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UNLIKELY AMAZONS: BRAZILIAN INDIGENOUS GENDER CONSTRUCTS IN A MODERN CONTEXT

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Feminist theory predicts that when traditional societies with egalitarian gender relations contact European state societies in which gender stratification exists, the traditional society will adopt the European gender construct. This rule may be modified in cases where the relations between the two types of society are modulated by interpretive processes which allow the state society to appropriate symbols of the indigenous culture for their own purposes, and the indigenous society to shape contact and change as they occur. This article describes how European contact transformed gender constructs among the Bakairí Indians of central Brazil, while accounting for the presence of an anomalous group of women who behave differently to the typical Indian woman. It explains how individual Bakairí, along with the support of key Brazilian institutions, have employed interpretively the early-contact indigenous version of the female gender role to authenticate the indigenous identity.

Keywords: Amazonian studies; Gender; Historical comparison; Indians; Cultural change

INTRODUCTION

The Amazonian warrior myth traveled across the Atlantic Ocean with European explorers who named one of the greatest rivers in the world after these women (Carneiro 2002). European culture has paradoxically enjoyed an enduring fascination with strong, independent women who are capable of leading, fighting and participating in the public arena, in spite of the fact that women in societies influenced by European culture continue to struggle for such opportunities.

Gender discourse remains a hotly contested area. Nancy Bonvillain's (2000) cogent synthesis of a wide range of ethnographical and historical data concerning the role of men and women in different kinds of societies establishes that women in most hunting-and-gathering, and some horticultural and even agricultural, societies enjoy a remarkable amount of personal autonomy, sexual freedom and opportunity for input into economic and political decision making. This generalization has been supported over the years by numerous ethnographies, such as Marjorie Shostak's (1983) classic case study of the !Kung woman, Nisa. Her independence as she organizes her personal life, makes a living for herself and her family, and interfaces with her community is striking.

However, almost without exception, when Europeans contact such societies, relatively egalitarian gender roles are transformed, and men assume greater control over production and

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access to key political positions. The imposition of state societies causes even more profound changes in gender roles. Gender stratification intensifies, roles are more rigidly defined and women are relegated to a subordinate role, restricting their lives (Etienne and Leacock 1980; Gailey 1987; Silverblatt 1988; Wolf 1982). Irene Silverblatt (1987) documents this transition in her book, *Moon, Sun, and Witches*, where she uses an historical perspective to show how concepts of gender and power changed in Inca society in response to the Spanish occupation. Although Inca women mobilized their own cultural traditions to resist total domination by the Europeans, the imported patriarchal model negatively affected these women's lives in profound ways.

This article describes what appears to be an anomalous gender case among the Bakairí Indians of Brazil. About five hundred Bakairí presently live on a reservation in Mato Grosso, inhabiting seven villages. The largest and oldest community is called Pakuera—the Bakairí word for the Paranatinga River that is located nearby (Picchi 1995). Early reports from Portuguese explorers in the 18th century suggest that at least some Bakairí had been in contact with Europeans for hundreds of years (Campos 1862; Levi-Strauss 1948; Von den Steinen 1966a, 1966b). However, about three hundred of them lived in a more isolated state (as suggested by their use of only stone tools when they were first visited) in the headwaters of the Xingú River until European explorers contacted them in the late 19th century. Within thirty years of this historic visit, the Xinguano Bakairí left the area and moved to the Paranatinga River area where they joined up with the other Bakairí who had experienced more regular contact with Brazilians. By 1918, the Brazilian government had demarcated a reservation for them.

In a relatively short time, the Xinguano Bakairí passed from a relatively isolated state into permanent contact. Their interactions with non-Indians affected all of their cultural traditions, including gender roles. Based upon the ways in which other societies resembling the Bakairí have responded to European contact, we would expect to see the emergence of gender stratification with men dominant in the economic and political spheres and women increasingly marginalized. We would also anticipate women experiencing less personal autonomy and sexual freedom as well as a reduction of influence in marriage and the family. Beginning with my baseline fieldwork in 1979, I was able to document many of the predicted changes.

However, an elderly woman and her three grown-up daughters stood out in the reservation for behaving in ways that ran contrary to the typical gender role exemplified by other Bakairí women. These unusual women were known for being assertive in contact situations with Brazilians, for assuming leadership roles in the reservation, for participating with men in the public arena and for challenging the power of important male institutions. Some of the daughters also rejected the conventional role of wife and mother that was followed by nearly all Bakairí women.

In order to understand this anomaly we must search Bakairí history for clues about how the female gender role was constructed at the time of contact, and then go on to show how it has changed. Four aspects of gender role will be considered: (1) the ability to make economic contributions, (2) presence and leadership in the public arena, (3) a significant role in religious rituals and myths, and (4) decision-making ability with regard to sex, marriage and divorce. Within this context we will examine how individual Bakairí and representatives of national institutions such as FUNAI (the National Indian Foundation) have both promoted and capitalized on cultural differences that exist between the Bakairí and the Brazilian nation state. Through the use of the interpretive perspective, we will see the ways in which different groups have defined gender construct in order to realize their own agendas. State society appropriates symbols of indigenous culture for its own purposes, and indigenous society shapes the process of change as it occurs.

METHODOLOGY

The data for this article come from two main sources: historical accounts of the Bakairí made by explorers and social scientists during the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and interviews and direct observations made during field research in the village of Pakuera that took place between 1979 and 1981, and during subsequent follow-up visits in 1989 and 1999 (Picchi 2000). As regards the historical accounts, reconstructing gender roles from materials gathered in a different era is a risky business because they are prepared by people who might not be trained social scientists or concerned with many of the questions researchers ask today. Explorers who reported on meetings with Indians like the Bakairí were mapping western Brazil and searching for specimens of material culture they could ship home to museums. These men were more interested in rivers and spears, than in ethnographic descriptions which they approached as generalists.

