

Heteronormativity and the deflection of male same-sex attraction among the Pitjantjatjara people of Australia's Western Desert¹

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This paper describes findings from fieldwork conducted among Pitjantjatjara tribespeople of Central Australia between 1989 and 1997. The study examined the impact of a distinctive gender system and practices of masculinity, particularly sexual and ritual practices, on the risk of contracting sexually transmissible infections and other blood-borne diseases. The research was designed as an ethnography of masculinity, conducted via participant observation, life history interviews, ritual analysis, and critical reflection on the work of early ethnographers. The paper presents selected field data, examined in the light of early twentieth century anthropological description of Pitjantjatjara sexuality. It identifies a systematic deflection of male same-sex attraction away from possible resolution through sexual practices between men. Key components of this deflection are the ritual construction of a culturally distinctive masculinity, the inextricable linkage between masculinity rites and the system for arranging marriages, and the cultural coding of the penis during ritual. The paper concludes that although men may feel erotic attraction for each other, the gender and kinship systems of the Pitjantjatjara conspire to limit completely the possibilities for the physical, sexual expression of this attraction. The findings reported here add to our understanding of the cultural basis of heteronormativity.

Introduction

Although a blandly descriptive, rigorously clinical term like 'homosexuality' would appear to be unobjectionable as a taxonomic device, it carries with it a heavy complement of ideological baggage, and has, in fact, proved a significant obstacle to understanding the distinctive features of sexual life in non-Western and pre-modern cultures. (Halperin 1990, p. 18)

There is now a considerable body of scholarly work, including that of Halperin (1990) and Herdt (1981), to suggest that same-sex attraction and sexual practice has in some form existed throughout human history and across human societies, despite the relatively recent coinage and cultural specificity of 'homosexuality' as a construct. Scholars of sexuality have come to expect to find same-sex practices or attraction in most cultures, although not necessarily identifiable even broadly as homosexual, especially where social organization is not framed around sexuality, or interaction between individuals constructed around desire (see, for example, Parker

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1991, Shepherd 1987, Herdt and Lindenbaum 1992, Abramson 1992, and Abramson and Herdt 1990).

My fieldwork among the Pitjantjatjara people of Australia's Western Desert was conducted during the period 1989 to 1997. The Pitjantjatjara are a relatively large language group of approximately 3000 Aboriginal people, occupying a vast area of Central Australia around the junction of Western Australia, the Northern Territory and South Australia. They maintain a strong commitment to ancient religious traditions and ceremonial life, despite more than a century of contact with European colonization (see Spencer and Gillen 1899, Finlayson 1936, Mountford 1950, Gould 1969, Yengoyan 1969, Brokensha 1975, Mountford 1976, Peterson 1976, Layton, 1986). The study described here (Willis 1997) was aimed at understanding the nature and place of men's high-risk practices for the transmission of sexually transmissible and other blood-borne diseases, through a combination of detailed investigation of individual life histories and an analysis of defining moments within the generalized masculine life. The focus was on Pitjantjatjara masculinity and, in particular, that liminal period between boyhood and married life in which adult men are formed. As an inhabitant of, and participant in, that liminal space by courtesy of my initiation into Pitjantjatjara men's secret ritual life in 1991, I was able to gain an unprecedented insight into the ritual and sexual lives of Pitjantjatjara men.

The objective of the work was to understand the importance and role of sexual and ritual practice in the construction and maintenance of the lives of healthy *wati*, the name given to adult, initiated men. By comprehending how *wati* viewed health, disease and risk, and the connection in their minds between risky practice and disease, the goal was to understand the extent to which risky practices were vulnerable to elimination or alteration towards safer alternatives. Inherent in this objective was the belief that for Pitjantjatjara *wati*, sexual and ritual practices are strongly linked by the roles they play in defining and maintaining masculinity. The fact that adult men's sexual lives cannot legitimately begin until certain ritual status has been achieved is one clear indicator of this link. Another is the symbolic weight given to the *kalu*, the penis, the key organ of both ceremonial and sexual participation.

The method became focused around three aims: to comprehend Pitjantjatjara models of the physical and social development of adult male bodies; to understand the nature, range and cultural dynamics of *wati* sexual and ritual practice; and to assess the health and infection risks posed by both sexual and ritual practice, taking into account the epidemiology of sexually transmissible diseases among *wati*, and the impact of safe-sex messages. To achieve these aims, a suite of methods from the ethnographic tradition was used. This included key informant interviews, participant and unstructured observation, and ceremonial and textual analysis of materials drawn from fieldwork and from the published but hitherto unanalysed work of others—both researchers and the Pitjantjatjara themselves. As well, epidemiological method was utilized to analyse data on clinical presentations.

