ANDROGYNOUS PARENTS AND GUEST CHILDREN: THE HUAORANI COUVADE

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Despite the current popularity of the post-feminist motto 'gender is the effect of discourse, and sex the effect of gender' which defines sexuality as erotica and ignores its life-transmitting function, I argue that there can be no sound theorizing of sex and gender which does not account for procreative sex. I base my argument on a discussion of the way in which the Huaorani Indians of Amazonian Ecuador conceptualize human sexuality as the channel through which parenthood is created and intimate relationships formed. Childbirth rites (known in the literature as couvade) form an essential part of this process. Having reviewed past anthropological interpretations of the couvade and suggested some modifications to account for the androgy nous nature of procreative life-giving in Amazonia, I show that social reproduction among the Huaorani is not primarily dependent on predation and warfare, but on the incorporation of the newborn. Returning in the Conclusion to postmodern views on sexuality, I highlight the limitation of analyses of subjective identity which do not address the beginning and perpetuation of life.

Everything suggests that the awareness of sexual differences and the distinction between the paternal and the maternal function are constituted simultaneously (Bourdieu 1977: 93).

Gender differentiation is, at the bottom, this differentiation of parentage (Yeatman 1982: 10).

All our customs come from life, and are made for life; we do not explain anything, we do not believe (in) anything (Saladin d'Anglure 1980: 30, my translation).

Simone de Beauvoir (1949) argued that biology was woman's destiny, and that, according to existential philosophy, this made woman into the second sex. What she meant by this is that whereas man can transcend life through his creative acts, woman can do no more than repeat life through the procreative powers of her body. My purpose in writing this essay is to show that, contrary to the common Eurocentric view so well captured by de Beauvoir, to give life is in many societies seen as an act of creation. To make this argument, I use the birth rites practised throughout Amazonia and known in the anthropological literature as couvade; in particular, those practised by the Huaorani Indians of the Ecuadorian Amazon, of which I have first-hand knowledge. I show that the birth of a child represents an essential moment of the life transfer process, by which the in-marrying

* Curl Essay Prize 1997

J. Roy. anthrop. Inst. (N.S.) 4, 619-642
husband becomes a kinsman to his wife and to her housegroup. This process involves the recognition of both a new person and the web of relationships without which she or he would not exist as a full social being. In the course of making the argument that to procreate is a quintessentially creative act, I review anthropological interpretations of the couvade, reflect on the devaluation of birth by some of the most influential theorists of Amazonian anthropology and, finally, challenge the predominant post-feminist position which, as I see it, reduces the meaning of human sexuality to the individual's desire for a sexual identity.

'Two making' sex: sexual complementarity

Upon arriving in July 1996 in the Huaorani community where I have carried out most of my fieldwork, I was closely and relentlessly questioned by my women 'kin' about my reproductive state. This was because on a previous visit seven months earlier I had plainly lied to them in the hope of getting more accurate and detailed information on procreation, pregnancy and birth, and said that I was pregnant. Now trapped in the lie, I tried to elude their questions by saying that this early pregnancy had ended with a miscarriage. At this point, my classificatory sister and close informant Hueica made an appearance. She was slowly approaching, holding her third son born just a few hours before my arrival, and showing the signs of fatigue and physical strain that delivery leaves on a woman's face. Had I really been pregnant on that previous visit, I would have given birth more or less at the same time as Hueica. Noticing my growing infatuation for her baby and acknowledging my childlessness, she often gave me the newborn to carry around. This of course did not go unnoticed and raised a series of speculations in people's minds. One late afternoon, as I was sitting in Hueica's house with the baby on my lap, visitors poured in for an impromptu drinking party. There was an unusual tension in the air and a word I had never heard before, tapey, got repeated several times amidst loud laughs and ribald comments. Broad jokes flew faster and faster, and the men's shaking with laughter started to make me feel vaguely uncomfortable. It all became unbearable when two of my male classificatory cross-cousins, who were more or less my age, directed their gauloiseries openly at me: if I so wished for a baby, I only had to ask them. Their behaviour was most unusual. Huaorani men had never treated me as a desirable female and I had so far enjoyed the freedom and peace that being a kinswoman gives. I received no dirty looks, no ambiguous comments or provocative gestures, just amusing requests concerning my own female relatives, such as 'If you live with us, your daughter will have to stay and marry one of our sons', or 'Bring me your younger sister, I am bored with just one wife'. I swiftly went to find refuge near Hueica by the hearth and shouted back that I would not listen to their bad words. Hueica added angrily that they would all have to leave the house if they kept misbehaving, and 'normal' conversation resumed. This is how I came across the word tapey, the only 'obscene' expression to be found in the Huaorani language. Obscene, for, unless used between a woman and her husband, it causes considerable embarrassment and discomfort. Tapey is what women say to men when they want to copulate. It means: 'Let's make another child'.

In Huaorani culture, sexuality is the reproductive activity by which heterosexual pairs (men and women who are not siblings, belong to the same gener-
ation and are of approximately the same chronological age) are ‘two making’ (\textit{mina pa}), or ‘sleep as one’ (\textit{arome mò}; \textit{mò} means both ‘to sleep’ and ‘to be married’) and, consequently, ‘multiply through copulation’ (\textit{niñoopa}). \textit{Niño} is what all sexed animals do to reproduce, from crocodiles to birds, jaguars, monkeys or dogs. Making love involves two persons in one hammock, and only two, so if a man has several wives, he goes in turns from one hammock to the next. Husbands and wives sleep together as part of growing into an organic unit which will eventually produce children. Sexual intercourse is overtly geared towards reproduction. Having babies is not seen as a by-product of sexual pleasure, but as a reward in itself, for adulthood is about pairing and giving birth to children. The few unmarried men I know live with their married sisters and act as second husbands in terms of the division of labour. The single mothers I know live with their mothers and married sisters. Their children have no father, for no man has shared substance with them through repeated intercourse and no man has performed the \textit{couvade} for them. There is ‘no good reason’ (\textit{ononqui}), it is said, for the birth of these children.

Sensuality, which a Huaorani would translate as ‘we live well’ (\textit{huaponi quehue-monípa}), is not centred on genitalia, nor is genital pleasure the exclusive realm of adult heterosexuality. Children actively seek sensual pleasure, for sensuality, which does not require sexual maturity, is an essential part of belonging to the collectivity. Whereas reproductive sexuality, the conscious and focused action of making a child, is goal-oriented, sensuality, like all forms of bodily pleasures, is amorphous and diffuse. It is promiscuous well-being, one of the ways in which the longhouse sharing economy is materialized. People living in the same longhouse gradually become of the same substance, literally ‘of one same flesh’ (\textit{aroquequi bòñ anobain}). The physical reality of living together, that is, of continuously feeding each other, eating the same food and sleeping together, develops into a common physicality, which is far more real than genealogical ties. As I have discussed elsewhere (Rival 1992; 1996a), on-going common residence in the longhouse forms the sociological basis of the sharing economy. Sharing practices express and continuously re-assert togetherness, and the repeated and undifferentiated action of sharing that goes on within the longhouse turns co-residents into a single, indistinct substance.\textsuperscript{3} The principle by which people become related through common living applies to diet restrictions as well. When a member of the longhouse residential group (\textit{nanicabo}) is sick, all residents must respect the same food prohibitions to help him or her recover. By contrast, cognatic relatives living elsewhere have no such restrictions. Relatedness may result from consuming together, or avoiding food together.\textsuperscript{4} Everyone in the \textit{nanicabo} partakes in everyone else’s care and well-being, and the more people spend time together the more they become alike. Persons and communities are processes that unfold in time, through the cumulative experience of living side by side, day after day. \textit{Nanicabo} members share illnesses, parasites, a common dwelling and a common territory. Sensual bonding, as diffuse as food sharing, unfolds as one aspect of the pleasure of living in each other’s company. Sensuality is practised, not as the realization of private fantasies but as the bodily expression of sharing. This implies that the need for comfort and physical contact is not necessarily eroticized. The wish for contact is not construed as sexual, nor the desire for affection taken to be a desire for sex (see also Liedloff 1986: 151, 152). It is therefore not surprising that the evangelical missionaries who translated part
of the Bible into Huaorani had great difficulty in finding the right term for adultery. They finally settled for *nano tohue nono* (literally, 'someone who’s having fun'), and resorted to the made-up expression 'someone who’s repeatedly having fun' (đê quête ante né tohuenga) to translate 'prostitute'. But Huaorani sexuality is not predicated on the repression of sexual desire. More, as orgasm is not considered the ultimate, most pleasurable bodily experience, its attainment does not constitute the main channel for the building up and the release of sexual energy. In my view, the almost 'anti-orgasmic' character of Huaorani sexuality is not caused by the fear of losing vital substances and life force; rather, it results from the diffuse, unfocused nature of sensuous pleasure.

