoy a high social status. There are not classified as members of a distinct category.

We can note that after being sexually approached involuntarily by another woman, the victim fell ill. This indicates that some relations between women can – from a certain point of view – be included in a specific category of events. Indeed this is fairly heavily marked from the male perspective and which also appears in the narratives of those women who were apparently unwillingly involved in homosexual practices.

Here we can return to the Rikbaktsa concept of ‘beauty.’ For these groups of people, such incidents are *batsisapy*, ugly or inadequate. In contrast, the adequate or desired existence of beings and things in the world, their expected order or state, are designated by the expression *tsapyina*, beautiful, good.

These attributive clauses potentially translate everything capable of positively or negatively affecting Rikbaktsa perceptions and experience. The root ‘-sapy’ was initially translated by non-Amerindians as ‘good,’ but can also signify ‘place.’ Consequently its negative form, *bato isapy* or *batsisapy* (in spoken form), implies that whatever is perceived is out of place or inadequate.

Sounds, visions, odours and feelings described as *batsisapy* may also function as an omen that something is not going well and that the person is at risk in the near or distant future. Artefacts, food, body painting, sounds, smells, music, situations, images, social behaviours and body postures, including relations between people, marriages and so on, can all be qualified as *tsapyina* or, on the contrary, as *batsisapy*.

Whether applied to bodies and relations or the current state of the world, ‘beauty’ is cited as the reason for a variety of productions, such as body paintings, the order and way of performing ritual tasks, as well as matrimonial relations. None of these are natural attributes of people, clans or other sociological forms of grouping given at birth: instead they are acquired through careful experimentation until everything conforms to the state described as ‘beautiful,’ *tsapyina*. Beings, things and social segments are all created through these sequences of transformative actions:

“Ever since they pulled off the sloth’s tail and began to see who had [which] paint design [at first the designs were all identical], who danced [in what order]. **They experimented** at the end of the festival. First *hazobiktsa*; second *makwaraktsa*; next *bitsitsiyktsa* [Rikbaktsa macro social groupings]. **They experimented in that way until it looked beautiful**, *tsapyitsa*! The yellow group [*makwaraktsa*] experimented going in front. It didn’t look good. Afterwards they went to see who was going to try making the porridge – *mybainytsa* [the clan of the *makwaraktsa* group] made it properly, at the end of the festival. That’s how it is.

Matrinxã, piava, all good fish. They ask when they ‘dance on the arm.’<sup>8</sup> They tried dancing ‘kin’ with ‘kin,’ **it didn’t look beautiful** – *batsisapy* – so they decided to dance with non-kin. Then it turned out well, *tsapyitsa*. **It remains fine**

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8 At a set moment at the end of the rainy season festivals, one or more women, providing they are from the opposite moiety, may dance with a man, holding onto an armband made from plant fibre. This gives women the prerogative to ask the men for things – fish, pans and other items – to be repaid in some form or other after the festival period. The Rikbaktsa usually refer to this practice as “dancing on the arm.”

**even today (...) If it doesn't work, it's done again until it turns out well.**

And so it continues, until it's done..."

(Vicente Bitseryk 2003, my emphases)

The native concept of beauty reveals a non-essentialized conception of the connection between people, groups and their attributes, indicating that these associations can be altered in pursuit of beauty. As a non-permanent 'state' defined by instability and risk, the realization of 'beauty' inevitably involves the continual effort to produce and maintain it.

*Batsisapy* situations are invariably dangerous. They allow interactions between the living and metaphysical beings (or the dead) through what the Rikbaktsa call *myhyrikoso*, something akin to the *shadow* or *spirit* in the absence of a more suitable translation, or alternatively the *sparitsa*, whose principal trait is some degree of zoomorphism.

Aspects of the personalized and impersonalized dead and other metaphysical beings, all fairly mundane, inhabit the reverse of the world occupied by the Rikbaktsa. When it is day for one, it is night for the other. Undesired encounters take place at night and during dreams, but they can also occur during the day when the weather darkens suddenly or something atypical is seen, heard or felt by someone who separated from the group or remains alone at home. These kinds of events are or should be perceived as *batsisapy* or ugly.

Events such as someone separating from the group in the forest and seeing birds that live in the tree canopies fly down near the undergrowth, encountering nocturnal animals during the day, or finding game dead by the side of a path, are all considered *batsisapy* and thus highly dangerous. The concept of *batsisapy* is also applied to feelings/behaviours deemed to be inadequate, disobeying requests made by older people, and everyday attitudes that are equally reprehensible, such as undertaking activities alone during the day, leaving the village unaccompanied at night, or eating certain parts of foods.