However, with that caveat in mind, we are fortunate that several high-quality fieldworkers made early visits to the Bakairí: Karl von den Steinen, who is widely recognized for making the first scientific account of the Bakairí, journeyed to their villages in 1884 and again in 1887–1888.[1] His accounts of his travels in central Brazil were obviously written at a time when Europeans held views of indigenous cultures that were very different from 21st-century anthropologists. Reading through his work, one finds sympathetic statements such as: "[The Bakairí] were gay, talkative, and trustful, as I observed them in their association with one another and as they acted toward me alone" (Von den Steinen 1966b: 56). Yet there are also judgmental and ethnocentric observations sprinkled throughout his text. For example, a Bakairí man he met was described as having "a stupid face and big nose", a Bakairí woman "was painted all over her body with a disgusting yellow pigment" and a 12 year-old girl had "large eyes whose sweet glance contains no coquetry at all, but in whose radiant fire . . . glowed that spark of innocent lust that must once upon a time have kindled the eternal fires of the universe. . . . Unfortunately she scratched her head too often . . ." (Von den Steinen 1966b: 169, 57–58). Nonetheless, he provided important information about the Paranatinga Bakairí, as well as the Xinguano Bakairí, who he did not think had been visited by Europeans before him

Kalervo Oberg with Fernando Altenfelder Silva visited the Bakairí in 1947 and gathered data on how the Indians lived when Von den Steinen visited them.[2] Their accounts were objectively written with few remarks about individuals and fewer philosophical discussions. While Von den Steinen's work described the adventure as well as the culture, Oberg and Altenfelder Silva approached their project in a more classically scientific manner. While the reader appreciates the clarity and conciseness in the writing of the later researchers, the invisibility of Oberg and Altenfelder Silva is striking, especially after reading Von den Steinen's books where his presence is so keenly felt.

Vicente Petrullo did fieldwork with the Bakairí in 1931 and published his results in English in 1932. Like Von den Steinen, he described his adventures in an enthusiastic style, with many comments about what he saw and thought. He traveled by truck to present-day Pakuera, which was then called the Simõe Lopes Post, where he met a government representative living near the Indians. He noted that the Bakairí lived in their own village. They "lead their own life in their own way. They are not forced to stay at the post, or in any way bound to do as the agent says . . . it is understood that they are free men and that they can do as they please" (Petrullo 1932: 128). He added that they followed many of their traditional customs, such as filing their upper teeth to a point, wearing the gee string under their European clothing and using bull-roarers in ceremonies.

Petrullo also made several observations that contradict the above statement. He wrote that the post was made up of a number of government buildings with the Bakairí village being

contained in a wire fence enclosure. He did not comment on this enclosure or speculate why it existed, so we are left wondering why it was there. Was the government agent trying to control the Indians, or protect them, or was there another reason altogether for the enclosure? Petrullo (1932: 168) also stated that the Bakairí were anxious to avoid practices that were not European, so that when he questioned a Bakairí man about his body paint, the Indian downplayed its importance and quickly wiped it off. Petrullo did not explain this anxiety, but if the first part of the century was anything like it is today in Mato Grosso, the Indians would have been sensitive to the staring and ridicule that they encounter outside of the reservation. Finally, Petrullo (1932: 128–129) describes a school where every effort was being made to teach children to read and write Portuguese and do arithmetic, something which is not usually conducive to the perpetuation of traditional customs.

Taken together, the observations of these four men span over a half of a century of history at the critical time the Bakairí were making major cultural adjustments as a result of contact with Europeans. These reports allow for my reconstruction of the early-contact role of women. I then go on to provide a more recent overview of the role of women based upon my own fieldwork. Comparative data on how gender roles changed are provided by in-depth interviews taped in 1989 with Vilinta[3] (the mother) and Doroty (her oldest daughter) as well as an interview in 1999 with one of Vilinta's sons. Direct observations made in Pakuera between 1979 and 1981, and during return field sessions in 1989 and 1999, both of Vilinta and her daughters and other Bakairí women, provide a context for analysis.

THE 1880s THROUGH 1930—EARLY-CONTACT GENDER ROLE CONSTRUCTS

Economic Contributions

With regard to gender roles and economics, Von den Steinen reported that Bakairí men and women shared responsibility for maintaining the household. Women had exclusive charge of cultivating and preparing manioc, while men cultivated tobacco. Women fetched palm nuts down from the trees and dragged them home as men hunted and fished (Von den Steinen 1966b: 214). He also noted that there was craft specialization by gender in that men manufactured canoes and basketry, and women made hammocks and fishing nets. At one point he obviously felt the need to defend why Bakairí women worked so hard because he argued that a woman "did not occupy an undignified position" insofar as, although she worked hard, "[her husband] did what she wanted" and also kept her safe (Von den Steinen 1966b: 331, 332).

Oberg confirmed much of what Von den Steinen reported about the division of labour by sex. He added, however, that both men and women organized collective enterprizes which were gender specific, and which involved social and ceremonial dimensions. For example, a man organized a group of male relatives and friends to clear a piece of land for gardening, after which there was a feast. Or a group of men collected excess goods and traveled to other villages where they traded with neighbouring men, after which they wrestled and had a feast. A comparable event for women was when an individual with a larger than usual cotton crop organized a hammock-making endeavour. She distributed the cotton among friends, received the hammocks they made from it, and then organized a feast for the women after which they danced the *yamaikuma* (Oberg 1953: 72–73, 76).

From his 1930s perspective, Petrullo (1932: 173) wrote that men's and women's roles in economics were egalitarian. In short "[they] and children helped one another in any undertaking". He echoed Von den Steinen and Oberg in the examples he provided to illustrate this, such as the men fishing while the women steered the canoes, and so on. To this he added

that both men and women were recognized for their skills. For example, Petrullo (1932: 130) noted that the Bakairí had the reputation of being the best canoeists in the region, and the women were as good at it as the men.