Huaorani culture does not represent men and women as classes of people constituted by and through sexual desire, except, perhaps, in myths about the lethal sexual attraction between humans and animals. A great number of myths involve women who copulate with animals (anacodas, monkeys, tapirs and so forth), become pregnant, and, their insides devoured by the monstrous foetuses they carry, die. The myth of a young woman fatally attracted to a giant earth worm who resides underground beneath the longhouse and next to the hearth is particularly explicit about the awesome pleasure she derives from her repeated sexual encounters with the beast. The only myth about male bestiality relates the story of a man who finds the genitalia of the Amazonian dolphin identical to, and far more desirable than, those of a human female. He derives so much pleasure from copulating over and over again with the she-dolphin that he ends up wasting all his blood and semen, drowns, and dies in his animal lover's dwelling at the bottom of the river. As I understand them (on the basis of conversations with informants and of ethnographic observations), these myths express the asocial nature of excessive sexual desire and unreasonable attraction. They also, albeit more indirectly, suggest that sexuality is really about 'child making' and that this activity, which should only occur within the same species, starts as tapey and ends up as *baromipa*, literally, 'creating the child'.

**Men's participation in the birth process**

Although there is no native term for 'cuvade',7 the institution exists amongst the Huaorani in ways very similar to those described in Amazonian ethnology. As elsewhere in Amazonia, Huaorani birth observances fundamentally consist in perinatal dietary and activity restrictions for both parents. Some time towards the end of the pregnancy, the expectant couple stop eating fish and most types of meat. They are only allowed toucan (*yahuë, Ramphastos cuvier*) and curassow (*barë, Cracidde*) meat. In case of polygyny (men often marry two or three [classificatory] sisters), the other wife or wives eat, work and sleep as usual, and do all the siblings of the baby-to-come. From the time the mother enters labour to some days following the birth, the father restricts his food intake to boiled plantain or manioc broth. He avoids hunting and stays at home as much as possible, preferably lying in his hammock, where he spends the night alone (rather than with his younger children and wife, as usual).

When asked why they restrict their diet and daily occupations before and after childbirth, men invariably answer that, first, they do so because their wives do; and that, secondly, the newborn, who 'is one flesh' with its mother and father, must be protected from wasting away. The cuvade is not a male rite but a rite of
a couple. Parents are anxious to protect infants from diarrhoea and weight loss, perceived as a form of bodily ‘liquefaction’. Food taboos are aimed at ‘hardening’ the body, that is, at reinforcing its intrinsic energy. The goal is to make the baby vigorous and strong, so it can grow fast and develop into an independent member of the longhouse. Men I interviewed insisted that both parents were protecting the infant’s vigour and assisting its fast growth through fasting. This fact seemed to be far more significant to them than the precise details of what particular food should be avoided and why. What mattered also was that dieting parents behaved differently from fellow co-residents. Only parents-to-be avoided walking in the forest, to protect both themselves and the child from animal attacks. During conversations with informants, I also realized that these protective measures and restrictions were not different from those observed by the sick. In either case, the endangered vital force of particular individuals was restored through collective effort and the strict limitation of imports from without the longhouse.

Individual behaviour, however, seems to vary a great deal within these general guidelines. Couvade restrictions may last from a period of six months (three months before and three months after birth) to just one week. If few informants observe the most stringent diet (manioc broth), almost all report some kind of fasting in connexion with their wives’ pregnancies. The biggest change in food intake I have detected is the radical shift from a mainly meat to a mostly vegetable diet. It is also worth mentioning that if not all young fathers observe the couvade today, those who do not are not acting differently from their wives. In other words, there is no case of women dieting and giving up ordinary activities while their husbands do not, or, for that matter, of husbands respecting couvade rites when their wives do not. When Hueica was expecting her second child, for example, she accepted from a North American missionary nurse vitamin and mineral pills, which, although explicitly prescribed for her, she shared with her husband Nanto. Many young parents find perinatal observances bothersome and impractical. Nanto, currently the Health Co-ordinator of the Organization of the Huaorani Nationality of Amazon Ecuador (ONHAE) spends much time visiting indigenous communities and meeting officials in the provincial and national capitals. Just before taking on this responsibility, he and his wife left the house of his parents-in-law (where they had resided since their wedding) to live in his parents’ village. As Nanto’s duties prevented him from coming back home for the birth of his third son (briefly alluded to at the beginning of the previous section), Hueica’s mother trekked all the way from her home to be with her daughter during childbirth and help her look after the two older sons. This time, as her husband was away, Hueica did not observe couvade restrictions, and I am almost certain that Nanto did not restrict his food intake or activities either; but he did radio his wife from the organization headquarters at least once a day. And, although both have great faith in modern medicine, had anything gone wrong during the delivery, or had the newborn been unwell, they would have immediately started couvade restrictions, and Nanto would have come back home right away, no matter what.

Huaorani men do not ‘imitate’ childbirth, but take an active part in it, often acting as midwives. Unless labour starts during the night and the mother has no time to reach the kitchen area, births still take place near the hearth, which is now located away from the sleeping quarters. Huaorani women give birth in an old hammock especially hung near the hearth for this purpose. The middle cord is
pulled out when labour pains finally appear. The hammock, now split in two halves in the middle, allows the newborn to pass right through the hole onto large leaves on the ground. The expectant father helps his wife during labour by massaging her back. He applies stinging nettles (*huento*, a common analgesic) on her stomach, back and temples. He may reach into his wife’s body if there is a difficulty, as when, for instance, the umbilical cord is wrapped around the baby’s neck. He also knows how to assist her in breech deliveries. The father cuts the umbilical cord with a sharp instrument (usually a knife-shaped piece of bamboo), wraps the placenta in the large leaves on which the baby was born, and buries the bundle with the afterbirth in the nearby forest, at the foot of a slow-growing tree. Traditionally, the placenta was placed in a special clay bowl (*caanta*), also used by a girl to drink when she menstruates for the first time. This bowl is still used by men to prepare and store curare poison.12

A young husband is aided in all these tasks by his mother-in-law (he usually resides uxorilocally), at least until he acquires sufficient knowledge and experience. He might in fact do no more than observe her during the birth of his first child. But by the third or fourth delivery roles are reversed: the prospective father is in charge; his wife’s mother might not even be present. The other men of the longhouse, especially the father, unmarried brothers and brothers-in-law of the mother-to-be, if they have not deserted the communal dwelling, keep aloof from other co-residents and move about inconspicuously. Today, few Huaorani still live in longhouses, but births have remained communal events in which a woman’s close female kin (her grandmother, mother, classificatory mothers and sisters) actively participate, along with her husband and the young children who are commonly associated with her household. Even when she lives virilocally, a woman seeks to involve her mother in the birth process. It is not uncommon for her husband’s mother and father to leave the common residence just before labour pains start and come back when the infant is several weeks old.