Girls and younger women who refuse any request made to them are also said to manifest an 'ugly' attitude. Since the prototypical subjects of unsolicited sexual approaches are older women, homoerotic relations would seem to come under the category of things that cannot be refused, meaning that refusal would be inadequate and thus *batsisapy*.

As we have seen, just as much as refusing to take part, involvement in the event can itself be identified as an etiological cause of sicknesses and risky or fatal indispositions – which is precisely what happens after someone's

participation in *batsisapy* situations. As a result, from a particular viewpoint of female homoerotic relations – namely the view adopted by men generally and by those women who have been unwillingly approached by other women – these interactions are strongly associated with the dangerous liaisons between metaphysical beings and the Rikbaktsa. These liaisons are risky and capable of transforming the ‘body/person,’ meaning they should be carefully avoided or controlled in order to ensure an adequate outcome.

Little by little, then, we move away from exclusively *erotic* explanations, or indeed interpretative stances that conceive such practices as *sterile* relations, including those analyses that reduce the phenomenon of homosexuality among Amerindians to a mere demographic correction for the scarcity of women (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 78) or – in our case, taking the opposite as a logical possibility – the absence of men.

My proposal from the outset of this article has been that homoerotic relations cannot be isolated from the general set of ideas and practices associated with women, bodies and the collectivity. Moreover there are innumerable connections between the diverse relations in which women take the lead and the possibilities for transforming the person, which also means attributing these relations with the capacity to generate, in the broad sense explained earlier. Here a brief description of native knowledge about filiation and principally conception, both markedly patrilinear, can shed a little more light on our question.

The Rikbaktsa insist that the father “makes the child.” A child generated in this way will also belong to the father’s social group rather than the mother’s, an attribution not necessarily found among other indigenous populations.<sup>9</sup> Although semen fabricates the child in this official discourse, the metonymic relations between bodies in general – fathers, mothers and children – mean that it is not exclusively responsible for this formation process. Anything that affects the father or mother – social postures, diet, feelings, dreams – can be transferred to the child, even before the infant is generated, as may happen to pre-pubescent girls who rebuff the advances made by older women. As we can observe in the stories about the gestation and maturation of children, at least three bodies will be interconnected for some time.

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9 Conception theories do not always coincide with forms of recruitment or filiation. Hence a group may, for example, attribute generation of a child to the man but determine that the child belongs to the social group of the mother.

I frequently heard men say that the Rikbaktsa were going to die out because women were having children with whites. Or that one of the clans would disappear because there were no more 'pure' individuals left in the clan to ensure its perpetuation. Since multiple paternity is a given, this means that 'pure' individuals are children whose fathers belong to the same clan and, consequently, the same moiety, in contrast to 'mixed' children whose fathers belong to clans from different moieties.

At this point a question arises: can something or someone be responsible for the extinction of a particular social group? What might this supplement to reproduction represent, this addition of diverse traits in the fabrication of new bodies?

This is the crux of our question. The power to determine paternity is categorically attributed to women. This topic involves both the formal questions asked prior to festivals and an influential parallel network of informal quotidian comments that work in an opposite direction to the ritual efforts to fix paternity, thereby ensuring, among other things, that the ritual tasks are performed 'adequately,' in a 'beautiful' (*tsapyina*) way – that is, by individuals from one moiety or subgroup rather than another. An aggravating factor is that paternity is never resolved definitively, since it can oscillate diachronically throughout the individual's life. Synchronically it also depends on context, the interests of various people, the viewpoints of the people from whom and to whom paternity is attributed, and the presence or absence of anyone affected by this attribution.

It is tempting to analyze these narratives as a pronounced effort to achieve a 'regulatory fiction,' in Haraway's phrase, composed in part by the idea that "motherhood is known on sight" while "fatherhood is inferred" (Haraway 1991:135) and – I take the liberty to add – at some cost and many doubts. However, it would be ethnographically mistaken to analyze patrilinearity as a fake construction, an audacious *male artifice* designed to obscure a *true reality* in which women are the ones *truly* responsible for reproduction.

While the Rikbaktsa man "produces the child," the woman designates the man or men who produced the newborn, but does so making full use of patrilinearity and the official version of conception, including multiple paternity. Reaffirming this knowledge – declaring who the father is and doing so within a spectrum of possibilities that vary over time and sometimes space – women significantly alter the native 'databases,' such as the one determining that

mother and child belong to different social segments.

