



14

Mehinaku Men and Women

A Sociology of Marriage, Sex, and Affection

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Kikyala! your "little hammock" just went down
to the water.

—Kama, referring to his
friend's wife

Among the Mehinaku, the "battle of the sexes" is more than a metaphor. Men and women make insulting sexual jokes in each others' presence and engage in knock-down, drag-out brawls in the course of certain rituals. Much of this book describes the antagonistic character of men's and women's relationships and the price the men pay in fear of women and insecurity about their masculine selves. This focus is of theoretical interest, and it reflects the concerns of Mehinaku masculine culture. It is the oppositional nature of male and female interaction that draws the attention of the villagers. But it is well to remember that

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Mehinaku men and women are also united in enduring relationships of work, residence, kinship, and affection. Before describing the tensions between the sexes, we must document the institutions that link village men and women and provide a basic background in the sociology of Mehinaku male-female relations.

WORK, MARRIAGE, AND AFFECTION

Men, Women, and the Division of Labor

A division of labor is a separation of tasks, yet a basis for interdependence. Among the Mehinaku, the assignment of separate jobs to men and women is the fundamental economic contract. Even a casual observer of village life will notice that men and women are usually found in different places, following different schedules, and engaged in different tasks.

The six haystack-shaped houses that surround the central plaza are the focus of female activities. . . . A glance into one of these buildings during the late morning hours

The village is conceived by the Mehinaku as a great circle formed by the perimeter of houses and the brush and scrub forest beyond. Within the circle is the public plaza and the men's house. These are primarily masculine areas of the community, and they are used for public oratory, rituals associated with the men's house, and wrestling. The houses and the "trashyards" immedi-

ately behind them are feminine regions where the women process manioc and take care of young children. Bisecting the community are broad paths that the men clear in order to see visitors well in advance of their arrival in the village. Also visible are two houses under construction and several manioc drying racks, which are built during the rainless months of the dry season.

catches the women of the house at work: making hammocks, processing manioc flour, spinning cotton, or making twine cord. All of these tasks, like women's work in most cultures, are compatible with child care. The job can be quickly put aside to keep a child away from the open hearth or the hot tub of manioc porridge and then resumed with little difficulty. The association of women with the houses and domestic activities is built into the way the villagers conceive of their community. The village is perceived as two concentric rings. In the innermost are the plaza (*wenekutaku*, "frequented place") and the men's house. These are public regions for casual male interaction and organization of community activities. In the outermost ring are the houses and their backyards. This region is feminine in its connotations. A man who hangs around the backyards is derisively called a "trash-yard man," and he is said to be "like" a woman. Boys who spend too much time in these areas are scolded by their parents and ordered away. Only women properly belong in these regions. When they leave, it is for specific tasks, such as getting water, visiting their gardens, and participating in public rituals.

But the women are never quite comfortable beyond the house and yard and move about in circumspect groups of two or three close relatives. On the paths and in the gardens, they are uneasy about the hazards of jaguars, snakes, and "wild" Indians. And on the plaza, the younger women are concerned that the men are staring at them from the men's house and perhaps making sexual comments. The men are more wide ranging in their movements. At a random moment, we

find them dispersed about the village. Some are hunting or fishing many miles from home. Others are clearing distant gardens or working on arrows and baskets in the men's house. And a few are to be found aimlessly wandering through the forest in search of whatever adventure may befall them. The men feel at home where the women are out of place.

A Mehinaku feminist who added up the many tasks allotted to the sexes would sense that, as in our own society, the equation does not balance. Steel tools and fish hooks have greatly eased men's work as farmers and fishermen but made no dent in the women's drudgery of producing manioc flour. Following Robert Carneiro's comparable data gathered among the neighboring Kuikuru Indians (1957, 223), I estimate that the Mehinaku men spend only three-and-one-half hours a day in subsistence tasks. Admittedly the work is hard and occasionally dangerous, but it is far less time-consuming than the women's seven to nine hours of processing manioc, fetching firewood, and carrying tubs of water from the stream. When at last these tasks are done, the women are still the main caretakers of small children. Meanwhile, rich in free time, their husbands are off on trading trips to the Indian post, meanders through the forest, and long periods of socializing in the men's house. Only for a few weeks during the dry season when the men clear new fields do they face work that is as demanding of time as that of their wives.

