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BARA ENDOGAMY AND INCEST PROHIBITION

I

Incest and Social Theory

In this article, I describe the relationship between the preferences for marriage with kin and the prohibitions of sex with kin among the Bara people of the Malagasy Republic. It is paradoxical that in spite of the long-standing prominence of the topic of incest taboo in studies of kinship, there are rather few detailed ethnographic accounts.¹ This has been attributed to the sensitive nature of the topic which makes it difficult to collect data or to discuss it freely in the field situation (Beidelman 1971). Certainly this is often the case with this and other topics that concern the anthropologist. But it seems as if there may be an additional impediment to the study of incest prohibitions, and that is the rather bizarre importance given to the topic in the structure of anthropological theory.

A number of influential writers have presented the incest taboo in terms of either the origins of human culture or the definition of the essence of human society. Although today we associate this grand approach with the theories of Lévi-Strauss, it hardly originates in his work; and it is no detraction to note, with Needham (1971: 24), that Lévi-Strauss' approach to the incest taboo is in a sense a culmination of a long trend in anthropological thought.

Many approaches, in spite of their diversity of explanation, focus on the problem of the integration of the variable complexity of human cultural forms with some more uniform biological imperative. It would be tedious to rehearse all the differences among the approaches to the issue, and for the present, it is sufficient to note that the concept of incest prohibition as a rule regulating mating (whatever its supposed source and/or function), serves as an important link between the organic and super-organic aspects of various Western perspectives on the nature of social man. Such theoretical weight adds an inevitable distortion to

the analysis of sexual taboos, a distortion that is less of a problem in, say, the analysis of food taboos. For at the root of the many anthropological approaches to incest prohibition lurks a rather vague notion that it is some sort of key to the very nature of human society.

Clearly, there is a certain mythical quality about the various social anthropological theories of incest prohibition. After all, those theories of incest prohibition that stress origins cannot be supported empirically since the archaeological record of sexual restraint is minimal. (It is amazing how the idiom of "origins" persists regarding incest taboos long after it has ceased to be considered useful in the analysis of any other basic cultural phenomenon.) And those theories that postulate the universality of the taboo flounder in the sticky problem of cross-cultural definition. Although "incest theories" provide powerful intellectual devices for ordering theories of society, they do not reasonably invite empirical proof or disproof. As Needham (1971:29) recognizes, there can be no general theory of incest since it is "a mistaken sociological concept and not a universal". Given this theoretical legacy, what directions might an ethnographic investigation of incest prohibitions usefully take? Why raise the topic at all?

It is raised because in spite of the evanescence of the analytical category of incest and the falsity of the problem of its taboo, complex formulations relating to sex with close kin remain extremely important and interesting components of social life and values in many parts of the world. Certainly for the people considered here, the Bara of Madagascar, incest and its prohibition provide a real symbolic connection between essentially social constructs and the natural, biological essence of man. The Bara, somewhat like the Western theorists, seem to use the notion of incest as a central device in their concept of society.

The social anthropologist's goal in the study of incest is the same as for any other topic: to make intelligible to us certain aspects of life in a foreign culture. Furthermore, it is the often related experience of anthropology that this ethnographic concern gives us an important and necessary perspective on the ethnocentric roots of our own explanatory systems. An additional aim, and one that is sometimes forgotten by anthropologists rushing to construct models and hypotheses, is that we humbly hope to learn valuable lessons from the wisdom of other peoples. This is particularly striking regarding the present topic, for, as Burton (1973: 504-513) has shown, the world's folk theories regarding incest prohibition are as consistent and accurate as the various hypotheses that Western social science has paraded out over the past one hundred years.

II

Incest, Atonement and Bara Social Categories

During its history in social anthropological theory, the topic of incest has been associated with exogamy. Marrying out has been seen generally to correlate one way or another with prohibiting familial sex. As has been pointed out (Leach 1970, Fox 1967), this correlation has often been little other than the erroneous conflation by the anthropologist of sex and marriage. But even so, the seemingly logical relation has received considerable reinforcement from the ethnographic fact that for most of the unilineally ordered societies that were for so long the primary concern of kinship studies, incest and exogamy define the basic social units. Ethnographers have been aware, however, that even for unilineal societies with their discrete corporate groups, the boundaries of sexual and marital prohibitions do not always coincide (Fortes 1949).

