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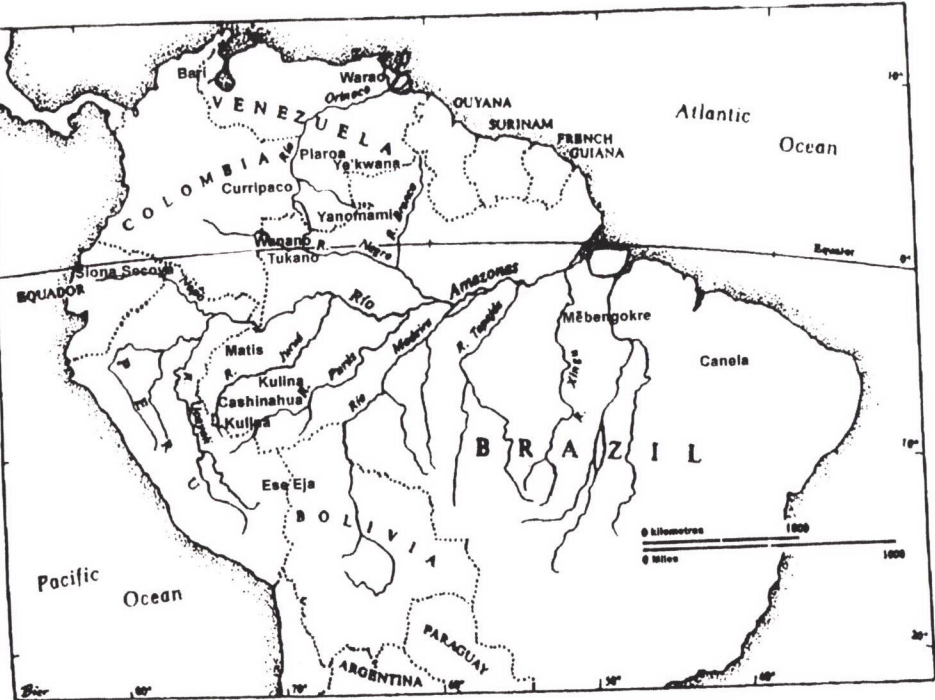
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# Cultures of Multiple Fathers

## The Theory and Practice of Partible Paternity in Lowland South America



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did exist and had to be suppressed even before outside influences began to interfere with the extramarital sex practices. Thus sex jealousy could not be culturally determined, but may be determined at some psychological or psycho-physiological level.

7. The expression *Elders* is capitalized to differentiate it from being understood as the older men of the tribe. The Elders are a special group of older men, those of the oldest age class of the Lower age class moiety, known as the Prokhämmā.

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## Multiple Paternity among the Mēbengokre (Kayapó, Jê) of Central Brazil

Vanessa Lea

The Mēbengokre, better known as the Kayapó, inhabit areas of transition between tropical forest and savanna in central Brazil, with over a dozen villages located in the states of Mato Grosso and Pará. This chapter is based on fieldwork carried out between 1978 and 1995 with the Mētyktire subgroup. They presently reside in two villages near the state boundary of Mato Grosso and Pará. One village, with a population of 205 people in 1994, is located in an area of transition between savanna and forest, on the banks of the Xingu River, guaranteeing an abundant supply of fish (besides game). The other village, with a population of 337 people in 1995, is located inland, in an area long inhabited by this Amerindian people, in the heart of the savanna, where meat from herds of two species of wild pigs constitutes the main source of protein, besides the less abundant tapir, armadillos, monkeys, birds, land and river turtles, and the occasional fish.

The Mēbengokre have a uterine ideology that automatically allocates individuals as members of their mother's house. Matri-houses are exogamous units that transcend the boundaries of any one village. Besides occupying a specific portion of the village circle, in relation to the sun's trajectory from east to west, matri-houses are characterized by a distinctive stock of heritable names and prerogatives.<sup>1</sup> The most outstanding aspect of paternity in Mēbengokre society is that it is linked to the vicarious transmission of affinity, a question to which we will return in due course. As discussed in various chapters in this book, it is a common belief in lowland South America that whoever engages in sexual relations with a woman during the course of her

pregnancy is considered to contribute toward the formation of the fetus, engendering the phenomenon of multiple paternity. In the Mēbengokre case, it is the fact that one inherits formal friends from one's genitor, together with the fact that physical well-being is dependent on a person's relation to his or her parents and siblings, that act as deterrents against multiple paternity in the classical sense alluded to above.

When a person is ill, especially a small child, his or her parents and siblings must abstain from eating a series of food items, including all meat and fish, from fear of worsening the state of the sick person or even bringing about his or her death. The Mēbengokre recognize the possibility of an individual having two or more genitors, but in practice it is uncommon. When a newborn infant with various genitors dies, this is taken as a self-fulfilling prophecy of the danger of having various fathers, because it may be impossible to contact all of them when their offspring is ill, to ensure that the necessary food restrictions are adhered to. A genitor who, for example, eats beef on a journey to the city, not knowing that his child is ill, can inadvertently kill it. I came across the case of a child described as having four genitors in one census, while in a later census the same child was described as having one father. It seems as if a series of hypotheses are discarded during the course of time, depending, for example, on the respective fathers recognizing their role, the efficacy of the fathers respecting food taboos, physical likeness, and so on. A few people are considered to have two fathers, or sometimes it is uncertain which of two men engendered a child, but this applies to a minority of cases.