Presence and Leadership in the Public Arena

Presence and leadership in the public arena are important considerations in any discussion of the female role's construction. At the very beginning of Von den Steinen's visit to a Xinguano Bakairí village, he makes an important observation about women and the geography of the community. He states that he was glad that he, a guest, had been placed in the *cadueti* (also called the "flute house" or the "men's house") because women were not allowed to enter and thus he was afforded some privacy. This passage suggests that the women could move about other parts of the village freely. We will see this change in the late 20th century.

Although there was no general Bakairí leader, each village had a chief who inherited his title. He was called "*pima*", and he had an assistant who could be his son. Von den Steinen stated that chiefs did not have a lot of power, and their responsibilities concerned directing garden work and managing manioc stores. If people did not like a chief, then they moved out of the village and set up their own community or went to another village where they had kin (Von den Steinen 1966b: 330). Women could not be chief, but Von den Steinen (1966b: 58) noted that they could inherit the title and pass it on to their husbands.

Older women were allowed to exercise leadership in the public arena, and Von den Steinen referred to such women at several points in his text. When he first visited a Bakairí village, a group of seven Indians appeared with "the tribal sorceress at their head" (Von den Steinen 1966b: 162). Another time, they were trading with the Bakairí and "the tribal sorceress ran about busily; in vain she speculated on a cooking pot, which she excitedly examined from all sides; but she won a spoon, a tin plate . . ." (Von den Steinen 1966b: 159). During a second visit to a village, a chief met the expedition, but Von den Steinen (1966b: 169) added, "an old woman here too kept the tribe in order". At another point he stated that "there was as always an old woman who had a great deal to say and who. . . was the 'tribal witch"' (Von den Steinen 1966b: 57). The reason for von den Steinen's use of the terms "sorceress" and "witch" is not clear. Bakairí women could not be shamans, so they technically could not be sorceresses or witches. It is possible he used the terms as synonyms for "older woman".

With regard to presence and leadership in the public arena, Oberg, like Von den Steinen before him, discussed the *kadoeti*.[4] Contrary to Von den Steinen's account, Oberg noted that women and children were allowed inside. He did add, however, that they could not enter a second smaller house where the sacred flutes were stored, suggesting that it was the sacred artifacts rather than the *kadoeti* that was the issue (Oberg 1953: 70). He also described the Bakairí chiefs called "*pima*" whose job included ceremonial, judicial and economic responsibilities, but unlike Von den Steinen, he was silent on the question of how women influenced community events. It is possible that between Petrullo's visit in the early 1930s and Oberg's fieldwork in the late 1940s, the role of women changed to the extent that women were restricted in their ability to contribute to the public arena. Or it is possible that Oberg simply made no note of women's contributions even though they existed. We now recognize that such factors as politics, gender and research agendas affect perceptions in the field.

Petrullo (1932: 136), on the other hand, wrote that women were as outspoken as men; although he noted that the younger women kept behind the older ones, peering over their shoulders. In fact, at one point he wrote that often the women were more aggressive than the men (Petrullo 1932: 171). Headmen were male, but they were nominal leaders with their authority limited to the ceremonial aspects of village life. Petrullo explained that they were

more like counselors than leaders, stating that the women were actually the authoritative persons in the village. He confirmed what Von den Steinen discovered, that succession and inheritance could be traced through women, and although a stranger dealt with the men, "they [the Bakairí] consult their women in everything and refuse to do anything unless the women are compliant" (Petrullo 1932: 171).

Roles in Religious Rituals and Myths

The way women are incorporated into religious rituals and myths is an important dimension of their role in a society. Of interest is that Petrullo made no mention of these traditions in his monograph, whereas Von den Steinen, Oberg and Altenfelder Silva provided a number of observations.

We already know from Von den Steinen that Bakairí women could not enter the *cadueti* if flutes were inside and were excluded from ceremonies that involved these flutes. They took part in smaller ceremonies, and they also danced and sang by themselves without the men (Von den Steinen 1966b: 298). Von den Steinen (1966b: 299–305) and Altenfelder Silva (1950: 268) mentioned the men sometimes wore large masks on their faces when they danced. Von den Steinen provided many drawings of these masks and speculated on their origins. Altenfelder Silva stated that the masks represented *iamüra*, which he translated as "lords of various animals". I could find no mention made by these explorers of women owning or dancing inside of masks. We will see how this contrasts with recent times.

Women, like men, were recognized with important rites of passage. One ceremony marked puberty; another occurred during the later phase of pregnancy and at birth. In both instances, the woman entered into a state of ritual danger and was secluded in her house where she lay in her hammock. After birth, the woman's husband joined her in this state, and the two of them were secluded and observed strict diets of manioc and water—in the case of the man, until the umbilical cord dropped off (Altenfelder Silva 1950: 334–335). When the woman's birth seclusion terminated, there was a festival at which the village women danced.

Oberg confirmed that both men and women passed through puberty rituals and described how boys go through the ear-piercing ceremony, called "*ransegero*", while *g*irls celebrate the onset of menses. Following these events, the young people go into seclusion (*posegeiro*), during which they cannot see the light of day. They are fed and cared for by relatives and spend their time doing crafts (Oberg 1953: 74). Altenfelder Silva explained that this was a time of ritual danger called "*wanki*", and seclusion was employed as a defense against it. The feast of *tadaunuto* marked the end of seclusion for young people (Altenfelder Silva 1950: 270). Oberg and Altenfelder Silva also described another period of *wanki*. This was at birth, after which the mother and infant went into seclusion until the woman's menstrual cycle resumed. A ceremony called the "*itabienli*"—at which the village women danced—marked the mother's and infant's re-incorporation into the village (Altenfelder Silva 1950: 263; Oberg 1953: 74). Of interest is that neither Oberg nor Altenfelder mentioned the husband's participation in birth seclusion or in observing food taboos.