Whereas it is the official father (the man who lives uxorilocally with the pregnant woman and forms an economic partnership with her) who cuts the umbilical cord, receives the newborn and buries the placenta, any man who has contributed semen may observe the taboos associated with the couvade, by which he publicly acknowledges his creative contribution to the making of the child. It took me a long time to understand that when an informant mentioned several names in answer to my question about who their father was, or when people were arguing about who exactly was the father of a person whose genealogy I was trying to chart, they were not fooling me, confusing genealogical and classificatory fatherhood, or making bad jokes. Alleged or claimed fatherhood can be translated into a multiplicity of more or less official links that blur distinctions between cognatic and affinal kin, and between the biological and social aspects of kinship. The fact that more than one father can be socially recognized is not without consequences.13 Children (particularly male children) who would have been potential affines had co-fatherhood not been claimed, are now half-siblings. Whereas co-fatherhood does not seem to have much impact on marriage alliances, for most alliances are considered acceptable as long as the rule emically expressed as ‘if the mothers are different [i.e. not sisters] the children can marry’ is respected, it multiplies links and reinforces solidarity between men, both inter- and intra-generationally. However, given that inseminators give up their routine activities and restrict their diet but are not involved
in the delivery of the child they have helped create, and given that the newborn’s maternal grandmother helps in the birth of her grandchild but does not observe couvade restrictions, only the official father fully participates, alongside the mother, in the birth process.\textsuperscript{14}

All men (but only two women) I interviewed about couvade restrictions ended up mentioning a popular myth about a time when babies were raised by their fathers. Because women did not know the muscular movements to expel babies out of their bodies, men were obliged to cut their wives open, extract the babies and feed them until they were old enough to fend for themselves. As women never survived the operation, and as there were not enough women available to remarry, men could have only one child. The myth can be summarized as follows:

It was a tragic, terrible period of our history, for married men could only have one child, whom they delivered by killing their wives. Women had a birth canal and a hole, but it was too narrow to let the child out, so men had to cut their pregnant wives open to get the baby out.

One day, \textit{wegõnhue}\textsuperscript{15} observed an expectant couple from a distance. The woman was close to giving birth, so her husband went to the forest to prepare the spears for the caesarean section. He was in grief at the thought of having to kill and bury his wife and raise the baby on \textit{kapamo} juice.\textsuperscript{16} But while he was busy making his spears, the little rodent came near the pregnant woman, held her in the back and taught her muscular movements to dilate the birth canal. The baby was born just before its father’s return. He was absolutely stunned and delighted. The word spread around, and pregnant women from the vicinity came to learn from the woman who had given birth without losing her life. From then on, the Huáorani race grew and multiplied.

When telling this myth, men put the stress on how terrible it is for the husband to lose his wife. The new father has no problem coping with, caring for, or feeding the child. But he is now spouseless and left with a single child. The primary concern here, which is with what happens to the wife/mother, represents the almost exact reversal of the concern expressed in the couvade.

\textit{Hosting the newborn}

There is only one term in Huáorani, which literally means ‘in the process of being born’ (\textit{têquê enaringa}), to translate foetus, newborn and infant. As in other parts of Amazonia, the child is said to result from the coagulation of female blood and male semen.\textsuperscript{17} I felt during conversations with informants (observing the movement of their scooped hands) that they were trying to impress on me that there should be an equal proportion of semen and blood, and hence repetitive sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{18} As the clot forms, it is activated – energized – by the Creator’s\textsuperscript{19} soul matter and becomes a child. So the child is all formed from the start; there is no process of transformation or metamorphosis, only a process of growth. Likewise, delivery is not sufficient to give birth to the child, who is definitively born only when the father and the mother have ended the couvade restrictions, and when a classificatory grandparent (a grandmother for a girl, a grandfather for a boy) has given him or her at least one personal name. Going a step further, I would say that the moment of birth is not the beginning of life \textit{per se}, but rather the transfer from one dwelling (the womb) to another (the longhouse).\textsuperscript{20} The word for ‘guest’ is actually ‘the one who is born’ (\textit{ne eñaca}); the word for ‘host’, ‘the one who is at home’ (\textit{ne ocõinga}); and the word for womb,
the place where children multiply' (*huinégãncoo*). All this suggests that birth is part of a wider process of gradual incorporation by which children, who start their lives in the mother’s womb, are progressively integrated within the longhouse sharing economy. This requires a period of transition during which they are exclusively fed by their biological parents.

According to Huaorani etiquette, hosts must give to their guests unilaterally and upon request. Guests are considered to be pure consumers, just like newborns, at least when they first arrive. Outside formal attendance at drinking ceremonies or feasts, visiting, which is always surrounded with an aura of tension and uneasiness, is fairly restricted. Visiting connects close kin who, having ceased to live together, now partake in the sharing economy of different longhouses. The connexion is therefore never between the visitor and all the members of the visited longhouse. The visitor is the guest of one or, at most, two or three longhouse members. A married man living uxorilocally who goes back to spend some time with his mother and sisters represents the typical visitor. If he comes accompanied by his wife or another member of his longhouse, these stay outside. He alone, the authorized guest, sits inside the longhouse. The wife partakes in the commensality of the visited longhouse from without, conversing with the hosts through the palm wall and, when food is served, she receives a share indirectly, from the hands of the official visitor. Another reason why visiting creates uneasiness is that guests are suspected of wanting to prolong their visit with the intention of shifting allegiance from one longhouse to another, or to find refuge there after a raid. Because guests may potentially cease to be exogenous to the *nanicabo* they visit and turn into new co-residents, visiting is always on the verge of leading to a process of incorporation and, as such, is intrinsically ambiguous.

With the birth of each child, parents are like hosts to newcomers, their guest-children, whose attachment to the longhouse is at first tenuous. Parents are involved in the business of creating a new life, that is, of adding new members to the *nanicabo*, and they protect the fragile connexion between the child and the *nanicabo* by respecting couvade restrictions which entail the alteration of their sharing patterns within the longhouse. From this perspective, parents, whose productive activities have diminished almost to nothing, have very little to give away to co-residents from whom they receive much less than they normally would, because of the stringent food prohibitions they are following. In other words, parents undergoing the couvade, while directing most of their giving-away practices to the newborn, the privileged centre of their sharing relations, share less with their fellow co-residents.

The child exists as a person from the first conscious parental acts of feeding, which denote, at the same time, the parents’ partial exclusion from the *nanicabo*. Moreover, their fasting and inactivity strongly identify them with the newborn with whom they form a community of substance. When both parents observe the couvade restrictions, the child is publicly linked to caretakers; it is a welcome guest. The parental ritual behaviour signifies that the child’s existence is unconditionally accepted. A non-desired child cannot become a person; it is killed and buried with the afterbirth. A woman pregnant against her wishes does not abort, but, having gone through the pregnancy without observing any couvade restrictions, buries the newborn with the placenta right after delivery. It is extremely difficult for orphans to survive, even when they have been adopted or when they
are under someone's protection. Social bonding starts before birth and develops and grows after birth as the child's needs are satisfied and its expectations fulfilled. Well-being is a prime concern of social life, and so is caretaking. Parents, through their repeated acts of unilateral giving away (i.e. sharing), transfer life substance onto a separate individual, who is no more linked to the mother than it is to the father, and who is made to feel just as at home in the external world as it was in the womb.

The couvade, therefore, also relates to a certain conception of children as inherently social, of child development as the natural development of self-reliance, and of individuals as their own proprietors. A child's inferior strength and dependence upon adults does not imply that its motives are not social, nor that it should be treated with less respect than an adult. There is no trace here of the view that childhood is an antisocial, animal-like stage in the individual's life cycle, or that it is the painful and conflictive process by which children grow up only if their needs are frustrated, and if owning parents and owned children stand in an adversary relationship. There are no wild instincts to tame or domesticate through socialization. If the newborn demonstrates its willingness to live by performing successfully during delivery and by actively breast feeding; if its genitrix and genitor(s) show their intention to welcome and host its new life through performing the couvade; then the newborn is considered human, hence social, that is, as social and human as it can be at this early stage. The implication is, therefore, that the child's process of becoming a person fully immersed in a developed web of sharing relations is inseparable from the process by which its parents become parents, i.e. a married, reproductive couple fully inserted within a matrifocal housegroup. As we shall see below, this is particularly crucial for the child's father.