For most of the peoples of Madagascar, there is an apparent contradiction between the norms regarding sexual prohibition and those pertaining to preferred marriages. Sexual relations are forbidden between kin, yet endogamous marriages are strongly preferred. In his study of the Merina, Bloch (1971b: 52-54; 1971a: 171) reports that these contradictory factors are seen to be of different orders; that the injunction against incest is viewed as a moral value which is compromised by the tactical advantage of close marriages. "The incest rule is concerned with the moral and physical effects of marriage between kinsmen. The preferential rule is explained in terms of economic morality." (Bloch 1971a: 171).

This idiom of economic choice and inheritance would be quite foreign to Bara concepts of incest prohibition and endogamy which cannot be separated so neatly into the categories of collective moral value, on one hand, and individual advantage, on the other. The convergence of sexual prohibition and marriage preference is not so much a paradox to be resolved through individual choices but rather a fundamental definitional axiom of Bara marriage. They are both moral injunctions, and they both have complex implications for individuals' interests depending on the details of particular social situations. I will first investigate the systematic features of the relationship between certain Bara sex taboos and marriage preferences, then I will consider certain affective and symbolic aspects through the analysis of Bara folktales and concepts of procreation.

The Bara² are one of approximately eighteen ethnic groups in Mada-

gascar, all of which share a common, but extremely variable, language and culture. They are sedentary pastoralists who tend ample herds of zebu cattle in the rather dry and sparsely-populated savannah of the south-central part of the island republic. Although famous among the Malagasy as herdsman, the Bara also practice subsistence production of irrigated rice. The most prominent features of Bara social organization are the local, agnatic lineage (*tariky*) and the dispersed, cognatic, named "clan" (*raza*). The agnatic lineage is a small (four generations) corporate group whose members generally reside together in one hamlet and share a common tomb for their dead. Most importantly, they are patrilineally connected to the world of the ancestors through the same patriarch who alone is empowered to perform sacrifices on their behalf. The "clan", on the other hand, is a large (thousands) cognatic group whose members generally inter-marry. It has certain attributes of corporation in that it is named, possesses a named cattle ear-brand, and has an official clan history. But the "clan" is primarily a category of social identity rather than a corporate group. Bara society, then, is largely ordered on a balance of complementary principles that finds its basic form in the distinction of gender. The lineal principle, traced through males, is associated with the ancestors and provides the normative structure for the local lineage; whereas an undifferentiated principle, associated with femaleness and fertility spirits, predominates in the organization and values of the wider "clan".

Another distinction of great importance to Bara social relations is that between kin (*hava*) and non-kin (*tsy-hava*). A person counts among his kin all those related to him through his mother or father. It is this grouping of kin (*hava*) that relates most directly to the topic of incest, for it defines the category of forbidden sexual partners. All pre-marital or extra-marital sexual relations with kin are prohibited. In addition to physical intercourse, any approach, proposition, or act that is vaguely preparatory or analogous to sex is considered a breach of the incest prohibition. This strict prohibition against sex with kin contrasts sharply with the otherwise rather tolerant Bara attitude toward casual sexual liaisons. Since young (and old) Bara generally have an active and varied sex life and since the category of kin includes the great majority of nearby members of the opposite sex, this incest rule is seen as a constraint. Leaving aside for the moment the question of Bara emotions regarding sex with kin, I wish simply to stress here that the incest taboo among the Bara is not one of those so called "rules" that no one is really likely to break.

The consequences of breaking this incest prohibition can be severe. It is said that the girl will likely die from an unnatural and fatal swelling of her stomach. This description appears to resemble some bizarre sort of false pregnancy, although I cannot say to what extent Bara make that association. Interestingly, men also are said to die from similar stomach swelling as a result of sorcerous medicine that a woman may place in her vagina before intercourse. Although the Bara, unlike some Malagasy groups, have different terms for incest (*mila fady*) and sorcery (*mamoriky*, *mamosavy*), there is a certain parallel between the two since incest and sorcery are both seen as evil because they are forms of murder. Still, there is an important difference, for whereas sex-related sorcery supposedly can be prevented and cured by a shaman's (*ombiasy*) charms and medicines, the dangers of incest can be averted only through recourse to the ancestors.³ Should a girl be propositioned by a related youth, she must report this immediately to her parents to avoid the risk of losing her life. Her parents then demand a cow from his parents for sacrifice to the gods and ancestors in the ritual of atonement (*mangala tognò*). The girl's parents are irate that the boy should be so callow as to risk her life for the sake of his own pleasure, and they must kill one of his cows that their daughter may live.