The Mehinaku have made rough but similar calculations, and most will agree that women work longer hours than men. But they do not draw the conclusion that the women

are therefore exploited. Rather, they maintain, men and women have different jobs for which they are suited by temperament and biology. Thus Kalu, one of the more assertive women, remarks, "I could not go fishing. The line would cut my hands. I am afraid of big animals. We women have no strength . . . the men are worthy of respect." For Kalu and the other women, the significance of the division of labor between men and women lies in exchange and interdependence. The principal institution that mediates this economic relationship is marriage.

Marriage as the Basic Economic Partnership

On the first morning of his marriage, a young man awakens long before any of the other residents of his house. Slipping out as quietly as possible, he goes to fish in a distant but well-stocked lake. The trip is long, but he would be ashamed if he were to return empty-handed on such an important day. His bride is busy at home, making the sweetest and most delicate manioc bread of the finest flour. On her husband's return, she greets him at the door, takes his catch, and cooks the fish stew. Called the "mistress of the fish stew" (*wakula weketu*), she sends gifts of fish and bread to her relatives and in-laws. Neither manioc or fish alone would make a meal, but when they are distributed together, they are a powerful symbol of the new economic partnership of husband and wife.

Men's and women's craft work is also connected to the symbolism of marriage. Women are known for their ability as hammock makers, and everyone speaks admiringly of the best craftswomen in the village. An essential reason for making a hammock is to fulfill an obligation owed to a man, especially a husband. Properly, a man's hammock is woven from cotton thread, while a woman's hammock is a loosely tied net of palm fiber. As Palui put it as she wove a cotton hammock, "A man's hammock is hard to make, a woman's is easy. A woman's hammock breaks easily. It has so many holes that the mosquitoes eat you when you sleep. This good woven hammock that I am making I will give to my husband." Unlike

Palui, some village women weave poorly made hammocks and make them so infrequently that their families are said to sleep "practically on the ground." The contemptuous and derisive descriptions of these women underscore the more than utilitarian significance of the hammock within marriage. The gift of food and well-crafted material goods celebrates the relationship of husband and wife.

The Plight of the Bachelor

There is no better way to appreciate the value of Mehinaku marriage than to look at the pitiable bachelor. Consider, for example, the case of Tala, a man in his fifties, who has been without a wife for nearly fifteen years. His tattered hammock barely keeps him off the ground, and he has been unable to obtain a manufactured one at the trading post despite his constant importuning. Thinner than many of the other villagers, Tala complains that he never gets enough manioc bread. His sister-in-law usually keeps him supplied, but he cannot ask her to start the fire and bake a new batch as her husband can. Tala is also dependent on other men's women for manioc porridge and water. None of the women, however, get him firewood. On the coldest of nights, he reluctantly hauls his own. When the evening chill has less bite, he wraps himself in a ragged blanket cadged from the post and shivers through the night. But at least he has avoided women's work.

When Tala leaves his house, his frayed arm bands and bead belt show that he has no wife to supply him with cotton thread essential for masculine adornment. Moreover, his unmarried status prevents him from participating in the public ritual and political life of the village as an equal of other men. Only married adults may become "owners" of significant spirits, sponsors of important rituals, and respected chiefs. Bachelors cannot provide the bread and porridge that is the spirit's food and a chief's hospitality. The Mehinaku marital partnership is therefore a unit of participation in vital social events.

Tala is fully aware of the advantages of marriage, and only a shortage of eligible women among the Mehinaku and neighboring tribes

has kept him from finding a wife. Once he brought home a woman from the despised Carib-speaking Txicão tribe, but she was never accepted by the village women and soon left. At all times, Tala tries to compensate for his low status by being a particularly energetic fisherman and farmer. Each year when the rains come, he keeps his household well supplied with fish caught in his extensive network of traps along the Tuatuari River. And yet he is never on the same footing as the other men. Lacking basic possessions and living on the margins of the village system of ritual and politics, he is not respected. To his friends, he is an object of pity.