Women's treatment in myths is another way to understand how their roles are constructed in a society. Von den Steinen reviewed the Keri and Kame myths that described the adventures of twin Bakairí culture heroes. He noted that everything the two undertook that was in the best interests of the Bakairí could be traced back to the advice of a woman called Aunt Ewaki who also served as mother. It was she who pointed out the ways and the means to Keri and Kame. Von den Steinen (1966b: 219) said that this proved that the men did not see the women as "stupid work animals". Women transmitted the myths from generation to generation, and it was from their mothers that men learned to recite them (Von den Steinen 1966b: 365).

With regard to mythology, Oberg (1953: 77–81) recounted the myths about Keri and Kame. Some pertinent details include the fact that the Bakairí have always existed but that women have not—they were created by Kamuschini who was of another people. He created them to appease Oka, a jaguar who threatened him. Oka accepted two women from Kamuschini, but one died and the other was killed by Oka's mother. This second woman had already conceived Keri and Kame after eating two Bakairí finger bones she found in Oka's home. Later the culture heroes took on human forms, and with the help of Aunt Ewaki, who belonged to the Bakairí people, they accomplish many important things, such as getting the sun and the moon from the vulture and taking fire from the fox. In his discussion of religion, Oberg did not confirm Von den Steinen's observations that men learned myths from women and that women passed them down to their daughters.

Decision-making ability About Personal Lives

Women's autonomy and power in sexual matters and marriage, and in the home, are important to an understanding of the female role in society. Von den Steinen did not make any explicit references to sex, although he asked about adultery and said he received no answer. Most Bakairí marriages during that time were monogamous, although polygyny existed. He recorded that marriage ceremonies were simple and that, although men could marry into other tribes, there was no evidence that Bakairí women could do the same. He observed that this was because of the "matriarchal organization" of the group, "matriarchal" because sons belonged to the tribe of their mothers.

Other evidence of the importance of a woman's role in the home included a future husband staying with the bride-to-be's family and helping the father-in-law. Initial uxorilocal residence allowed for a wife and her mother to work together in the household while restraint and name avoidance between the husband's mother and the wife act against virilocal residence. The importance of the role of mother's brother's functioned in a similar way. If the father died, the mother's brother, rather than the father's family, assumed responsibility for the children and family property. With regard to divorce, a woman could divorce a man even if the man did not want the separation. An informant explained that "the woman leaves; perhaps he will catch her again" (Von den Steinen 1966b: 331–332).

Oberg discussed marriage (*todohokuinle*), noting that the boy's family usually made the first move, bringing gifts to the girl's family. The girl's family could turn down the gifts, thereby indicating that the suitor was unacceptable. However, if they accepted the gifts, the ceremony took place at the girl's home. Cross-cousin marriage was common, but not preferred. The Bakairí at that time lived in large communal houses, and often marriage was between two young people living in the same house. In such a case, the new couple took over a section in the house as their own. Oberg stated that the father and the father's brother were highly respected, and the mother's brother and sister were also respected, albeit implying that they were less so. In an interesting deviation from Von den Steinen's account, Oberg (1953: 74) noted there was no mother-in-law avoidance on the part of the wife.

Like Von den Steinen, Petrullo did not explicitly mention sexuality and autonomy. With regard to marriage, he agreed that the Bakairí were usually monogamous, although there were some polygynous unions. He noted that there seemed to be little jealousy as the two wives tended to get on like mother and daughter. Spouses seemed to be about the same age, although Petrullo (1932: 171) observed that the Bakairí were an exception when compared to other Indians in the area insofar as the young men sometimes married "much older women". A woman did have a say in whether or not she wanted to marry a man: she had the choice of signaling to a man that she was interested so that he could come to her house and hang his hammock under hers. On the following day, if she accepted his proposal, she hung

her hammock below his, and they were considered married. Following the union, the husband lived with the girl's parents until they were ready to build a house for themselves (Petrullo 1932: 171). After the birth of a child, both men and women participated in the child's education (Petrullo 1932: 171–173).

THE 1980s AND 1990s—MODERN GENDER ROLE CONSTRUCTS

When I began fieldwork with the Bakairí in 1979 I was first struck by the remarkable resiliency of many aspects of the gender construct. However, it became clear very quickly that significant changes had occurred.

Economic Contributions

I examined the division of labour by sex and found that women's contributions to the household economy in the form of harvesting crops and preparing food continued as Von den Steinen, Oberg and Petrullo had described them. However, the importance of such products as garden harvests was minimized as the Indians were exposed to metal tools and other goods money could secure for them. The penetration of the cash economy into the reservation led to small parties of Bakairí leaving the reservation each year for several weeks to work for wages. However, because the ranches in the area tended to hire men to provide unskilled agricultural labour and because FUNAI officials discouraged women from leaving the reservation, it was the men who earned the money, which gave them an enormous advantage over women.

Men, and not women, also acquired skills that allowed them access to means of production that were previously non-existent. Driving and handling machinery were the purview of men who learned these skills from FUNAI agents and/or ranchers in the region. By learning to drive tractors and trucks, they parlayed these skills into wage-earning activities. Men also learned to ride horses and to care for cattle herds, the ownership of which were transferred in the 1980s to indigenous extended families. This new source of wealth was guarded carefully by heads of large families, who did not want to have to distribute cattle to needy kin or villagers, as would be required by traditional leveling mechanisms. For this reason, they hid the herds some distance from the village, and men rode horses or bikes out to the grazing fields. Women did not know how to use either of these modes of transportation, and thus remained on the periphery of this new economic venture.

Presence and Leadership in the Public Arena

With regard to presence and leadership in the public arena, Von den Steinen and Petrullo agreed that women played important roles in community decision making. Whether discussing how outspoken they were or the ways in which men consulted them before acting, the role of women clearly included participation in politics.

By the late 1970s, when I entered the reservation, Bakairí women were excluded from at least three formal political apparatuses: the *cadueti*, the headman's council and the FUNAI agent's headquarters located just outside the village of Pakuera. With regard to the *cadueti*, it was the one edifice in Pakuera that retained the traditional elliptical shape of the long houses used in the Xingú culture area. Women were not allowed inside it, nor did they approach the bench outside of it to participate in informal meetings of men. It goes without saying that they were also unable to orate in the traditional way in the plaza in front of the *cadueti*. Women were also not allowed to sit inside the square, palm-covered structure

appended to the headman's home or to discuss the more formal matters that were introduced by the headman as he sought advice from household heads. Although women could approach the FUNAI agent in his quarters/office and share concerns, the agent normally interacted with the men.