Generally, the boy's parents readily agree to see that he brings one of his cows for the atonement ritual, for it is a moral duty to help kin in difficulty or danger. A mere boy may be so egotistical or lustful as to risk the death of his kinswoman, and even an adult male might in a brief lapse give in to temptation, but afterwards his parents and patriarch have no such excuses. To refuse to provide the expiation cow would be a breach of the all important obligations of kinship, a breach as serious as the incest itself. For the relationship of kinship (*fihavà*) is the most important value in Bara social life. In general, one is obligated to treat all kin fairly, to come to their aid and to avoid even the hint of violence toward them, and these obligations are codified and hedged by numerous minor and major taboos (*fady*). Although Bara would not deny disliking certain individuals of their kin, they none the less maintain a significant attitude of trust and affection toward kin in general. A man can trust his kin because he knows them, probably likes them, perhaps has experience in dealing with them, and because they respect the wrath of their common ancestors should trust be betrayed.

And so when arranging the most difficult enterprise of all, the marriage of one's child, the Bara prefer a match with kin. Experience

has shown them that when trusting others with the well-being of children, future grandchildren and cattle, it is prudent to deal with kin.⁴ When asked about their marriage customs, the Bara always say there are two kinds, marriage with kin (*fanabady hava*) and marriage with others (*fanabady amin' olo*). The great preference is for the former, and more than sixty percent of the present marriages in the village where I did research are between people classified as kin (usually first and second cousins by "Western" reckoning). Over seventy-five percent of the individuals had been married at one time to such a relative. Young women greatly resent these arranged marriages, and afterwards they are taunted privately by their former boyfriends about having incestuous relations with their "brothers". With the exception of the brides however, the Bara place great value on these family marriages. And so the Bara category of *hava* (which in anthropological jargon is an ego-centered kindred which as a result of the high rate of endogamy is largely isomorphic for closely related individuals) defines, on one hand, the category of forbidden sexual partners, and, on the other hand, the category of preferred spouses.

In spite of the sanctions, people do occasionally break the taboo against premarital sex with kin. It is difficult to say how often, but it seems that a sizeable minority of people have been involved in at least one case of incest accusation and atonement. The Bara term for incest, *mila fady*, means "to seek the forbidden" and generally is applied to the male. Almost all cases involve somewhat distant cousins, and it is this outer border of Bara sexual prohibitions that concerns us here. Men "seek the forbidden"; women are sought. It is an amatory accomplishment of sorts for a young man to seduce an attractive and distantly related girl. Usually she reports his first proposition and his attempt and failure become public. But there is also the slim chance that she will not report him, or that she will be willing to make love before reporting. Youths soon learn that it is a loser's gamble. Obviously, it takes two to get involved in such an affair, and some girls seem to get satisfaction from leading a boy on to risk one of his beloved cattle for her sake. For some young Bara men and women, this sort of sex play with distant kin is the rare and risky, but exciting boundary of the normal game of sexual conquest.

I have not specified exactly where this boundary lies, or to what degree of consanguinity this sexual prohibition extends. This is because the Bara make no such rigid specification; they state simply that one should not have sex with anyone with whom a kinship relationship can

be traced. Indeed, it is these cases of incest and atonement that help establish in practical terms the operational limits of the *hava*. For if, as sometimes occurs, the boy's family refuses to provide the sacrificial beast, then the girl's family angrily announces that there had been no incest, since these crude people are obviously no kin of theirs. Amid bitterness and dispute, the kinship relation between the two families is thus terminated and sexual relations are henceforth permitted. Conversely, acceptance of the obligation to provide the cow, and the celebration of the ritual of atonement is a public affirmation of the continued relationship between the two families. Years afterward, this event will be cited as proof of kinship. When a Bara wants to demonstrate that his family is related to another, he often makes a statement to the effect that a certain old man of his family once gave up a cow after seducing a now ancient lady of the other family. Actual genealogical ties may be forgotten or not be particularly relevant, but this ritual affirmation of direct responsibility of a girl's life and fertility is the most meaningful proof of common kinship between two families.

