

# **A commentary on Adriana Athila's article "How are people made? Gender, difference and ethnography in an Amazonian indigenous society"**

*Lux Vidal<sup>1</sup>*

Adriana Athila's article begins by showing the many varied theoretical perspectives on "the somewhat rather forgotten question of gender". She chose to look for and understand the meaning of affective and sexual practices that are distinct from the heterosexual norm. But in fact the article goes further than this, entering the debate over ethnography and its questionable claim to present or represent the other. According to the author, it is necessary to take into account the different historical contexts in which research was carried out, of the people researched, of the dominant ideas of the society of the researchers and of anthropology itself. In the end we cannot say that we have not made headway, and this is fascinating, especially when a researcher manages synthetically put forward the state of the art of her chosen theme. This excellent article gives priority to ethnographic data from an indigenous society and proposes to discuss the data in an ample cosmological frame, taking into account native knowledge and the different perspectives on homosexual relations and practices. She discusses gender in a somewhat didactic fashion in the light of the ethnographic data from an indigenous society that lead her to stress notions of transformation, of different moments in the construction of the person and of alterity in general. All this is related to cosmology and knowledge (and not beliefs) about the conception and production of people, and narratives (reflections on the world) where beings and things and their relations are multiple and complex.

The author's theoretical discussion is light, perspicacious and even humorous. Although each paragraph brings no particularly new data, the theoretical treatment is new, interesting and productive.

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I see here a great stimulus for comparative studies, since many anthropologists, myself included, have plenty of data, fragments or insights into the question without knowing exactly what to do with them, largely through an absence of debate and “comparative” data. Not that we would reach the same conclusions (there is not such thing as an indigenous Amazonian society, why Amazonian?), on the contrary, in spite of the myths (just to stay within Jê-speaking societies) being variations on a single theme. But the differences between the versions have everything to do with differentiated orientations and transformations, which lead to institutional arrangements that are also different. Each case must be studied from the point of view of native knowledge and the institutions and sociality that have been constructed and transformed over time.

I have innumerable examples. Among the Xikrin, a Central Brazil Kayapo group, there is greater equilibrium between men and women: in the production of a new being, men contribute with semen and women with blood and milk. The women act more as a group or category. There is a society of women. In the myth they all transform themselves into fish when men discover the tapir, lover of all women, kill it and punish the faulty woman, introducing in her vagina the roasted and dried penis of her lover. The women have a village just for themselves and become pregnant with the wind, but sometimes they invite young men for sexual purposes. When they become unsatisfied they go away to become mixed up with “foreigners” and create the white race, which lives today in Rio, São Paulo, Brasília, etc...

In point of fact the women can enter the men’s house, wear feathered headdresses and play rattles; they hold their own festival events, their own prerogatives and are owners of their houses and objects. The women are always together, they paint each other all the time, passing *urucu*<sup>2</sup>) and oil on each others’ bodies, usually in groups of two or three. The one who does the painting is called *inikié*, my other, symmetrical, my mirror (see my article on body painting). They also remove hair lice from one another. At night they lie all over one another on the mats in the patio. The younger girls have their own association. Paternity does not lead to affiliation (except for formal friendship), and all those who have had sexual relationships with a woman contribute to the formation of the new being and must participate in

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2 achiote or annatto in English. A reddish colouring taken from the *Bixa orellana* tree. (translator’s note)

post-natal observances. These relations may be forgotten, and later revived. Women manipulate the transmission of names and ceremonial objects.

The openly affective relationship between women did not lead me to perceive homosexual practices between them, possibly due to my blindness or lack of interest in the question. Male homosexuality, however, especially among the young men of the men's house is quite open and doesn't worry anyone. Men have attitudes that we consider feminine and vice-versa, women have attitudes that seem masculine. But that does not mean that they cease to be men and women. Women without husbands or widows may be at the disposal of men of the men's house, but when they marry everything returns to "normal". Even so there is transformation: they are considered more experienced, wise and strong, and more decisive.

These are the nuances the author of this article presents so well. Women may maintain homosexual relations, or use a wooden penis, but they are married, and are considered women; things can change depending on circumstances.

The ethnography on this theme among the indigenous people of Oiapoque in the northern state of Amapá is quite different. In my article on Cobra Grande [Big Snake] I show how gender relations between snakes and their practices are related in an inverted fashion to Palikur social organization (patrilineal) and Galibi Marworno (matrifocal).

Well, I'll finish now. I hope I have shown that this instigating article leads to important reflection, that it is well structured, generous and flexible, showing that there is nothing better than good ethnography, the centre of anthropology that allows us to further our knowledge of others and of ourselves.

## References

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