

Patterns of Sexual Behavior: The Athabascans of Interior Alaska

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INTRODUCTION

I suggest that the specific forms that now characterize Athabaskan sexual expression directly reflect unconscious personality dynamics that are themselves entwined with other aspects of Athabaskan culture, and which show significant continuities from precontact and early contact times. That sexual behavior expresses culturally supported values and assumptions in interpersonal behavior has been suggested by anthropologists over the past 40 or more years (Mead 1930, 1935, 1949). Psychoanalysts and others have long proposed that sexual behavior expresses the deepest levels of unconscious motivation (Roheim 1940, 1942, 1946). The entire field of culture and personality as a subdiscipline has been concerned primarily with the complex interrelationships between unconscious motivations, themselves assumed to be an ur-strata of the human psyche, and the social structural and cultural setting that provides various frameworks for their expression and control by psychic defenses, and coping mechanisms.

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During this period of time my own observations have been discussed with and to the extent possible cross-corroborated with other Athabascan Indians who must remain nameless. I am additionally grateful to the insights provided by Dr. Joseph Bloom, psychiatrist in Anchorage; Dr. William Rader, psychiatrist in Anchorage; Dr. Mitchell Weatherhorn, clinical psychologist in Anchorage (with whom I collaborated in some of the field work); various physicians and staff personnel at Alaska Psychiatric Institute and the Public Health Service Native Hospital in Anchorage; Betty Pleasant, social worker for the Public Health Service in Anchorage. Intensive discussion and field work have been carried out with my colleagues Dr. L. Bryce Boyer, a psychoanalyst, and Dr. Ruth Boyer, an anthropologist. Further corroboration of my findings has been sought out in analogous field work carried out by others among Athabascan groups, especially Honigmann (1945, 1947) and Balikci (1963, 1968).

While I am grateful for the assistance of all those named, the final responsibility for our statements is that of the author.

THE CULTURAL PERSONALITY APPROACH

To achieve my ends I am presenting Athabascan sexual behavior as if it were a single phenomenon related to a single type of personality organization itself based upon a single style of socialization. There are weaknesses to a "unimodal" model of this type which have been pointed out by Wallace (1952) among others. I am, of course, aware that not all Athabascans act in the manner I am describing. What I do believe is that I am presenting a significant dimension of Athabascan sexual life whose importance tends to color even the behavior of Athabascans who do not overtly express themselves in the fashion I describe. My theoretical justification for this is the use of the construct "cultural personality."

By cultural personality I mean that integrated whole of unconscious concerns and interests, defenses, and coping mechanisms which can be said to characterize the members of a cultural group. Cultural personality also includes those institutionalized expressive behaviors that reflect defensively or creatively these fundamental concerns, and which are part of the shared heritage of the group.

Cultural personality, therefore, includes shared elements, conscious and unconscious, overt and covert, which are carried by the individual members of the group. *The definition does not demand*

behavior such as attitudes toward and actions concerned with sex. It is this particular aspect of Athabascan cultural personality, its sexual expression, which I attempt to describe and analyze.

BACKGROUND

The ethnographic and quasi-ethnographic literature on Alaska and other subarctic Athabascans expresses at first glance a paradoxical polarity in discussing aboriginal and early postcontact Athabascan sexual behavior.³ Some observers have noticed the reticence, even the puritanical attitudes, of Athabascans in sexual matters. Others have observed very open and direct sexual expression. My own observations and field experience have discovered both these aspects of Athabascan sexual expression in dramatic form in the same communities and involving the same persons at different times. My informants have further corroborated the truth of these apparently irreconcilable positions as well.

I am proposing that not only are both of these expressions of overt behavior truly a part of Athabascan life, but both appear to spring from the same dynamic sources. Briefly I assume and shall attempt to show that sexual behavior is fraught with deep anxiety for many Athabascans and that its form of expression represents both this anxiety and characteristic forms of defenses against it. Chiefly the anxiety over sex is rooted in a deep distrust between men and women, which is overcome by patterns of avoidance and teasing. Both males and females appear to view sexual activity as a kind of assault with the penis as a weapon (an idea expressed spontaneously and overtly by several informants); thus sexual activity has many overtones for Athabascans of a form of rape. These anxieties and distrusts themselves seem to be related to socialization practices and certain ecological *cum* social structural factors in Athabascan life.⁴

PRECONTACT AND EARLY CONTACT ATHABASCAN LIFE:

THE SETTING

The entire subarctic region inhabited by Athabascans was a region of relatively sparse game, extreme climatic conditions, and endemic hunger if not outright periodic starvation; such a climate