We must examine this ritual closely for it plays an important role in resolving, at one level, the supposed contradiction between prohibition and preference toward the same category of sexual and marriage partners. This is but one of two rituals that are important in this regard; this one relates specifically to sex with kin whereas the other (which will be considered in the next section) concerns marriage. This ritual of atonement for sex with kin takes the form of the usual Bara invocation and sacrifice which is also the central act of rituals of circumcision, curing and marriage. The patriarch of the girl's patriline explains the reason for the sacrifice (*tata*) in a simple speech to the gods and ancestors; the young man involved kills the cow with the patriarch's knife; and the patriarch then sprinkles those involved and those observing with a mixture of water and a bit of blood from the sacrifice. As in a marriage, the sacrifice should be performed by the girl's patriarch, with a cow provided by the boy. The stated purpose of the rite, according to all informants, following the text of the patriarch's invocation, and embodied in the name of the ritual, *mangala togo*, is to "remove the transgression" that has been committed.

This ritual clearly has social implications in addition to the efficacious intervention with the supernatural. As stated earlier, the performance of the ritual is also an affirmation of kinship, of a continuing relationship between two families. This is important to the Bara, for with the passage of genealogical time such ties weaken and become questionable.

Although the usual way to shore up such links is through arranging endogamous marriages between children and grandchildren in the different lines, there are always more relationships to be maintained than there are children to marry. So incest and atonement between distant cousins can and often do function as a sort of bargain basement means of alliance maintenance. And whereas incest in general is abhorred, specific transgressions, properly atoned for, often are accepted with amused tolerance.

In the three cases of incest involving people I knew well, there were complicated social circumstances that made the atonement ritual's implied affirmation of kinship advantageous to one or both parties. One case can stand as an example. This case is typically complex and I apologize if the following simplified version remains difficult to follow. However, since it is the complexity and ambiguity of the social situation that provide the necessary leeway for action, over-simplification would obscure the sense. A young friend came to my hut one day in a state of great excitement and told me confidentially that he was soon going to commit incest. Several days later he arrived in a more serious mood to inform me that the patriarch of his lineage (his grandmother) had invited me to view a ritual that I had never seen — incest atonement. At his hamlet, the family was joking and discussing his sexual transgression with mock seriousness. His grandmother donated her skinniest young cow for the ritual, mumbling sarcastically to the amusement of all about how the way this boy carries on she will be lucky to have any cattle left for her own funeral.

Part of the levity resulted from the fact that this incest atonement ritual was convenient for them because of a complicated social situation. My friend's brother had a long-standing dispute with a man distantly related to the girl in question, a dispute that had recently been violent with my friend's brother in the wrong. The girl's guardian was also involved in a bitter disagreement with his patriarch, the father of my friend's brother's adversary. The incest atonement ritual forced the girl's guardian to affirm his kinship with my friend's family while simultaneously widening his dispute with his patriarch. Interestingly, since his dispute with his patriarch centered on the latter's supposed misuse of his patriarchial office, the girl's guardian was loath to have his patriarch celebrate the atonement ritual according to custom. He dared not celebrate the ritual himself, so he was forced to suggest that in this incest case the patriarch/grandmother of the transgressing male perform the sacrifice.⁵ My friend's family and grandmother had the enviable

task of sacrificing (and eating) their own cow in placation of their own ancestors while creating havoc among the ranks of their adversary. It could not have worked out better for them, unless, of course, the young man had also succeeded in what was to him the most important goal: making love to his pretty cousin.

In certain respects, an all too familiar sort of functional explanation presents itself here. Incest avoidance and the ritual of incest atonement not only please the ancestors and avoid "supernaturally" caused physical illness, but they also help maintain an important social category. This appears to hark back to many of the studies of African unilineal systems in which incest avoidance was seen to maintain exogamous lineages and clans which in turn were viewed partly as political institutions and hence supposedly synonymous with "society" itself. Within this framework, incest prohibition functioned to help maintain the entire system of societal order. Bara incest regulations relate, not to corporate unilineal groups, but to a general social and moral category, *hava*, which is essentially a cognatic kindred. Since this category amounts to little other than who is and who is not related to one, and is not a corporate or political group, there is no direct way this incest prohibition and atonement can be viewed as supporting societal integration.