Multiple paternity is an important phenomenon in Mēbengokre society—more in line with the way this expression is used in modern Western society, where it refers to a sequence of a mother's husbands (or lovers) during the course of her child's upbringing. A Mēbengokre village is formed by a large circle of houses facing onto an open plaza or patio, with a men's house (a kind of male clubhouse) standing at the center. At first glance, the majority of households are formed by various nuclear families, linked by two or more sisters, living together with elder relatives, forming extended matri-uxorilocal families. When this scenario is investigated with greater care, it becomes apparent that despite the preponderance of married couples and children, or married daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren (DC),<sup>2</sup> numerous older children were begotten by ex-spouses or lovers of the wife, with only the younger siblings being attributed to the current husband. Only widowers take children from a former marriage to a present one, and in all cases of this type, only one child continued to live with the father and his latest wife for any extended period.<sup>3</sup>

Few men or women have all their children with one partner (be it spouse or lover), due to both a high divorce rate and a high mortality rate. Twenty percent of children do not reside with their genitor, despite having only one, living instead either with the divorced or single mother, or with her latest husband (see table 6.1, fig. 6.1). When a woman separates from her husband, at her initiative or his, she remains with her children whether or not she remarries.<sup>4</sup> There is nothing 'natural' about this arrangement, for despite the tendency for children to remain with their mother upon divorce in the Euro-American world, this is not the case for all Amerindian peoples of lowland South America. A recent study of the Kaiowá (Pereira 1999)—Tupi-Guaraní speakers of southern Mato Grosso—stresses that children tend to remain neither with their mother nor their father when their parents are divorced, as this is seen as an impediment to their parents consolidating a new marriage. They go to live with their maternal grandparents or, alternatively, with the woman who assisted their mother to give birth, but in this latter case they become second-class citizens, overburdened with domestic chores. In the case of the patrilineal Kaingang, Southern Jê, children are most likely to be handed over to their paternal grandmother in the case of divorce, and they may later live with their father if he remarries (Veiga 1994, 2000).

Due to the prevalence of matri-uxorilocality among the Mēbengokre, it is the men who leave the wife's house when they separate and generally even when they are widowed. Marriage entails simply moving in with a woman, an arrangement that is consolidated cumulatively with the birth of children. Separation

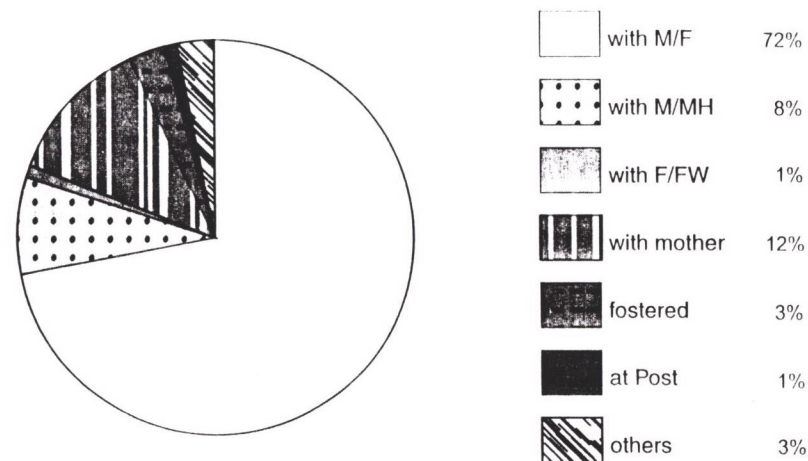


Fig. 6.1. Residential patterns of Mētyktire children

Table 6.1. Residential patterns of Mētyktire children

Year <sup>a</sup>	Children <sup>b</sup>	M/F <sup>c</sup>	M/MH <sup>d</sup>	F/FW <sup>e</sup>	Sum <sup>f</sup>	M <sup>g</sup>	No M <sup>h</sup>	Foster <sup>i</sup>	Post <sup>j</sup>	Other <sup>k</sup>
1978	64	50	3	1	54	8	3	0	0	2
1979	75	54	3	2	59	7	3	3	3	3
1982	90	68	6	1	75	8	1	3	4	0
1987	198	140	22	3	165	25	7	8	0	0
1994–95	286	201	23	3	227	35	15	10	0	14
Total	713	513	57	10	580	83	29	24	7	19

a. Year of censuses. (All censuses were undertaken personally.)

b. Total number of Mētyktire children. The category includes childless unmarried adolescents, including a few who have had miscarriages or have had a child that did not survive. It excludes those with spouses (with or without offspring). The census data from 1978, 1979, and 1981–82 are based exclusively on the village of Kretire. By 1987 the population of that village had joined with the remaining Mētyktire from the village of Jarina. In 1994–95 they had split into two groups again, but the data from the two new villages (which continue to exist) are shown together (facilitating comparison with the 1987 data, for the whole of the Mētyktire subgroup of Mēbengokre).

