TUNGARU CONJUGAL JEALOUSY AND SEXUAL MUTILATION

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Anthropologists and feminists have long been fascinated by sexual mutilation, including under this general term practices such as circumcision, subincision, clitoridectomy, infibulation, and defibulation (Morgan and Steinem 1980). But such operations should be seen as only a part of the range of practices subsumed under the term sexual mutilation. Feminists have noted that a much wider range of practices has been customarily employed to increase the sexual attractiveness of individuals, especially women, and to publicly display the wealth or status of the husband. This has included not only footbinding among the Chinese, but also ear piercing, eyebrow plucking, armpit shaving, wearing special adornment or clothing such as girdles and high-heeled shoes, cosmetic surgery, and hair curling among contemporary Western women (Dworkin 1974)--in short, all painful and disfiguring practices that are mandated by custom if a woman is to be attractive to men.

Anthropologists have considered sexual mutilations in the context of highly variable, culturally patterned definitions of beauty and sexual attractiveness, often functioning as important markers of the achievement of adult status, usually through successful performance in life-crisis rituals (van Gennep [1908] 1960; LaFontaine 1985). Feminists, on the other hand, have viewed sexual mutilations more inclusively as criminal acts that enslave women, ostensibly to a fetishistic male standard of beauty but ultimately to "describe in precise terms the relationship that an individual will have to her own body. They prescribe her mobility, spontaneity, posture, gait, the uses to which she can put her

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body. *They define precisely the dimensions of her physical freedom"* (Dworkin 1974:184-185; emphasis in original).

In this article I argue that the above conceptualizations of sexual mutilation remain inadequate. Here I suggest broadening the conceptual framework to include physical alterations designed to *reduce* the sexual attractiveness of women. By seeking a functional explanation for the use of a specific form of sexual mutilation, nose-biting among the Tungaru[1] of Micronesia, a structural cause of such mutilations as a form of domestic violence will be apparent. Examination of this extinct custom will demonstrate links with basic attitudes toward marriage, jealousy, and betrayal that influence current family life in Kiribati. The wider utility of this explanation of sexual mutilation will be explored in a cross-cultural survey of societies known to have practiced nose-biting.

Tungaru Society

Ancestors of the present population of the Republic of Kiribati settled the sixteen atolls and coral islands of the Gilbert group by A.D. 400 (Takayama 1985), and probably considerably earlier. Over the centuries they developed a distinctive social system adapted to the poor soils, limited land area, and intermittent droughts of the archipelago. The northernmost islands of the group, Makin and Butaritari, were drought free and highly productive, but moving southward the islands were progressively drier and less able to support staple crops such as taro and breadfruit. Residents of the southernmost islands were dependent almost exclusively upon pandanus and coconuts. Produce of lagoon and open ocean was usually plentiful but could become scarce in times of drought (Catala 1957) or inaccessible during rough weather, This level of environmental uncertainty led the Tungaru to adopt food storage strategies like fish farming (Catala 1957), storage of coconuts, and manufacture of pandanus preserves that keep in dried form for up to five years (A. Grimble 1933-1934). Despite these technologies and great skill in canoe building and sailing, the people found the environment harsh and uncertain, requiring constant attention to family size, resources, and political alliances in a game whose pawns were lands and women and whose principal moves were wars, marriages, and seductions. While the Tungaru may have originated in present-day Vanuatu (Blust 1984), they were in contact with their Micronesian neighbors to the north and west (Marshalls and Pohnpei) and with Polynesian societies to the south and east (Tuvalu and Samoa). This contact is reflected in elements of current language and culture in Kiribati.

Social Structure

Tungaru society centered on ambilineal extended families called *utu,* which occupied hamlets called *kainga.* Each hamlet consisted of a strip of land from lagoon to ocean beach. The kin group that occupied this estate was an independent economic and religious unit, represented in the district or island *maneaba,* meetinghouse, by the elders of the clan to which it belonged. The extended family was led by the eldest male of the oldest generation and by leaders of the warrior age-grade.