Part of the problem was that few women spoke Portuguese. The vast majority of them married about the age of 15, and then spent their lives raising children, caring for their homes, harvesting crops in gardens made by their husbands and male kin, preparing food, carrying water and washing clothes in the river. Unlike men, they lacked the opportunity to study outside the reservation at religious boarding schools or to travel frequently by truck around the region, having what Michelle Rosaldo (1980) called "adventures" that could be converted into prestige and power in home communities. In fact, during the time that I gathered baseline data, the resident FUNAI agent made a public effort to make sure that every adult woman traveled outside the reservation at least once so that they would be better informed about what the agent saw as their country, Brazil. At that time, many of the women had never left the reservation, while all of the men had already done so.

Roles in Religious Rituals and Myths

With regard to the *cadueti*, Bakairí women continued to be forbidden from entering this ritual and political centre of the community unless the sacred objects were stored elsewhere. However, the community was organized into gender-specific areas to a greater extent than the early records indicated. Women avoided the central plaza and soccer areas, confining their activities to the back yards and paths around the village. Even when important community events took place, the women stood back from the edge of the plaza.

Recently, this concept of "gendered space" penetrated even the household. The Bakairí traditionally lived in long houses that were elliptically shaped. Clusters of hammocks hung around fires marked nuclear family groupings. There were no formal private and public areas marked. Seclusion areas could be considered private islands; however, they were temporary and ritual in nature. For example, if a young man was in seclusion for a puberty ritual, a ritual area was screened off, but the divider was torn down when the seclusion period was over. This contrasted with the more recent genderization of space. By the late 1990s, the Bakairí lived in square wattle-and-daub houses that resembled rural Brazilian homes. Frequently, families built kitchen structures in the back of the house and added on other edifices over time. These back-yard buildings became the women's area, while the front rooms of the house, and the front of the house itself where a bench stood, were the men's domain. If people, especially Brazilians, visited, the women quickly moved into the back rooms out of the sight of the strangers and did not come out until the visitors left. If coffee was offered to the visitor, a child served it.

Ritual masks were one of the first things I saw in Pakuera. The large stately masks chanted and danced down the village paths each evening for much of the dry season. This was consistent with what Von den Steinen and Altenfelder Silva reported. I was perplexed, however, to discover from my informants that the masks belonged to the women and were passed down from mother to daughter. Although the men learned the chants and performed them inside the masks, it was the women who owned them. I could find no mention of this fact in Von den Steinen, Oberg, Altenfelder Silva or Petrullo.

As in the past, both young men and women passed through puberty rituals. Boys had their ears pierced with the bone of an emu when they were in their late teens. When a girl experienced her first period, she went into seclusion for about a month, lying in her hammock hardly eating anything. Older women came and scraped her body when she was allowed to get up. Then they rubbed a sweet-smelling salve from the piqui plant on her skin. During

subsequent periods, women stayed indoors as much as possible, and they and their husbands observed food and sex taboos.

Birth seclusion continued to be observed. For about three to six months after birth, the mother remained indoors with her infant, not even being allowed to go to the river to bathe. Her relatives brought her water that she used to sponge off indoors. She and her husband also observed strict food taboos until the umbilical cord fell off. However, unlike in the days of Von den Steinen, the father was not required to stay in seclusion with his wife and new baby.

Another change in gender roles and religion concerned the ceremonies that accompanied men and women rejoining the community following a period of *wanki*, ritual vulnerability, when individuals go into seclusion. In the past, the feast of *tadaunuto* marked the release from seclusion for young people following puberty rituals, and the *itabienli* ceremony celebrated the mother's and infant's re-incorporation into the village. I saw no evidence of either of these ceremonies.

Mortuary practices involved the husband of a daughter of the dead person, or a similar relative, unless he had an infant who might be endangered by the dead person's spirit. About six months of *wanki* seclusion and fasting follow. Then, if the person who died was a man, the male villagers beat the walls of the house to chase away the dead person's spirit, and if the dead person was a woman, the female villagers did the same.

Decision-making Ability about Personal Lives

Traditions surrounding marriage continue to allow women a significant say in their relationships with men and in how they live their lives after marriage. However, some changes were apparent in that there seemed to be more flexibility in interpreting traditions and in allowing for exceptions. Men were still expected to do bride service to the father of their future bride, but some successfully avoided it. A young man still brought his hammock to the girl's house and hung it near hers, expecting to remain for a year or more. Yet sometimes the girl joined the young man in his house and lived there.

Relations between a woman and her mother-in-law were formal, and name taboos between the women contributed to the reserve that existed between them. The mother-in-law addresses the girl only by her kin term (*iwese*) and the girl rarely if ever addresses the older woman. The pressure on girl to be with her mother is strong even after a year. In a household where I lived for a while, a young wife interacted in a subdued way with her mother-in-law, helping her with the daily chores, but any time the husband went off, the girl hurried down the lane to visit with her mother until he returned.

With regard to identity, while Von den Steinen clearly classified the Bakairí as being matrilineal in that sons belonged to the mother's family, the Bakairí in the 1980s and 1990s gave conflicting responses to this question. In my conversations with various heads of households, I heard evidence of equivocation. Possibly as a result of their interactions with a decidedly patrilineal and patriarchal Brazilian culture, many said that the man was really the head of the family, but others said the woman's family was more important.

Relations between husbands and wives varied. In some cases there was domestic violence, and both men and women were the aggressors. Drinking alcohol was considered the cause of violence on the part of men, and women usually attacked men over extramarital affairs. However, the tendency toward uxorilocal residence allowed women to be protected by their kin from chronically abusive situations.