The uncertainty surrounding paternity modulates social organization with important consequences at a practical level, including ‘where’ and with ‘whom’ to marry, with whom to live and what kind of relations to have with each person. This provides us with a glimpse of the scale of the disruption that women can cause to the male world of their husbands either in the latter’s clans and moieties or in their own.

This female potency induces instability and in this sense again closely approximates the potential contacts between the Rikbaktsa and metaphysical beings, a possibility permeated by ‘ugly’ or *batsisapy* events, which can lead to sickness and death. Just like the contact with metaphysical beings, women throw the Rikbaktsa social system into perpetual disequilibrium and imbue the system with a dynamism marked by transformation in a world that remains forever open to the event.

Women’s decision-making power over paternity, which they amplify through indecision or reversible decisions, does not emanate from any ‘reproductive-natural’ capacity. Neither can we attribute it to the recapturing of a power lost or stolen by men in the mythic past, a situation absent from their mythological corpus. In this sense, female attitudes are entirely compatible with current Rikbaktsa theories about the ways in which bodies are fabricated – theories which indeed they skilfully manipulate.

Moreover, as I have emphasized, female homoerotic relations among the Rikbaktsa cannot be comprehended separately from this wider framework which defines women in their diverse modalities of relationship with Rikbaktsa sociology and cosmology. These kinds of relations can be positively creative, so to speak, just as they can be dangerous to the smooth course of life, desired by some women and criticized by men and other women. At the same time, practicing these relations does not lead to any re-classification of these women: on the contrary, they seem to distil something very important about being ‘female’ among this people.

### **On multiple places and forms of difference**

While most ethnologists identify men as those responsible for exchange (Lévi-Strauss 1982: 73, 102 and elsewhere), women can intercept this circuit, altering its ‘meaning’ and its ‘product’ various times by designating someone’s

paternity or hesitating to do so. This is precisely the case of Rikbaktsa women, who use the theories of conception and patrilineal affiliation in their own favour.

While they do not steal male fertility, they skilfully appropriate it by inaugurating or implying another simultaneous circuit of production or 'reproduction' of bodies/persons. They multiply the ways of producing interpersonal and sociological differences, expanding their range of possibilities, often in unusual forms.

Shifting away from any 'natural' basis to an alleged female hegemony over reproduction, the implications of erotic relations between women, along with other attitudes potentially associated with them, have a marked impact on the formal hierarchy. They belong to the political dimension of Rikbaktsa sociality and their theories concerning difference and the potential consequences of any generation of beings and things, which indeed expands into numerous modalities and combinations.

Weiner (1979:328) emphasizes how the use of a biological notion of reproduction had "reduced the affairs of kinship to their most narrow manifestations." Verdon (1980) demonstrates how none of the schools studying kinship and specifically descent – even those calling themselves 'cultural' approaches – discussed 'biological fact' as the basis of kinship. Did we create '*nature*' only to then "tell ourselves stories about how nature create us!" (Wagner 1981:140)?

Here I propose to waive any argument appealing to 'accepted truths' (Howell & Melhuus 1993:44) or resorting to *nature*. These kind of explanations anticipating ethnographic research – and this is another point of this article – would limit rather than elucidate Rikbaktsa kinship with all the multi-centric richness involved in its making.

Authors like Hérítier would accuse me of being fascinated by the aleatory and anti-scientific (Hérítier 1981:10). While the aleatory may not seduce her, the invariance of the so-called universal biological fact clearly does, cited on every other page of her *real* and *fictional* kinship exercises. For Hérítier, this is the ground zero of any kinship system. Universal, atemporal, 'eternal,' something so evident it amounts to a 'banality' (ibid:15-17). The thesis of the differential valency of the sexes is held to explain all kinship systems (ibid:38). Cross-sex siblings are always inevitably treated unequally, even in systems that favour and theoretically prescribe the symmetrical treatment of this pairing (ibid:38,49).

Adapting Weiner's conclusion to her re-examination of Trobriand kinship through her foregrounding of siblinghood, the roles of women and men are both distorted (Weiner 1979:332) when we take what is just one more form of *knowledge* about the world as a 'natural given'. Trobriand men do not just exchange women or oppose women and men in crossed form. Instead both are responsible for reproducing themselves and for reproducing social relations – for Weiner in complementary form, though this is debatable in the Rikbaktsa case – in accordance with their own parameters, including through the seminal relationship between brother and sister.

It is now a virtual consensus that sexual roles are not 'naturally' fixed. Among the Rikbaktsa, we can add, neither do they appear to be 'culturally' permanent or definitively exclusive. They are subject to the risks and dynamic disputes that constitute the genders and their attributes, all of which can oscillate over the course of a person's life.