Affection between Husbands and Wives

For the Mehinaku, the idea of romantic love is absurd. Nothing is more ridiculous to the young men who understand some Portuguese than the love songs they hear on their transistor radios: "What is this 'I love you, I love you'?" Amairi asked me. "I don't understand it. I don't like it. Why does the white man make himself a fool?"

Although all romantic love is suspect, romance between spouses borders on bad taste. Husband and wife should respect one another and, to a degree, stand apart. Each represents a set of in-laws to whom the other owes work, gifts, and deference. Whatever potential remains for romantic attachment is further diluted by coresidence with many kinsmen and an elaborate network of extra-marital affairs. In this setting, only a new couple (*autsapalui*) is permitted anything more than a low-keyed expression of affection. Typically, a newly married husband and wife sleep together in the same large hammock and spend much of the day in each other's company. As their marriage matures, however, this degree of affection seems foolish. Those who persist risk the laughter of their comrades and supernatural dangers. Excessive thoughts about one's spouse, the villagers say, attract snakes, jaguars, and deadly spirits.

Despite the absence of romance, some husbands and wives take an enduring pleasure in one another's company. Ketepe tells me that his wife is "good" and that she is "dear" (*kakai-*

apai; literally, precious or expensive) to him. He likes to take her and his children on long fishing trips so that they can be alone together. Far away from in-laws, village gossip, and the tension of sexual intrigues, they spend the days fishing, collecting wild fruits, and paddling together in their canoe to explore distant streams and lakes. On my most recent visit to the Mehinaku, Ketepe asked that I buy him a large tarpaulin as a roof for his family when they pitched their hammocks together under the trees.

Even couples who are less affectionate than Ketepe and his wife spend a fair amount of time together. It is true that their daily work separates them, but each day, a husband and wife go bathing together and speak to the other couples whom they meet on the trail. In the late afternoon, they may pair off to visit their garden. On the way, they talk about the day's events, their children, and the social life of the community. Unlike the communal houses, the gardens are intimate places where husband and wife have sexual relations and speak in privacy. Returning home, couples eat together around a common hearth, share a common water bowl, and rest in hammocks that are slung closely together. Each of these activities is regarded as an expression of the solidarity of the marital relationship. When husband and wife no longer eat together, when they drink from different bowls and separate their hammocks, they are not far from divorce. Hammock position is an especially good barometer of the pressures and pleasures of marriage. When spouses get along well, they hang their hammocks so that the woman is suspended just a few inches below her husband. Whispering to each other after the children are asleep, they discuss the day's events.

More often, husbands and wives prefer to separate their hammocks, suggesting a degree of distance (though not hostility) in their relationship. In this position, the hammocks are tied to separate poles so that the intimacy of the first arrangement is broken. To place even greater distance between themselves and their mates, spouses attach their hammocks to separate house poles and build the family hearth between them. During

severe quarrels, a wife may sleep so that no matter how her husband turns, her feet lie alongside his head. Hammock positions are part of the Mehinaku language of marital intimacy and estrangement, just as double beds, twin beds, and separate bedrooms can make the same point in middle-class American homes. But the Mehinaku use the system to convey one message that is beyond the scope of American sleeping arrangements. When enraged at her husband, a wife may take a machete and cut down her husband's hammock. More than ropes are severed, for this symbolic act may initiate divorce.

The most dramatic evidence of the concern that most spouses feel for one another occurs during prolonged absences. The men's two-week fishing expeditions take them through forest that is believed to be the haunt of dangerous spirits and "wild" Indians who prowl the borders of Mehinaku territory. Wives worry about their absent husbands. The men are concerned about the well-being of their women and families. When the men are away, the village is a quiet, empty place, but in each house there is a symbol of connectedness and concern. On his departure, a husband gives his wife a knotted cord and retains an identical one for himself. Each knot stands for "one sleep," and in the evening, husband and wife loosen a tie, so that they can keep track of the days. When at last the string is untied, a wife knows that her husband will return no later than the next evening.