3. See especially Honigmann 1945, 1947, and Balikci 1963, 1968.

4. These and other aspects of Athabascan personality are dealt with at greater length elsewhere (Hippler 1973).

and while they are often shunted out-of-doors, they are rarely restricted in their choice of play objects there. A more careful reading of the literature, and an analysis of my own observations and of informants' statements tend to clarify the meaning of this apparent contradiction. Athabascans felt that the child's soul was very weak and could easily be lost. Much phobic and counterphobic magic was carried out with the neonate to ensure its (unlikely) survival. A continued realistic and fantasized preoccupation with death, especially of the neonate did in fact create serious anxiety concerning the child. For example, the child was in the past in areas I have observed, and still minimally today, given charms at birth to ensure its survival. Black feathers ensure its not getting gray, father's next hunt must be successful or the neonate is endangered, parental sexual intercourse is delayed up to several months magically to ensure the child's survival. (See Hippler, Boyer, and Boyer 1973*a*, 1973*b*, for more detailed discussion of this.)

Thus, though for the first year or more of life the infant was carefully tended, the care it received though competently custodial was fraught with anxiety. A kind of fatalistic melancholia seemed in the past and still seems to color Athabascan attitudes toward the infant. I have elsewhere suggested (Hippler 1973) that the infant responded to this minimal emotional intensity and the flavor of anxiety surrounding it by developing a belief in its essential interior "badness." The perceived cold mother and the negative introjects following from such a perception were the basis of the ubiquitous dangerous devouring and baby-stealing monsters with which Athabascans populated the universe. For example, most of the dangerous monsters, such as "brush men" who are still nearly universally believed in, wreak their most serious magical harm upon infants, stealing them, eating them, and so on.

We must add to this two additional notes. First, the mother, while providing adequate if not overly warm care, was also giving to the infant signals stressing her sadness and melancholia about its likely demise. Second, the mother's indulgence had a quality of both narcissism and personal melancholia which colored its impact. (This particular aspect of maternal attitudes has been noted by therapists at one of the Alaskan psychiatric centers, where large numbers of Athabascans are treated.)

At this time the child is slowly developing a sense of self-other differentiation and is beginning to see the mother as an object that

never in my observation overtly sexual. It is, moreover, extremely rare to see a young Athabascan couple either holding hands publicly, or even walking together. Unisexual groupings are far more common.

The concerns aroused also can be seen reflected in the folklore in which there are numerous examples of dentate vaginas that actually chew off penes. Thus, the male concern with potency, castration, and fear of (and hence anger with) women seems to be reflected in the expressive oral literature. Such circumstances still exist. As noted below, the realities of violence associated with the parents' sexual acts, in many instances, cannot help but create anxieties for most children.

For girls we believe that the "identification with the aggressor" was the principal component of the peculiar intensity of the love/hate relationship between mother and daughter which is so characteristic of Athabascan young women. I have observed in a score of cases, an early or middle teen-aged antipathy toward mother change slowly into a total acceptance of her as mentor. Usually this happens by the very early twenties. In most observed instances a girl will either become pregnant by a man who has no wish to marry, or whom she does not wish to marry, or become involved in an affair without offspring which ends badly. This is so inevitable a pattern that I suspect essentially similar unconscious dynamics in each case.

Attraction for and need to dominate and be dominated by men leads to interpersonal tensions where resolution in only the rarest of cases is positive. Ordinarily disillusion from beatings, infidelities, and neglect or nonsupport sends the girl back home to mother, with or without baby, where she is reinforced in her distrust by mother's warnings that "all men are like that."

To this I must add that a quality of a feeling of "we" versus the universe finally interpreted as "we" versus men was and is a significant part of female identification. Finally, the sad warmth of the early relationship could be very easily interpreted by the infant as "I make mother sad and unhappy." The infant's talion anxiety over its devouring impulses, and its guilt over the mother's hunger were critical introjections in ego and superego development.

If we add to this, "I make mother sad and unhappy, but she still says she care for me, and it is probably my badness which makes her sad," we find some key to the attempt by the infant to express deep love for the mother mixed with an anger and meloncholia in adult-

power over their children when the children are in some cases 35 or more years in age. This tactic is successful even to the point where the child becomes a grandmother or grandfather itself.

