

Women Among the Kuikúro—

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This article systematizes scattered ethnographic observations on women, womanhood, sexes, and sexuality among the Kuikúro, a Karib people from the Alto Xingu, recorded on the fringes of another study of a different nature, with different objectives¹. The Alto Xingu region, located in the State of Mato Grosso, constitutes an ecological, political, and cultural unit, the result of a long history of migrations and adjustments by various indigenous peoples who ended up forming an intertribal and multilingual society, sharing many elements of social organization and cosmology. Living side by side in the Alto Xingu are Karib,

¹ My research was and is of a linguistic nature and the objective of the field work, carried out over the course of a year and a half, was to document, describe, and analyze the Kuikúro language, one of the variants of Alto Xingu Karib. My PhD thesis was an ethno-linguistic study proper, where in addition to structure I consider values and uses of the language in the social and cultural context. This research would not have been possible without the support of the Program for Graduate Studies in Social Anthropology at the *Museu Nacional/UFRJ*, the Brazilian National Research Council (CNPq), and the Ford Foundation. I continue with the Kuikúro today and I continue to learn with and about them and the peoples of the Alto Xingu. I thank Vanessa Lea for the invitation to participate in the Working Group she coordinated on gender in lowland South American indigenous societies at the 19th Meeting of the Brazilian Anthropology Association (*Universidade Federal Fluminense*, Rio de Janeiro, March 1994), where I presented a preliminary version of the data and ideas contained in this article and where I had the opportunity to hear criticism and suggestions. I also thank Cecília McCallum and Carlos Fausto for their contributions.

Aruak, and Tupi language groups; while coexisting in a dense relational network of exchange, the various villages still maintain their respective territorial, political, linguistic, and cultural identities.

The reader will find a story told in a literary and personal rather than academic style, stitching together fragments from various sources: excerpts from my field diary, drawings, narratives, songs, conversations. My narrative sequence is a rather isomorphic tracing of my working and living experience as it unfolded in an indigenous village of some three hundred inhabitants, from 1976 to 1982. Along the way, I gradually lost my initial feeling of oddness as both a foreigner and a woman. An initially androgynous being ended up being drawn into a female identity constructed in the contradictory space between a woman *on this side* and another woman that was feeling her way around *on that side*. Once there, my need for emotional survival drove me into an apparently archaic feminization, together with a refusal of or reaction towards a woman being who (once again apparently) crudely revealed what we on this side identify as marginalization, inferiorization - a suffering condition. Finally, I discovered the village women themselves, once having achieved a basic command of their language, through conversations and my labor at understanding words, expressions, narratives, songs - in short, my discovery of a women's collective and its power. Beyond the desire to share a woman's singular experience in the specific context of an indigenous society, this essay adds ethnographic and reflective elements to an anthropological discussion of genders, the result of an increasingly sophisticated literature abounding in recent years. I thus

suggest (by way of conclusion) what one might call an alternative reading of the mythical/ritual complex of the Jamurikumáú, the Hyper-Women, seen as the female "voice" - that of the Kuikúro women - expounding on the theme of difference, hierarchy, and complementarity between the sexes.

Among the men, observing the women

The first phase of my living experience in the Kuikúro village was marked by solitude and the harsh feeling of being outside the fringes of a society in which I was absolutely foreign and strange. The Kuikúro placed me in the surreal position of an androgynous being. At night, certain dreams from my adolescence would reappear, fantasies of androgyny and hermaphroditism. Distant from the women, who eyed me with distrust, since they did not speak my language nor theirs, I was stuck among the men, under their control because of the goods, objects, "gifts" that I possessed and was expected to distribute or cede little by little. Distant, distrusting women and nearby distrusting men defined my ambiguous, ridiculous, frightening identity.

A solitary individual like the "owners of spells", I had a woman's visible and obvious bodily traits, yet they were covered, disguised by clothing. I had male traits, manifestations of some power emanating from the world of whites, and traits of incomplete, mutilated femaleness: *ahagy*², **an old woman** according to the system of age categories and the fact that I had no children; married but without a husband; alone, sterile, exiled. To the women I was a pseudo-woman beyond reach from the other side of a borderline. To the men I was a pseudo-woman, rather disgusting for not being a full woman, rather desirable for having something female inscribed in my body; they accepted me among them, in

their territory, while never failing to constantly re-situate me on the fringes of womanhood. Thus, I could traverse and occupy some male spaces that were forbidden to the women: the pathways on the central village grounds and the *kwakútu*, the central house of the male collective, where the men meet, tell stories and histories, rest far removed from the family and domestic domain, and where they prepare for and develop "feasts", sacred and profane rituals. I moved about equally among the domestic areas of the houses, the huge Xingu houses arranged in a circle around the vast central plaza; not having my own space. I could enter all of them, both free and lacking a center, with no reference except my own little nook, a hammock, a sleeping bag, a few boxes, a guest imposed and received with certain careful calculations as to material and symbolic prestige, "adopted" into a family in a pantomime of protection and control. In time, I ended up having powerful brothers, sisters, (women)friends who waited patiently for my metamorphosis, and a severe, exploring, and hopelessly distant mother. Finally, identified fictionally as the member of a family, I ended up being identified realistically as the member of a faction and gained some allies and enemies, faithful and coherent as such to the very end. At the same time, I never failed to be a woman for the men, who always reminded me of what I could not do, for not being and being at the same time: intellectual limits ("women have hard heads"), which made the already difficult work of my learning process even harsher; limits to freedom (there were forbidden spaces and times, like those of the *pajelança*, or shamanic session, which I was supposed to either avoid altogether or traverse with a keen awareness of the risks involved); insurmountable limits of the body (blood, smell). Outside of my nook/refuge, my hammock, I always felt on the verge of nothingness, at the edge of an abyss (or on top of an open tower in the middle of a storm, another recurrent theme in my dreams/nightmares in the village).