Still, we need to examine carefully certain functional aspects of these Bara institutions. (a) The avowed purpose and necessary reason for the atonement ritual is to placate the ancestors and avoid illness and death for the girl. Other aspects must be viewed as additions to, rather than reductions of, this manifest purpose of the incest atonement ritual. (b) By its nature, the atonement ritual is also an affirmation of kinship and so is a perfect vehicle for stressing particular social links and for indirectly pressuring others to affirm such ties and act accordingly. As we have seen, Bara participants are well aware of this specific function of the ritual. (c) Finally, the fact that this ritual allows for the affirmation of social ties has implications in relation to the systematic aspects of Bara kinship. Since, as we have seen, the category of kin (*hava*) has no definite genealogical boundaries, these rituals function to maintain the categorical distinction between kin and non-kin. The natural expansion over genealogical time of the networks of kinship is thus periodically checked, defining the limits of kinship and matching the ideal category to the current demographic reality.

There is, however, a catch in this last clause, and that is the well known tautology of such explanations. Sexual regulation may be said to maintain the category of kinship, but, more than that, it is the most

important aspect, almost the very essence of the Bara definition of kinship (*fihavà*). Since other obligations of common kinship (mutual aid, etc.) are secondary to (or, at least, no more important than) the ancestral regulation of sexuality between kin, it would be absurd to view the latter as maintaining anything other than itself. We have seen that at a certain normative level, sex with kin is absolutely forbidden and carries strong sanctions. Yet it occurs and if atoned for properly in an ancestral sacrifice is acceptable and even, in some circumstances, welcome. Marriage between kin is common and strongly preferred in spite of this strong norm against sex with kin. It is only by viewing all aspects of sexual regulation that we can see that the logical contradiction between these prohibitions and preferences is minimal. Sex between unrelated individuals is largely their own affair. Sex with kin is regulated through ancestral sanction and family approval. Such sex is important and should take place within marriage so as to contribute to the orderly growth and to the moral and economic prosperity of one's family.

III

Incest and Marriage Preferences

In an important sense, the aspect of Bara sexual prohibitions which pertains to the outer boundary of the kindred is a reversed variation of Tylor's dictum. Bara sexual prohibitions are meant to preserve the delicate alliances among affinally linked families. This aspect of Bara sexual regulation has little to do with our Western notions of incest as sex within the family, for it is an activity played out among somewhat distant cousins and it relates directly to the specific structure of Bara social alliance. This seems to support Goody's (1956) facile suggestion that there are really two incest taboos everywhere, one maintaining alliance and varying from society to society, and the other expressing primal familial relationships and assuming an almost universally uniform configuration. So far I have discussed only this "socially determined" form of sexual prohibition, but now I turn our attention toward the inner boundary between marriageable kin and those kin too close for even marital sex within the Bara tradition of endogamy. The Bara do not under any circumstances marry primary kin and this inner boundary of endogamous marriage is articulated through ritual in a fashion similar to the articulation of the outer boundary through the atonement ritual. Obviously, the Bara would not recognize Goody's

division of incest into one type relating to external social realities and another relating to internal biological realities. Not only are both kinds of incest (defined in Goody's functional terms) given the same term (*fady*), but both are seen as confounding the laws of nature as well as being inextricably bound up with aspects of Bara marriage preference.

So far I have indicated that the Bara prefer to arrange marriages within the kindred (*hava*). Now, I wish to explore more precisely the values that the Bara attach to endogamous marriage in general and to specific categories of preferred unions. Endogamous marriage is not a special case or a compromising exception, but is the ideal form of marital arrangement. In contrast to Bloch's account of the Merina patterns (Bloch 1971a: 171), there is little shame attached to Bara close marriages, and no preference for unions with distant rather than close kin. Quite the opposite: the strongest marriage preferences are couched in genealogical terms and define the border between absolutely prohibited primary kin and the wider category of potential endogamous unions.⁶

Bara attitudes toward marriage with close kin are expressed most naturally through their folktales. By "naturally" I mean simply that this is the medium through which the Bara express the wisdom of their own understanding and bafflement regarding key aspects of their society. For my aim is not to uncover secret desires or repulsions, but to follow the Bara as they reflect upon the ideological complexities and ambiguities of their own sexual regulations. Most importantly, I wish to indicate something of the tone and ambiance of such notions and related actions. For when the topic is sex, the tone and style of a people's customs are surely as important as their place in the symbolic structure or in the system of functional relationships.