The Rikbaktsa narratives are not concerned with associating women and men with separate hierarchized 'domains' or 'realms,' like 'nature' and 'culture,' opposing them obsessively in a kind of infinite progression. As we have seen, women are owners of festivals and play aerophones. In extreme cases, they procreate alone, but effectively control the fecundity of men, have sexual relations among themselves and with substitutes for men.

However, we cannot assert that they are ambiguous or that they destabilize the collectivity by imposing their '**natural** fertility' in contrast to 'male procreative **contractual** power.' Everything unfolds without the patrilinear construction of bodies ever being questioned. Irrespective of other possible forms of generation, it is primarily through this patrilinear fabrication that women acquire the power to continue and extinguish social segments, moieties and even the Rikbaktsa as a people.

Were I to try to define them, women are more like the villains flouting the formal norms of the collectivity, controlling and – depending on the perspective adopted – sabotaging the production of persons by specific patriline. They manipulate the native-based biological fact in a patrilineal society with an emphatically patrilineal theory of conception.

Accepting that my representation of them is inevitably imprecise, this description is only partially true since women seem to do 'one and the other' simultaneously. They both use and in this sense reaffirm official knowledge on paternity and, through the latter, generate instability and from a certain

perspective hinder the smooth functioning of the collectivity, its 'beautiful' actualization, though they in fact produce it in their own way.

This is a fundamental point. The instability still productively impels Rikbaktsa ontology and sociology. As we have seen, performance of the latter always involves risk, construction and destruction forming the obligatory counterparts of every relationship with otherness within the scope and modality of difference possible in a cosmology marked by the transformation of pre-existing beings and substances, rather than creation properly speaking.

Female homosexual relations become highly significant when analyzed in this context. They comprise an important part of the female 'being' within the group, despite the discussions and contrasting perspectives over what 'being' constitutes among the Rikbaktsa. Likewise my description of the Rikbaktsa social system, and the body/person, places much more emphasis on states, which are inherently risky, unstable and mutable, rather than solid modes of being, acting or classifying.

In contrast to more androcentric explanations, a woman who is the 'owner' of a festival, who determines a child's paternity, or who intervenes in community disputes, is not 'acting like' a man or a 'bad woman' (Busby 1997:272). She is only exercising precisely what the collectivity expects of her, which is not always opposed to attitudes and attributes that we might hastily judge to be prototypically or primarily 'male.'

Following Strathern's formulation of Melanesian ideas (2006b:20), I consider gender relations to be completely imbricated in the native notion of sociality. The meaning of the difference between men and women, taken as an analytic category (Moore 1999b), cannot be understood separately from Rikbaktsa sociocosmology.

This is what I have tried to explore here, not just through models, but also through a description that stresses the sociocosmology's dynamism and risk, as well as its profound consistency. Anatomy and binarism do not always enable an exclusive distinction between 'men' and 'women,' meaning that this distinction is more gradual than absolute, allowing for imbalances and reversible hierarchies, as with all other Rikbaktsa categories of alterity.

## **Conclusion: little shortcuts between village and town**

In light of the Rikbaktsa ethnography, what should we make of the

hypothesis that women are universally conceived to be closer to 'nature' and the 'domestic' than men (Ortner 1974:84)? Or indeed Lévi-Strauss's assertion that "(...) woman everywhere is synonymous with nature" (Lévi-Strauss 1969:270)? How can these concepts be removed from their ethnographic setting? How do we analyze ethnographic contexts where the categories 'man' and 'woman' appear to be internally split (Howell & Melhuus 1993:45)?

For so-called complex societies, Rubin (2003) points to other coherences and associations between 'sex,' 'gender' and 'sexual practices,' as well as 'desire.' Haraway, citing Butler (2003 *apud* Haraway 2004), suggests feminism's difficulty in absorbing the full range of possibilities for expressing gender, excluding as illegitimate those perceived as non-coherent or limiting itself to a univocal definition of attributes (Haraway 1991:135). The antagonistic relationship between coherent men and women continues to feed the 'identity' and 'fiction' through which feminism constitutes itself (*ibid.*).

Recent ethnographic research has steadily undermined this particular coherence. In some contexts men may engage in a variety of homoerotic practices as an integral part of affirming their masculinity, as in the case of the San Francisco gay leather community studied by Gayle Rubin, which "codes both desiring/desired subjects and desired/desiring objects as masculine" (Rubin 2003:204).