² The indigenous terms are written using the spelling established for the Karib variants (Kuikúro, Kalapálo, Maitupú, and Nahuquá). The Alto Xingu Indians are undergoing an incipient literacy phase in both their mother tongues and Portuguese.

There are two definitive characteristics of being a woman among the Kuikúro (and not only among them): blood, essentially menstrual blood, and a particular smell, unmistakable, exciting and disgusting, dangerous for men and individuals in threshold situations (transformations in initiation and disease, the integrity of the wrestler and the *pajé*, or shaman). Menarche is an unavoidable fact in a woman's life, marking a critical passage in her biological and social life, a metamorphosis taking place during a period of pubescent seclusion³. When a woman menstruates for the first time, she is defined collectively and publicly as *masópe* (from *matso*, to menstruate, with a nominalizing and temporal suffix added, "she who has already had menstrual blood"), is removed from social visibility for a period varying from several months to two years, depending on her family group's expectations and status. Physically invisible in a protected, surrounded nook of the house, the recluse undergoes a metamorphosis from girl to woman; her body, like that of any pubescent recluse, whether male or female, is submitted to a somatic fabrication resulting in an adult sexual and social person. The body is fabricated for beauty within specific cultural mores and for the aesthetics of sexual consumption. Ideal female beauty is represented by the recluse's body, which has already displayed the forms of a work of sculpture in living

flesh. The hair must grow black and shiny until it hides the face and back. The skin must be kept perfectly white in the darkness of seclusion, from which the young girl is only allowed to leave for a few minutes in the early evening or when she presents herself in dances at the height of rituals - exhibitions of her beautiful body and gradual previews of her return to society as a woman, literally made. Her legs are painstakingly modeled; knees and ankles bound with embira fibers or cotton string for her calves to swell up tumescent and round, overly highlighted between the upper and lower furrows. Her body is beautiful, white, and fat, her thighs and buttocks fat; for months the recluse has her physical activity reduced to a minimum. Regular scarification, ingestion of emetics, and observation of dietary restrictions associated with blood - interdiction of fish, the basic source of protein in the Alto Xingu diet - help fabricate the body/person, maintaining a balance of entries and exits of substances and experiencing pain. In her confines, the recluse receives visits from her nearest relatives, mainly women, and clandestinely from the men who desire her and succeed in approaching her, skirting the protection of family isolation. As the bearer of quintessential uncontaminated beauty (both internal and external), the recluse is highly coveted sexually, and exciting the male appetite.

I was ugly: breasts that did not nurse, fair hair, watery-colored eyes, skinny. Yet I was never void of the characteristics of blood and smell, the ultimate traits of being - at least something - as woman. Blood and smell define the fertile, sexual woman, thus desired and feared, to be controlled within the limits of her universe, voracious, powerful, dirty, beautiful, indispensable creator and balance of conflicts. Children and old women (up to eight and over forty years of age, approximately) also exist on the fringes, still not or no longer fertile, enjoy some privileges not granted to the others, like a certain easy access to male territories and bodies; the old women (*hagy*) exert and express powers in family and collective

³ I purposely deal with only female pubescent seclusion here. There is a parallel seclusion for boys, but they enter it at different times, since they lack the manifest sign of a "first blood". Adolescents boys are also "made" (*yí*) during seclusion in a process with characteristics that are very similar to those I describe for women. Eduardo B. Viveiros de Castro made this theme a central issue for an understanding of the person's locus among the Yawalapití, another Alto Xingu group (A Fabricação do Corpo na Sociedade Xingua. In: OLIVEIRA FILHO, João Pacheco de. *Sociedades Indígenas e Indigenismo no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Marco Zero/UFRJ, 1987, p. 31-42). In a personal communication, Patrick Menget talks about a kind of third sex, a condition that makes the recluse virtually a sexually indifferenced or generically feminized category.

decision-making and as consecrated mothers they are guaranteed love, profound respect, and eternal gratitude from the children, who close the ranks of family and even factional solidarity around them. I was a child, an immature being, and on the threshold of society, trying to learn, babbling, and as such with no powers; I was old, but with no power; I was a sexual woman, kept at a distance for her smell and her blood. Contradictory sensations: I wanted not to be a woman, since I could not escape the experience of that woman-being as differentially constructed in that society, felt and interpreted as a sad and unbearable experience of inferiorization. From my cultural and personal perspective, I could not fail to interpret the solidly demarcated difference between men and women as the epiphenomenon of a kind of sexual oppression, a hierarchical inequality, not just an asymmetry. At the same time and sufferingly, I wanted to be a woman anyway (in any way), since indefiniteness and solitude were even more unbearable. In that space/time, I could only be loved by men and women if I recognized myself as a woman accepting the rules of the game. I confess that these - the rules of the game - were comprehensible, familiar, based on a universal substrate of the female condition, capable of being decoded by me (as by any woman from any society), but the object of rageful repulsion by a woman from this side who had already incorporated the individualist and egalitarian mutations of Western women's ideology, a modern history.

I observed silent women among outspoken men, who attributed a discourse to them. Women are *augene oto*, "owners of gossip/lies". The category expressed by the root *augu*, translated very loosely here as "to gossip/to lie", lexicalizes the crucial meaning (in social life) of a channel for circulation of information through stories and news (all *akinhã*) which by word of mouth weave a network of alliances and conflicts permeating the entire village. The Kuikúro consider that ordinary language/speech is capable of infinite illusory inventiveness, given its

capacity to create verbal objects separate from their referents and to give them a life of their own in word-of-mouth communication, as well as to subordinate the construction of verbal universes to prefigured objectives. Thus, the Kuikúro very clearly conceive of language/speech through its representational and intentional aspects, conjugating its ideational and pragmatic functions. In this sense, to speak is inherently (and until proven otherwise) to lie. To lie is to create, and it is power.