On one occasion, I recall that Kikayala did not return after the final knot had been loosened and night had fallen. Even though his wife, Pialu, had never seemed to display any special affection for her husband, she became increasingly concerned. Anxiously peering down the trail, she wondered if her husband had been carried off by a forest spirit or attacked by a jaguar. She finally borrowed my flashlight and walked with her son to the edge of the woods to wait. When at last Kikyala arrived, she greeted him calmly, but he must have sensed Pialu's concern and her pleasure in his safe return.

The most extreme form of separation is that occasioned by death. Among the Mehinaku, the death of a spouse initiates a period

of seclusion and mourning that is more prolonged and intense than for any other class of relative. The villagers say that the purpose of mourning seclusion is to cry for one's lost spouse. The period of isolation, closely supervised by the deceased's kin, can last as long as a year. The mourner (*katumbachui*) must stay behind a palm-wood partition and speak in a hushed voice. Although initially the bereaved cry copiously, the meaning of mourning seclusion varies. For some it is an expression of propriety and an obligation to in-laws rather than an outpouring of grief. It is a mistake to interpret the institution too romantically, as we might be inclined to do from the perspective of our own society, which lacks long periods of formal mourning. Nonetheless, Mehinaku mourning is a ceremonialization of marriage and an expression of one facet of the idealized relationship of spouses.

SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Within the roles of marriage and kinship, Mehinaku men and women express mutual affection and respect and advance their economic well-being. The bond of sexual attraction is basic to understanding their complex relationships.

Early Sexual Experiences

A Mehinaku child grows up in an erotically charged social environment. Living on close terms with his sexually active older kin and occasionally following them out to the gardens to watch their assignations, a ten-year-old child is already a sophisticate by American standards. His parents openly joke about sex in his presence, and he is likely to be well informed about the village's latest extramarital intrigues. In the open setting of the Mehinaku community, parents cannot wall off sex in a secret adult world. Many of them do just the opposite, openly attributing sexual motivation to their children. As toddlers play and tussle in a promiscuous huddle on the floor, parents make broad jokes about their having sexual relations: "Look! Glike is having sex with Pairuma's daughter." As a result, there

are few mysteries about the facts of life, and some children grow up with a relatively matter-of-fact attitude toward sexuality. "I haven't had sex yet," one eight-year-old remarked to me, "but in a few years I will."

Sex and marriage, like virtually every adult activity, have their counterpart in children's games. In a game called "marrying" (*kamupai*; literally, "taking a wife") little boys and girls sling their hammocks in the trees around the village. The boys bring home "fish" (actually big leaves) to be cooked by their "wives." After the "food" is cooked and consumed, the game has a number of variants. In one, "being jealous" (*ukitsapai*), the children sneak off on extramarital assignations, only to be surprised by furious spouses. In all versions of the game, however, a few of the children may drift off in pairs to experiment in sexual play. Parents do not seem overly concerned about this kind of activity while their children are young and so long as they are discreet. If exposed, mothers and fathers are merciless in their teasing. Children rapidly learn that sexual activity and public exposure do not mix.

By early adolescence, parents are far more concerned about their children's, and especially their sons' sexuality. Maturation, say the villagers, is not an inevitable process. Sexual and physical development must be induced by medicines and sexual abstinence. When a boy is eleven or twelve years of age, his father erects a seclusion barrier of palm-wood staves across one end of the house. The son ties his hammock behind the partition and begins a term of seclusion that, with interruptions, will last for approximately three years. Watching over him during this lengthy period is a spirit, "the master of the medicines," who makes sure that his charge confines himself to quarters, takes medicines to augment his growth, speaks softly, and follows all the dietary rules. Above all, the boy in seclusion must avoid sexual relations. Unlike the little girls he played with when he was young, sexually mature women are dangerous. Their menstrual blood and vaginal secretions can poison the medicines and even induce the medicine spirit to pass a fatal sentence: *makatsiki*, a paralytic disease striking young men in seclusion. . . .