My methodological approach was informed by the work of many other

researchers working in the areas of identity, masculinity, sexuality, and ritual analysis. In particular, the approach of Robert Levy (Levy 1973, p. xix) in describing mind and experience in Tahiti involved a period of unstructured household observation and participation in village life, coupled with systematic, relatively formal interviewing of individual informants to establish life-histories. Once his language was adequate to the task and he had achieved a strong degree of acceptance from his informants, he followed up with detailed but unstructured interviews with 20 informants, aimed at eliciting individuals' responses to their life history and to their present life. Bradd Shore (Shore 1982, p. xv), working in Samoa to unravel the symbols and meanings that give structure to social relations, based his work on observations over a 7 year period, household surveys, 55 2-hour interviews, a questionnaire delivered to 140 school-children, and analysis of published materials and recordings made of meetings, speeches, songs, plays and other cultural performances. His use of a dramatic incident, a murder, like Geertz's cockfight (Geertz 1973, pp. 412–453), provided a structure on which to centre his analysis, and informed my approach to gathering data on Pitjantjatjara ceremony. Malinowski's (Malinowski 1932) classic study of marriage and family life drew my attention to the importance of studying the role of kinship relations in regulating sexual practice, and the Berndt's work in Arnhem land (Berndt and Berndt 1951, Berndt 1976), using both kinship and symbolic analysis to form the only detailed study of sexuality in an Australian Aboriginal society, demonstrated one way in which kinship and ritual are linked in sexual practice. Isobel White's paper on sexual myth (White 1975) among the southern Yankunytjatjara gave some very useful cues as to the behavioural organization of sexual practice for Western Desert people. Finally, Gilbert Herdt's analysis of Sambia male ritual cults (Herdt 1981, p. 12) suggested an approach to the analysis of sexual and ritual practice, particularly in focusing on the cultural context, social organization, and behavioural system of ritual, the personal meanings and aspects of identity drawn from ritual, and the symbolic system constructed and supported through ritual.

Pitjantjatjara men and same-sex attraction and sexual practice

The first time I participated in Pitjantjatjara men's ritual in 1991, I was confronted by the unexpected vision of a group of naked young men decorating themselves to dance. What caught my eye was the pair of men closest to me: one sat on the ground, while the other stood above and behind him, a little hunched over, with his knees bent and his buttocks tucked in, concentrating hard and apparently masturbating. I was stunned: was this a form of ritualized homosexuality? I had never had a hint from Pitjantjatjara men that they did sexual things with each other, either in ceremonies, or at all. There were some accounts in the historical literature of Aboriginal homosexuality from other parts of Australia (for a review of this literature, see Gay and Lesbian Aboriginal Alliance, 1994), but the

only evidence in the literature of Pitjantjatjara same-sex practices was a minor reference in the work of Geza Roheim.

Roheim, the Hungarian psychoanalyst and anthropologist set off from Budapest in 1928 with his wife to carry out fieldwork with the Arrernte and Pitjantjatjara peoples of Central Australia. He had already published an extensive Freudian analysis of Arrernte totemic beliefs and rituals in 1925, based on the published work of other ethnographers, but was frustrated by the gaps and flaws in his work (Roheim 1971 (1925), p. 15). One of his specific frustrations was the lack of information in these published sources about the sexual life of Central Australian Aboriginal peoples. 'I could show you', he wrote,

many famous books on anthropology with minute details about pottery and such subjects, which do not even mention what position is normally adopted in coitus. Yet I should think the man in the street will agree with me if I say that the sexual life of a human being is nearly as important as the chips of stone that fall off when he makes an axe. (Roheim 1932, p. 21)

Along with the analysis of dreams, of children's play, and of myths, ceremonies and customs, making enquiries about sexual life was a key part of Roheim's approach to his first fieldwork.