Further, since the grandmother tends to be "warmer" than mother, the child's capacity to finally integrate "good" and "bad" mother is further weakened. That is, grandparental indulgence of infants' indulgence of infants is interpreted unconsciously by the child, I believe, as providing it with two mothers, a good one and a bad one. The integration in the child of a consistent mature object capable of good and bad human response is thus retarded. The overall effect of these practices seems to have been to create anxiety about the expression of warmth, longing for it, but fear of it in both men and women.

The infant faced with chronic hunger experienced a generalized discomfort that persisted as a psychophysiological substrate upon which other personality development would occur, and which was manifested by free-floating anxiety. (See Greenacre 1941, for a discussion of these dynamics.) It is also forced to fear talion punishment for its anger at the "bad" mother, and finally has difficulty integrating "good" and "bad" images into a whole. Oedipal type trauma further added to castration anxiety for boys (already present nascently as oral-devouring fantasies) and to fears of penetration for girls.

This constellation of attitudes and defenses received final buttressing and support by the conditions under which oedipal concerns were worked out. Father, for both boys and girls is an outsider. In this matrilineal and matrilocal society a man did not give his clan identification to his offspring. He raised children, as informants note, "for the other people (clan)." He was the main authority figure for his sister's children not those of his wife. Thus the general distrust with which the members of a matriline always viewed the intruder who must marry one of their women was communicated to children.

The father was often absent from the home on hunting trips, and boys and girls commonly slept with the mother till the prepubertal seclusion of girls began. The arousal of oedipal interests in the male child would have been more difficult to suppress in the absence of a strong paternal protector against whom the male child could express oedipal antagonism and from whom he could receive powerful commands against his unconscious wishes.

heavy drinkers, or where there is no father, that sexual experimentation starts in the early teen-age years.

Sexual behavior for teen-agers always appears to have been minimal. In the past and now, enough generalized anxiety about sex and specific male/female fear existed and exists to insure that few early sexual contacts are made. Interestingly, both aboriginally and at present, first sexual contacts were very often with much older men and women. In the villages more often first sexual contact will be with an older Athabascan. In town, or in the larger villages where there is a resident or significant transient white population, girls quite often lose their virginity to young white men, either high school age mates, or in Fairbanks, to university students and often to military personnel.

In the villages the period of final latency and early puberty for girls is one in which they develop and refine their skills of teasing older adult males who are drunk. Their seductive activities rarely result in a successful sexual encounter, because they literally run, in groups, from the men whose attention they deliberately attract. The young men are "seduced" in this fashion only when they are drunk, and therefore "safe." When the young adult males are sober, the preteen-aged girls who tease them mercilessly when they are drunk, avoid them for fear of rape, which, paradoxically, is unlikely to occur at all when the parties are sober.

Rape, its fantasy, or sexual intercourse, which stimulates it, is one of the primary ways in which many young Athabascan women view sexual activity. I have derived such information both as overt statements, unself-consciously given, and from more covert behavior. Men are pictured as dangerous by women, but seductively attractive because of that danger. Sexual activity is perceived as dangerous. For Athabascan women it is generally symbolic of attack and overpowering, and since a significant amount of Athabascan sexual behavior occurs in precisely this way, such a perception has a reality base in addition to its unconscious genesis.

Young boys are taught to feel, and in fact do feel, terror concerning sex. They are most often initiated by an older Athabascan woman, if they live in a village. If they live in town, their sexual initiation may be delayed until they are twenty or more years of age, and will then tend to be with an Athabascan woman of similar age.

Both young men and women, especially in villages, have dramatic

he can get his wife *hors-de-combat* does he feel secure enough to initiate sexual penetration into the dangerous, unconsciously toothed, dirty vagina of what he sees as a virago.

We have observed, and note from other observers, that a previous night's sexual activity is evidenced, very often, from facial bruises and cuts on the woman participant.

Women so attacked customarily fight back, but lose the fight whenever their sexual desires overcome their fear of male aggression. Those women who actually win such fights dishearten men to the point that they are henceforth seldom offered the approaches that they have once rejected.

Aboriginally men married in their late twenties or early thirties; after they had proven themselves men, by potlatching and hunting enough to show their mature sense of responsibility. Customarily they married women considerably younger than themselves, often in their early teens. This pattern of deferred marriage among other things may well have functioned to delay the onset of sexual activity among men, in part because such activity was feared, and also to provide them with young, therefore less frightening sexual partners, though its rationale was to ensure that a man had proven his worth through potlatching.

In aboriginal times adultery was considered a serious offense, not, informants state, because of a moral judgment concerning extramarital sexuality, but because of the danger of creating jealousies and angers that would threaten the carefully woven intermoiety gift and marriage exchange system. An adulterer had to pay damages to the man he had wronged. A recidivist might legally be killed if the chief felt his actions badly disrupted the social network.