Above all, to women is attributed the power of the creative speech of lying, and they detain the covert power of creating, undoing, intervening in social relations through the use of non-public speech. Albeit excluded from public speech,⁴ on many occasions they have the last word in important decisions and resolution of factional disputes, at both the family and even village level, even going beyond local borders and intervening in inter-village alliances and conflicts. "Gossip" is dangerous. There is a continuum linking the two extremes of political life: "gossip" and accusation, the latter act being of extreme gravity, capable of sparking mortal vengeance. The men manipulate this prerogative, making it a definitive and negative trait of the female collective. They warned me: "Don't talk to the women, watch out, they're liars!" By this they meant to keep me out of the whirlwind of politics and a domain of womanly knowledge and power. Of course, I still had to learn that all (men and women) are liars, by virtue of the fact that they all speak!

The issue of the vital and dangerous circulation of rumors is recurrent in tolo songs, performed mainly during the Jamurikumálu and Kwampy "feasts". The

⁴The masters of narrative art, ceremonial discourse, and oratory are men. Some women are considered good storytellers, but their narrative style is more condensed, more dramatic, and with a more restricted use of repetitions and parallelisms. Women leadership status (inherited and exercised) or older women can make public speeches, another style with its own formal, essentially formulaic characteristics, but nowadays this is a rare occurrence.

first is a female ritual which we will come back to later; the second is a kind of small intramural Mardi Gras. Like most of the "feasts", they are held to domesticate what we could call supernatural hyper-beings, perpetrators of disease, death, and destruction. Consider the lyrics to some tolo songs, small poetic texts translated here:

"Who was going around telling?/your vagina of course/went around telling/and your clitoris of course/went around telling;

I am tired - why don't the old women stop gossiping?/they don't like urucum (annatto)/why don't they stop gossiping?/they don't like ulurí/why don't they stop gossiping?;

I am cut as if with a knife/enough! stop gossiping!/when you go to the ulukí/when you go to sit."

Women's speech is radically naturalized: it is the vaginas (*igygy*) and clitorises (*mingaky*) that tell. The old women are identified as the most dangerous; free from fertile and controlled sex, represented by the *ulurí*, the mark of womanhood, they exert real, efficacious power through the covert speech of gossip. There is a privileged time/space for women's verbal creativity: it is the *ulukí*, an event in which women (or men) meet and make the rounds of the houses in the village negotiating the exchange of various goods. Goods and stories are traded beyond the immediate confines of household groups.

The primary meaning of the word tolo is "bird", and a derived meaning is "pet". The tolo songs are set free to fly as messages from their "owner" to an addressee, but as if the person who enunciates the song is disguised, ascribing the message to others, i.e., women. There is a recurrent verse used to construct the poetic structure (rhyme/rhythm) of the text, and significantly this verse is a repeated word, *itaóni*, or a phrase, *itao kily*, "the women speak".

In the words of the tolo songs and the men, "the vagina is dear". This is called *igygy ihipygy*, "payment for the vagina", the work that the males devote and owe to their fathers-in-law for years prior to and after marriage, as well as the material goods that the man owes to the woman whenever he

wishes and manages to have extraconjugal relations. They are all *ajó*, they all have *ajó*, or "lovers". The women "give", the men "pay" with valuable objects, cherished by their *ajó*. Relations between lovers are clandestine, everyone knows about them, but nobody says so; public disclosure of an adulterous encounter can lead to physical fighting in which the victim can be either a man or a woman, and it can even lead to factional feuds. For both men and women, the locus of seduction and passion is not marriage or the family, but the union between *ajó*. This is another central theme in the tolo songs:

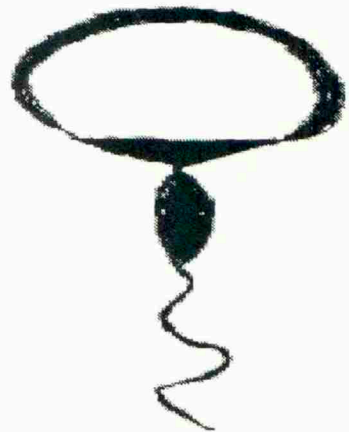
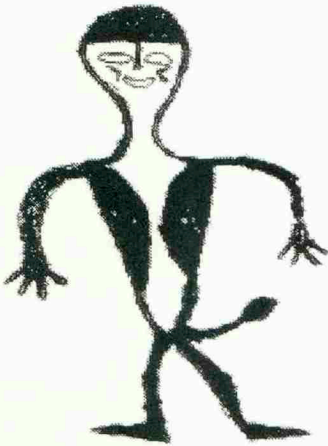
"May wings be born on us/to fly beyond the river's edge/I shall fly yonder like a hummingbird/You cannot stay here/for us to love/take me with you/let us go to your village./Hagita/let us flee/and go far away/for us to love/for you to love me always/"Let us speak hoarsely," (whisper)/I said to Nigikwegy./Ahinukwegy/they cut your hair/in the center of the village/there on the mat;/yes, let us don our necklaces/only then may you burn me/wait/I wish to bathe/I wish to paint myself/only then may you burn me/not now/yes, let us don our necklaces/only after I adorn myself with your necklace;/I still have the little piece of wood from your *ulurí*/the little piece of wood from your *ulurí*/to long for you/for me to use as an earring."

The songs sing of love and lovers, longing, and the desire to flee. A man asks his *ajó* to speak softly, "hoarsely", so that they may not be heard while they make love in hiding. Another observes a scene from a distance: his loved one is emerging from her period of reclusion and her hair is cut publicly. Another asks for his *ajó* to wait for him to get fixed up; only then may she "burn him". While the penis "pierces" the vagina, he in turn is "burned" by her. Another kept a remembrance from his loved one, a fragment of her *ulurí*.