By modern anthropological standards, this fieldwork was brief in the extreme, a mere four months, dwarfed by the two years it took him to journey to and from Central Australia. (Roheim 1932, p. 3). There are problems with his data that clearly result from the short time he spent in the field, particularly with his use and understanding of Arrernte and Pitjantjatjara languages. For example, he makes much of the fact that the Pitjantjatjara word *kuna* means both anus and vagina, which would no doubt have extraordinary implications if it were true. In fact, *kuna* is the word for faeces (Roheim 1974, p. 257). At another place, he translates both *pila* (the imperative form of the verb 'to remove skin') and *pikali* (we two are injured) as foreskin, and *mimi* (breast) as penis (Roheim 1934, pp. 84–85). This somewhat Cubist approach to indigenous sexual anatomy is no doubt a consequence of the short time he spent at the Hermannsberg Lutheran mission, but Roheim was particularly lucky in the time that he chose. The severe drought then raging in Central Australia meant that there were a large number of nomadic tribespeople camped in the vicinity of Hermannsberg for much of the time he was there. He was able to witness ceremonies that would normally have been held irregularly, and far from the disapproving shadow of the mission.

Roheim was motivated to study the Arrernte by Freud's 1912 publication of *Totem and Taboo* (Freud 1938). His ambition was to provide the kind of methodological rigour to psychoanalytic anthropology that Freud had applied in the clinical setting, and so arrive at a 'complete psychological understanding' of a whole society (Roheim 1932, p. 74). His analysis of the development of the Id in Central Australian men led him to the astonishing conclusion, based on Freud's assertion of the centrality of Oedipal conflict to the human psyche, that the 'deflection' of sexual desire for women into desire for men through homosexual ritual was a key mechanism in the formation of human societies. He argued that for humans in totemic societies, as with other mammals living in herds,

The young males fight with their sire for their mothers and sisters; they kill or are killed by the old male. If the old and the young are to live beside each other in one group, a part of the genital libido must become deflected, i.e., the boy must love not only his mother but also his father, and love in a new way without genital detension. When the original Oedipus struggle of the rutting season has become transformed into a totemic ceremony, coitus degenerates into ritual onanism in the presence of the fathers instead of the mothers. (Roheim 1932, p. 68)

What Roheim might have meant by 'love in a new way without genital detension' is not clear in his writing, and has been rendered more opaque by the interventions of time and translation. It must be assumed that Roheim's is a psychoanalytic understanding of love—i.e., 'the application of libidinal or erotic instincts towards some object gratification' (see Chaplin 1975, p. 294)—rather than, for example, filial piety, or some other non-sexual romantic attachment.

The requirement in his formulation for an erect penis in the expression of this love is almost certainly based on his observation of totemic ritual among his Arrernte and Pitjantjatjara informants, where men manipulated their own penis to achieve partial erection as a part of many ceremonies. In these ceremonies the performers were decorated with bird's down, glued to the body with blood obtained by pricking the inside of their subincised penises with sharp stones or twigs. The men masturbated together before each ceremony, because the blood could only be obtained when their penises were erect (Roheim 1974, p. 245). Roheim's view was that this 'group masturbation' was a key part of the important integrative function that ritual performs for Pitjantjatjara and Arrernte society:

The general trend of ritual is to transform direct heterosexual into deflected homosexual libido. The first step in attaining this aim is revealed by ritual itself. For blood is taken from the penis and smeared all over the body, that is, libido is withdrawn from the genital organ and used as a secondary reinforcement of the narcissistic cathexis of the whole body. In order to obtain this blood from the penis, the men masturbate in a group, but only in order to procure an erection, not an ejaculation. In other words, the most primitive mechanism used for stabilizing society is the genito-fugal trend of the libido (Ferenczi), for instead of women and instead of ejaculation we have a ceremony in which the men perform together, having transformed their whole body into a penis. (Roheim 1932, p. 95)

There are some intellectual sleights-of-hand at work here that weaken the force of this passage. First, though we might expect that after 'the first step in transforming heterosexual into deflected homosexual libido' there might be others, it appears that taking blood from the penis and smearing it all over the body is the first and final step. Second, penile blood makes a slick transition to libido here, with no discussion of the connection between the two. Although the standard comparison here might be between penile blood and menstrual blood (e.g., Hogbin 1970), Roheim's analysis begs a comparison between semen and penile blood and yet he makes no such comparison. While ejaculated semen could legitimately stand as a symbol of libido, Roheim has missed a couple of steps here. With a little reformulation, however the key points are clear—in the deflection of heterosexual to homosexual libido, a number of key substitutions are required: the substitution of male objects for female objects; the substitution of erection for ejaculation; the substitution of penile blood for semen; and the substitution of public group masturbation for more intimate sexual contact

between heterosexual partners. What is removed by these substitutions is any notion of sexual attraction or desire, so while the activity might retain some of the form of a sexual act, its erotic content has been deflected—although Herdt is perhaps right in suggesting that without knowing the masturbation fantasies of the men involved, it is difficult to make any clear assertion about the presence or absence of same-sex attraction in these ceremonies (Herdt 1997, personal communication).