c. Children who reside with their mother and their father.

d. Children who reside with their mother and their mother's husband (who is not the child's father).

e. Children who reside with their father and his wife (who is not the child's mother, after the death of the latter).

f. The sum of children who live with their parents, mother and mother's husband, or father and father's wife.

g. Children who live with their mother, with neither their father nor a mother's husband; in other words, these are children with no father figure.

h. Children whose mother has died.

i. Children who are fostered out, usually to grandparents. They are still considered to be children of their parents, unlike adopted children, who are considered children of their adoptive parents.

j. Male adolescents residing at the post temporarily, until they marry and move to their wife's house. Whether or not their parents are alive is irrelevant to this category; in former times these youths would reside in the men's house until they married and fathered a child.

k. This residual category partially overlaps with the data in the foster-children column, except that some male adolescents now live with relatives other than their parents (such as mother's sister or stepsister) until they marry, rather than at the post. This column also includes people living with relatives unspecified genealogically, orphans, and those in temporary arrangements. The 1994–95 data include two pairs of children living with their sister(s), after losing their mother, and five siblings who have lost both parents living with the mother's sister ('M'), her husband, and the mother's mother.

tion or divorce occurs when a man moves out or is thrown out by his wife or mother-in-law. Neither separated nor widowed men return to live in their natal homes, together with their sisters (though a married man may sometimes spend a period living with his sisters); instead they tend to install themselves in the men's house for a brief period, until they remarry, thereby acquiring a new home. Tension ensues when a man abandons a wife and children for another woman. In one such case, the newly formed couple left the village for an indefinite period. In another case, a mother-in-law accused the ex-father-in-law of her daughter's husband of having 'ruined' her own husband and grandson with sorcery. From a Euro-American perspective these individuals suffered from a degenerative disease.

Some spouses tolerate their partners having a child with a lover, without this being considered a case for divorce. I knew of two men whose wife's child by a lover was incorporated into their sibling group without discrimination. In a similar case, a woman received meat from the husband of a daughter born to her husband's lover. Another woman, whose rival had shown jealousy, failed to give garden produce to her lover's wife, despite having had a child with him. It was explained to me that the correct procedure would be to give food to the lover's wife. In two cases that I was able to observe at close hand, the genitors had nothing whatever to do with the child born to their lover. Both children were brought up by these women on their own, and subsequently by the husband of each of them. The ex-lover would be unable to send meat or fish to his child without this signaling the continuation of a relation with the child's mother.

Janet Siskind's (1973) analysis of meat being exchanged for sex continues to merit discussion. Gow (1989) has refined this notion, for the issue is more subtle. Men and women cater for the gendered desire of the opposite sex, without a one-to-one exchange being involved. The Mēbengokre represent men as desirous of sex and women of meat, although men also value meat, and women are not indifferent to sex. To the extent that hunting is a male monopoly, meat can only be obtained via a man. The men depend on marriage more than the women, for it not only guarantees access to garden produce, but also to a home of one's own. For women, home is taken for granted; it is ascribed by birth and is lifelong, and when there are no men around they are able to survive by consuming their garden produce.

### Fatherhood, Conception, and Fetal Development

It was difficult to broach the question of conception with the Mēbengokre, for most people were incredulous that I should need to ask about it. One man fi-

nally explained to me that when a woman has sexual relations the semen accumulates inside her, gradually forming the fetus.<sup>5</sup> People are unanimous in insisting that a series of sexual relations is necessary to form the fetus, and it was explicitly denied that a single act of sexual intercourse could result in pregnancy. I asked one woman if her child had been begotten by a lover, as someone had mentioned to me. She denied the fact, declaring that the lover in question was “only a bit of a lover.”<sup>6</sup> It is difficult to know where this imaginary dividing line lies between who is a bit of a lover and who is sufficiently a lover to become a genitor. Nevertheless, this means that the Mēbengokre eliminate a small but incalculable percentage of men from the role of genitor who would be characterized as such from the Euro-American perspective. Hence not only do the Mēbengokre differ from Western society because they believe that more than one man can fabricate a fetus but, more importantly, a proportion of men who would be regarded as genitors from a genetic standpoint are not recognized as such by the Mēbengokre because they engaged in sexual relations only once or a few times with the future mother.

Ethnographic studies of the Mēbengokre mention ceremonial sex in pairs, especially between members of different age categories, for example, between adolescent men and women who have children, or vice versa.<sup>7</sup> Turner (1966, 221–22, 234–35) mentions sequential sex (between one woman and various men) on certain ceremonial occasions, a practice that still occurred at the time of my fieldwork.<sup>8</sup> Bamberger (1974) and Dreyfus (1963) mention punitive rape. Dreyfus (1963, 58) was told that the men could resort to punitive rape if a woman dared to gossip about having had sexual relations with a married man, or if a young woman was too reticent, in general terms, about having sexual relations. She noted that husbands of pregnant wives and of those with newborn babies had extramarital affairs. Men used to return to live in the men’s house until a child was weaned. Nowadays they remain in the wife’s house, but sleep separately, in a hammock, facilitating nightly sorties after lovers. One woman told me of a ceremonial occasion when a wife takes the arm of her husband’s lover. Such lovers are chosen from among unmarried mothers, divorced or widowed women. He can hunt for her and spend the night with her. The female lover reciprocates, sending food to the wife. It was always stressed to me that neither the husband nor the wife should show jealousy when their spouse engages in ceremonial sex. Turner (1966, 222) mentions that on certain occasions the older women can volunteer their services whereas it is compulsory for childless girls. He also mentions (1966, 235) that the mothers of initiates present food to the women who have had ritual intercourse with their

sons. Ceremonial sexual practices tend to obliterate any question of male infertility, for if a husband fails to impregnate his wife, then sooner or later some other man will do so.