The *ulurí* (*uigy* in *Kuikúro*) is a small women's garment, a triangle of underbark covering the vaginal slit and held by *buriti* bark twine wrapping around the hips and penetrating between the buttocks. It protects, hides,

and marks the vagina. Nowadays, women use them only sporadically in everyday life but obligatorily on festive occasions. New, refined *ulurí* are made by mothers for their pubescent, recluse daughters, who flaunt them when they are presented publicly, accompanying the dances during the "feasts". The *ulurí* is the mark of mature sexuality, fertility, and is seen as an integral part of female genitalia. It is interesting to compare the graphic representations of drawings reproduced here as done by men (*ifoto*) and women (*ifao*) of various ages.

The male body displays a huge penis (*hygé*, "arrow"); the female body does not show the sex except indirectly through the hairs and contrast in the paint. On the other hand, the male genitalia is portrayed naked, simply a phallus, while the female genitalia (*igygy*) always appears clothed, as if merged with the *ulurí*. For the men, the *ulurí* is the vagina/clitoris and vice versa. While the male genitalia is seen as a naked organ, given immediately to nature, the female genitalia is seen through its culturalization. Both this fact in particular



and what can be deduced from observation of Kuikúro life in general appear to contradict the rather widespread notion that women in their "primitive" state are tied to a sort of natural condition, while men are linked to the creation of cultural norms.

Among the women, observing the men

Over time, I underwent a metamorphosis that the women had been waiting for rather anxiously. Both contact and the search for escape from my solitude led me to assume women's roles. In the house where I lived I ended up doing chores (with a mixture of pleasure and resignation) that allowed me to taste a share of the daily weight of women's work: fieldwork, cooking, fetching water, preparing manioc, bringing firewood, tending the fire. The men themselves admit that the women work a lot harder than they; in no time at all, the body of a young woman emerging from reclusion is shaped with strong, constantly exercised musculature. A mature woman's body is wiry and robust, capable of withstanding any physical effort, generous; bellies and breasts, whether swollen or shriveled, show the signs of their functions, continents of children and milk. I began to achieve a command of the language to the point of expressing (not without some difficulty) my thoughts and intentions; I could finally exchange experiences verbally with the women. They took me into their domains with tenderness and enthusiasm to listen to them and satisfy their curiosity. Of all that I learned, I leave here some observations, data, and remarks. In our conversations, the Kuikúro women were very interested in understanding my experiences as a woman *from this side* and to compare my experiences with their own. They asked me about pain, the first sexual intercourse, what the men paid the women; sex was a central topic. They told me that their lives were permeated by the experience of pain (*siní*), the same pain common to all and that all learn to endure as an unavoidable fact of life. However, there is a woman's pain that is particularly associated with sex and childbirth.

The pain of childbirth is without a doubt the most violent, acute, and intense pain a human being can feel, they told me. For the women it is an unforgettable **drama**. Birthing conditions in the village are certainly as "natural" as they can be; predictions as to the outcome always involved the suspense of unforeseen events, complications which can only be treated with the aid of traditional resources. The parturient woman, lying in a special hammock with a wide mesh, her legs doubled, is attended throughout the birthing process by older women, drawing on their knowledge from many birthings, both experienced and witnessed, and by other specialists, those familiar with remedies, *pajés* (shamans), and "owners of prayers" (*kehege oto*). All help to push the child out, either directly by manipulating the woman's body or verbally, drumming up her resistance, or indirectly by singing "prayers" to facilitate the exit, the voyage of a being that must guarantee its survival, suddenly crawling its way through a hole, from a deep inner darkness to outside light.

There are other unforeseen circumstances for which there are easily applicable rules. The birth of another girl after two or three in a row, the fruit of an adulterous relationship or an unmarried woman, a child with a serious birth defect, or twins can lead to the decision by the family group (received affirmatively and serenely by the village collective and with the mother's own serene acquiescence) to bury the newborn. This solution is unavoidable in the birth of twins, which according to their cultural standards is an animal-like, monstrous duality, a deviation, an abnormality where only one is allowed to survive, just as in the case of a child with a birth defect or one to whom it is impossible to identify paternity. The newborn, which has fallen through the mesh in the hammock into a hole dug under the mother, where the placenta and blood are to be buried, is also left there to be buried immediately, with no pain. Pain appears to be absent at this moment; the exhausted mother is helped by the attendants and observes the outcome,

the rapid gestures concluding long hours of terrible effort and leaving no tracks, nothing but the marks of pain in her body and the reclusion to which she must submit, like all those who have too much blood. Nevertheless, the mother has the last word when it is a case of one daughter too many, no small matter in a society based on an absolutely functional sexual division with a view towards basic reproduction. Only the mother can challenge all expectations, even (and mainly) those of the husband and father, with a decisive, definitive gesture: she bends down to pick her daughter up from the ground and lay her on her breast. The tiny being, covered with dirt, liquids, and blood, is remembered and enters life; the attendants clean her and deliver her unto the mother, the body to which she will be attached for several years. I breath in relief, alone and in silence, moved, without making any comments out of context, pensive. In truth, it all seems perfectly plausible to me.

Sex is also painful for the women, and this pain is associated with penetration. I would dare to speak of traumatic penetration, as a radical 1970s German feminist put it. When we would talk about "the first time", there were invariably two initial questions: "Did it hurt?" and "What was the **payment** (*ihipy*)?" Based on the responses, discussions developed on sex, pain, and pleasure, which always revealed a contradiction between the necessary evil and the conquered good.

Kuikúro women dislike large penises and consider penetration a necessary outcome, good for men (whose pleasure is linked mechanically to ejaculation) and not so good for them. Pleasure is relative, happening on rare occasions and in certain (rare) positions, like a "tickling". Women and men seduce, but only men display violent behavior. "To cross the pathway" and "to take by the wrist" (*inhutake*) are typical gestures of male aggressiveness: any desirable woman can be "taken" by surprise (not only by her lover) on the way to the fields or to the lake and literally dragged to some secluded place, "into

the woods". With such characteristics, the first sexual intercourse, i.e., the first penetration, can occur when the woman is still a preadolescent, before menarche, at the initiative of much older men. After the fact, the girl spends several days virtually hidden inside the house, **ashamed** (*ihysu*), under a protective blanket, with a sad countenance, silent. Having gone through this kind of **infinitation** and reduced reclusion, everything returns to normal; after all, the incident was normal, and no apparent marks are left except for the memory of pain relived in conversations among women.