Roheim (1974, p. 241) further suggests that additional evidence for the ritualization of homosexual libido lies in what he characterized as secular mutual masturbation between male cross-cousins. For example, a pair of Pitjantjatjara informants described to him a typical homoerotic conversation between male cross-cousins:

When cross-cousins talk, one will show the other his penis and say: 'I have a little one'. The other will respond: 'Oh no! Yours is as big as that of a demon'. Each examines the penis of the other, exclaiming: 'Yours is big, mine is little'.

He reports being told by another informant that 'the cross-cousins stand facing each other, each holding his own penis and rubbing it in order to produce an erection'.

For the modern reader, this is remarkably tame stuff as far as homosexual 'love' goes, and again some of the key substitutions noted above appear. Nobody touches anybody's penis but his own, there is no exchange of fluids—indeed no ejaculation at all. The locker-room banter of the mutual masturbation of cross-cousins has little obvious erotic content, and even less in cultural context where big penises are regarded as faintly ridiculous and penile size a rich source of teasing (Roheim 1974, p. 251, Willis 1997, p. 162). Indeed, there is a distinct lack of 'mutuality' to this masturbation, at least as mutuality is understood in the modern context, each man only handling his own penis. Like the ritual group masturbation, it has the look-and-feel of a sexual act, but with the desire component swept neatly aside.

Roheim depicts a strongly homosocial society, with specific and limited homoerotic activity between men providing key support for the homosocial bonds that allow the social group to exist successfully. Given the universality in this society of what Sedgwick has termed 'homosocial desire', one might be forgiven for anticipating a high tolerance for a variety of homosexual activity in such a society (Sedgwick 1985, p. 1). Yet from the limited additional data which Roheim presents, this seems not to be the case. He reports (Roheim 1974, p. 243) that a woman and her brother technically belong to the same marriage class, and so there is the potential for a man to have a homosexual relationship with his wife's brother. He continues, however, that although such a relationship was technically possible,

...an attempt to form such a relationship may meet with a great deal of adverse sentiment. When these customs were discussed, Kanakana said indignantly: 'If any man tried to do that to me, I would pull his penis out and then spear him'.

Roheim's characterization of the possibilities for homosexual relationships within the marriage class system is misleading, for while at some analytical level, wives and their brothers belong to the same kinship category, this

does not imply that they are sexual equivalents. The clear evidence from Roheim's key informant in this matter is that un-'deflected' homosexual acts are not tolerated. It is additionally clear in other parts of his analysis that in this society the particular social organization of adult sexuality through kinship and gender systems guarantees universal marriage with a person of the opposite sex.

When, earlier in this paper, I recounted my initial impression of men's ceremony that the men were involved in a sexual act, it becomes clear that I was wrong on two counts. Firstly, a naked man manipulating his penis is not necessarily masturbating. Secondly, a naked man doing this in the company of other naked men is not necessarily involved in a sexual act. This is not a matter of semantics, but of more fundamental structures of meaning that allow for eroticism divorced from sexual expression; for the alignment of reproductive organs with ritual as well as sexual function; for a more intense physicality in non-sexual relationships with other men than exists in sexual relationships with women; and for the deflection of the expression of sexual feeling for men, generated through the intense homosociality of social organization and the eroticization of men's bodies through ritual, into a very narrow repertoire of sexual expression focused almost entirely on vaginal sex with women. The importance of this deflection is in the protection it provides for the fragile viability of Pitjantjatjara life, which has traditionally relied on intensely homosocial division of labour for foraging group survival in a very harsh arid environment, but I contend could not withstand the consequences of reproductively dangerous homosexual relationships. It is these two aspects of Pitjantjatjara sexual culture—the heterosexist determinism of the kinship and gender systems and the mechanisms whereby same-sex attraction is 'deflected' away from sexual practice—that I wish now to explore.

The social organization of Pitjantjatjara masculine heteronormativity

For the Pitjantjatjara, the universality of marriage with a person of the opposite sex is a core component of social organization, focused both in a highly gendered division of productive and reproductive labour, and in a highly inclusive kinship system. Understanding the heteronormativity of Pitjantjatjara society meant identifying the institutions, mechanisms and symbols that underpin this social organization. There are three key mechanisms to consider.