I asked one man if, as somebody had mentioned to me, he was the father of an unmarried mother’s child. He replied that he did not yet know. On another occasion, I asked him how a man knows whether he is the genitor if the woman in question has had various lovers. He replied that if the husband follows the prescribed food prohibitions when the child is ill, and despite this the child dies, then he knows that it was not his child.

Collecting genealogies among the Mēbengokre uncovered the question of ‘pseudo children’ (*kró’aj kra*) (i.e., children engendered by lovers but who were brought up as if they were the mother’s husband’s children, hence his pseudo offspring). Various women requested me to censure information contained in genealogies, intended for use in the schools, concerning the true paternity of their children, asking me to note their husband as the father. I suspect that the figures showing the number of children resident with their mother and father are still overestimated, for the more intimate with a family I became, the more I discovered about the complexity of the composition of domestic groups (see table 6.1). The couple with whom I lived during my last phase of fieldwork exemplified this tendency. The man had married a widow and treated her daughter by a former lover the same way as his own children by this same woman. The girl referred to in this example was about seven and did not realize that her mother’s husband was not her father. Supposedly she will later be informed who her real father is, to prevent her from marrying a close relative of the genitor. This illustrates that, for the Mēbengokre, the identification of the genitor is not of supreme importance, except for defining one’s formal friends and for contributing to one’s well-being in the case of illness. Some children, whose accused genitors denied responsibility, ended up acquiring the formal friends of their mother’s husband or even of the mother’s father.

Initially, it seemed to me that a Mēbengokre woman was regarded merely as the receptacle of the fetus. However, after reflecting on Bamberger’s extensive list (1967) of food taboos that pertain to pregnant people, it now seems that although it is semen that forms the body, the mother has an important role in ensuring a well-formed fetus by avoiding a series of foods that could harm it, or lead to difficulties at the time of giving birth. The category of pregnant person (*mētujarô*; lit., ‘people with protuberant bellies’) applies equally to men and to women, and men should likewise observe a series of taboos during ges-

tation and in the postpartum period to avoid endangering the newborn baby. This phenomenon has been labeled *couvade* in the literature (e.g., Rival 1998; Rivière 1974) and is widespread in lowland South America. My data reveal various accusations of men described as having "killed" their newborn baby by firing a gun, not aimed at the baby but off in the forest. When a baby or child dies, it is the mother who appears to blame herself to the extent that she practices self-flagellation, cutting the top of her head open with blows from a machete, and repeatedly throwing herself backward to the ground until a close relative intervenes to stop her.

Marilyn Strathern (1995a, b),<sup>9</sup> in a stimulating reflection on paternity, notes, in a discussion of a previous article by Delaney (1986), that the Euro-American view of each parent contributing 50% to the fetus is uncommon both across the globe and in historical time. A man may be credited with the creative act of engendering the fetus, or he may be held responsible for nurturing its growth, as in the case of the Trobriands, where the fetus is engendered by ancestral spirits. In the Mēbengokre case, one man initiates the process, but a series of other men may then consolidate the growth of the fetus. There appears to be neither a notion of fertilization nor of subsequent 'natural' growth; rather the fetus is built up gradually, somewhat like a snowball. In the Xingu area in general (including Amerindian peoples of diverse language families), the men describe themselves in smug tones of self-abnegation as "working very hard" in order to make a child. (See Descola 1986 for a discussion of work envisaged as physical exertion.)

It was commonplace in the anthropological literature, until recently, to view the establishment of paternity as more problematic than that of maternity. There could be no doubt about the identification of the genitrix before the invention of surrogate mothers, although before the invention of DNA tests it was not always possible to identify the genitor. For the Mēbengokre, paternity is not an area of *doxa*;<sup>10</sup> there is not always consensus concerning the allocation of responsibility. Consequently, there are some individuals with no father (for at least a certain phase of their life), and others whose mothers point out a certain man as their genitor while the man in question denies responsibility. It is sometimes said, in a derogatory tone, that a certain child is "everybody's" (implicitly referring to a specific age category). It is a hyperbole, synonymous with "nobody's child." I came across two cases of women who refused to identify the father of their child to their coresidents in the village. It was unclear whether such attitudes were temporary or permanent. There was even a woman who claimed that one of her children had no genitor whatsoever; it had been

engendered by root medicine. Later I discovered that the genitor had been a lover who belonged to the matri-house of the woman concerned, a rare case of sexual relations with a member of one's matri-house.