The Network of Sexual Affairs

A boy in seclusion is almost invariably celibate, especially while taking medicines. Toward the end of his stay, however, it is common for him to succumb to temptation and sneak out at night for an affair. Upon hearing of such adventures his father rips down the seclusion barrier and expels his son into public village life. Now the boy is nearly a man, ready to cut his own garden, go on long trips away from the village by himself, and get married. At this point, too, he gingerly enters the elaborate village network of sexual relationships. Arranging sexual encounters with most village women can be a risky and humiliating business. Unmarried girls present no problem since they have no jealous husbands. Their fathers are pleased by a potential son-in-law who sends occasional gifts of fish over to the house as an acknowledgment of his indebtedness. So casual is the attitude toward premarital courtship that girls are said to unabashedly return from an assignation smeared with their boyfriends' body paint.

Unfortunately, from a young man's point of view, there are never many unmarried women. Despite the villagers' toleration of premarital sex, pregnancy out of wedlock is wrong. The *pukapi'inu*, "mother of the illegitimate child," is an object of scorn. The "fatherless" child is himself subject to abuse. As a result, most girls are married as soon as they emerge from the period of adolescent seclusion that follows their first menses. Virtually all sexual affairs, therefore, are extramarital affairs. These are fraught with danger because husbands and wives are sexually jealous. To use the Mehinaku idiom, they "prize each other's genitals" and do not like to see them appropriated by an interloper. Numerous cautionary tales warn the would-be adulterer against the fury of the jealous spouse. In these myths, adulterous couples are beaten, dismembered, put to death, and in one story, glued together in a permanent copulatory embrace. The tale of Patijai and his girlfriend is very much in this genre of cautionary myths (see Gregor 1977, 139, 145-46 for other examples). Our narrator is Ketepe, who has both more girl friends and more cautionary tales than anyone else in the village.

PATIJAI

Patijai went to the garden to have sex with another man's wife. He did not know it, but the husband was following close behind. Patijai and his girlfriend had sex together, and then they worked a little in the garden, weeding. Just then, they heard the husband coming, whistling as he walked on the path. Quickly, Patijai hid in a pile of sticks and leaves. But his foot was not covered up, and the husband said, "Oh, I think I'll clean the garden a little and burn off these sticks and leaves."

"No, don't do that. My mother hid her knife there," said the wife.

"Well, then, look for it."

"No, only mother knows where it is."

"I'll burn it all the same," said the husband, and he did. A huge fire sprang up, and out of the blaze ran Patijai, his hair ablaze.

"There goes your mother's knife, there goes your mother's knife, there goes your mother's knife!" shouted the husband. "You had sex with your lover. I'll club you."

And he struck her, and that was the end of her and the end of her former lover's semen, still in her vagina.

Meanwhile Patijai, his hair burned off completely, went to hide: "What has become of my son," his mother asked the villagers.

"We don't know. Maybe he went off fishing," everyone replied. But one woman had seen what had happened, and she said, "It's good that your son caught on fire after having sex with another man's wife. Sex fiends like Patijai are no good."

In real life, extramarital affairs seldom provoke serious confrontations. Only in the early years of marriage are spouses so jealous that they openly quarrel. As they mature, jealousy is tempered by social pressure that enjoins discretion in managing affairs and avoiding confrontations. A Mehinaku like the jealous husband in the myth is called an *itsula*, "king-fisher," a bird noted for its raucous scolding and aimless flapping about. Only a few of the younger villagers seem to deserve the title.

Even though sexual jealousy is muted, entering the network of sexual affairs is still a delicate matter. One low risk strategy is "buying" (*aiyatapai*) the girl's services with the help of one of her established lovers. In exchange for a small gift to both the lover

and the girl, she will agree to meet him for sexual relations and perhaps become a regular girlfriend. A second, bolder alternative is to approach the girl when she is alone in a public place. The path to the river and the bushes behind the houses are favored areas. Here the young man takes the girl firmly by the wrist and says, "Come, let us have sexual relations together." On occasion, the suitor may sweeten his offer with a gift, such as a bar of soap, a comb, or a small handful of beads. If the girl accepts, they will have sexual relations immediately in the bushes; or, fearing her husband, she may suggest that her lover come "alligating" (*aiyakatapai*) later in the day. "To alligator," in the vernacular of the Mehinaku men, means to summon women to assignations from small areas behind the houses known as "alligator places" (*yaka epuga*). The use of the alligator (actually the cayman, *Caiman crocodilus*) as a sexual metaphor derives from Mehinaku mythology, which describes the alligator as a libidinous animal who in ancient times had repeated assignations with two village women.