In addition to the couvade, two important ritual practices denote the great importance of becoming a father. The ritual recognition of paternity finds full expression in the sacrifice of a young child on the grave of its dying father. It was not until the summer of 1996, when I had my most trusting informants role-play a killing raid and the burying of a dying warrior, that I could fully appreciate the nature and importance of what I call a child sacrifice, for lack of a better term. When a warrior is found in agony, left with spears run through his body and no chance of surviving, his male relatives dig a shallow grave, to which he is carried by his female relatives. His wife puts their youngest child in the grave with him and the two die by suffocation. When questioned on this issue, informants unanimously answered that this was done 'so the father would not leave the land alone, so he would not feel lonely in the afterworld'.

In the second ritual marking the social significance of fatherhood, a man of mature age, with some of his children already married, and fully incorporated into his wife's housegroup, acquires the ability to establish consanguineal ties of a more personal and mystical nature. He becomes a shaman when the spirit of a jaguar adopts him as his father and comes to visit him at night in the longhouse. The jaguar spirit first appears in dreams. If welcomed and encouraged to come back, he makes the man 'die' temporarly and takes the place of his soul. He speaks and chants, refers to the unconscious man whose body he possesses as 'my father', and addresses the man's wife as 'mother' and the man's children as 'siblings'. The term for shaman, meñe, may derive etymologically from miñe, 'jaguar' and 'bara', mother. Furthermore, dead shamans are said to transform into
female jaguar cubs who eventually possess other mature men who in turn become shamans. Contrary to the common practice in Northwest Amazonia, however, a shaman is never called to purify the newborn and its parents before their reintegation within the longhouse. Is the father adopting a jaguar son conceptualized as a female-like agent with the capacity to engender a child? Or is it, rather, that the male body can, after having begotten human children, host a spiritual, animal force? I do not know. But whatever the answer, what remains significant in this form of incorporation is that it takes the form of a father-son relationship.

Anthropological interpretations of the couvade

The couvade is classically defined as the custom by which 'the father, on the birth of his child, makes a ceremonial pretence of being the mother, being nursed and taken care of, and performing other rites such as fasting and abstaining from certain kinds of food or occupations, lest the new-born should suffer thereby' (Tylor 1888: 254). More accurately, it has been described as 'a set of ideas and related conventional behaviour that intimately associates a man with the birth of his child' (Rivièere 1974: 425). It has fascinated anthropologists, as both a typically Amazonian rite and a particularly telling piece of anthropological theorizing. What is striking about the different interpretations which have been proposed in the course of the last 150 years, is the irreconcilability of the views giving primacy, after Mauss (1979), to the idea of human individuation – fostered and protected sympathetically by couvade restrictions – and those reducing it all, after Bachofen (1861), to a paternity ritual institutionalizing the father's right. It is clear, however, that in the light of the current understanding of kinship, no longer seen as a social identity given at birth and fixed in a set of structural positions, but, rather, as a process of becoming (Carsten 1995; Strathern 1989; 1992), we should stop oscillating between these two positions and start thinking about the couvade as a rite corresponding to the process by which a new human person is brought to life and new relationships are created. It is only because of the entrenched view that the social is grafted onto the biological, with the corollary proposition that biology is woman's destiny, or that female is to male as nature is to culture (Ortner 1974),21 that the two positions are kept as rival alternatives.

Without fully reviewing here the anthropological debate on the couvade,22 I should simply like to stress that all the explanations offered so far have naturalized the mother-child bond, and have either ignored or misrepresented the joint effort through which the husband-wife pair transfers life onto a new human person, thus remodelling the configuration of affinal and consanguineal ties in their social group. This neglect is particularly obvious in the early reports on Carib childbirths, which all reveal the (male) European astonishment at, and disapproval of, the father's 'sickly behaviour',23 seen as passive, cowardly and shocking, especially when contrasted with the swift recovery of the mother, who, far from convalescing as a European woman would, resumes her domestic work immediately after delivery. However, the Carib parturient shocks the seventeenth-century French, Dutch or English man far less than her spouse does. She might be very distant from her European, civilized counterpart, yet her behaviour is intelligible: it is savage and animal-like: in one word, natural. But the comportment of the new father, which has no counterpart in the natural
world, appears utterly anomalous. The father’s lying-in subverts not only the order of culture, but also the order of nature: it is not a pre-civilized but an anti-civilized practice. Lionetti (1988: 143–2), who discusses the ways in which sixteenth-century European myth-makers spread stories about Amerindian male breast feeding, Amazon warriors and other aberrant sexual inversions supposedly observed in the West Indies, has shown the political implications of Western colonial fantasies about sexual difference, rooted as they were (and still are) in the fear of, and cultural anxiety about, the confusion of the sexes.

Tylor’s theoretical hesitation between mystical contagion and paternal function is ultimately due to the same biased opposition between mother-child (biological) bond and father-child (spiritual) connexion. His lucid remark that ‘South American tribes consciously believe that different persons are not necessarily separate beings’ and that the couvade expresses the native denial of ‘that physical separation of “individuals” which a civilised man would probably set down as a first principle’ (Tylor 1865: 292), loses all its power as he goes on opposing, and this despite the counter-evidence he cites, the nature of the mother-child and father-child contagion. Whereas he takes the former to be real (it is, consequently, perfectly rational for the mother to observe food restrictions), he finds the latter to be the result of the savage mind’s confusion between imaginary and real relations and, as such, purely mystical and derivative (Tylor 1865: 293). The distance from opposing real and natural mother-child contagion, and artificial and cultural father-child contagion, to arguing that the function of the couvade is to assert and realize the primacy of father right is, indeed, minimal.

Although found in other parts of the world, the couvade is first and foremost an Amazonian rite. When analysed in its proper regional context, with no pretention of developing a general theory to explain its origin and institutional development, the couvade appears clearly for what it is, i.e. a rite of co-parenthood. Métraux’s short article on the couvade written for the Handbook of South American Indians (1946–1950) was the first synthetic and comparative analysis of this custom in the Amazon region. In it, Métraux emphatically stressed that the Amazonian couvade was not motivated by a male desire to imitate childbirth, and that perinatal food and activity restrictions applied to both parents. While following Tylor (1865), Frazer (1910) and Crawley (1927) in interpreting these restrictions as a form of sympathetic magic, he also noted that food prohibitions were primarily aimed at the temporary elimination of animal flesh from the parents’ diet. Métraux (1946–50: 374) then concluded that, for those who practised it, the couvade was the ‘expression of the close bond between the father and the infant’s clinging soul’.

The challenge of explaining the couvade as both a rite of parenthood and the expression of a strong spiritual connexion between a father and his child has been taken up more recently by Rivière (1974) in an influential contribution to the debate. His solution to the conundrum is that the couvade, not unlike Christian baptism or compadrazgo in Latin America, is a rite of spiritual creation. Rivière thus interprets the couvade as primarily concerned with the creation of a complete person, composed of a body and a mind – or soul. The new individual’s physical part is delivered (i.e. born) but the spiritual part must be created, and if the father participates in the former his primary responsibility is in the latter. In the same line of reasoning, Menget interprets the process by which a new human person is brought to life and new relationships are created in terms of the
'universal system of elementary symbolics' (Menget 1979: 257). One element of this system is the representation of vital fluids, which structures the constitution of the person, her or his relationship to society and the creation of new individuals. Menget, following Héritier (1979), and perhaps more in tune with lowland South American social philosophies (Seeger et al. 1987), as Rivière would himself contend today (pers. comm. 1997), thus locates the phenomenon of spiritual creation within a more general theory of substances, which also encompasses incest prohibitions. He finds that the classification of food into forbidden and recommended, which underlines diet restrictions and incest taboos, and codifies the fundamental opposition between weak substances (water, milk, sperm, white flour and lean meat) and strong substances (foods rich in blood and fat and fermented foods), works to ensure that the progressive separation of parental substance, divided by the couvade, does not get reunited through incestual union.