With regard to sexuality, both girls and boys typically began having sexual relations at an early age and were expected to have many sex partners before they married. Women were allowed to choose their own sex partners, and they could be involved sexually with more than

one person at a time. Extramarital sex occurred frequently, although, as noted above, these affairs could lead to quarrels and confrontations. In the course of a lifetime, men and women still shared the burden of observing sex taboos. During pregnancy, and for one to two years after birth, the couple was not allowed to have intercourse. If they did, it was believed that the child would not develop properly.

As was consistent with Von den Steinen's observations, women could terminate a marriage if they so desired even if the man did not agree. In one stormy divorce that I witnessed, a wife threw all of her husband's belongings out in the path and slammed the door. He did not return to their home. In another case I heard about the following morning, a woman left with her two youngest children in the dark of night and moved back in with her mother. The husband subsequently attempted to negotiate her return and even approached the FUNAI agent to plead his case, but he was not able to win her back.

While many aspects of marriage and husband/wife relations remained unchanged and women exercized power over their personal relations, by the 1980s and 1990s it became increasingly apparent that some Bakairí men were attempting to curtail the sexual activities of the women in very public ways. Although bantering and teasing about sex were part of village life, the most recent jibes were different in that they referred to women as prostitutes and as having flawed characters. The entire concept of prostitution was foreign to such people as the Bakairí who did not perceive of sex as a commodity that could be bought and sold on the market. Such remarks sent a qualitatively different kind of message to the women in the village.

Another example was that the men composed critical chants for the ritual masks to sing in front of specific women's houses. Chants typically addressed issues that were circulating in the community—a kind of commentary on village life. Generally the comments were mild. However, during one holiday, they became more acerbic. The Bakairí had invited nearby ranchers and their workers to visit the reservation, play a game of soccer and enjoy a barbecue. A group of Brazilians accepted the Bakairí invitation and traveled to Pakuera. By the end of the day, the Bakairí men were incensed with the behaviour of some of the women, who they accused of flirting with the Brazilians. For weeks afterwards, the masks censored these women by singing pointedly critical songs in front of their houses.

VILINTA AND HER DAUGHTERS: BAKAIRÍ AMAZONS?

Between the 1880s and the 1980s, Bakairí gender constructs changed, and these alterations affected the role that women fulfilled. In particular, the political and economic aspects of the constructs altered, diminishing women's contributions to the household economy and to village politics. Against this backdrop, Vilinta and her daughters stood out as exceptions.

I first met Vilinta in 1979. Born in 1938, she was a friendly woman who, unlike many of the other Bakairí women, spoke Portuguese fluently. I frequently visited her in her home where she lived with her husband, Carlos, and a number of children. Later, when I completed my first census, I discovered that Vilinta had six children, three of whom lived outside the reservation.[5] I interacted mainly with Vilinta and her third daughter, Maisa, in the late 1970s and early 1980s; with Vilinta and her oldest daughter, Doroty, in 1989; and with Vilinta and her older son, Estevão, in 1999.[6] Each of these individuals was notable, but they shared some common features. All spoke Portuguese very well and knew how to read and write. They were hard working and openly ambitious in their approach to life. They balanced living outside of the reservation for long periods of time with returning for long stays with the extended family.[7] They earned wages, generally working for FUNAI in a variety of capacities. For example, Darlene, who lived in Cuiabá (the capital of Mato Grosso) when I

first met her, worked in the FUNAI shop where indigenous artifacts were sold. Doroty worked in a number of jobs, including ones in the large metropolitan areas of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

With regard to adopting the role of spouse and parent, Vilinta's children made a number of different choices. Some, like Maisa, married Bakairí spouses, while Estevão married a Brazilian schoolteacher. Some rejected the conventional role of wife and mother followed by nearly all Bakairí women. For example, Doroty and Darlene had not married as of 1999. In 1999, I heard that Andrea (Vilinta's youngest daughter) and Isabel (Doroty's daughter) were living in Cuiaba and Brasilia respectively, but I did not hear if they were married.

Although these characteristics served to distinguish Vilinta and her family from others in the reservation, she and her daughters (Doroty and Maisa in particular) were quite extraordinary when compared to the typical Bakairí woman described thus far in this article. They were known for being assertive in contact situations with Brazilians. For example, I once flew into the reservation using a local missionary plane. A Brazilian minister came along for the ride and spent an hour walking around before he and the pilot returned to Cuiaba. Maisa, with her daughter on her hip, immediately came over, introduced herself to the minister, and spent the hours walking and chatting with him and the pilot. This was in marked contrast to the other Bakairí women who shyly stood back from the visitors or peeked out of doors and windows as they walked by, and even in contrast to most of the men who tended to be reticent with Brazilians. Another time during field research, two Brazilians walked into the reservation. Doroty met and greeted the men, and then organized a large community meeting in the plaza at which she introduced the visitors to the villagers.

Vilinta and her daughters assumed many different kinds of leadership roles in the reservation. Maisa seemingly took a more traditional route in that she became a schoolteacher at Pakuera. However, her choice to participate in this initiative was courageous because she was part of the first generation of Bakairí teachers who took over from the Brazilian teachers who had run the reservation school since the 1950s. This first group of indigenous teachers was evaluated by FUNAI agents who were unsure whether the experiment would work and criticized by other Bakairí as a result of intra-village political infighting. I might also add that Maisa was at a considerable disadvantage when compared to the Bakairi men who participated in the initiative in that she had not been educated outside the reservation, while the men had attended religious boarding schools.

Another example concerns public speaking in the village. Bakairí women usually do not feel comfortable speaking publicly, and traditional oration is left to the men who speak from the central plaza. Yet I saw Vilinta speak publicly before the men in the plaza in front of the *cadueti*. However, it was Doroty who astounded everyone when she became the Bakairí FUNAI agent in 1986 and successfully managed seven villages for about ten years. I toured the reservation with her in 1989 and was able to interview her extensively about the job and her plans for her people. She dealt with many difficult and potentially violent cases including ongoing border disputes between nearby Brazilians and the Bakairí, a small-scale invasion by impoverished Brazilians seeking land and the Bakairí's violent reaction to professional fishermen using their rivers. When she gave up the job, she went to Cuiaba to work for FUNAI's Department of Education.