Thus, in aboriginal times, not only were there strong cultural strictures against premarital sexual behavior, but marriage rules themselves, which of course govern legal sexual behavior, were succinctly stated and integrated within the needs of the social system itself, supporting both that system and the psychic needs of the individual. Beyond that, clearly defined legal rights of sexual behavior meant that there were enforceable mores, based on cultural expectations, with the most powerful of legitimate sanctions to enforce them.

Culture contact, especially in the last 40 years, has collapsed this social system, and therefore has weakened all the institutional supports for legitimate sexual behavior and eliminated the power of

Since the outcome of these orgies is so predictable and invariant, those in attendance must, we believe, either acquiesce to the outcomes, or receive some secondary reward for undergoing this danger. I propose that these orgies provide their members an opportunity to express extreme violence and unrestrained sexuality, and often toward the same person, which is denied them at other times.

In villages, drinking parties customarily break down into sexual and fighting orgies where outcomes include few fatalities probably only because of the advanced state of intoxication of the antagonists. Sometimes nearly the entire adult male population of a village is away for summer work, fighting fires, or employed in construction. When this occurs, infidelity is expected and occurs regularly in the village, often involving transients.

Upon the return of the man or men, the truth is eventually leaked by gossip and the offending women (though rarely the offending man) are beaten by their husbands.

In one village of eleven families, six couples are below the age of 50. Members of four of these families routinely engage in infidelities upon the absence of spouses. Since everyone knows this, the return of the offended spouse leads inevitably to a round of accusations and beatings. In some incidents it has also led to punitive "rape" by the offended husband. In these cases, however, the violence, whether by husband or wife, is directed against the offending partner and not against the spouse's adulterous contact.

In the cities the outcome of parties is generally the same as the village orgy pattern except that less actual intercourse seems to take place. In both villages and cities, the next morning most participants confess a lack of memory of events of the preceding night. I am convinced that this is a hysterical forgetting that reflects not only the utility of not remembering insults that would force one to retaliate, but also provides an alleviation of guilt over wrongdoing. These blocked memories of infidelities and physical assaults, however, become unblocked at the next drinking party, precipitating a new round of retaliatory infidelity and physical violence to be forgotten once more on the morrow.

Thus, for many reasons, at this time in adult life, sex is identified with drinking and violence and as an occasion not of joy but of anxiety. This anxiety, while similar in some respects to that of aboriginal times, nonetheless cannot be controlled and countered as it was in the past by an effective social control system.

THE PRESENT

There is now a strong tendency toward orgiastic sex and violence, misuse of alcohol, and associated antisocial sexual activity for Athabascans. In precontact times, there was a great deal of reticence about sex, and certainly no such overt orgiastic violence-connected activity, so far as I can discover.

Athabascans in the past were deeply concerned with control. Control of affect and control of behavior were felt necessary to ensure that no bad feelings would arise between lineages and thereby endanger the all important potlatch system.⁷ The authority to maintain controls of all types was vested in lineage heads and their *primus-inter-pares* the chief. With the collapse of the chieftain system and the demise of the power of lineage heads after white contact, no one had the authority to arrange marriages. Essentially, no one had the authority to impose controls on sexual appetites—or to encourage them appropriately.

Faced with the loss of external controls, and with access to alcohol further to dilute or confuse inhibitions, the complex of attitudes of fearfulness, desire, and anger between the sexes had no mediators. The inevitable result was orgiastic jealous violence, and sexual avoidance interspersed with drunken rape.

Presently it is also much easier for an attractive Indian girl to get a white husband or lover than for an Indian boy to do so. Since the realities of life are that whites are of higher status, this angers Indian boys and, instead of precipitating antiwhite violence, leads to further male solidarity, latent homosexual contact, and violent retributive sex against Athabascan women. Thus in urban centers the reduction of external controls over behavior, greater ease of divorce, and a tendency for Indian girls to prefer non-Indian mates has led to an exacerbation of tensions between the sexes and a pattern of greater overt sexual behavior than was possible in precontact village society.

Finally, I conclude that the attitudes toward sexual behavior that were characteristic of precontact Athabascans have remained the same through time, although their means of expression has changed. That is, the kinds of institutional supports for the control of sexual expression arising from the psychocultural circumstances of precontact Athabascan society have been removed and altered by

7. See Hippler and Conn 1972, Hippler, Boyer, and Boyer 1973.

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