If we now turn to more ethnographic materials, we note that most Amazonian anthropologists have insisted, like Métraux, that couvade restrictions are observed by both parents and, like him, have been primarily concerned with the active participation of the father in the birth process, as if the mother's ritual restrictions were natural and matter-of-fact. Such oversight may be due to the fact that pregnant and breast-feeding women in Western societies are also subjected to all sorts of behavioural and dietary change. Whereas, like Métraux, most ethnographers have paid more attention to food restrictions than to behavioural ones, they have, unlike him, stressed that couvade restrictions are essentially similar to those observed on many other liminal occasions, such as a girl's first menses, illness, death, or shamanic initiation. A comparison of their accounts shows that in addition to practising birth observances widely and explaining them in quite similar terms, Amazonian Indians also usually: (1) conceive of the child as the product of paternal and maternal influences (in other words, the child results from the complementarity of shape and substance, or of two substances such as blood and semen); (2) believe that repeated sexual intercourse before and throughout pregnancy is necessary for the foetus to develop and grow; (3) grant a special role to the mother's mother during delivery, sometimes in partnership with her son-in-law; (4) equate the end of the couvade with the naming (with or without ceremony) of the child; (5) prefer to space and limit the number of their children; (6) and, finally, try to achieve (and use infanticide if necessary) an equal number of male and female children. Beside these common features, which should form an essential part of any proper analysis of childbirth ritual restrictions, there is some variation in the duration and severity of the couvade. The most salient are: (1) the intervention of a shaman to reintegrate the couple and the newborn within the communal dwelling; (2) the preferred location for, and the participation of the father in, the delivery; (3) and, finally, the exclusivity of physiological paternity (i.e. whether several genitors are recognized or not).

The six common features identified above apply equally to the Huaorani couvade. They highlight two important characteristics of Amazonian birth practices. The first one is that childbirth does not constitute a radical break – it is not an event – but, rather, the process by which a new human life is gradually incorporated within the longhouse. The second characteristic is that childbirth is at once child-centred and parent-focused. Perinatal restrictions protect the child
and create new relationships between, on the one hand, the child, his father and his mother, and, on the other hand, the parents and the housegroup. They also emphasize, along with native theories of procreation and sexuality, that the creation of a new human life requires the same involvement from the two sexes, even if equal participation in childmaking affects men and women differently.

It seems to me that Rivière's (1974: 432) exclusive focus on the transcending effect of culture, which works at ordering and transforming raw biological matter (he sums it up with the formula Birth:Couvade :: Nature:Culture), risks the danger of overlooking the two central characteristics mentioned above. In the Amazonian context, the individuation of the child does not depend only on its getting a soul as well as a body, but on its being placed within a field of social relations, ultimately leading to its successful incorporation within a specific social group. By giving priority to a hierarchical symbolic ordering which makes the spiritual creation of the child not only necessary to its welfare but also socially more significant than its biological birth, Rivière could be read as ignoring such placement. Furthermore, given the father's special role in creating the child spiritually, his interpretation implicitly leads one to infer that fatherhood is more social than motherhood. This is in some ways the conclusion also reached by Bloch and Guggenheim (1981) in their study of Christian baptism, and by most Melanesianists interested in male initiation rituals (see in particular Godelier 1982). I am not denying that some Amazonian male initiation rites (Hugh-Jones 1979), like their Melanesian counterparts, promote the symbolic appropriation of female reproductive powers by men. But to assimilate the couvade to the ritual rebirth of male initiands under the control of senior male relatives would be entirely misleading and would represent a real distortion of the ethnographic data.

The couvade is not a rite of fatherhood but a rite of co-parenthood with special implications for men, given the uxorilocal nature of Amazonian societies. Menget's interpretation is similar to Rivière's in that both look for the signification of the couvade, not within the institution itself, but within the structural and abstract properties of dualist categories of substance which, ultimately, determine the social order. Menget's structuralist theory is attractive in that it draws no distinction between bodily substances and food substances (food substances are processed by, and in, bodily substances), a view shared by anthropologists who view kinship in terms of biological processes (see, for example, Carsten 1995). The problem with this theory, as with many structuralist theories, is that it tries to derive marriage rules from incest prohibitions. I do not take issue with Menget on his well-taken point that Amazonian parents understand the protection of their newborns in terms of the substances which make up the person, but, rather, on his overlooking the sociological significance of the father's recognition that he and his newborn share the same substance. Ritual abstinence by a man on the birth of a child corresponds to his public notification that he is connected to this child and to its mother, quite independently from marriage and residence. Through observing the couvade restrictions, a man claims to be a father. If he lives uxorilocally with the child's mother, his claim furthers his incorporation within his wife's nancibo as kin, while at the same time making his relation to his sisters (potentially the future mothers-in-law of the child) more affinal. Menget's global representational system ultimately articulates the categories of 'same' and 'different'. Among the Huaorani, identity and alterity do
not overlap neatly with gender categories. Within the category ‘true human beings’, that is Huaorani people as opposed to all other kinds of people and spirits, the gender category ‘woman’ includes the most alike and the most different. Whereas mothers and daughters (i.e. sisters) are most identical, female cross-cousins (mengui) are most ‘other’. If men’s relationships – even that between male cross-cousins of either sex – are always ‘consanguinizable’, it is absolutely impossible to consanguinize relationships between mengui. This is why women are both a source of identity and of difference.

Sperber’s (1996) critique of Menget entirely misses the sociological significance of the couvade, for his interest in the end is not to understand the couvade in its Amazonian context but to criticize what he sees as the arbitrary nature of most anthropology. For Sperber, anthropologists do not explain socio-cultural phenomena: they merely interpret them. Menget, he continues, should have first described the individual mental states of the Txikáño men he discusses at the beginning of his article and tried to answer two questions: (1) how did this ritual first appear? and (2) in which sense can it be said to be beneficial? The latter question ultimately raises the more fundamental question: (3) why is a particular representation more contagious and more frequently implanted in a particular population? Sperber’s hypothesis is that the man undergoing the rite believes that the precautions he takes do prevent the dangers and risks associated with the transmission of life. His starting point, therefore, is Frazerian; it is sympathetic magic he seeks to explain. For this, he focuses on the cognitive mechanisms by which such a potentially harmful fasting ritual as the couvade is selected and transmitted over generations, and identifies four psycho-social reasons underpinning the magical belief: (1) all misfortunes call for explanation; (2) authority-holders are entrusted with the responsibility of determining the cause(s) of misfortune and of prescribing preventive remedies, and with the task of transmitting the group’s customs and lore; (3) when misfortune strikes, those who were supposed to have behaved in a certain way and have not are held responsible. They, therefore, abide by the custom as a means for personal protection; (4) because the couvade has no real efficacy, its persistence must be explained in terms of the fact that actors make inadequate inferences on the basis of observed facts. One could well say that Sperber’s thesis does little more than re-examine Malinowski’s (1941) synthesis of Malinowski’s (1954) and Radcliffe-Brown’s (1965) positions on ritual and anxiety from the viewpoint of evolutionary psychology.

There are several problems with Sperber’s hypothesis, the first one being that he naturalizes the mother-child bond by thinking of the couvade as primarily the father’s concern, and by taking the reasons for the mother’s precautionary observations before, during and just after childbirth to be obvious (Sperber 1996: 54). Then there is the problem that by seeing the couvade as a defence mechanism against the risks of childbirth, he does not explain why beliefs structured around sympathetic magic and contagion are so widespread in Amazonia, particularly when it comes to the ritual association or pairing of closely related entities such as begetter/begotten, killer/victim, or predator/prey (Taylor 1950: 349). In each of these cases, the individuation of ‘self’ and ‘other’ is at stake. Finally, Sperber’s hypothesis in no way addresses the fact that the newborn’s welfare depends on its insertion within a web of relationships. All the available ethnographic evidence supports the contention that this is as profound and transmittable a
motivation as the concern with protecting the baby's health. As I have tried to show, the Huaorani's understanding of the couvade is inseparable from the notion that people who live together come to share the same substance, and that the good health of longhouse co-residents largely depends on sharing practices, including that of fasting together. The incidence of perinatal risk is not higher in Amazonian societies, nor are newborns perceived as fragile and weak individuals any more than in other, non couvade-practising societies. Like many birth rituals, couvade restrictions are at least as much parent-centred as they are child-centred (Bloch 1992). I therefore wish to argue, against Sperber, that the couvade is profoundly Amazonian and its existence intrinsically linked to the structural position of fathers, be they uxorilocally incorporated or not.