Like the real-life alligator who lies submerged for hours until his prey comes into range, the would-be lover remains concealed in his "alligator place" until his girlfriend comes into view. Even though she may not appear for an hour or more, he has to be patient, knowing how risky a direct approach may be. At last she steps outside of her house, perhaps to prepare some manioc flour. Smacking his lips, he signals her to come to him. The sexual behavior that ensues varies according to the participants' preferences. The most common position is "having intercourse while seated" (*putakene aintyawakapai*), in which the couple sit flat on the ground facing each other, the women's legs over and around the man's thighs. In a frequent variation of the position, the man kneels, resting on his legs, knees spread apart. As in the first case, his partner places her legs over his thighs while he clutches her about the back so that they are both supported. The prone position favored in our society is less frequently used by the Mehinaku, since lying on the ground leaves one vulnerable to insects and is considered unattractive. Most commonly, this

position is reserved for "having sex on top of a log" (*ata penwitsa aintyawakapai*), with both partners lying down, the man on top.

These positions are employed when couples have sufficient time and privacy. There are a number of other methods, however, adapted to particular situations and considerably less privacy. The most demanding of these is "having intercourse in the hammock" (*amakwaitisa aintyawakapai*), a feat that requires considerable gymnastics on the part of both partners. Although the basic side-to-side position has been described to me, I cannot understand how a couple can arrange themselves in a small swinging hammock so that they can have intercourse. The task is made doubly difficult by the minimal privacy in which such encounters occur. Occasionally, I am told, a woman will have sexual relations with a lover in her hammock even though her husband sleeps only a few inches away. "Danger," say some of the villagers, "is pepper for sex."

"Standing intercourse" (*enwitsa aintywakapai*) is a fourth position, best adapted to the fleeting moments of chance encounters along the side of a path or in back of a house. Holding his partner about the buttocks and lower back, the man lifts her slightly off the ground while she raises one knee. "In-the-water intercourse" (*unya aintyawakapai*) is the final commonly used position, occurring in the bathing area when a man is briefly alone with his girlfriend. Easiest to perform when the water is about chest level, the physical arrangements resemble those in standing intercourse.

This list of five coital positions does not exhaust the Mehinaku repertory and indicates somewhat more inventiveness than is typical of many societies, including America.¹ Not limiting themselves to one stereotyped act, the Mehinaku vary their techniques to match their mood and situation. Ketepe, for example, prefers the prone position because the penetration is deepest; but, he says "the women usually makes the choice."

Repression and Desire

"All men," Ketepe informs me, "like sex. But women are different." My data support Ketepe's belief to the extent that sexuality has

a somewhat different meaning for the women than it does for the men. Men are more overtly sexual, and hence it is possible for women to use their sexuality to secure food and support in exchange for intercourse. Moreover, women are subject to repressive beliefs and practices that confine and even suffocate their sexual natures. From an early age, a girl knows that she is "just a girl" and in many respects inferior to boys. As she matures, she learns that her vagina is "smelly" and "disgusting." She must take care that others do not see it when she sits or walks. With her first menses, she discovers that she is a danger to others. She can be held responsible for contaminating food, defiling sacred rituals, and making men sick. When she enters the network of sexual affairs, she finds that she must comport herself carefully. A casual boyfriend may seize on any unusual or uninhibited conduct in sexual relations and joke about it among his friends. One of the reasons that a woman expects gifts of her lovers is that a token of commitment is insurance that she will not be denigrated in village gossip. Even discreet sexual relationships are risky, however, since pregnancy is known to be painful and dangerous.

A Mehinaku woman's sexuality is thus linked to a sense of inferiority to men, to feelings of disgust about the genitalia, to concern about menstrual contamination, and to fear of unwanted pregnancy. No wonder that some of the women are *kanatalalu*, literally "rejecting women," and in this context "women who do not like sex." At the moment there is only one Mehinaku woman who is widely stigmatized as a *kanatalalu*, but the men complain that the others are less than enthusiastic. They are, in the male vernacular, "stingy with their genitals." This lack of interest is disturbing to the men. It puts into question both their own attractiveness and the legitimacy of their sexual demands. Women who consistently reject their suitors are the subject of gossip and are referred to as "worthless women" (*teneju malu*).