At international congresses, new researchers into similar topics among internet communities or same-sex clubs have expressed the inadequacy of orthodox associations of these attributes. Everything seems to happen in multiple and singular forms. Sexuality and gender may be associated but they are not the same thing, integrating arrangements that are situational and non-universal (*ibid.*).

How do we make sense of the multiple traits, meanings and practices directly or indirectly evoked by individuals to describe their lifestyle, how they relate with each other, reproduce and make kin? The complexity of an 'in-between' identity escapes the hegemonic discourse on gender, punctuated by the 'feminine' or the 'masculine' (Shohat *in* Costa 2001: 155).

Working in this interstitial zone, Maluf (2002) turns to contemporary ethnological theory in her examination of the experiential notions of *gender* and *body* through the persona of Agrado, a transvestite character from *Todo sobre mi madre* by Almodóvar. She focuses in particular on ideas of bodily construction (Seeger et al. 1987) and Amerindian perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro

1996 and Lima 1996 *apud* Maluf 2002), as well as their later developments (Lagrou 1998 *apud* Maluf 2002) to exemplify the inadequacy of the anatomical version of difference when faced with contemporary ethnographic challenges. Bodies and potential identities end up stifled by the naturalized dualism (Maluf 2002:146, 148).

There are notable conceptual proximities between the *body* at the margin of gender – which emphasizes the process more than the final product (ibid: 149), remaining between being *one* and the *other* and taking *transformation* as a ‘condition’ of its existence – and what I have looked to demonstrate ethnographically in relation to Rikbaktsa bodies in general. Hence when Maluf argues for the complete relationality of the ‘prey-predator’ position and its respective attributions of ‘non-subject’ and ‘non-humanity’ (ibid: 151) which, however reversible they may be, are established at some moment as a condition of Amerindian perspectivism (cf. Athila 2006: 69, 70), she does so in a way very similar to ethnography on the Rikbaktsa production of differences and what I call ‘multi-perspectival bodies.’

A stimulating article by Fonseca investigates the adoption of DNA examinations by Brazilian public authorities in paternity lawsuits. Revealing a variety of nuances that traverse each other creatively in the form of thinking, ‘unthinking’ and ‘rethinking’ ‘paternity’ (Fonseca 2004), the article evokes a number of potential intersections with the Rikbaktsa concepts of ‘reproduction’ and ‘paternity,’ insofar as the new technology enables the certainty of determining who the father is or merely who is not (any longer) the father. DNA, as Fonseca shows, introduces a doubt where very often there was none given the social construction of the ties between father and children (ibid:15, 16).

According to Fonseca, for most of the western world biology no longer exists “outside or prior to culture,” although she notes its virile persistence in the form of conceiving kinship, “as something concrete, empirically demonstrable,” like the DNA exams (ibid: 28). On this note, she demonstrates how filial bonds will never be constructed, despite the technological confirmation of paternity, while others, solid until then, will perhaps be broken as a result of the same process.

This ethnographic case makes me wonder whether the Rikbaktsa universe would become more homogenous and static were they to use DNA exams. Many exams, in fact, given the number of potential fathers involved. On

reflection, though, this technology would only confirm the endemic doubt concerning a child's paternity, and would quickly be discarded as useless or ineffective in stabilizing it. The Rikbaktsa would probably return to more conventional methods.

There are far more similarities between contemporary discussions of gender and ethnology than the sceptical attitude of mainstream anthropology, with some exceptions, would admit. A new dialogue, on different bases to those established in the 1970s, would seem to be highly productive. It is ethnographically unsustainable to assert the existence of universal or natural traits and roles capable of encapsulating gender, sex or any type of difference.

Whether we are islanders or Amazonians, club-goers or internet site visitors, we need to dialogue in relation to the practices and attributes to which we confer (or not) the capacity to differentiate, identify or assimilate. Ethnology and kinship, understood in a broad sense through non-essentialized Amerindian definitions of the 'body,' 'sex,' 'reproduction' and the meanings of being 'men' or 'women,' can, in a two-way dialogue, contribute to a better understanding of other ethnographic contexts.

Returning to an earlier remark, it may not always be that interesting to seek a definitive answer to these questions, trying to discover once and for all what difference is, or what male and female are, or even 'who' or 'if' someone 'lied' or 'joked.' Unsurprisingly perhaps, this interaction with the Rikbaktsa conceptual universe forced me to reflect upon and test my own notions – notions which, perhaps, I didn't even precisely have in any clear form -, of how men, women, kin, people and thus anthropology are made.

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