Conclusion: the value of reproductive sexuality

I have so far discussed the role Huaorani people attribute to sexuality and child-birth in the creation of parenthood and the formation of intimate relationships, and critically reviewed past anthropological interpretations of the couvade, suggesting that their greatest failure has been to overlook the fact that procreative life-giving is always represented as involving the complementary participation of the two sexes, often implying the constitution of some kind of androgynous agency. I would now like to summarize my argument on the birth process in many Amazonian societies, and conclude that it should be analysed from the viewpoint of its transformative effect on the procreative couple and, in particular, on the father. This leads me to reassess today's dominant thesis in Amazonian anthropology that warfare, predation and devouring are the necessary means for the constitution of collective identities and for their social reproduction. Finally, I will go back to the feminist and post-feminist quandaries with which I started this article to argue that subjective identity cannot be properly analysed without reference to the beginning and perpetuation of life.

As I have tried to show, the newborn child is a key element in the reproduction of Huaorani social life. The birth process - of which couvade rites form an intrinsic part - represents a state of inception as well as the incorporation of a new life at several levels. First, there is 'the social placing of the newborn' (James 1997), that is, the recognition of the child before its full social integration which, in Amazonia, occurs with the naming ceremony. In other words, the inception of life is socially marked prior to the social recognition of hereditary transmission. Then there is the fact that couvade restrictions are meant to secure the child's initial attachment to life. Life, far from being taken for granted, is seen as depending as much on the attention and care the child gets from the sharing community, as on the child's will to live - and to live with a particular set of parents (see Wagley 1977: 135). The parents do not give life to the child, but foster its introduction within the longhouse community of substance. It is because newborn babies are guests of their parents, on whom they exercise exclusive demand-sharing rights as part of their progressive incorporation within the sharing community, that Huaorani couvade restrictions, I have argued, temporarily re-order the longhouse sharing economy. Finally, the father and the mother have worked and made the baby together; they have shared the capacity to produce kin. So the child can also be said to create an enduring couple out of its co-residing parents. The couvade, in this light, represents a 'second marriage',
and not a 'second birth' primarily concerned with spiritual creation (Rivière 1974: 431). It does not replace the creativity of biological parents with that of spiritual parents, but celebrates reproductive sexuality, that is, women's and men's power to create new social beings (bodies and souls). The fact that in many Amazonian societies marriage is not the object of any ceremony, and that it is publicly acknowledged only after a couple has one or two healthy, thriving babies (Kensinger 1984) confirms that childbirth materializes the conjugal tie, and creates marriage. So the wife and the husband are in a sense 'reborn' as mother and father during the birth process. This seems to be confirmed by the nature of couvade restrictions, which, as Guss (1989: 135) has so rightly stressed, make the parents of a newborn child follow the diet of an infant and relive throughout the fasting period the first years of a child.

If the birth of a child irrevocably transforms sexually mature men and women into parents, it remains nevertheless true that fatherhood and motherhood constitute two non-equivalent forms of parenthood under the uxorilocal regime prevailing in many parts of Amazonia. A number of authors have stressed the fact that the couvade makes the social unit of parents-and-child visible (notably Da Matta 1971; Fock 1963; Seeger 1981). This in no way implies their allegiance to a Malinowskian functionalist interpretation of the nuclear family with its universal function of nurturing children, for it is the fact that mothers undergo couvade restrictions as native members of the longhouse, while fathers do so as incomers, which is socially significant. By dramatizing men's equal participation in procreation and by making it visible, perinatal observances have the catalytic effect of furthering the absorption of in-marrying men into their wives' houses. The rule of uxorilocal post-marital residence, and the critical importance of fathering children in men's social careers, are two closely related social facts. Men start their married lives as affinal guests, almost as visitors, but progressively lose their affinal guest status through fathering, i.e. co-hosting, children guests. By increasingly participating in their wives' naticabo through living, sharing food and bringing children to life, married men end up belonging to the groups amongst which they reside with their wives. When their daughters reach puberty they take them on a ritual hunt, as if the incipient sexual maturity of their female offspring represented the promise of more consanguinity—more kinship. When some of their sons and daughters have married and borne them grandchildren, they let the jaguar-spirits visit them, adopting them as sons. And they meet death, their bodies marred and riddled with the spears of the enemy, along with their last child, buried by their wives and wives' female kin as fully incorporated, consubstantial kin.

What about co-genitors who participate in the making of the child and respect couvade restrictions without actually being uxorial fathers, that is, living with the child and its mother? Co-fatherhood, I would argue, is identical to wife swapping (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 168-72), in the sense that these two very Amazonian practices equally render kinship categories elusive and ambiguous. This is particularly clear in the Huaraoran case, where a single term (nanoongue) is used for 'wife', 'husband', 'wife's (classificatory) sisters', and 'husband's (classificatory) brothers'; where many in-marrying men end up developing conjugal ties with one or two of their first wives' younger sisters (therefore strengthening their evolving position as insiders and fathers), and where men, who are occasionally permitted to have sex with their classificatory wives, 'co-sire' the children of their
classificatory brothers. True, Huaorani housegroups (nanicaboiri) are unusual in their extreme preference for limiting the number of in-coming sons-in-law, their high percentage of double cross-cousin marriages (i.e. alliances between two longhouses united through cross-sex siblingship), and their ‘filial adoptive’ relationship to the supernatural world. Huaorani society may be extreme in its treatment of the wife-husband relationship as the axis of consanguinity, and of the brother-sister one as the axis of affinity. It nevertheless remains the case that the widespread character of shared biological paternity throughout Amazonia must be accounted for. Paradigmatic consanguinity is not purely female, nor paradigmatic affinity purely male, everywhere (Descola 1993: 175; Viveiros de Castro 1992; 1995).

Finally, I have briefly alluded to the fact that sexual isomorphism30 (i.e. the reproductive power of husband-wife or brother-sister cross-sex pairs) equally underpins Huaorani representations of procreation, social reproduction and fertility – as either ‘natural abundance’ or ‘increase through gestation’31. The Huaorani may well be exceptional in their ‘victims of predation’ syndrome,32 but their cultural insistence that they can reproduce themselves without the intervention of external creators nonetheless requires Amazonian anthropologists to exercise caution in their claim that killing, cannibalism and predation are the primary means of social reproduction throughout Amazonia (Menget 1985; Viveiros de Castro 1992; 1995), or that homicide and warfare (in opposition to biological processes such as birth which are not specific to humans), the products of consciousness and intentionality, are the real sources of a group’s fertility and procreative power (A. C. Taylor 1996). My endeavour in this article has been to demonstrate that the birth process is a rich cultural domain, at least in societies practising the couvade, and that life giving may involve as much consciousness and intentionality as, and be politically as significant as, life taking.

It is ironic that while a dominant current in Amazonian anthropology identifies warfare with identity formation and subjective will, constructivist social theory makes of sexual embodiment a central issue, and of sexed bodies the privileged terrain to test the discursive construction of the real and the material (Butler 1993). Neither of them, however, has very much to say about procreativity. In contrast to an earlier generation of feminist scholars who challenged patriarchal ideologies that reduce women’s prime contribution to society to their biological capacity for nurturing and reproducing, the new gender theorists are fundamentally concerned with individual sexed subjectivity and the embodiment of sexual identity. Their main claim is that, as sex is no more an essential property than gender is, it is no longer useful to differentiate sex from gender. Their units of analysis are no longer gender categories, i.e. ‘men’ and ‘women’, but ‘fully individuated subjects’ constituted through their sexual desires. Sex is the most decisive and crucial component of one’s social identity, given that the individual subject is an effect of his or her (sexual) desire, and this independently of his or her genitalia. Moore (1994: 6), for example, asserts that ‘there are different ways of being gendered because there are different ways of living one’s sexuality’. What I find remarkable about these theorizations is that they treat reproductive sex as entirely ideological, oppressive or irrelevant. Butler (quoted in Segal 1994: 27-8), for instance, remarks that ‘most women will spend almost all their lives not pregnant, not giving birth and not suckling their young’. As, she goes on, non-parenthood is an objective socio-economic fact for a majority of
women in industrialized societies, pregnancy and childbearing are not the reality of female bodies; they are no more than the products of ideology and prescriptive discourses. This leads her to conclude that the institution of reproduction is not a salient question for thinking about gender in our Western, end-of-second-millennium, context (see Rival et al. in press).