First, there is the formal system of socially constructing masculinity through a sequence of rituals that cause lasting physical changes to the appearance and functionality of men's penises, and social changes to men's status as sexual subjects. Pitjantjatjara men move to social and physical adulthood through a series of rituals that prepare them, physically and intellectually, to fulfil the key roles of adult male life: to contribute to the ongoing reproduction of the cosmos by participating in secret men's ritual; to enhance their own physical survival, and that of their land-holding groups, by making advantageous alliances with other land-holding groups

through marriage; and to ensure the reproduction of their land-holding group by fathering children. The physical aspect of the ritual involves multiple operations to the penis over a period of years, beginning with circumcision followed by a number of subincision cuts. The operations make it physically possible for men to participate in other secret men's ritual, where the production of blood from the subincision is typically required. The operations also make it socially possible for men to marry, as only subincised men may enter into sexual relationships.

A second key institution is the inextricable linkage between masculinity rites and the system for arranging marriages. A Pitjantjatjara man's adult sexual subjectivity, once established via subincision, is exercised in the rather small field of opportunity provided by the so-called 'promising' of wives at circumcision and subincision. By subincising another man, *Waputju* (the title given to the men from the opposite generational moiety who are the ceremonial operants) take on a responsibility to ensure that the man can marry from among their daughters and patrilateral nieces. Most men and women therefore have a relatively delimited pool of potential suitable marriage partners to choose from. Who a person ends up marrying from within this group of potential marriage partners has traditionally been determined by complex negotiations between the kin groups of potential partners, and traditionally marriages have been seen as mechanisms for the formation of alliances between land-holding patrilineages. Between the period immediately before initiation and eventual marriage (from puberty to early 20s), there are tight controls over the disposition of men's bodies which mean that men are effectively unavailable to enter into sexual relationships of any kind except with the (female) partners prescribed by the marriage system (Gould 1969, Mountford 1976, Willis 1997, pp. 174–204). Along with the change of sexual status, specific body parts, bodily dispositions, and clothing or decorative codes mark unmarried initiated men as available for negotiating marriage with one of their promised wives. The key point is that you cannot be an adult male Pitjantjatjara without having a marriage arranged for you.

A third key issue is the cultural coding of initiated men's penises, erections, masturbation, and urethral blood which occurs in masculinity rituals. This, combined with changes to post-initiation functionality, considerably limits the kinds of sexual practice in which men can engage. In purely physical terms, the reshaping through ritual operations of the penis and erections govern to an extent the kinds and timing of sexual acts that are pleasurable and feasible for men. The various kinds of ritual injuries done to penises affect men throughout their lives and render sexual activity uncomfortable and less likely in the period immediately after ceremonies each year. For those who have been newly circumcised or subincised, the newly exposed glans and mucosal lining of the urethra are quite fragile and sensitive, and the resulting period of sexual dysfunction due to injury may last for several months and, if progression through the stages of the ritual cycle are rapid, may last for 2 years. This is not the usual case however, as most young men are eager to try out their modified equipment as soon as is practical, and begin actively seeking an appropriate sexual liaison within a few months of their initial ordeal. Strong warnings about

masturbation during this period are frequent: the newly exposed flesh is delicate, with many blood vessels close to the surface. The clear message given is that masturbation is for boys with an intact penis, and something for which an adult man's penis is no longer built. Although the mucosal surface of the exposed urethra eventually dries and toughens to an extent, this process takes some years, by which time the large majority of Pitjantjatjara men are married and have access to other sexual outlets that do not damage their penises. During this period of sensitivity, it is clear that the only comfortable sexual activity that conforms to cultural norms about the privacy of sexual organs is vaginal intercourse. The vagina is soft and naturally lubricated which minimizes the potential for penile damage.

Additional to the physical issues, the sexual organs have inscribed upon them a ritual significance that strongly determines the kinds of use of them that men are willing or able to contemplate as part of their personal sexual repertoires. A key issue here is that aspects of the ceremonies are secret from women, and the penis itself has become a symbol of 'men's business', and is kept mysterious to women. Penises may not be directly observed or manipulated by women. Sexual intercourse between men and women is therefore limited to vaginal penetration as there is no permissible oral or hand contact with the penis by a woman.

Masturbation is also co-opted into secret men's business: urethral blood, used in men's ceremonial decoration, is obtained from partially erect penises, and these partial erections are achieved by a technique of self-stimulation quite different from sexual masturbation. Because of the role of manual manipulation of the penis in ceremony to achieve the partial erection required to obtain blood, masturbation outside ceremonial contexts is regarded as mildly sacrilegious and puerile.