Except on the two northernmost islands (Makin and Butaritari, which had a stable, quasi-Marshallese, high chieftainship [Lambert 1966]) and the three islands of the central group (Abemama, Kuria, and Aranuka, which also had a stable dynasty of more recent vintage [Maude 1970]), factional warfare was endemic on the atolls and islands of the Gilbert archipelago. As Hainline-Underwood pointed out and Cordy has recently confirmed, a strong relationship existed between subsistence resources as measured by population density (Hainline-Underwood 1965) or population size (Cordy 1986) and the degree of social stratification that could be maintained within Micronesian polities, While the northern Gilberts were able to support up to four status levels, only on the wettest and most productive islands could stable dynasties emerge from contending factions. Instability, both ecological and political, was thus a pervasive reality for the Tungaru.

The only controls on warfare lay in the prestige of the current claimant to the high chieftainship in the northern group, and in the power of successful war leaders to hold their factions together in the southern group. Another check on warfare that existed on all islands except the two northernmost was the supernatural sanctions elders of the meetinghouse could bring to bear in enforcing a consensus judgment upon contending parties. Disputes over women or land seem to have been the primary causes of warfare, with land-hunger the ultimate motive. Traditional law provided for the payment of land or other forms of wealth in lieu of blood feud in such cases. So important was land that an offender might consent to be killed by the extended family of his victim rather than have his own extended family yield a piece of land. Or the perpetrator's extended family might decide to execute him themselves rather than pay. Included among offenses for which compensation in land or blood might be demanded were theft, murder, incest, and adultery (A. Grimble 1921; Maude [1963] 1977; Bate et al. 1979).

Although the descent system was cognatic (Goodenough 1955), recruitment of hamlet members tended to be patrilineally biased with

patrilocal postmarital residence (Maude [1963] 1977). However, a man who fell out with the members of his father's hamlet had the option of residing with the *kainga* of his maternal grandparents, adoptive grandparents, wife, or fictive siblings. Deciding where to reside usually took place at marriage, but the ambilineal nature of the kinship system and the chronic factional warfare made changes of mind a viable response to a dispute over the distribution of land, spoils of war, or women's sexual favors.

Marriage

Marriages were arranged by the leader of the hamlet for military or economic advantage. Modern informants say the most advantageous marriage was one contracted between two only children because their children could inherit all the land of four grandparents from four different families, whereas multiple siblings had to share an inheritance. The power of the hamlet leader also extended to the number of children the couple was allowed. If the family was already large or a drought was in progress, he might order a young wife to kill her infant at birth. Modern informants assert that she would always comply because of mama, "shame," and the possible *kamaraiia,* "cursing," of someone who failed to obey an elder's orders.

A woman was expected to be a virgin at marriage. This would be publicly acclaimed following deflowering on her wedding night when the groom's father's brothers smeared their faces with her blood (A. Grimble 1921). If she was found not to be a virgin she might be instantly divorced, beaten by both families, and sent home, often to be cast out or even killed by her outraged and shamed extended family. Girls of the highest status were prepared for marriage by months of residence in a darkened bleaching hut and instruction in traditional dances, many of which were extremely suggestive. Unmarried girls performed these dances in the *maneaba* wearing only short grass skirts that barely covered the genitals.[2]

Sexuality

Following marriage, a woman was expected to avoid contact with strange men. Longer skirts covered her thighs, considered a major erogenous zone. Her face was hidden in shadow beneath a poncholike cape made of woven pandanus (see Talu et al. 1979: ill. 10). She was expected to remain totally faithful to her husband except in the context

of culturally approved liaisons with her husband's classificatory brothers, *eiriki*,[3] or with his classificatory fathers, *tinaba*[4] (R. Grimble 1972; Maude [1963] 1977). It should be noted that these two types of relationships almost always took place within the extended family. They did not always involve sexual relations but, if sex was requested, modern informants state that the woman was expected to comply regardless of her personal feelings. *Tinaba* was seen as a way of doing honor to a senior member of the husband's kindred, who traditionally compensated the husband with a gift of land. According to one I-Kiribati physician, *eiriki* was seen as a way of delaying or preventing the birth of a second child or of protecting the health of mother and child during pregnancy by substituting one of her classificatory sisters in the husband's bed (but see R. Grimble 1972 for a conflicting interpretation).