Pleasure is elsewhere: in the game of seduction, the thrills of clandestineness and the "play" preceding penetration, in the excitement caused by the goods given in payment. Rare are those who do not cultivate their *ajó*, their lovers; pleasure and passion appear to be outside the family domain, dissociated from procreation, constituting another domain where women exercise surprising autonomy, both individual and collective. In this domain they control their own wealth: their bodies, their sex, their goods. They establish alliances and reinforce ties of family solidarity and formal friendship, since mothers, sisters, aunts, and friends protect the lovers, keeping watch for the secret not to be discovered, confirming stories and cover-ups, administering the payments received. Thus, extraconjugal relations form a complex, diffuse, and vital network of parallel exchanges. As a rule, the goods acquired by women in their amorous encounters are immediately placed in circulation in a kind of ritualized market, the *ulukí*, exclusively for women. In the *ulukí*, objects, stories, and versions are exchanged, whereby facts and payments are diluted, passing from one to another successively, and the tracks of their origins are lost. The women go back home, happy, satisfied, and secure.

Jamurikumálu, the Hyper-Women

Jamurikumálu is myth and ritual. The name is known even to non-Indians as one of the main intra- and intertribal feasts in the Alto

Xingu, a rite with female characters played by women, recalling and updating the homonymous myth every year. I dwell here on a revisit of the myth, a possible reading of the particular outcome of what I would call a universal theme, from a woman's perspective conjugating my feeling with that of Kuikúro women as I understood it.

The word Jamurikumálu is from the Aruák language (*Jamuri-kuma-lu*, woman-hyper-female); in Kuikúro, a Karib language, it is *itao kwery*, woman hyper.⁵ The gloss **hyper** that I propose for the modifiers *kuma* and *kwery* is merely an approximation in the attempt to translate them. We already have interesting exegeses on their meaning by some of the ethnologists familiar with the Alto Xingu societies⁶; in this context, suffice it to say that every (let us say) mythical being defined by cognitive distance and excess is hyper in a system of differential relations with current or actual (real?) beings, which can be adequate (having the right measurements) or inadequate (i.e., deficient). Hyper-beings belong to the domain of collective fabulation expounding on origins; they are cosmogonic, yet contemporary. They exist in some space/time. As mentioned above, hyper-beings could be thought of as models, generative categorizing ideas; hyper-canoe, hyper-butternut, hyper-people, hyper-jaguar, hyper-fish, hyper-caraíba⁷, hyper-woman, etc. Hyper-beings are excessive, and as such, dangerous (*inegetu*); to make contact with them wrecks disease and death. They are *itséke*,

"spirits", and they inhabit far-off places, the deep waters, the heart of the forest, phenomena of nature that terrify humans. Jamurikumálu is the *akinhá* ("story", "narrative") of the Hyper-Women, who existed among the peoples of the Alto Xingu and exist today at the far ends of the Earth, who knows perhaps in the cities of the caraíbas, say the Kuikúro. A widespread myth among the lowland peoples of tropical South America, with variations and transformations, recurrent fragments, reaching the world of the whites in the vulgarized story of the Amazons and mentioned, reproduced, and interpreted in various ethnographies, including those on the Alto Xingu peoples. I reproduce here the synthesis of two versions told to me in 1982 by Ijáli, an elderly, highly-respected storyteller, "owner of stories", master of the narrative art among the Kuikúro, and by Moká, one of the most knowledgeable women in Jamurikumálu songs. What follows is a by-product, the summary of a translation in linear prose of the original oral renditions, almost an hour of narrative style, a quasi-poem weaving the sequence of the story's scenes through a sophisticated use of parallelisms and dialogues, punctuated by the songs of the Hyper-Women.⁸

"Once the *iponhy* ceremony (male initiation marked by ear-piercing) was over for the son of chief Magijá, the men decided to go off fishing, to seek food for their children. They were supposed to spend five days on the banks of the river, in the middle of the forest. Many days went by, and the women waited for them in vain in the village. Off in the forest, the men were turning into *etinki*, the hyper-boars: hair and fangs grew on them, and they grew huge. Agijakumá, wife of Magijá, sent her recently-initiated son Kamatahirári to the river to see what was happening. Kamatahirári saw the

⁵ The Alto Xingu is a multilingual sociocultural system, where the Karib, Aruák, and Tupi languages are spoken by nine different peoples in ten villages. A major portion of the mythical and ritual vocabulary is in the Aruák language.

⁶ Take for example the article by Eduardo Batalha Viveiros de Castro, *Alguns Aspectos do Pensamento Yawalapiti (Alto Xingu): classificações e transformações*, in: *Sociedades Indígenas e Indigenismo no Brasil*. Rio de Janeiro: Marco Zero/UFRJ, 1987 (pp. 43-83).

⁷ The term "caraíba" in Portuguese is used in the entire Alto Xingu to refer to whites; in Kuikúro the word is *kagaiha*.