The sum effect of the physical changes to men's bodies made during initiation ceremonies, and the social and discursive structures around appropriate sexual practice for adult Pitjantjatjara men is a universal, albeit fairly specific and limited, secular heterosexuality that owes its existence to an equally universal, specific and limited ritual homosexuality.

Deflecting homosexuality

There is no doubt that Pitjantjatjara men's ritual eroticizes the male body. It does this most importantly by the articulation together of naked male bodies and the sexual excitement required to produce partially erect penises, and by the ceremonial centrality of the penis that begins with circumcision and is sustained throughout men's lives by the production and use of urethral blood. From the beginning of ritual life, men are constantly touching each other's bodies in intimate ways, constantly exposing their own nakedness and being exposed to the nakedness of others, and in myriad ways subjecting their personal and sexual privacy to the demands of the male collectivity.

This is in stark contrast to the relative lack of eroticization by men of women's bodies, and the consequent lack of interest in the female form as

an abstraction. An anecdote may be helpful here. Although the newsagency at the resort near my field site sold numerous soft-pornographic publications featuring naked women, few of these were ever purchased by community members. The newsagent also sold numerous women's publications that featured male nudes. One of the registered nurses in the community, a woman, regularly bought these magazines and often lent them to my sister Trish, who was living with me during part of my field work. On one occasion, one of these magazines was lying on the kitchen table when the community's young but very conservative community policeman, dropped by for a cup of tea. As we sat and talked, he leafed through the magazine, examining the pictures of naked men with some interest. He casually asked me if the magazine was mine, and I told him that it belonged to our community nurse. He stared at me shocked and disgusted. 'Kura', he said, with characteristic terseness. That's wrong. It was perfectly acceptable to him that another man would buy a magazine full of pictures of naked men, but morally reprehensible for a woman to look at what was clearly 'men's business'. We discussed the fact that the nurse, an older woman, was divorced and had no boyfriend. His conclusion was that a lack of sex had addled her brain.

Given this interest in male bodies, the intensity of male relationships, and the erotic charge of ritual situations, it is of interest to examine what prevents the development of sexual excitement for men's bodies. My questions on homosexual activity, of both scholarly and personal interest to me as a gay man, invariably were greeted with a blank: many informants wondered what two men could possibly do together. My suggestions of possible types of male to male sexual contact—anal intercourse, frottage and mutual masturbation—provoked reactions from incredulity to shocked hilarity. One informant had spent a month in jail in Perth, the capital city of Western Australia. While he was in jail, one of the other inmates, a non-Aboriginal man, had been raped. The informant remained profoundly disturbed by the rape, and clearly imagined male to male sexual contact as always a form of violent assault. The same informant was once leafing through a volume of Robert Mapplethorpe portraits. He passed over a photograph of two men dressed entirely in leather, whose pose implied to my eye a sado-masochistic sexual relationship. On the next page was a closeup shot of just the head of a bald black man. 'He's a poofter', he said. Poofter is an Australian slang word for male homosexual. 'How can you tell', I asked, intrigued. After some hesitation, he replied, 'He's got no hair'. Even more intrigued, I asked, 'What is a poofter?' Again he hesitated, before finally mumbling, '*Wampa*' (I don't know).

Given this lack of any evidence of homosexual expression, I am inclined to accept informants' statements at face value: they simply do not conceive of sexual acts between men. This is not surprising considering that penetrative sex is limited by mythology, explicit training and example to vaginal sex (ruling out the possibilities of anal or oral sex), and that masturbation is redefined as a ritual act for adult men (ruling out mutual masturbation). What, indeed, would two men do together? The only answer that could be considered within the Pitjantjatjara system is for them to have sex together with the same woman. Although polygamous marriage is limited in the

Pitjantjatjara system to men marrying two or three wives, a restricted form of polyandry appears to operate in some marginal casual relationships. There are two types, both rare: a woman may agree to have sex with a group of fictive brothers (known locally as a 'gang bang'), or she may have sex with a pair of brothers (known as a 'double bang'). It strikes me that these forms of group sex are dangerous to Pitjantjatjara notions of masculinity, because they confuse otherwise carefully maintained boundaries between sexual subjectivity and collective identity.