Wife exchange, *te kamane kie*, and wife-swapping, *te bo kie*, could also be entered into, but only, informants hasten to point out, with the approval of a woman's husband. Nevertheless, one modern informant stated that wife-swapping was one strategy an adulterer could use to avoid jealous retribution: he would persuade his wife to comply and then go to the unwitting cuckold and ask him to swap wives. While the man to whom a woman was given in a wife exchange had to be a member of the husband's kindred, in wife-swapping he did not have to be, though it is likely he would have been a close ally or an *itaritari*, "fictive brother," of the husband.

Thus a Tungaru woman's sexuality was tightly controlled but not suppressed. In her father's hamlet a maiden was protected by the inviolability of the land to nonmembers, by her seclusion in the bleaching hut following her first menses, and by a classificatory grandmother who chaperoned her everywhere. So strong was this protection that a girl or woman encountered alone in the bush was assumed to be seeking a sexual encounter and was fair game for rape. A married woman had a wider range of sexual opportunities, but only in the context of traditional sexual courtesies between relatives and never on her own initiative. Otherwise she was expected to remain chaste and to avoid contact with strangers.

Young men were also likely to be virgins at marriage. From the age of five a boy was "set apart from his mother and sisters, forbidden the fellowship of all girls of his age, and obliged to sleep thereafter only beside boys and men" (R. Grimble 1972:73).[5] This continued during his childhood, adolescence, and years of seclusion on the ocean shore in preparation for his initiation through feats of strength and memorization of traditional lore and magic. Raving completed the trial by fire, *te kabueari*,

and the laceration of his scalp with a shark's tooth, *te ati-ni-kana,* that climaxed initiation into warrior status between the ages of twenty-five and twenty-eight, he was permitted to marry (A. Grimble 1921; Luomala 1980) and often did so immediately. He could then participate in sexual courtesies and take additional wives or chaste concubines, *tauanikai,* from among his wife's classificatory sisters. Sexual relations were also permitted outside the kin group with unmarried women called *nikiranroro.* These women, literally "the remnant of their generation," were "single women who were not virgins and married women who were not living with their husbands" (Onorio 1979:49). They were allowed to exchange their sexual favors for gifts but were not prostitutes in the Western sense.[6]

A man who seduced another man's wife, betrothed, or concubine could be killed immediately without fear of retribution from his kindred (Lundsgaarde 1968) or he might be forced to pay a land fine to the aggrieved husband and his kindred. A woman involved in an adulterous relationship was apt to be mutilated by her husband or future husband:[7] he would bite her nose off (Lundsgaarde 1968). Informants say this was intended to disfigure her *(kabainrangaki;* literally, "make despised") so she would no longer be sexually attractive.[8] The key motive for this kind of response is said to be *te koko,* "sexual jealousy," an extremely powerful emotion in Kiribati culture today and one whose power to explain violent or deviant behavior is widely invoked.

While jealousy is a natural emotion, it is not always under rational control and may become delusional or paranoid (Freud 1922). It has long been thought that control of jealousy is a prerequisite for social stability, Engels believed that "mutual toleration among the adult males, freedom from jealousy, was the first condition for the formation of those larger permanent groups in which alone animals could become men" ([1884] 1985:64-65). Among I-Kiribati, this emotion is thought to be so powerful that informants assert that a woman who continuously provoked her husband by immodest behavior would be subject to an escalating series of punishments with the full backing of custom. Should she fail to dress modestly, allow herself to be observed talking to another man, or leave the hamlet alone, he was likely to beat her. On the second offense he would beat her again, this time with her relatives cheering him on, for only by publicly supporting his actions could they avoid the shame of her immodesty. After this, if she failed to mend her ways he was likely to invite her to accompany him into the bush on the pretext of cultivating taro. Once he got her alone he would suddenly lunge forward and bite off her nose.