Vilinta and her daughters even went so far as to challenge the power of such male-based institutions as the *cadueti*. When Doroty became FUNAI agent of Pakuera, Vilinta, with her daughter's help, spearheaded a controversial initiative to take over the *cadueti* and make it into a Bakairí museum. Vilinta's rationale for this was that the younger generation of Bakairí was losing its sense of indigenous identity. She introduced the idea of a cultural repository into the community and, at the same time, hoped to encourage outsiders to visit the museum and learn about Bakairí culture.

In the museum, Vilinta and Doroty hung photographs and posters of the village and exhibited examples of indigenous artifacts. They also purchased a tape recorder with which Vilinta recorded Bakairí mask chants and songs that were played on special occasions when the reservation generator functioned. At one point, Vilinta said in an interview that she would like to see a kind of Bakairí cottage industry producing a variety of indigenous goods that could be sold in the museum.

All members of the community were allowed inside the museum, including women and children. Sacred ritual objects were sequestered from view, so this development was in a sense consistent with historical uses of the structure. Nonetheless, the redefinition of the *cadueti* constituted a break with recent trends. Although as early as 1947 Oberg recorded what he called the "*kadoeti*" being open to women, this traditional constructed edifice had been exclusively the domain of men since at least the 1970s when I first visited the reservation. Guarded by the threat of gang rape[8] of any woman who entered it, the *cadueti* had been imbued with patriarchal meaning. The exclusion of women, which at one time had been part of a complementary interlocking system between the two sexes, reflected the emergence of gender stratification. It was this symbol that Vilinta and Doroty appropriated.

DISCUSSION

How do we account for this anomalous group of women who have, with at least temporary success, countered historical trends in the evolution of gender constructs? Three factors have made this possible: (1) a cultural tradition which supports egalitarian gender relations; (2) individuals in the Bakairí community and in Brazilian institutions who are aware of these traditions; and (3) an environment in which there is recognition of the economic and/or cultural value of being indigenous.

Von den Steinen, Oberg, and Petrullo described late 19th-early 20th-century gender relations among the Bakairí as egalitarian when compared to European culture. With regard to economics, men and women worked together to maintain the household, each making important contributions. Von den Steinen and Petrullo (less so Oberg) provided information about women's presence and leadership in the public arena. Von den Steinen's tribal "sorceresses" led groups of Indians to meet with the Europeans and managed the communities to the extent that he commented on their organizational skills. Petrullo described women who were aggressive and stressed the importance of men consulting with them when making a decision.

With regard to rituals, men and women occupied positions of parity in that they both were required to pass through important puberty and birth rituals during which time they were spiritually vulnerable. Von den Steinen reported that Bakairí myths were passed down through the woman's side of the family and Oberg recorded a story in which a woman bore Kere and Kame, two culture heroes who eventually took on human forms and accomplished feats that benefited the Bakairí. Ritual masks were apparently owned by women but men performed inside of them. Marriage among the Bakairí required the consent of the woman, and a number of traditions aided her in establishing a cooperative, rather than a subordinate, relationship with her husband.

Many Bakairí were aware of the cultural traditions that were brought from the Xingú River headwaters. My 1980 census indicated that at least a handful of elders who remembered actually moving from the Xingú area to the Paranatinga region were still alive, and their children were community leaders in their 50s and 60s. Vilinta was born seven years after Petrullo's visit, during which time he said that the Bakairí continued to practice many of their

indigenous customs. She was nine when Oberg and Altenfelder Silva's expedition came through the reservation, and we have seen that they were able to extensively document what the culture had been like in the 1880s when Von den Steinen explored the region. She was raised in a community in which oral traditions kept the past alive, and she attempted to raise her children with knowledge of and respect for the Bakairí culture. Her efforts to begin a museum that would serve to educate Bakairí young people reflected the seriousness with which she dedicated herself to her mission.

Vilinta was supported by her children in her efforts and by many of the FUNAI agents who preceded Doroty. Even Petrullo observed as far back as 1931 that the government agent in place at that time said the Indians should lead their lives in their own way. This cultural relativistic position permeated FUNAI and SPI (Indian Protection Service), the organization that preceded it. Although these sometimes promoted economic development, as happened in the 1970s and early 1980s in the Bakairí reservation, the underlying premize of respect for indigenous cultures remained intact (Picchi 1991).

Over and above this general approach to Indian affairs, the Bakairí benefited from the presence of a FUNAI agent who was a highly respected Indianist. Idevar Sardinha spent a lifetime working in the field with various Indian tribes, and he was FUNAI's field agent in the Bakairí reservation during the 1970s. In the late 1990s he agreed to be promoted into administration and became the regional director for FUNAI. Sardinha had an unusual sympathy for indigenous causes, and the Bakairí viewed him as a friend and ally. He was also informed about their culture in that he was associated with the Mato Grosso Indian Museum in Cuiabá where he found employment when not working for FUNAI.

The final component of this model concerns an environment in which there is recognition of the value of being Indian. This recognition provides the impetus for both the Indians and the representatives of the non-Indian world to interpret and appropriate the traditional gender construct. With regard to indigenous awareness of how the outside world perceives them, Michael Brown (1993), Beth Conklin and Laura Graham (1995), and Jean Jackson (1991) have written about the sophisticated and acutely insightful way in which Brazilian Indians manipulate the media and political scene for their own purposes. Brown calls our attention to the way many Indian leaders travel outside their territories, meeting with politicians and journalists to discuss indigenous economic and political agendas. Conklin and Graham write about Amazonian Indians allowing themselves to be temporarily adopted by First World environmentalists and rock stars to symbolize such values as the natural world. Jackson documents how Indians evaluate which cultural traits are favoured by non-Indians, showing that they consciously shed practices non-Indians dislike and retain and even emphasize ones that are considered desirable by outsiders.