The men's complaints about the low level of female sexuality may also be related to their own lack of sophistication in sexual technique. With a few notable exceptions, the men do not engage in foreplay or touch the

genitals of their partners. Significantly, there is no word in the Mehinaku language for a woman's sexual climax. From my questioning of male and female informants, I am uncertain if any of the women are orgasmic. Certainly it is not an expectation that they have in participating in sexual relations.²

Most women, however, take some pleasure in sexual relations even though their level of interest is lower than that of the men. As Kama puts it, "Women act as if they do not want to have sex. You take them by the wrist and say, 'let's go over there.' And they say, 'Not me. I don't want to have sex.' I don't know why they say that. Perhaps they are afraid of the semen. Perhaps it is revolting to them. But when you sit on the ground and the penis goes in, then they like it. They thrust their hips. It is sensual for them."

Once a couple begin to have sexual relations regularly, they regard themselves as "boyfriend" and "girlfriend," a relationship that is in some respects like marriage. Boyfriends and girlfriends exchange food, spindles of cotton, baskets, and even shell jewelry, just as do spouses. As we shall see, men may even assume a quasi-parental role in relation to the children they have fathered.

As of my last visit to the Mehinaku, the thirty-seven adults were conducting approximately 88 extramarital affairs. This figure is only an estimate because the relationship is noncontractual, and opinions vary within the village as to who is having a genuine affair, and who is engaging in an occasional liaison. To put this number in perspective, it would be possible for the villagers to pair off in 340 extramarital (heterosexual) partnerships if they were unrestrainedly promiscuous. If affairs that are in violation of in-law avoidances, the incest taboo, and the respect owed older persons are eliminated, 150 theoretically possible pairings remain. Given that the actual number of partners is 88, I conclude that the villagers' taste for extramarital liaisons is limited primarily by social barriers, such as the incest taboo, and only secondarily by personal preference. In short, village men and women tend to have relations with each other unless they are specifically prohibited from doing so by the rules of their culture.

The sheer number of affairs is evidence of the villagers' intensely sexual orientation. The network of liaisons, however, is more impressive than the modest frequency of actual sexual encounters. These are limited by long taboos associated with rituals and the life cycle, by the absence of privacy within the community, by competition from jealous husbands and more attractive rivals, and especially by the difficulty of finding a willing female partner. These constraints on sex create shortages in the midst of apparent abundance. Nonetheless, several of the young men have told me that when they make the effort (importuning, gifts, verbal coercion), they are able to have sex on a once-a-day basis. The frequency of sex for the average Mehinaku, however, is far less.

Motives for Becoming Lovers and Some Standards of Attractiveness

Table 1 below shows that the number of affairs per person varies widely from zero to fourteen, with age and physical appearance as the main source of variation. Young, physically attractive men and women have more lovers. A youthful woman with long sleek hair, heavy yet firm calves and thighs, large breasts and nipples, small close-set eyes, little body hair and "attractive genitals" (those that do not show the inner labia) is an avidly sought after sex partner.

TABLE 14-1 Mehinaku Sexual Affairs (1972)

Number of Affairs per Person	Number of Persons Having the Affairs	
	Men	Women
0	0	3
1	2	0
2	3	0
3	4	3
4	3	1
5	0	4
6	4	1
7	2	1
8	1	1
9	0	1
10	1	0
11	0	1
14	0	1
	20	17

Appearance in men is also important. A heavily muscled, imposingly built man is likely to accumulate many girlfriends, while a small man, deprecatingly referred to as a *peritsi*, fares badly. The mere fact of height creates a measurable advantage. Men over 5'4" (N = 7) had an average of six girlfriends at the time of my study, while those under 5'4" (N = 8) had only 3.4 girlfriends. To a degree, these data reflect the advantage height gives men in their political relations with other men rather than simply their sexual attractiveness. As in our own society, men who are socially successful are more attractive to women as sexual partners.