I could have mimicked performative theory in my interpretation of the couvade, and presented expectant fathers as parodying birthing mothers in an excess of ironical consciousness used to deflect the compulsive character of sexual reproduction by imitation. This, however, would have really done violence to the ethnographic material. The creation of a new life, which is an important component of adult identity formation, is a joint project, which transcends gender difference. The unit of analysis is not the individual materializing through hegemonic discourse, but the conjugal body giving birth to a third body.

NOTES

I dedicate this essay to my Canelo Quichua friend Leonardo Viteri, who has patiently explained to me the meaning of Amazonian husbandry and fatherhood, and to Ningui, my ‘little son’, monito nanomoca, huĩñe hiĩ, monito huaponi ghehuenonipa, manonay amonipa. Fieldwork among the Huarani was supported by the Wenner Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research (Grant #GR5146), with additional funding from the Linnean Society of London. The work on which this article is based was originally presented in the Department of Anthropology at Oxford, in October 1996. I am very grateful to Peter Rivièere, who inspired me to write on Amazonian birth rites, and who commented on earlier drafts. Many thanks also to Marilyn Strathern and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro for their invaluable comments and criticisms. I am grateful to Simon Harrison for his editorial suggestions.

1 Any dictionary definition (the one from my Petit Robert for example) mentions that the word ‘sexual’ was coined in 1742 from a Latin root to describe what is relative to male and female reproductive functions. The term ‘sexuality’, coined in 1838, was first used by biologists as a synonym for ‘genitality’, to refer to the set of traits characteristic of each sex. It was not before 1924 that sexuality came to mean all the behaviours relating to sexual instinct, sexual desire and its satisfaction. In other words, the notion of sexuality as we know it has developed with the birth of psychoanalysis.

2 Ironically enough, missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) have used this word to translate the honourable, male-centred Biblical term ‘to beget’.

3 If living together turns people into the same substance, the process is not irreversible. The sharing of a common substance lasts only as long as it is sustained through continuous sharing practices. It is not permanent, and can be discontinued. However, reversing the process is a serious matter. Individuals who leave one group for another undergo a change of identity, which is usually marked by the adoption of a different personal name. They have become ‘other’ and cannot go back to the longhouse they left, where they would be taken for malevolent spirits, who have returned only to kill and devour their former kin-associates.

4 Da Matta (1982) was the first anthropologist to stress the importance of ‘substance relationships’ in native Amazonia, and to discuss the concomitant belief that parents influence the physical appearance and health of their children according to the foods they eat or avoid.

5 The brother-sister incest myth, in which a brother transforms himself into a mosquito and seduces his sister by getting into her throat, could also be interpreted as a form of animal-human intercourse, but it does not have the erotic charge found in the other myths (Rival 1996b).

6 The suffix ending tapey derives from – or at least is related to – the expression iey, which indicates force and vitality. The same suffix is found in maney, the action of inserting manioc stalks into the holes hastily created with the digging stick into the forest ground before fruit fell felling. The expression iey is used by hunters when blowing a dart through the blowpipe. Baromipa, on the other hand, is also used to talk about the making of a blowpipe or spear by a man and the making of a pot
by a woman. I am not sure whether the term baromipu is also used with reference to the conjoint
making of a hammock by the conjugal pair. However, and revealingly, baromipu has been used by
the SIL missionaries to translate ‘God’s creation’.

7 This is generally the case. Butt Colson (1975), Da Matta (1982) and Guss (1989) note that their
informants refer to perinatal restrictions with the same generic term they also apply to other
periods of fasting and confinement. To my knowledge, only the Wayápi studied by Grenand (1984),
who use a similar term to refer to both parental birth observances and a bird sitting on top of eggs,
view the couvade as a kind of human brooding.

8 For instance, Århem 1981; Barbira-Freedman n.d.; Basso 1973; Butt Colson 1975; Da Matta
Menget 1979; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971; Rivière 1974; Seeger 1981; Shapiro 1972; Wágley 1977;
Wilbert 1974.

9 This is a list – far from exhaustive – of some of the taboos. Root crops such as papa china, tamote
and sweet potato must be avoided, otherwise the child will not stand on its feet, and will be too
heavy to walk well. Parents should eat only plantain and manioc and avoid all types of meat. As soon
as labour pains start, parents must avoid aba, bayenca and nihuino fish. It is acceptable (according to
some informants only) to eat yeye, queremene and tarano fish. It is prohibited to eat howler or woolly
monkey heads, as well as the feet, tails and heads of other animals. Squirrel meat is forbidden
during pregnancy but can be eaten after childbirth. Colatai (wild turkey) should not be eaten.
When the baby is several months old, the parents can eat woolly monkey again. When it is older,
they can eat howler monkey again. They should not eat manioc which has been cooked in the
morning. It should be put in a basket to dry and be eaten at sunset. Any of these taboos, if violated,
causes a specific abnormality in the infant. As noted by Métraux (1956: 369), avoidances are ‘based
on the belief that some unfavourable characteristic of the animal or plant could be sympathetically
transmitted to the infant’.

10 As Barbira-Freedman (n.d.) reports for the Lamistas of the Peruvian montaña, greater
integration within the national society does not necessarily put an end to couvade rites.

11 In most Amazonian societies (see for example Århem 1981; Gray 1996; Grenand 1984; Harner
1972; Hugh-Jones 1979; Jackson 1983; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971; Wilbert 1974) women give birth
outside, most often in their gardens or in shelters built at the edge of the forest. The Tapirape
(Wágley 1977), the Tzikao (Menget 1979) and some Guyana Shield Carib groups (Butt Colson
1975) choose, like the Huaraorani, to give birth at home.

12 In a myth about former times ‘when humans and animals were the same’, the sun and creator
of all living things, Huéngógni, who is referred to as ‘our grandfather’, is intentionally taken to a big
fire by his treacherous river otter grandchildren, and dies. His wife, ‘our grandmother’, picks the
ashes, gathers the bone remains and piles them up in a leaf funnel, which she places above a caanta
clay bowl. The water she pours on them drips into the bowl, drop by drop. When she comes back
the following morning, she finds a four-month-old baby in the pot; it is her husband, reborn.
Today, men prepare curare poison by scraping the oonta vine (Curarea tecunumum) onto mû leaves
rolled into a funnel. They place the funnel above a small clay pot they call aanta, slowly run a small
quantity of water over it, and place the pot filled with black liquid over the embers of the cooking
hearth for several hours.

13 Multiple genitors seem to be more common in central Brazil than in the northwest Amazon.
A good description is offered by Seeger (1981: 149):

A man who believes that his wife’s new born is not his child may observe diet restrictions
very severely until the child gets sick; then he knows that the child is not his, since the child
became sick in spite of his observing the restrictions. Or he may not observe any restrictions
and note that the child stays healthy. This last, however, is considered a bad procedure by the
rest of the village.

Wágley (1977: 133) reports that, among the Tapirape, ‘When it was known that a woman had had
intercourse with several men (four, five or more), then the child had “too many fathers”’. As this
would endanger the child’s health and well-being, the newborn was buried at once with the
afterbirth. Among the Timbira (Nimuendajú 1946, cited in Paige & Paige 1981: 192-3), the mother
must name all the possible genitors at the time of delivery. All named men must perform the
couvade.