There is no doubt that the conjunction between the sexual and the ritual that attends men's secret ceremonies is erotically charged, but also that the eroticization of men's bodies is carefully channelled away from the sexual and towards the ritual. Additionally, the sexual comradeship of young men prior to marriage is structured into serial forms that discharge its homoerotic potential by allowing men to maintain a supportive framework of homosociality within a rigid structure of heterosexuality. By serial forms, I mean that rather than the group of men or the pair of men having sex with a woman in front of each other and at the same time, a man might have sex with a woman comforted by the fact that his fictive brothers are also having sex with the same woman at different times and places. The gang-bang mentioned above is, on the other hand, very public, and arguably quite homoerotic. By adopting structures of participation drawn from men's ritual (public nakedness, groupings based on moiety, public use of the erect penis), it reveals the sexual content of ritual settings in a way which must be unconsciously disturbing for the participants, and which must ultimately undermine ritual.

On several occasions during fieldwork, I found myself in situations with other men that I interpreted as covertly sexual, and am reasonably certain that the lack of culturally structured ways of acting out sexual feelings for another man does not necessarily stop Pitjantjatjara men from feeling them. On each occasion, the feelings that might have been directed towards me by initiating a sexual act, were instead deflected, in Roheim's sense, into another activity. Three of these instances were with one man, a fictive brother, with whom I had a very close friendship for many years. We shared clothes, he frequently slept at my house, and we went everywhere together for almost a year, including sharing a bed-roll on ceremonial trips. On two occasions, he asked me to double-bang with him. Both times he was quite drunk. On the first occasion, he went off with the woman by himself, but came back afterwards to sleep at my place. On the second occasion we were in Alice Springs, sharing a bedroom at a friend's house. When I wouldn't go with him, he took off his clothes and lay next to me on the bed, claiming it was too hot to go to bed with clothes on. He began singing a song from secret men's ceremonies which relates to masturbating to get an erection for blood, all the while manipulating his penis in the ceremonial manner until he had a full erection. He kept singing and manipulating his penis for perhaps half-an-hour before he fell asleep, though he made no obvious effort to bring himself to ejaculation. On the third occasion, he came to my house late one night, and asked if he could sleep with me because his wife was away for the night. We had barely settled down to sleep in my bed, when he suddenly became agitated, got

up again and said that he was going home, a very strange thing to do in context—like most Pitjantjatjara, he would normally be very reluctant to sleep alone in a house.

The other occasions involved two other men, and again they were men that I had close friendships with, and who came to my house late at night and drunk. One man woke me up to give me a gift of a pair of jeans, and insisted that I get out of bed and try them on. When they proved to be too small for me, he took off all his clothes and tried them on himself, notwithstanding the fact that he is a much bigger man than me. Having got us both naked, and in my bedroom, he then decided he would go home to his wife, taking the jeans with him. The last incident involved another late night drunken visit. My visitor decided he wanted to sleep in my bed with me, and when I went to put on some shorts, he told me not to worry because two *wati* could look at each other without clothes. He was in a very garrulous mood, and refused to go to sleep, and instead lay beside me telling me detailed and quite pornographic stories of his recent sexual adventures.

Although there were factors about me (as a white *wati* I was at once marginal to the community and yet party to men's secret business) and about my living style (alone among young single men I had a house to myself) that may have facilitated these encounters, I believe that similar incidents must be a part of many Pitjantjatjara men's lives. They were not sexual incidents in any strict sense (there was no contact and certainly no exchange of fluids), and their sexual content was inchoate, unarticulated and almost certainly unrecognized. What makes these incidents different from the ritual situations first described in Roheim's work is that in the ritual situation, homosexual practice exists in the absence of associated desire, whereas in the secular incidents I describe we have homosexual attraction divorced from any possible practice. In each case, any sexual potential was deflected into a masking activity (ritual masturbation, talk of double-banging, leaving, trying on clothes, and telling stories about other sexual experiences), and in three of the five cases, the men involved subsequently went and had sex with a female third party.

Conclusions

It is clear, then, that we are talking about multiple deflections in the management of homosexual desire and practice among Pitjantjatjara men, achieved in the secular realm through the substitution of vaginal sex with a limited range of female partners for any possible sexual activity with another man. What these deflections and substitutions address is the incomplete separation of the sexual and the ritual in ceremonies, and the consequent lack of resolution of the erotic content of men's bodies. In combination with the pervasive homosociality of social formations, these erotic feelings for men's bodies demand sexual resolution. This tension is effectively resolved by denying men the option of masturbation and associated fantasy, and channelling all sexual energy into potentially reproductive

vaginal sex. As an ecological steady-state system geared at ensuring maximum reproductive success, it could not be improved.