An additional factor that correlates with numbers of affairs is gender. The average man engages in 4.4 affairs, and most of the men are fairly close to that average. In the case of the women, however, the range or variation is greater. The three most sexually active women in the village account for almost forty percent of the total number of liaisons, while the three least active women account for none of the community's extramarital relationships. In contrast, all of the men have at least one sexual partner, and the three most active men engage in only twenty-eight percent of the total number of extramarital affairs.

The data reflect the different meaning of extramarital relationships for men and women. The men's principal motivation for initiating affairs is sexual desire. The women, on the other hand, seem to value the social contact and the gifts they receive in the course of the affair as well as the physical side of the relationship. The result is that women who do not excite sexual interest (the old, the sick, the extremely unattractive) have little opportunity to engage in affairs. All the men, however, no matter what their age or appearance, can have an affair, or at least a sexual encounter, by offering a gift. All village men, therefore, have some sexual contacts, while some women have none.

The case of Tamalu, the most sexually active woman in the village, illustrates the different meaning of affairs for men and women. At the time of my study, Tamalu had fourteen lovers whom she had rapidly accumulated upon her arrival among the Mehinaku. Her initial reception in the village had

been less than enthusiastic, since she sought refuge there after abandoning a husband in another Xingu tribe. Though she was welcomed by her cousins and aunts, the men grumbled about her voracious and bothersome children. Each day, her two daughters were mercilessly teased by the village boys and girls. After Tamalu had been in the village for a while, however, these problems largely abated. Gifts of fish from her lovers began to arrive with clockwork regularity, making it apparent she was an economic asset to her household. In addition, some of her paramours took it upon themselves to protect her daughters from the other village children. Tamalu's case suggests that the pressures and incentives for a woman to engage in extramarital affairs sometimes leave her very vulnerable to the men's advances.

Extramarital Affairs and Mehinaku Society

Despite husbands' and wives' occasional jealous quarrels, I believe extramarital attachments among the Mehinaku contribute to village cohesion. Within the community, affairs may consolidate relationships between persons in different kindreds. Not only must a man find most of his mistresses among distantly related kinswomen, but he may be obliged to recognize children born of the relationship as his own. The network of blood kinship is thereby greatly expanded. There are few Mehinaku, no matter how marginal they may be to the village kindreds, who are wholly outside the orbit of these extensions of normal paternity (see Gregor 1977, 292-94).

Liaisons also enhance community stability by promoting enduring relationships based on mutual affection. Many lovers are very fond of one another and regard separation as a privation to avoid. In a community whose boundaries and unity are not structured by fear of war or by regular patterns of marriage with other groups, the relationship of lovers is centripetal. The traveler to other villages or the man who takes his family to a distant dry-season garden is never far from home in his thoughts. Eventually, he will return to his community and the pleasures of his extramarital affairs. Finally,

even invidious gossip and jealous intrigues are a part of the beat of Mehinaku community life. The culture of sexual liaisons makes the village an exciting and interesting place. As Ketepe often explained to me, "Good fish get dull, but sex is always fun."

Mehinaku men and women enjoy an organic and complex relationship. Attracted to each other by an enthusiastic heterosexuality, benefiting from the affection they owe each other as spouses and kinsmen, and profiting from their exchanges of material goods, they appear to stand united and indivisible. Yet within this pattern of attraction, they are in many respects opposed. Mehinaku society is separated into a male and a female world by fears of sexual pollution, antagonism, and anxiety. . . .

NOTES

1. The relatively stereotyped pattern of sexual relations is noted in Kinsey's classic study of American male sexuality: "Universally, at all social levels in our Anglo-American culture, the opinion is held that there is one coital position which is biologically natural, and that all others are man-devised variants which become perversions when regularly engaged in" (Kinsey, Pomeroy, and Martin 1948, 373).

2. The preceding discussion was suggested to me by Emilienne Ireland, whose research among the Waura (neighbors of the Mehinaku) has increased my awareness of the difficulties faced by the Mehinaku women.

CONSTRUCTING SEXUALITIES

READINGS IN SEXUALITY, GENDER, AND CULTURE

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