On a day-to-day basis, a good father is a mother's husband who ensures that a child does not go hungry for protein. The Mēbengokre refer to such men as those who "take the child around with them" (*óba*), in the sense of those who rear the child. This implies that one can become the father of a child by nurturing it. A person will always express gratitude and respect for the man who helped to bring him or her up, regardless of whether that person is the genitor or not. This provides an analogy with the Peruvian Piro as described by Gow (1991). They treat kinship as something that is constructed through the process of nurturance. In the Mēbengokre case, it would be interesting to know whether the importance of the mother's husband illustrates their recognition of the fact that kinship can be socially constructed, or whether they believe that the family constitutes a community of bodily substance. Da Matta (1976) affirms that, in the Apinayé case, a couple is taken as intermingling their substance through sexual intercourse. It would be relevant to know whether MHs tend to observe food prohibitions for their wife's children when the latter are ill. Unfortunately I did not inquire into this question.

Since the mid-1980s, there has been an attempt to resurrect an association between matrilineality and low probabilities of paternity.<sup>11</sup> According to the marital history of numerous mature Mēbengokre women, it used to be common for young girls of seven or so to marry adult men. Such husbands slept with their young wives without engaging in sexual relations until the girls reached puberty. This arrangement seems to indicate a valorization of virginity, which in turn implies some guarantee of paternity, once the husbands were able to consummate the marriage.

A point shared by much of the bibliography consulted for this chapter is that acceptance of the paternal role depends almost exclusively on the conviction that one is the biological father of a child. The underlying assumption appears to be that the modern Western notion of paternity is metonymical. One is only a father to the extent that a child is an extension of the self. The Nuer, according to Evans-Pritchard (1992), represent the opposite pole of thinking, in so far as the father is the man who provided bridewealth, regardless of whether or not he is the genitor. According to Radcliffe-Brown, a similar view may once have been held in Europe; he cites an early English saying: "whoso boleth my kyne, ewere calf is mine" (1950, 4). The Mēbengokre have a multifaceted view of paternity. A child can have one or more genitors, but a further avenue to father-

hood is nurturance. It is as if there were two complementary stages to paternity: first, a fetus must be constructed, resulting in the birth of a small baby; second, this baby has to be nourished in order to attain adulthood. Different 'fathers' can be responsible for these separate stages.

### Domestic Life and the Circulation of Food

The cognatic kindred of each individual forms a hierarchical structure, indicating which relatives ego can appeal to in order to acquire the necessary food for satisfying his or her hunger. The orphan is a paradigm of misfortune, especially a motherless child who lacks someone to paint and decorate it. Being fatherless is less serious. The genitor can be substituted by the mother's husband, a series of mother's lovers, by the mother's sister's husband ('F'), the mother's father, the husband of the mother's sister's daughter, or even the mother's brothers (real or classificatory), as the providers of protein, one of the key contributions of the adult male. A careful examination of the composition of Mēbengokre domestic groups over nearly two decades (recorded by me in 119 diagrams) revealed considerable variety, when focusing on the issue of hunters per household. This tallies with an already held impressionistic view that quality of life is to a large extent determined by the vagaries of demography. Larger households, especially those with a balanced population of males and females, benefit from having various adult men who take turns hunting, and various women who fetch garden produce while leaving behind a girl or old woman to look after the small children, who can thereby remain at home while their parents are out at work.

Besides the circulation of food within a house, there is also widespread circulation of food between houses. When a hunter arrives back at the village with game, he hands it over to his wife. Upon arrival from a fishing trip, a man leaves the fish in the canoe whither his wife goes to clean it, at the riverside. Subsequent distribution of meat and fish is in the hands of the women. They are expected, sanctioned by the risk of accusations of stinginess, to send raw portions to the house of their husband's mother and sisters whenever there is more than the wife and her children require for immediate consumption. Despite each married woman having her own garden to tend, sweet potatoes, maize, bananas, watermelon, and other crops mature more quickly in one garden than in another, and one woman's entire crop tends to mature in a short time, so there is too great a yield for consumption by the immediate family of the garden's owner. Consequently, there is widespread redistribution of these products from one house to another, especially between a woman and her

husband's mother and sisters, but also between sisters, whether or not they reside in separate houses, and to brothers and other relatives, depending on the quantity of food available.<sup>12</sup>

It is only on ceremonial occasions, after large-scale collective hunting expeditions, that a man cuts up raw game and distributes it to the women. On these occasions, the women collect the hereditary cuts that their brothers have the right to eat, and take them home to cook. The brothers return to their maternal home to eat the traditional Jê meat pies, made of manioc flour filled with meat, cooked in banana leaves in stone or earth ovens, which are located outside each house.