Folktales are the most important form of oral literature for the Bara and are a regular part of daily life. In contrast to some Malagasy peoples, the Bara show little interest in proverbs or in formal ritual text. And like most groups in Madagascar, they have no long, sacred, formal myth of creation. And so it is these amusing, short and almost casual stories (*tapasiry*) that represent the major and almost exclusive form of Bara oral tradition. This is extremely apt since the tone and style of these tales fit the image the Bara have of themselves as simple folk, who even take some delight in construing their ethnic name (especially the reduplicative diminutive *barbara*) to mean "rude and simple". For they are a proud people who value the ability to mask cleverness and wisdom in a cloak of simplicity and modest humor.

Bara folktales rely heavily on this irony to communicate various levels of meaning to the listeners. If I may be permitted a personal note, my first reading of Jacques Faublée's *Récits Bara* left me disappointed. I had not yet visited Madagascar and, unaware of this ironic character of the tales, I despaired of ever learning anything from them. Faublée himself seems poorly attuned to the irony and so although he states in his preface that these tales are by definition amusing, the source and nature of the humor does not always survive his translation and explication. Later, while I was with the Bara, I saw how during each recitation, men, women and children smile, their eyes sparkle, they giggle and guffaw. And at the end of each story, the teller repeats the stock closing, "It is not I who lies, but this lie comes from olden times" (*Tsy aho no mavandy, fa taloha*).

Unless we begin to sense the source of humor for the Bara, any analysis of these tales is likely to lead us quite astray. And so I asked about the closing caveat, for I needed some indication of how they regard these stories. Everyone agreed (grinning) that these stories are "Lies! Great lies! All lies!" (*Mavandy. Vandi-be. Vandy aby.*) "But none the less, true!" (*Ka nefa marina.*)⁷ More than anything else it is this juxtaposition of truth and falsehood, probable and impossible, acceptable and forbidden in an assiduously simple narrative framework that is the source of humor and enlightenment in these folktales. As my knowledge of Bara social conventions grew, I began to find amusement in the topsy-turvy world of the storytellers and to realize that these tales are indispensable aids toward an understanding of Bara customs, especially those dealing with the difficult but important matter of sex with relatives.

Our texts are the first three tales in Faublée's *Récits Bara*. I shall recount each tale in English; however, the reader is referred to Faublée (1947: 23-32) for a very beautiful narrow transcription in the Bara dialect of Malagasy and for a quite literal and accurate translation into French. Our first tale (the second in Faublée's collection) is entitled "The Origin of Marriage" (*Ny Boahany Fanabadia*) and it is about the courtship and marriage of a brother and sister.

There were people who had children, three boys and one girl. The three boys did not have wives. The middle son went to God and requested "something he could marry to give him life". God had him carry a shaped and flattened club.

Do not ever leave this behind. When you herd the cattle, take it with you.

One day he left his club at home. His older sister saw it and she lay on top of it. He remembered it and returned to the village.

Where is my "thing"?

His sister was laying on her stomach. He tried to roll this child, but she would not. Finally he rolled her and saw his club. (At this point the story teller has the brother speak a triple-entendre, *vadiko hanao*, meaning "I have rolled you", "I have had sex with you", "You are my wife". The sister responds to the third.)

Yes, I am your wife.

He went to visit God.

That thing which you had me carry, I forgot it and my older sister saw it and she lay on it. When I returned she said she is my wife.

Perform the *tandra* ritual for she is your wife.

They got married, those two, and they had children. And that is the root (*fotorany*) of marriage. Even those who are forbidden (*fady*) can marry if they perform the *tandra* ritual.

It is not I who lies, but this lie comes from olden times.

The playfully erotic aspects of the tale are not entirely obvious in translation and so a preliminary explication of some of the word-play may help to establish the tone of the story. To begin with, the story teller plays with the word *velo*, alive, which can refer to a range of states of vital-being such as fertility, health, or sexual arousal. The young man is commanded to take his "club" when herding cattle. Although it is usual for cow herds to carry a club, by this point in the story the club is clearly taking on phallic connotations. The idea of a young man leaving his "club" behind is ludicrous. All of this word-play leads to his "rolling" the girl (his older sister) who has been lying on his "thing".