Discussion

Behavior now considered abusive domestic violence in Western societies was once considered appropriate in those same societies. The concept of domestic violence, therefore, refers to levels and kinds of violent behavior within the family that the society defines as inappropriate. In this sense, domestic violence in Western societies is a comparatively recent phenomenon, while in some non-Western societies it may fairly be said to be almost nonexistent. But if we set aside the personal values we attach to the term "domestic violence" and recognize the fact that many societies permit--even encourage--violence within the family under certain circumstances, it may be possible to understand why behavior that Western and other peoples have traditionally defined as abhorrent *outside* the family can be accepted *within.*

In the case of Tungaru nose-biting, sexual mutilation was a form of domestic violence that was culturally approved as a response to a woman's failure to conform to the control of her sexuality by her husband and the men of his extended family. The culture's almost universal practice of arranged marriage, including child betrothal, and the strong bias in sexual relations toward male pleasure and male control confirm modern informants' characterization of wives as the property of their husbands (see Karaiti 1975).

This sense of ownership combined with the extremely competitive struggle over land and prestige, both between and within kin groups, to produce a female role as pawns whose sexual favors could be exchanged for land and honor (through *tinaba)* or military loyalty (via wife exchange). Women's sexuality was part of the glue holding together social groups whose natural tendency, lacking powerful institutions of social control that crosscut kin lines, was fission and blood feud.[9] Loyalty to the hamlet was weaker than in unilineal societies because of the extensive options for affiliation available to individuals and the impermanence of any decision. Indeed, tales of traditional warfare are replete with women as go-betweens, mediators, betrayers, provokers, and even combatants (Batiara 1979; Pateman 1942). Given chronic factional warfare, the extreme bellicosity into which Tungaru men were socialized during the grueling initiation process, and the pervasive concern for avoiding shame, it is not surprising that the ultimate sanction--destroying attractiveness--was reserved for women who tried or seemed to be trying to control their own sexuality.[10] But it is likely that this sanction was actually inflicted rarely, the threat alone being enough to cause most Tungaru women to conform, as did most Sauk and Mesquakie women (Forsyth [c. 1826] 1912).

Nose-biting or nose-cutting has been practiced in a number of other cultures, usually as a punishment for actual adultery. Some of the societies that practiced nose-biting are the Apache (Reagan 1930), the Chevsurs (Weideger 1986), the Blackfeet (zu Wied 1976), the Mesquakie (Forsyth [c. 1826] 1912; Jones 1939) and the ancient Egyptians (Sameh 1964). In each case the intent was to destroy the woman's attractiveness in retaliation for unauthorized sexuality A number of these societies were extremely warlike, with a cult of masculinity that demanded female obedience and submission to a highly individualistic male who was vulnerable to betrayal due to the unpredictable fluctuations of military factions. The distribution of this custom can therefore be seen as part of "a widespread complex of male supremacist institutions among band and village societies" that "arose as a by-product of warfare, of the male monopoly over weapons, and of the use of sex for the nurturance of aggressive male personalities" (Harris 1977:57).

In the case of the Tungaru, the geographic distribution of chronic warfare on the one hand and stable chiefdoms and elite control on the other correspond exactly to the ability of the ecology to support social institutions that crosscut clans, as predicted by Hainline-Underwood (1965). Given the fluid nature of the social structure and the importance of women in reinforcing ties between related men, it is apparent why the Tungaru chose to control women through violence (beatings and nose-biting) or the threat of violence rather than immobilizing them as in Chinese footbinding, diminishing their sexual responsiveness through clitoridectomy or excision, or eliminating them as sexual beings through chastity belts, infibulation, or defibulation.

By controlling the notion of sexual attractiveness and a patriarchal dominance of the family that transmits these notions, men have been able to regulate sexuality as a potential source of conflict between men in societies where political unity is constantly threatened by factionalism. Sexual mutilation is then a solution to the structural problem of blood feud and shame in societies organized around the patriarchal extended family with few institutional means of avoiding blood feud. In the case of the now extinct custom of nose-biting, the threat of mutilation was used to control women's behavior since their intact sexuality was critical to male solidarity.