The bond between brothers and sisters is lifelong, especially when they transmit their names to each other's children, as they ideally do.<sup>13</sup> Genitors and name givers are conceived as being mutually exclusive categories. The genitor produces the fetus with his semen, while the name giver transforms it into a person. Melatti (1979, 78) has aptly referred to this process as onomastic incest, compensating the fact that men must leave their natal home in order to marry. This is reminiscent of the bond between a Trobriander brother and sister, described by Strathern (1995b), as complementing in asexual terms the relation between a husband and wife. This must be emphasized in order to understand that what Euro-Americans envisage as 'paternity' encompasses, in Mēbengokre society, certain aspects of the bond between brother and sister. Genitors produce bodily substance, but that raw material is transformed into a person through naming and the transmission of ancestral prerogatives. Men store their ceremonial adornments at the house of their mother and sisters. During the course of rituals they often return home to be painted and decorated. In one sense, organic substance does not constitute the essence of a Mēbengokre person, for that rots away after death. Names and heritable prerogatives transcend the infinite cycle of life and death, lent out and returned to uterine lines that trace their continuity through fixed location in a specific matriline (which may be represented by two or more dwellings) within the village circle.

Men who have sexual relations with unmarried women, without providing them with game afterward, are criticized by the Mēbengokre as 'stealing' (*ôaki*) them. A chief told me that he disapproved when men have extraconjugal affairs with husbandless women with children, without providing them with food. Sex is represented as a service that women provide to men and for which they are entitled to recompense.<sup>14</sup> Nowadays, Western goods such as beads, soap, and industrialized tobacco are the standard payment for extramarital sexual rela-

tions. It could be argued that the exchange of meat for sex is incorporated into marriage itself, and inadvertently this facilitates multiple paternity in the sense of children depending for survival, not on their genitors, but on their MH or any other man who temporarily (or sporadically) fills the role of meat giver. Children depend on their mothers for food and benefit indirectly from their sexual relations, be it with their genitors or any other men.

Thiel (1994) has argued that ritualized meat sharing among hunters and gatherers allows men to feed children they suspect are theirs without being overt. In line with the metonymical view of paternity referred to above, I regard this view as naive. From my experience of the Mēbengokre, there is no guarantee that men who beget children are preoccupied with feeding them, as there is no guarantee that they will recognize them as their own children, whether they are so or not. It has been demonstrated that the allocation of responsibility is socially constructed and not an objective fact. Sexual relations are prolific in Mēbengokre society (as Crocker and Crocker [1994] have described for the Canela), and women who refuse sex too often are labeled as stingy. From a Euro-American standpoint there is maximization of genetic circulation. If children were to depend on their genitors for food, this would render them vulnerable if their father died. In the past, the men used to travel on lengthy warfare expeditions, besides extended hunting or gathering trips. Nowadays, leaders travel to other villages and to the city, both for trading purposes and to defend the interests of their communities. Sexual intercourse is on a par with game, in terms of infinite demand and replenishment, one regulating the supply of the other throughout the community.

### Formal Friendship

The genitor, besides being essential to the organic well-being of his child, is also the vehicle of its formal friends (of both sexes), inherited patrilineally. The institution of formal friendship has been widely treated in the ethnographic literature concerning the Jê. Formal friends play an important role in all rites of passage. The senior member of a pair of formal friends (the age difference being the equivalent of parent and child) accompanies the junior friend, assisting him/her to enter and leave ritual states.<sup>15</sup>

The patrilineal inheritance of formal friends implies the existence of patriline, traced back only as far as the dead patrilineal relatives remembered by the eldest living people. The notion of submerged patrilineages has been bombarded with criticism in the anthropological literature. However, in

the Mēbengokre case, submerged patriline is an apt designation. Paternity, through the attribution of formal friends, is indirectly associated with the ideal form of marriage, characterized by a mother choosing one of her own formal friends (inherited through her father) as her son-in-law. She selects a formal friend of the appropriate age, that is, someone slightly older than her daughter. It is frowned upon to marry a formal friend. When a woman does this, she stagnates a source of virtual spouses for her daughters, that is, the mother's formal friends. This discovery of a category of virtual or ideal spouses amongst the Mēbengokre approximates them to the Dravidian societies of Amazonia. In societies with Dravidian terminologies, Viveiros de Castro (1993) distinguishes virtual spouses, cross-cousins for example, from potential spouses, distant cognates and noncognates.<sup>16</sup> For the Mēbengokre, prior to the association of formal friendship with the inheritance of affinity (albeit indirectly), it was enigmatic why the Jê should constitute a stronghold, impervious to notions of matrimonial alliance, within an encompassing Dravidian landscape.

Patriline is nebulous because they are neither localized nor legitimized by myths, as are names and prerogatives. One does not belong to a patriline in any sense that could be interpreted as implying a notion of double descent.<sup>17</sup> It was found easy to construct extensive genealogies relating to matri-houses but not to patriline. Many of the formal friends of the population with whom research was carried out were located in distant villages with which there was only sporadic contact.

For the Mēbengokre, formal friends are neither relatives nor nonrelatives. As one woman explained to me, they are different from nonrelatives because the relation between opposite-sex formal friends is characterized by avoidance, shame, or respect (*piaam*), as exists between mother-in-law and son-in-law. Consequently, when a woman chooses a formal friend as a son-in-law, her relationship with him is unaltered. It is said that one can become blind upon pronouncing the name of a formal friend, indicating a mystical component in formal friendship.