However, since the couple are brother and sister, this normally common courtship scene becomes preposterous. For Bara siblings are forbidden not only sex and marriage, but also any act or word that is even vaguely preparatory or analogous to sex. One is forbidden to step over a sleeping sibling or even over a sibling's empty sleeping mat. Furthermore, such language as exhibited in this story, the playful and erotic euphemism, is certainly forbidden. It is clear that this combination of the natural and the impossible might be a source of amusement, but how is it such a scene is also presented as the foundation of the institution of marriage?

Certain explanations come to mind readily. If this is supposed to be the original family group then sibling mating must occur to populate the world. Indeed, Faublée (1947: 28) offers this explanation for the tale. However, this common theme of creation stories receives little

emphasis in the Bara version. Few of the Bara creation tales portray the characters as ancestral in the way the Genesis tales present Adam and Eve as our direct forebears. When the Bara reflect on the origins of man, they show little concern for the logical restraints of the primal situation. Additionally, it might be surmised that the story appeals to some sublimated attraction between brothers and sisters. This possibility can be neither demonstrated nor excluded, but there is no evidence that such is the major appeal of the story. There is, however, the usual ambiguity as to whether the story applies to actual siblings or to a distantly related pair. The story teller has made it fairly clear that these are actual siblings, but the scene described is reminiscent of the sort of seduction that can take place between distant cousins (as described in the previous section).

Except for the fact that this relationship is highly incestuous, the tale of the brother and sister describes an ideal marriage, based on sexual attraction and happiness, maintaining family unity, having God's blessing, and producing children. And so the absurdity at one level reveals ultimate values at a higher level. In the real world, such an ideal union is unattainable, for marriages often ignore the personal feelings of the partners, create some family conflict, and lose the children (at least partially) to the affines. The ideal can be approximated, however, with God's permission and the ancestors' blessing, through the marriage of the children of the brother and sister in the next generation. This is by far the most favored form of union among the Bara, which brings us to the next story which opens with a cross-cousin marriage.

Once upon a time the children of a brother and sister got married without performing the *tandra* ritual. They had a difficult marriage and often fought. The woman became heavy with child, but the pregnancy went badly. The man said,

I don't know what is causing this trouble with your stomach, perhaps there is a rule made by God for the married children of a brother and sister. Perhaps the elders will know of it.

I ask you, elders, the pregnancy of my wife is going badly, is there perhaps a rule given by God to the people of olden days?

We have not heard and do not know of any rule.

His wife aborted, and after a few days she died.

Let us bury the dead, said her father, for we do not know what interdiction made her die.

The burial was over and the mourners were returning to the village. How can we find out the cause of her death? There is a diviner nearby, let us find him.

They sent for the diviner and he arrived.

We have called you because we wish to know what killed our child.

That will be difficult since you have waited until the patient is already dead before calling for me, but I will do the divination anyway and perhaps we will discover what transgression killed her.

He dealt the divination seeds and saw the form *Alebeavo* alone in its family.

There is some interdiction that you failed to remove with the sacrifice of a cow.

The father of the deceased answered, I had my daughter marry the son of my sister and I did not remove any interdiction.

Quickly, save those who are still alive, for there will be more deaths if you do not kill a cow. Place on the forehead of each some blood from the cow and the danger will be avoided and there will be no more deaths.

But what should we do if we have more children to marry to one another?

Kill a cow. The patriarch shall sprinkle water on those who wish to marry. And they shall mark themselves with the blood. There will be no more deaths and the woman will have children for the danger will be avoided.

There were two brothers, one had a son, and the other had a daughter.

Let us attempt to marry our children. You, eldest, with the son, sprinkle the water, and I'll donate a cow, and the children will do this *tandra* ritual.

We will see if this diviner speaks the truth. If our children die, said the eldest, what shall we do?

We will weep, said the youngest.

Choose a lucky day for us to do the rite.

They performed the invocation and the sacrifice. The young couple performed the *tandra* with the blood of the cow. They were married. The wife gave birth, and the husband remained in good health.

That diviner spoke the truth, they said, let us keep this custom just as if it were a custom from the ancestors.

And the *tandra* became one of our ancestral customs which we keep even today.

It is not I who lies, but this lie comes from olden times.

This story clarifies certain basic principles of Bara marriage: close kin, especially paternal and cross-cousins, may marry if they first perform a ritual to remove the taboo. But the Bara listeners already know this, and so we must look elsewhere for the source of their enjoyment of the tale. There are humorous lines such as when the diviner/curer suggests dryly that they are a bit late in requesting his services. And there are poignant lines such as when the younger brother answers with, "We will weep". Furthermore, there is considerable humor in the con-

trast between the characters' experimenting to discover customs which the listeners, on the other hand, know very well. These characters, seemingly normal and intelligent Bara, bumble along in ignorance of the most basic rules of social and moral life.