NOTES

1. Tungaru is the ancient name of the Gilbertese people of the present-day Republic of Kiribati, formerly the Gilbert Islands Colony (U.K.), The descriptions herein, while dependent upon the accounts of traditional culture related by modern I-Kiribati (Gilber-

tese), apply to the precontact residents of that archipelago and do not reflect the current social system unless specifically noted.

2. There is good reason to believe that before contact with Europeans, Tungaru maidens wore no clothes at all. This is evident in the illustration of the great *maneaba* at Utiroa, Tabiteuea, drawn by the artist of the Wilkes expedition in 1841 (see Wilkes 1845 or Talu et al. 1979). Stevenson reported that as recently as the 1860s "women went naked until marriage" ([1900] 1971:266)

3. *Eiriki* describes both a kinship relationship between siblings-in-law and a form of sexual courtesy in which a man had sexual access to his brothers' wives and to his wife's sisters. Likewise, a woman had sexual access to her sisters' husbands and her husband's brothers. See R. Grimble 1972 and Maude [1963]1977 for a fuller discussion.

4. *Tinaba* was a special relationship of respect, *karinerine,* between a young married woman and her husband's father's brothers. The most public manifestation of this relationship, at least on the island of Marakei, was the performance in the meetinghouse of a special dance by the young woman and the anointment of her husband's matri- or patri-uncle (see Maude [1963] 1977 for a discussion of this point) with coconut oil. The woman was expected to comply with her husband's urging to enter into this relationship for fear of shaming her husband and as a way of expressing a core value in Tungaru society, *akoi,* "kindness" (Lawrence 1977).

5. The prospect that a boy might engage in homosexual activities while sleeping in the men's house, *uma ni mane,* that was a part of each hamlet cannot be totally discounted, but no evidence is available on this. Some modern I-Kiribati engage in gender roles known as *bina aine,* "a man having ways of a woman:' or *bina mane,* "a woman with manners of a man" (Sabatier 1971:66), which involve assuming the dress, mannerisms, and modal personalities associated with the opposite sex. Whether this includes sexual relationships I was unable to determine. Other I-Kiribati clearly regard these individuals as humorous but not as threatening or deviant. These two roles appear to be of considerable antiquity, being mentioned in Bingham's 1908 dictionary, but more research is needed to clarify the place of cross-dressers in Tungaru society.

6. Nikiranroro include widowed, divorced, and older never-married women-that is, currently unmarried women--and "dishonoured girl[s]" (Sabatier 1971:276) such as those who proved not to be virgins at marriage. As Sabatier points out, distinguishing the two meanings depends upon "context and way of speaking."

7. She might also be mutilated by the jealous wife of her paramour. Murdoch (1923) describes a 4- to 6-inch "scratching weapon" called *tebutu* used by women in such fights. The Bishop Museum in Honolulu exhibits a knuckle-duster used in similar situations, consisting of a woven band mounted with two large shark's teeth. In addition, Lundsgaarde (1968) reports that the jealous wife might bite off the nose of her rival, a practice to which Stevenson ([1900] 1971:238) also seems to allude.

8. As LaFontaine (1985: 116) has pointed out, in Freudian exegesis the nose is equivalent to the phallus. Perhaps by biting off her nose the husband is symbolically castrating the adulterous wife, who has illicitly assumed the male role by taking control of her own sexuality. Or alternately, perhaps the husband is castrating the lover--biting off the symbolic equivalent of the lover's penis--and so fending off the rival's attempts to appropriate his property without provoking open warfare (I am indebted to Judith Barker for this interpretation). Since this custom is extinct it is not possible to explore emic interpretations of such acts.

9. It should also be noted that sorcery (and the fear of it) was also a pervasive instrument of social control, one that modern informants say could even counteract the most powerful military forces.

10. Even in the case of *nikiranroro,* sexuality appears to have been at least partially under the control of men, These women seem to have lived under the protection of war leaders, *toka,* or hamlet heads who, during the early contact period, traded their sexual favors for tobacco and other goods. However, the possibility that this was a distortion of Tungaru culture due to contact cannot be discounted.

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