### Mentors for Young Boys

Those familiar with the writing of Terence Turner (1966, 1979) may be surprised that the pseudo father (*bam kaik*) has not been considered in the foregoing discussion. The reason for this is that, first, he is more of a mentor or tutor than a 'substitute' father, and second, the tradition of sending boys off to live



in the men's house has fallen into disuse. Vestiges of this practice were found in the late 1970s, when adolescent males lived at the post, 100 meters or so from the main village. This also explains two cases, found in the 1994–95 data, of boys living with a stepsister or mother's sister as a transitional phase, in preparation for leaving the maternal home for good. The elder male mentors used to teach boys handicrafts, hunting, and medicinal knowledge. Nowadays, the elders constantly complain that the young are bedazzled by the 'white man's' world, being more interested in learning how to operate the radio, drive a tractor, and read and write, than how to become a shaman, sing war songs, or learn about herbal medicines.

A boy's mentor, in the men's house, was recruited from among his classificatory fathers. When a child is born, all the men who are real or classificatory brothers of the father, such as parallel cousins, paint themselves in a specific style, attesting to their relationship of shared brotherhood. Upon the occasion of the birth of a man's first child, he and his brothers, besides being specially painted for the occasion, use long ceremonial poles (known as *pute*) with which they sit outside the men's house during the course of the short rite that marks this event.

### The Kin Terminology

The Mēbengokre kinship terminology has consensually been classified as Omaha, although it lacks the sexual asymmetry described by Héritier (1981) for the African Samo terminology that she analyzes. The Mēbengokre manifest abhorrence at the mere suggestion of cross-cousin marriage. In accordance with the terminology, which ignores the generational principle, there are many oblique marriages. The avoidance or suppression of affinity is a classical theme from Northern Amazonia and the Guiana region. In my view, formal friendship is a mechanism for suppressing existing ties, both consanguineal and affinal, thereby facilitating new marriages. The use of kinship terms among all members of a village expresses a code of sociality. It does not preclude recognition of the distinction between close genealogical relatives (who cannot easily be reclassified) and the more distant classificatory ones who shade into the category of nonrelatives.

Mēbengokre social organization can best be described as a type of Venn diagram, with a strong matrilineal dimension, represented by the matri-houses envisaged as moral persons, submerged patrilineal (reminiscent of, but not to be confused with double descent), and (universally recognized) cog-

natic kindreds. Research since the mid-1980s on the Dravidian societies of Amazonia, where the number of marriages with close relatives is proportionately small, in terms of the ideal of endogamy within the local group, and research on those with a Crow-Omaha terminology, where cross-cousin marriage is prohibited, is tending to narrow the gap between them (e.g., Houseman and White 1998).

### Environmental Transformation and Its Impact on the Ecology of the Region

The last two to three decades have witnessed striking and seemingly irreversible effects on the Amazon region and the surrounding savanna. In the 1970s, the Brazilian military dictatorship paved the way for the opening up of the forest with road construction and fiscal incentives to develop cattle breeding in the region. The roads facilitated colonization, gold prospecting, and the lumber trade. Different Mēbengokre areas have been diversely affected by these developments, the logging industry presently posing the greatest threat; it is most intense precisely in the region of the Mētyktire with whom most of my research has been concentrated. Year by year, the game supply becomes increasingly depleted as the stranglehold tightens on the Mēbengokre and other lowland Amerindians, surrounded by cattle ranches and timber merchants, with a yellowish-gray strip of smoke, produced by forest fires, observable by plane at the end of the dry season, dividing the villages below and the blue sky above.<sup>18</sup> The rivers are also becoming increasingly polluted, although the drinking water available to the Mēbengokre of the Gorotire area, from the Fresco River in which they also fish, east of the Xingu River, had been poisoned with mercury as far back as the early 1980s (Lea 1984).

The land inhabited by the Mētyktire is contiguous to the Xingu Park. Nowadays these areas resemble an oasis in the desert when viewed from a plane; they are surrounded by dusty towns, scorched pastures dotted with cattle, and the odd tree trunk that has survived deforestation. Even the remaining forest is scarred by gold prospectors, who leave behind them clearings and muddy pools of stagnant water. A vicious circle is produced, with the Mēbengokre and other indigenous peoples increasingly dependent on firearms for hunting, in order to maintain a sufficient supply of meat; game is diminishing in quantity and is located increasingly further afield. On the other hand, the belligerence of the Mēbengokre, along with a number of other factors, has guaranteed them land roughly equivalent to the area of Scotland (Turner 1993, 114), allowing them

to enjoy one of the best current land-to-population ratios of any Amerindian society within Brazil.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, many Brazilian Amerindian peoples experienced demographic growth as they gradually built up resistance to newly encountered illnesses and received meager health assistance, such as vaccination programs organized by the federal government. In the late 1990s, with the dismantling of the state—due to the triumph of neoliberalism and the increase in malaria, tuberculosis, and sexually transmitted diseases (including the first cases of AIDS in the neighboring Mēbengokre area, east of the Xingu River), following in the wake of deforestation and gold prospecting—there was little cause for optimism. On the other hand, the dire prognostications concerning acculturation, in the 1950s and even later, proved not only exaggerated but also deleterious to the interests of the Amerindian population, disseminating the opinion within Brazil and elsewhere, that they were condemned to assimilation into national society, resulting in cultural annihilation. Ecological consciousness within Brazil has been gradually increasing since the early 1980s. One can only hope that it will soon be strong enough to turn the tide of ecological destruction of the Amazon and the surrounding region.