14 By cutting the newborn’s navel cord, the father publicly demonstrates his willingness to accept
paternity. This point is particularly well illustrated in Holmberg (1969: 177-84, 192-4).
A small mouse-like rodent which comes in the kitchen at night to feed on manioc and sweet potato.

Kapamo is a root similar to manioc in appearance, but with a juicy sweet white flesh which can be eaten raw like a fruit. It is still given to babies and young children as a complement to breast milk. Other versions mention that fathers raised their children on woolly monkey brains.

It should be noted, however, that a majority of groups favour a patrilateral theory of conception. The Arakenbut, for example, believe that a man’s semen is a part of his physical and spiritual being that is transferred to his wife:

The gradual accumulation of semen in her womb results in the formation of a child who is substantially a reformation of the father. Any differences are accounted for by the influence of the shape of the womb, or the fact that several fathers were responsible for the formation of the child.

Da Matta (1982: 171) notes a very similar reasoning among the Apinayé.

Hugjûngui, the original ancestor, ‘our grandfather’ (monito même), is at the origin of all animal and human life on earth.

Compare Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971: 140): ‘The newly born child effects the passage from one uterine existence to another’.

Each of these explanations [of the couvade] really errs in not taking into account the woman’s side of the question. They show a sympathy with the father and the child, but forget the mother, and are thus a modern document, illustrating the history of woman’s treatment by man.

For the historical debate following Tylor’s (1865) coining of the term ‘couvade’ see Tylor (1888; 1892a; 1892b) and Murray (1892a; 1892b; 1892c). See Tylor (1888), Roth (1893), Crawley (1927: 175-202) and Frazer (1910, vol.i: 72-3, vol.iv: 244) for discussions of why Tylor abandoned his earlier position that the couvade was a form of sympathetic magic and adopted Bachofen’s socio-political explanation. See Malinowski (1927) for the functionalist view that the couvade legitimizes the father’s social role, and Douglas (1975) that it acts as a binding force in societies where the marriage link is weak. Lévi-Strauss (1962) briefly discusses the couvade as a form of totemic thought in the context of naming systems. Rivière’s (1974) influential explanation stresses the dual (body/mind) constitution of the human person. Menget (1979) defines couvade observances in relation to incest taboos, in terms of a general structuro-symbolic grammar of strong (hot) and weak (cold) substances. More recently, Sperber (1996) has explained the couvade in evolutionary-psychological terms as an epidemiologically communicated cultural representation relating to perinatal risks. Surprisingly enough, despite the obvious interest the couvade should have for cultural materialism and cultural ecology, no-one has ever – at least to my knowledge – tried to demonstrate the adaptive value of the couvade, except perhaps indirectly as a form of food prohibition (Ross 1978).

Only Rochefort (1665: 550), who is the first to describe a Carib father undergoing couvade restrictions, and those who have written about the Caribbean natives on the basis of Rochefort’s first-hand observations, compare them to a supposedly similar old French peasant custom. There is no mention of the word couvade in Dutertré (1661-71: 372), for example.

Tylor explicitly writes in The Academy (5 Nov 1892, p. 412) that it is because of its etymological reference to brooding or hatching that he upgraded the local term couvade to the status of a general concept (with which he could measure historical development and social progress) to define birth customs characterized by the confinement and restriction of the father for a period after the birth of his child. The institutional development of the couvade was in his view somewhat modelled on the natural evolution of sexual reproduction from birds to mammals. However, except for the Wayãpi studied by Grenand (1984), who use a similar term to refer both to parental birth observances and to the action of a bird sitting on its eggs, there is no evidence that the couvade is emically perceived as a kind of human brooding. Murray’s (1892) etymological and historical investigations have convincingly shown that Rochefort’s (1665) derogatory use of the term faire couvade referred to a French satirical expression used to deride the cowardly behaviour of men who do not get involved in public affairs or fight, but instead stay at home like hens crouching down on their eggs, or, in American slang, ‘chicken-hearted’ or ‘chicken-livered’. I would like to propose, although this would require further investigation, that to appreciate the derogatory meaning attached to the
comparison of cowardly men with hens, one must contrast it with the sexual connotations of cock symbolism. The Gallic rooster is the symbol of virility (as the emblem of the French nation-state, it expresses conquering and victorious patriotism) and of sexual prowess (Don Juan and Casanovas are called 'cocks' in popular French). Interestingly, the ungentlemanny, recreant connotation has survived into modern French, in which couraison, the term for brooding or incubation, derives from the verb couver, a verb commonly used to mean 'hatching a plot' or 'meditating schemes of vengeance'.

25 Sadly, the influence of such prejudiced interpretation has made its way even into current encyclopedic definitions of couvade (Hunter & Whitten 1976: 93-94; Jones 1995: 124).

26 See for example the citation from a Tamanac informant recorded by Abate Gilij (Tylor 1865: 289-90).

27 Couvade rites reduce male anxiety about the uncertainties of birth, but, if performed incorrectly or not at all, the rites may create or increase anxiety. See Paige & Paige (1981: 40-1) for a discussion of this point.

28 This is the sense in which I interpret Lévi-Strauss's (1962: 258-59) remark that both parents respecting couvade restrictions imitate the child.

29 I am aware that my structural-functionalist argument focused on the uxorial condition of Huaorani fathers does not adequately explain the role of the couvade in societies with a strong patriloclal ideology. A truly pan-Amazonian explanation of the couvade may require that we transcend the sociological level of unilocal marriage rules, to define the jural and physical nature of Amazonian fatherhood, following Houseman's (1988) structural thesis regarding the non-empirical and universal character of the differences between male and female parenthood within the framework of their hierarchical integration.

30 Cross-gender social interactions are conflictive and cosmologies male-biased in some Amazonian societies. It is wrong, however, to interpret all complementary oppositions (self/other, kin/affine, victim/killer, virilocal/uxorilocal, and so forth) in sexual terms, as if they were variations on the same universal theme. Moreover, the fact that cosmological systems are saturated with sexual and other bodily images (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971; Roe 1982) should be understood as an expression of the importance of organic life, fertility and biological reproduction in Amazonian thinking.

31 In Rival (in press) I detail the process by which the couple (not the two individuals forming it) hosting a manioc drinking ceremony symbolizes, as an indivisible unit, a tree undergoing the slow biological process leading to maturation and fruiting, and argue that bearing a baby (gestation) and bearing fruit (fruiting) are conceptualized as identical processes.

32 The Huaorani social universe is partitioned into two irreducible and essential categories, 'the true human beings' (Huaorani) and 'the cannibals' (all non-Huaorani), who stand in a relation of unilateral predation, with man-eating predators replenishing their strength and vitality at the expense of the Huaorani, their human victims.

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Parents androgynes et enfants invités: la couvade chez les Huaorani

Résumé

N'hésitant pas à contredire la devise post-féministe 'le genre est un effet du discours, et le sexe un effet du genre' (pourtant très populaire aujourd'hui), parce qu'elle confond la sexualité avec l'érотisme, et choisit d'ignorer le rôle joué par celle-ci dans la transmission de la vie, l'auteur défend la position que toute théorie du sexe et du genre devrait partir de la fonction procréatrice. L'argument est développé à partir de la conception que les Huaorani de l'Amazonie équatorienne se font de la sexualité humaine. Elle représente pour eux une voie privilégiée pour créer la parenté et former les relations intimes. Les rites de naissance (plus connus dans la littérature ethnologique sous le nom de couvade) font partie intégrante de ce processus. L'auteur passe en revue les interprétations passées de la couvade, et suggère de les modifier dans un sens qui permette prendre en compte la nature androgyne du phénomène procréatif tel qu'il est vécu et représenté en Amazonie. Elle démontre ensuite que la reproduction sociale chez les Huaorani ne dépend pas au premier chef de la prédation et de la guerre, mais plutôt de l'incorporation du nouveau-né. L'article se termine par une brève discussion des positions post-modernes sur la sexualité, jugées limitées et erronées, car privilégiant l'identité subjective, ce qui rend impossible toute analyse des conceptions indigènes concernant le début et la perpétuation de la vie.

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