⁸ Comparing the versions and renditions by Ijáli and Moká, what stands out are a canonical, almost hypnotic fluency in the male narrative and a condensed dramaticity in the female narrative, where adherence to the norms of storytelling art is less important than the songs marking supernatural transformation as the story's highlights.

fathers turning into hyper-boars. The men-boars called out to him and wanted to feed him with some of the fish they had caught, and Kamatahirári put the fish inside a flute and took it back to the village. Night came, and he told his mother everything he had discovered. Agijakumá cooked the fish and took it to the center of the village, calling all 'hersisters': 'Our husbands are turning into hyper-boars, they are becoming monsters, while we are here waiting for them.' They shared and ate the fish, in the center of the village, in the men's place, and then shouted: 'Let us dance, let us celebrate, we no longer want our husbands and they no longer want us.' As they were singing all through the night, they turned into Hyper-Women. Morning came, and they were already Hyper-Women: they ate leaves and insects and stung their clitorises with poison ants, their vulvas became swollen and bulging and showed between their legs. They sang, they sang the Jamurikumálu songs. The men listened from out there in the middle of the forest and became bewildered. The Hyper-Women sang on the roof of the *kwakútu*, the men's house, and played the *kagutu*⁹, the forbidden flutes. The men-boars decided to return to the village. They came in by the main path, where they ran into the procession of women, aggressive, wearing the men's adornments (earrings, kneebands, armbands, belts). With dogfish teeth they beat the men into bleeding; with their clitorises bound in red thread, they danced around the circle of houses. Finally, after turning the only man in the village, Kamatahirári, into an armadillo,

they followed him under ground. Up on the surface the men could still hear their songs. The Hyper-Women took to the underground burrows; once in a while they would surface, appearing in the villages, enchanting other women. Although the men desperately tried to hold them down, many women joined the Jamurikumálu. "Sisters, leave the men behind to miss us!" said the leaders. At the river's edge, they threw away their *ulurí*, which turned into fish, and threw away the menchildren, who turned into fish. They took only the girls, destined to all remain together. They rubbed their bodies with butternut bark and became covered with thorns. They went farther and farther away, crossing rivers and fields, dancing, where there are no more people, beyond the world of the caraiabas. They stayed at a place surrounded by water; the men tried in vain to follow them. 'Leave our husbands, let them tire of waiting for us! Let us eat everything that is forbidden to eat, tapir, deer, all the animals!' They stayed there once and for all, playing the *kagutu* flutes. (Men only serve for procreation: captured, they fecundate the Hyper-Women, who eliminate the sons, keeping only the daughters. The Hyper-Women are dangerous, fatal; to meet up with them means disease and death; they are beautiful and enchanting, mortally enchanting.)"

The Jamurikumálu feast is a periodic reenactment of a founding fact, that is, the first rendition of the women's songs constituting the metamorphosis of the Hyper-Women, definitive and primordial in the myth, momentaneous and representational in the ritual. The ritual recalls and updates (in the ceremonial parenthesis) a possibility, dramatically imagined in the narrative.

Like all rituals, the Jamurikumálu is frequently held because of some disruptive event, a disease in some individual who has come into contact with "spirits" (the *itséke*, in a dream, in the forest, in the delirium of a fever). The "spirit" must be removed from its conjunction with the human being through an intervention by the *pajé*, who removes from the sick person's body the minuscule or even invisible darts shot by the "spirit",

⁹ Looking at the paired *kagutu* flutes, which only the men can handle and play, is strictly forbidden for women. It is said that disobeying this interdiction wrecks terrible punishment meted by the *kagutu* spirit and the men of the village: raping of the woman who dares to look, touch, or play the flutes. With a grave sound, these flutes play melodies from the *tolosongs*. The women follow the men's musical rendition attentively, locked in the houses, the doors of which are kept carefully closed. In the village, there is a solemn, ominous air, broken only occasionally by the duets/challenges between men and women, which I will talk about later.

and the ritual collectively performs the disjunction and subsequent domestication and departure of the "spirit". On the other hand, like all rituals, the Jamurikumálu feast results from the *mise en oeuvre* of a complex system of social relations involving the **owner of the feast**, a kind of sponsoring representative, an inherited or ascribed position, the group of people who formally request of the owner that the ritual be held, male or female singers (*igisy oto*), and owners of songs (*igínhu oto*), who must receive payment to allow **their** songs to be performed publicly. In the Jamurikumálu, there are only female singers, highly prized specialists whose knowledge is rewarded; however, during the time I was in the Kuikúro village, there were only men as owners of the feast and the songs. The feast takes place on one day, with the participation of several invited villages, the culmination and apogee of months of rehearsals and previews that liven the life of the host village, a long cycle of collective fishing expeditions, intense work (particularly by the owner of the feast) to amass large amounts of food from the fields, as well as dancing and singing. As the days go by the women gather into little groups (that get bigger as the final event approaches) to perform the Jamurikumálu songs, which are of two types: those "without words" and the *tolo*, the genre mentioned previously. The *kagutu* flutes are heard in the men's house. The houses are closed, the women close themselves in, they listen and whisper comments, or they may respond to calls by one of them, an older and more daring woman, and a prankish, exciting duet gets started. Goaded by the performance of the "songs of the *pygá-pygá* toad", especially the "song of the vagina" (*egy igisy*), in which the men describe ugliness, secretions, smells, and dangers in the female sex, the women react with the *hyge igisy*, the "song of the penis", poking fun at the ugliness of the male genital organ or its weakness, since it faints soon after penetrating a vagina. This is the "fight of the penis and the vagina". Men and women, penis and vagina also "fight" during their frequent

skirmishes, rather violent games characterizing the entire Jamurikumálu period. The women become aggressive and especially attack unsuspecting visitors, sparking laughter from onlookers.

On the last day of the feast, an intertribal event, the women are the Jamurikumálu, the Hyper-Women. Adorned as men, they occupy the village center, and in a grandiose enactment they perform the complete sequence of the songs and dances, in an order strictly established by tradition, recalling episodes and characters from the myth through the metaphors constituting the formulaic text of the *tolo* songs.

In the case of the Jamurikumálu, there is a gap in *pathos* between myth and ritual. While the narrative is tragic and gets the storyteller and the audience wrapped up in the emotion of a cognitive journey through a virtual scenario (the possibility), the feast reshapes what is imagined/imaginable in a kind of tragicomic play, alternating solemn moments and others of absolutely cathartic comicity. The myth is history, and the ritual repeats history as a farce. In the myth the women dominate, in the ritual it is the men, since they are not actors but directors in the final analysis. The women act the parts earnestly, while the men watch, assess, and direct, detainers of the norms of tradition, the sequence of dances and songs, the movements. The overall climate is not the same as in other feasts; it is more festive in a certain sense, since debauchery and laughter greet the men's criticism of the women's performance.