This brief analysis of Pitjantjatjara masculinity aims to reveal how the physical, social and discursive ways in which societies privilege sexual relationships with the opposite sex, coupled with the trajectories along which same sex attraction and practice are deflected, limit the territorial possibilities for homosexuality in ways that are contingent in terms of both culture and history. In Pitjantjatjara society, there is simply no territorial possibility for homosexuality as it might be understood in Western societies. Understanding the place of homosexuality in a range of cultural and historical settings means, as a first step, recognizing this contingency in the multiplicity and diversity of myriad local systems of social organizations and sets of practices related to both gender and sexual activity.

Heteronormativity, in this sense, is less a political strategy that privileges opposite-sex over other kinds of relationships, than it is an accidental outcome of practices in the full range of social and cultural systems that could broadly be characterized as unconscious ecological responses. For the Pitjantjatjara, the apparent heteronormativity of social relations responds to the need to secure human reproduction in a marginal desert ecology. In Western societies, it could be argued that the heteronormativity of our social systems unconsciously feeds into the labour requirements of late capitalism. As these requirements change, so the heteronormativity of social relations may also change.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the critical advice given by Gilbert Herdt and Gary Dowsett on an early version of this paper presented at the Beyond Homophobia: Rethinking Anti-gay Violence, Heterosexism and Homophobia in Multiple Perspective Conference, San Francisco State University, April 1999. I am also grateful for comments and advice by two anonymous referees and colleagues at ARCSHS including Anthony Smith, Michael Hurley and Shelley Mallett.

Notes

1. Although the matters discussed in this paper are known to Aboriginal adults, both men and women, in Central Australia, they are of considerable gender sensitivity and should not be discussed publicly where Aboriginal people are present.

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Résumé

Cet article décrit les résultats d'un travail de terrain mené chez les pitjantjatjara du centre de l'Australie entre 1989 et 1997. L'étude a examiné l'impact d'un système de genre spécifique et des pratiques liées à la masculinité—en particulier, sexuelles et rituelles—sur les risques de contamination par les MST et autres maladies présentes dans le sang. La recherche est une ethnographie de la masculinité, menée à partir d'une observation participante, de récits de vie, d'une analyse des rites, et d'une réflexion critique sur le travail des premiers ethnographes. L'article présente des données de terrain sélectionnées, examinées à la lumière d'une description anthropologique de la sexualité chez les pitjantjatjara, datant du début du vingtième siècle. Il identifie un contournement systématique de l'attraction masculine pour le même sexe, éloigné d'une possible affirmation érotique des hommes à travers des pratiques sexuelles entre eux. Les composants clé de ce contournement sont la construction rituelle d'une masculinité culturellement spécifique, le lien inextricable entre les rites de la masculinité et le système d'arrangement des mariages, et le codage culturel du pénis au cours des rituels. L'article conclut que bien que les hommes puissent ressentir une attraction érotique pour d'autres hommes, les systèmes de genre et de parenté chez les pitjantjatjara concourent à limiter complètement les possibilités d'expression physique et sexuelle de cette attraction. Les résultats présentés ici viennent compléter notre compréhension de la base culturelle de l'hétéronormativité.

Resumen

Este documento describe los hallazgos de un estudio de campo desarrollado entre los pueblos tribales Pitjantjatjara, en la Australia Central, entre 1989 y 1997. La investigación examinó el impacto que tiene un sistema de género distintivo y sus prácticas de masculinidad, particularmente las sexuales y rituales, en el riesgo de contraer infecciones de transmisión sexual y otras enfermedades transmitidas a través de la sangre. El estudio fue diseñado como una etnografía de la masculinidad, llevada a cabo mediante observación participante, entrevistas de historia de vida, análisis de rituales y la reflexión crítica del trabajo de etnógrafos anteriores. El trabajo presenta una selección de datos de campo, examinados a la luz de las descripciones antropológicas de comienzos del siglo XX sobre la sexualidad de los Pitjantjatjara. Identifica un alejamiento sistemático de la atracción entre hombres, de su posible resolución a través de prácticas homosexuales. Los componentes clave de este alejamiento son la construcción ritual de una masculinidad culturalmente distintiva, el vínculo inextricable entre los ritos de la masculinidad y el sistema de arreglo de los matrimonios, y la codificación cultural del pene durante el ritual. El documento concluye que, aún cuando los hombres puedan sentir atracción erótica entre ellos, los sistemas de género y de parentesco de los Pitjantjatjara conspiran para limitar completamente las posibilidades de expresión física y sexual de esta atracción. Los hallazgos reportados aquí aportan evidencia a nuestra concepción sobre la base cultural de la heteronormatividad.