Savvy Bakairí Indians such as Vilinta and her children are in the middle of repackaging themselves in a modern national context. Although their long-term goal may be survival on their own terms, they are presently trying to construct a cultural identity they can parlay into economic and political power. Interpreting the female gender construct in a way consistent with early-contact descriptions authenticates their "Indianness". It readily contrasts with Brazilian culture, especially in the rural areas where its patriarchal dimensions are highly visible, and it does so in a non-threatening and non-controversial way when compared to such practices as overt infanticide and inter-village raiding which the Bakairí abandoned in the recent past, or when compared to cannibalism which was practiced by other Brazilian Indians until the 1950s.

It is not only individual Bakairí who have laid claim to early versions of women's roles. Representatives of national institutions such as FUNAI have also promoted and capitalized upon the cultural differences that exist between the Bakairí and the Brazilian nation-state. Greg Urban and Joel Sherzer (1991) explain the nation-state's interest in such phenomena in

terms of two distinct processes that they believe tend to preserve aspects of indigenous culture within nation-states. The first is called "exoticization", through which both the Bakairí and the nation-state appropriate symbols of exotic Indians and convert them into the means for achieving economic and political goals. The other process, referred to as "folklorization", is the relocation of native customs in mainstream culture under the sponsorship of the state. By encouraging groups such as the Bakairí to celebrate cultural differences, the state usurps indigenous symbols and uses them to distinguish itself from other countries, such as Portugal, its colonial parent.[9]

Examples of what these two parallel processes look like might include the UNESCO folk dance tour of Europe that a FUNAI agent and several Bakairí men took in the 1990s. During the tour they performed their ritual dances on stage. Another example concerned how FUNAI in the Mato Grosso area experimented with the concept of allowing tourists to visit indigenous reservations. Ecotourism in the western part of Brazil was a burgeoning industry as European and North American tourists discovered the beautiful wilderness of places like the Pantanal, the largest wetland in the world. Safari-type trips by jeep through this area, with night stops in a wide range of rustic-to-luxury ranches, were available. The addition of a stop in a "real" Indian reservation with a shop where one can purchase Indian artifacts was a plan that Vilinta talked about in a 1989 interview with me, and her son, Estevão, revisited the idea when I interviewed him ten years later.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

One can look at Vilinta, Doroty and others like them through the prism of the mythical metaphor of "unlikely Amazons". They are "unlikely" to be Amazons because these women live on an obscure reservation on the western frontier of a nation-state that is considered to be a less developed country. In terms of power as we understand it, there are few in this world who possess less power than these women. Whatever gender roles were like when Europeans contacted the Bakairí, however egalitarian was their nature, their construction has been irreparably altered. And women did not benefit from the changes. Yet, paradoxically, these individuals loom before us, resembling the Amazonian warriors early explorers imagined they saw on the banks of a huge river. Daring to lead, to engage in conflict and to refuse to settle for the bare minimum they have been relegated by history, they energetically work to make their cultural identity known and respected to outsiders, even as they hope to realise personal goals of wealth and power.

One last question remains. How do we account for certain Bakairí women acting differently to other women in their society? Vilinta and her daughters have chosen roles that contrast with those opted for by others in the reservation. One way we can explain this is in terms of factors that have affected specific communities. While contact with non-Indians over the course of over a hundred years has set in motion the dynamics of change, different communities have responded to these in divergent ways. As Fisher (2000: 12, 15) notes, general cultural studies are limited because they do not reflect the complexities of indigenous life, nor do they reveal how some individuals derive more benefits than others from social organizational features.

Yet perhaps even more significant is that the human actors who inhabit the indigenous landscape confront the reality of day-to-day life, with all its problems and opportunities, in radically different ways. Rosenbaum (1993) and Tice (1995) have documented similar cases in Mayan society and among the Kuna Indians of Panama. They show that, although women may end up working harder and having less power in state societies, the issues are

complex and cannot be reduced to simple cause-and-effect statements. Human agency, or the involvement of individuals in the construction of their own social history, always plays a role.

Notes

1. Von den Steinen published his work in 1886 and 1894. His books were translated from German into Portuguese in 1940 and 1942, and into English in 1966 for the Human Relations Area File at Yale University. I depended upon both the Portuguese and English translations in this article, but cite the English versions.
2. Oberg published his findings in English in 1948 and 1953, and Altenfelder Silva published his work in Portuguese in 1950. Altenfelder Silva's article was translated into English by the Human Relations Area File at Yale University.
3. Portuguese rather than Bakairí names are used in this article.
4. The various authors used different transcriptions for the same Bakairí word. I quote them precisely.
5. Vilinta's oldest girl, named Doroty, was then about 20 years old; her 3 year-old daughter, who was cared for by Vilinta, was named Isabel; Darlene was 19; Maisa was 18; and Andrea, Vilinta's youngest daughter, was 5. There were two sons named Estevão, who was 17, and Edson, who was 15. Doroty, Darlene and Estevão lived outside the reservation in the later 1970s and early 1980s.
6. In 1999 I discovered that Edson, the younger son, had drowned in the Paranatinga River while bathing.
7. Darlene was the exception to the rule in that she rarely returned to the reservation.
8. The threat of gang rape was openly discussed, but no one could remember when this sanction had been last applied.
9. I will add here that it distinguishes it from countries such as the United States because, while North America was inhabited by indigenous people when Europeans first settled there, a massive number of deaths amounting to a genocide shattered this population (Bodley 1994). Although a few peoples, such as the Dine and the Navajo, continue to lead lives culturally distinct from mainstream American culture, they are exceptions. The Brazilians are acutely aware that within their national borders indigenous cultures continue to endure, and they believe that this contrasts in a positive way when compared to the United States. It is one thing they have done "right" when compared to the superpower that lies north of them.

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