A revisitación of the myth of women's revolt

Various versions and interpretations of the Jamurikumálu myth in the ethnographic or pseudo-literary literature have portrayed the world subsequent to the women's revolt as natural or wild chaos generated by a fictional subversion of the real order and which should return to order thanks to the men's reaction, a view that even became banal, or common-sense. Thus, Joan Bamberger defined this mythical body from the South American lowlands as a key to the understanding of the original, primordi-

al male domination in human societies, in an article significantly entitled *The Myth of Matriarchy: why men rule in primitive societies*.¹⁰ In general, the myth of women's ancestral rebellion as recounted by this researcher is either terminated with the men's successful revenge or is associated with another myth, that of the origin of the "forbidden" flutes (*kagutu* in Kuikúro), forming a logical, sequential, complementary pair with the former, closed in a pathway leading back to a same original order or the only real order, where men dominate once the female disturbance has been traversed.¹¹ There are other readings of the Jamurikumálu complex. Cecilia McCallum, in an article entitled *Ritual and the Origin of Sexuality in the Alto Xingu*¹², criticizes the Western (i.e., ethnocentric) perspective underlying "classical" analyses of the theme of sexual difference in terms of hierarchy and dominance structured in social forms

¹⁰ Bamberger's article was published in one of the first reference works for gender anthropology: ROSALDO, M. and LAMPHERE, L. (ed.), *Woman, Culture and Society*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1974.

¹¹ Th. Gregor (*Anxious Pleasures: the sexual lives of an Amazonian people*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1985) and E. Basso (*A Musical View of the Universe*, Philadelphia: Philadelphia University Press, 1985) present versions of the myth of the Hyper-Women and the origin of the "forbidden" flutes among the Mehináku and the Kalapalo, respectively, other peoples constituting the Alto Xingu system. According to the myth of origin of the flutes, in ancestral times men lived in a "savage" state, naked and without any type of utensil, forced to masturbate in order to satisfy their desire for sex. Women, however, lived in a perfectly structured, exclusively female society, and they possessed adornments, festivals, songs, cotton, and the *kagutu* flutes. The men heard them playing and decided to take everything, life itself. In order to do so they made bull-roarers with which they stormed the village. Frightened by the sound of the bull-roarers and having been duly instructed to occupy "their" place and play "their" role, the women tore off their adornments, fled inside the houses, and finally, during the night, had to make sex with the men, the new masters of the village. It is interesting to note that both the Jamurikumálu and *kagutu* flute narratives have an opening and first act with the same scene, that of a female order contrasting with male presocial animality.

where the female condition is that of **fear and torture**. The readings proposed by Bamberger and Gregor are considered examples of an approach intending to consecrate the universality of male supremacy either as defining so-called primitive societies (in the generalization and generic nature of Bamberger's analysis) or as the same in all societies, whether exotic or familiar, Western or non-Western, traditional or modern (see Gregor's interpretation of sexual psychology in Mehináku fantasies, dreams, and myths). McCallum starts from a controversial question: is it possible to interpret supposed and extreme manifestations of sexual violence such as gang rape from a more sophisticated anthropological perspective refusing facile generalizations or universalistic affirmations regarding the female condition? What is the significance of the terrible punishment the Alto Xingu peoples say besets women who by chance or through their own daring lay their eyes on or have some type of contact with the "forbidden" flutes? The author, who did not do field research in the region, delves into the ethnographic literature on Alto Xingu peoples and analyzes the mythical and ritual complex of the flutes and the Jamurikumálu through fine operations of cultural contextualization and symbolic interpretation, dwelling on the meaning of the representations contained in narratives, native comments, acts, and ritual events, since that social universe is considered specifically with its network of relations (kinship, within and between domestic groups, within and between villages, between men and spirits, between men and women, etc.). Space does not allow me to reproduce the details of the author's ethnographic course, so I will focus on some of her conclusions. Each step in the author's analysis is based on an attentive weaving of ethnographic data and stresses the complementariness, indeed an egalitarian harmony, between men and women.

¹² Published in HARVEY, P. and GOW, P. (ed.), *Sex and Violence*. London: Routledge, 1994, pp. 90-114.

The rituals of the *kagutu* flutes and the Jamurikumálu are thus understood "as complementary both in form and in rationale" (p. 104) and "are concerned, in parallel fashion, with the construction of separate male and female agencies, but on a collective rather than an individual scale" (p. 105). "Sexuality is constrained within the framework of kinship...Sex is a pleasure for both men and women, a possible danger for both...a matter of sensuality and fun, and also a deadly serious business..." (p. 105). A close reading of the ethnographic data would allow one to state that it is evident that "masculine and feminine agency underlie the cyclical creation, destruction and reconstitution of persons in a complex and interdependent process involving work, sex, eating and abstention" (p. 107). The fear women feel towards the flutes as they recall the possibility of sexual punishment is seen as equivalent to the fear that keeps the men far from the center of the village during the Jamurikumálu festival, the fear of being assaulted by the women in celebration. There is something underlying both fears that makes them **equal** and complementary, according to McCallum. Every ritual is a **making** of relations between the human community and the spirits, responsible for disease and death in successive moments of separation and approximation. At an initial moment, "The productive power that the spirit embodies at the height of the ritual is extremely dangerous and potentially violent...Human and spirit must remain mutually invisible." At a second moment, the spirits are reusherred into the bosom of the human community to be fed, so as to then leave the village in a new (and now peaceful) separation, leaving the humans with a "power both safe and non-violent" (p. 108). The **making** of social relations through the ritual performs the separation between both humans and spirits and men and women, and here sexuality, a central aspect in persons, is a crucial element. Having sex and eating are essential to human reproduction and antithetical to what is done and what **exists** in the world of the

dead and the spirits. Sex is life, and that is what opposes and distinguishes men and women as collectives: this is the ultimate value/significance of the complex and specific representations in the Alto Xingu society, in its fabulations and in its daily and ceremonial acts.