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## Notes

1. For further details see Lea 1995a.
2. The standard notation is used to designate kin: F = father; 'F' = classificatory father; DC = daughter's children; MH = mother's husband, and so on.
3. A detailed analysis of the composition of Mēbengokre (Kayapó) households is forthcoming as the chapter of a book (Lea, in press).
4. In only one case was there a man who raised his children when his wife left him for another man. The wife had lost her mother and lived with her father's latest wife. The abandoned father of the children earned a wage as a National Foundation of the Indian (FUNAI) worker and married a woman from another Amerindian people. All three factors may have influenced the specificity of this case.

5. *Prō nbi ojkwā, irā akupron, kra nhipetx* (lit., "wife sexual intercourse repeatedly, semen gathers, child is made").

6. *Krō'aj mied ngri* (lit., "pseudo husband (= lover) little").

7. Crocker and Crocker (1994) have written about the question of serial sexual relations in various ceremonial situations among the Canela, a related Jê society. It appears to me that when a woman has sexual relations with various men, on the one night, during the course of a ceremony, this is not taken to entail the possibility of becoming pregnant. However, I am not entirely sure, as I did not inquire about this. Contrary evidence is suggested by a narrative concerning a historic event that led to the separation of the Gorotire and the Ireamrayre (ancestral groups of the Mēbengokre). During a fight, the men of one group had sexual relations with the women of the opposite group, leading to the impregnation of both young girls and older women.

8. It generally involved women of the category *kwat̃j̃j* (FZ, MM, FM) of children honored in naming ceremonies.

9. I thank Marilyn Strathern for having made available to me the original version, from 1992, as yet unpublished in English. This article was first published in Italian (1995a) and republished in Portuguese (1995b).

10. Bourdieu (1977, 164–71 and *passim*) opposes *doxa* to orthodoxy and heterodoxy. It comprises the world of the self-evident, unanimous, "taken for granted" (164)—a "world which has no place for *opinion*" (167, emphasis in original).

11. According to Hartung, "In some cultures extramarital sex is not highly restricted for women, and in most of those cultures, men transfer wealth to their sisters' sons (matrilineal inheritance). Inheritance to sisters' sons ensures a man's biological relatedness to his heirs, and matrilineal inheritance has been posited as a male accommodation to cuckoldry—a paternity strategy at least since the 15th century" (1985, 661). This view entirely overlooks the fact that the modern genetic definition of paternity is not universally acknowledged. Hartung writes as if Western notions of paternity were shared by all cultures.

12. My disagreement with T. Turner (1979) on this point stems from over a year of working closely with the women and being involved in the daily chores of fetching and distributing garden produce, food in general, water, and firewood.

13. The intricacies of name transmission are dealt with in Lea 1992.

14. It is difficult to put this into words in English. What is involved is a notion of reciprocity, not monetary payment.

15. A wider discussion of formal friendship can be found in Lea 1995b.

16. Viveiros de Castro (1993, 167) includes formal friends in the category of potential spouses. In light of my findings, I include formal friends in the category of virtual spouses—that is, for female ego, her mother's formal friend. Potential spouses, for men and women, are comprised of nonrelatives (*mēkāt̃b* or *mēbajtem*).

17. The inheritance of formal friendship is vaguely reminiscent of the Ashanti, with their matri-clans and spiritual element (*ntoro*) inherited from the father, described by Rattray (1923), and later by Fortes (1950).

18. The smoke as seen from the air was particularly striking on my trip to the Mébengokre village of Kubékàkre, Southern Pará, in August 1998.

## 7

## Several Fathers in One's Cap

Polyandrous Conception among the Panoan Matis  
(Amazonas, Brazil)

Philippe Erikson

### Contemporary Matis Society

Because of the devastating pre- and postcontact epidemics that affected them in the late 1970s, the Matis, Panoan speakers of the Javari basin (Amazonas, Brazil), were both very few in number and, for the most part, very young when I first met them in 1984. Out of 109 people recorded in my February 1986 census (Erikson 1996, 141), only one male and six females were age 40 and above, in striking contrast with the 65 children estimated to be 14 or younger (38 boys, but only 27 girls). Nearly all the elders had died during the epidemics and most people had been either orphaned or widowed.

As generally occurs in similar situations (Adams and Price 1994), the Matis have seen their population more than double in the ten years following its demographic nadir. They are now nearly 240. The population crisis has thus slightly eased, but at the cost of increased imbalance in favor of youth. This critical situation, the result of a series of tragic historical accidents, has had serious implications on various aspects of Matis social life, including many of those discussed in this volume, such as the composition of the domestic group, the fate of fatherless children, marriage arrangements, and even kinship terminology.

After the latest outburst of epidemics, in the late seventies, the survivors from the five previously existing villages resettled in just two longhouses, separated only by a two-hour walk (CEDI 1982). One was relatively small and of