McCallum concludes: "In interpreting sexual violence or any form of symbolic action we must be aware of the way that individual action and experience are bound by historically specific social and cultural contexts. Feminism has made anthropologists particularly sensitive to these issues. Any analysis of myth and ritual can benefit from the deconstructive critique typical of feminist scholarship. Moreover, in such an ethnographic context it is vital to employ a clear view of symbolic form and action...In the West sexual murder is the killing of a representative object of sexual desire, and this representative object is a specifically Western construct. To assume that this form of symbolic violence is universal is to ascribe debased forms of symbolism and representation to other cultures. Such debasement is likely to go hand-in-hand with the imposition of a Western theory of human sexuality... gang rape in the Alto Xingu - whether as an idea or as an event - is many things: what it is not is a manifestation of a supposed universal male desire to overpower and humiliate women..." (pp. 109-110).

By way of conclusion, and entering into the anthropological and feminist debate, I intend to engage in dialogue with McCallum's arguments and add one further, alternative reading of the Jamurikumálu myth, based on my own ethnographic data. This reading emerged almost naturally from a personal perspective, as an observing woman, combined with a perspective that I ascribe to the *Kuikúro* women, as I was capable of hearing them and understanding them. The debate traversing anthropological literature on the genders is not finished; on the contrary, it is kept open with others, at least until we succeed in shifting its terms and its axis to a subsequent phase of reflection on the history of societies.

it appears to me that Gregor's view, based on his *Mehináku* ethnography, and McCallum's, an ethnographic flight over the Alto Xingu, take opposite directions, yet both tend to silence a discourse, that of the women. Despite the differences between groups from the Alto Xingu, I am struck by certain contradictions when comparing their empirical data. Thus, I disagree with Gregor when he says, for example, that female libido is, let us say, weaker than male libido; it is the concept of libido that needs to be considered in a relative light, contextualized. Thus, in general, I agree with McCallum's criticism of certain statements by Gregor, and I admire her brilliant argumentative construction, but I disagree with one of her central themes, the dilution of the hierarchy between men and women in favor of emphasis on complementarity. *Kuíkúro* women speak at great length about what distinguishes them from men, about the difference, and at the same time they speak at great length about their unequal position in a hierarchical position which they do not interpret as domination or oppression, concepts and feelings of a female condition and a feminist discourse that are specific historical and cultural products, Western and modern.¹³ I spoke of biological imperatives leading to hierarchy; this is what *Kuíkúro* women talk about. In this sense we see each other as close. I mentioned the specific meaning that the experience of sexual pleasure has for them. In this sense we see each other as simultaneously different and close. I would indeed stress the moments and areas of women's power (market, "gossip", lovers), women's fabulation, the construction of a female collective opposed to the male collective in veritable "Gender Wars" (a fortunate expression of Gregor's). It is here that the *Kuíkúro* women feel pleasure and succeed in laughing fully.

¹³ For an exercise in anthropological relativization of feminism, see the article by B. Franchetto, M. L. Viveiros de Castro Cavalcanti, and M. L. Heilborn, *Antropologia e Feminismo*. In: FRANCHETTO, B. et al. (org.). *Perspectivas Antropológicas da Mulher*. Rio de Janeiro: Editora Zahar, 1981, vol. 1, pp. 11-47.

The myth/ritual of the *Jamurikumálu* essentially deals with the theme of the encounter/disencounter between men and women as distinct, opposing collectives and the possibility imagined (yet intensely experienced in the narrative and the feast, especially by the women) of an exclusively female social order. I call attention to the fact that the *Kuíkúro* women never drew an explicit connection between the *Jamurikumálu* and *kagutu* flute myths, and that none of the versions of the former that I collected concludes with a scene of male revenge. The *Jamurikumálu* are still on the edge of the world, rulers of their villages, ominous and fascinating (a fascination that is danger, dream, and desire).

The strength of opposition between men and women in society, as I have said, is as productive as its famous complementarity. Indeed, there can be no complementarity without opposition. The myth/ritual of the *Jamurikumálu* picks out the theme of difference and works with it to the ultimate consequences: an absolute, metabolized difference, finally a new order, no longer based on complementarity, which I would say leads forcefully to sexual hierarchy through the unavoidable subjugation to biological imperatives, but rather based on (female) homogeneity. It is the invention of the only egalitarian order possible for women, an ancient fantasy, frequently dealt with as a theme. It is the collective (female) creativity serving the ideation of a paradise, a land without ills. The narrative thus speaks of (and the ritual fragmentally enacts) an irreducible antagonism, a possible female order contrasting with the men's animal-like transformation. There are no Hyper-Men, rather just Hyper-Boars and Hyper-Women. The *Jamurikumálu* break the alliance, move off once and for all, in their own way externally eliminating and internally absorbing difference, maleness: they are hermaphroditic beings, the clitorises become penises - rubbing them with butternut bark they enhance the vaginal smell all over their bodies, appropriating male insignia, neutralizing all interdictions,

not only sexual (the *kagutu* flutes) but also those affecting all individuals in society. I am reflecting on the consequences of the use of the **hyper** classifier in this context: cognitively speaking, the distance and generative capacity of a *hyper* category make it possible to conceive of a virtual, female world of maximum density, and of its decantation into the real world, adequate yet impoverished, existing yet

merely sufficient. This is the real world in which men exist and not just women - difference: penises and vaginas, sexual division of labor, spaces, interdictions, and fears destined exclusively for women, the family fate. How many women have dreamed of this voyage? Among the *Kuikúro*, I learned to love difference.