They test the diviner's word by attempting to marry the children of brothers. This is for the Bara a permitted but rare marriage arrangement. It is a true test of the diviner's advice since it is more anomalous than cross-cousin marriage because both partners belong to the same patrilocal group. Indeed, as a result of this, the normal marriage arrangements are all reversed in the story. It is the father of the bride who proposes and provides the cow, both of which are the obligations of the groom's family. And the father of the groom, rather than the bride, performs the ritual. At one level, these reversals are the logical result of the fact that the parties are of the same patrilocal group and that the groom's father happens to be the elder. Again, important situations are simultaneously the epitome of normality and the height of absurdity. Yet, with everything wrong, this marriage of paternal parallel cousins is successful.

What is this *tandra* ritual that is emphasized in all of these stories and seems to be at the very heart of Bara marriage customs? From the tales, it is clear that the manifest function of this rite is to remove the general sexual taboo between kin and therefore permit a marriage between particular cousins. Most commentators have adopted this explanation for their analyses of Malagasy marriage, and such is certainly Faublée's position regarding the Bara (Faublée 1953: 34-36). These folktales, however, present a more complex picture than that of a simple dispensation from a general prohibition. For the general prohibition of close marriage (with its corollary of marriage to outsiders) is certainly not given any logical priority over the custom of cousin marriage. All of these stories stress the custom of cousin marriage as a primary feature of Bara social organization, and they all ignore (as being of no relevance to Bara values) the possibility of out-marriage. Present practice among the Bara is to celebrate the *tandra* (or *fafy*) ritual only for marriages between first cousins. Essentially, the *tandra* consists of doubling the usual ritual; with one sacrifice and invocation performed by the bride's patriarch and another by the groom's patriarch. Marriage with more distant kin rarely entails an additional ritual. (Unless, of course, the couple have been intimate before the marriage, in which case an atonement ritual will be celebrated.)

In light of these folktales, one must go beyond a mere restatement

of the manifest purpose of the ritual in order to account for the *tandra* and its implications for Bara marriage customs. The sexual prohibition and the marriage preference are two aspects of a single system, and the general prohibition of sex between kin does not extend to the *tandra* marriage of cousins. For the Bara, the notion that such preferred marriages might *not* be allowed exists only in the topsy-turvy world of the folktale, not in reality. Rakoto (1966: 7-22; 1971: 95-100) has argued perceptively that the *tandra* ritual not only provides dispensation, but most importantly, celebrates and re-affirms the positive virtues of marriage between a "brother" and a "sister". This extra ritual serves to set the ideal marriage apart from all the other forms of sexual relationship. Just as the incest atonement ritual examined earlier defines the outer boundary of kinship and the inner boundary of unregulated sexual activity, this *tandra* marriage ritual defines the ultimate inner limits of preferred endogamy. And both rituals re-affirm the kinship ties that otherwise would be compromised by random sexual association. This double aspect of dispensation and celebration, of positive and negative emphasis on these relations with close kin is familiar to us as the very essence of ritual taboo and social avoidance behavior. One can do no better than to quote from Steiner's (1967: 65) *Taboo*:

... we can see that positive and negative transmission are not merely contemporaneous by accident; they are interdependent. Any ritual or practice embodying belief in negative transmission strengthens attitudes toward positive transmission. What is remarkable about the two kinds of transmission, surely, is the way they combine to create a universe of properties.... Only by conceiving these properties as active, human relationships can one conceive structured social life in terms of them.

IV

Bara Concepts of Procreation and the Incest Taboo

Lest the reader conclude that there is no limit to Bara compromise regarding familial sex, let me describe the ultimate line between, on one hand, the most valued marriages, and, on the other, the most abhorred incest. This line is not where a Westerner might expect, for it is firmly drawn, not merely around siblings and other primary kin, but around the children of sisters as well. Regarding the incest taboo, matrilineal parallel cousins (for several generations) are, in a sense, classed with siblings. This taboo against marriage and sex between individuals related through the uterine line is the most absolute, most important

and most emphasized of all Bara sexual prohibitions, and its ramifications permeate the entire social system. In recognition of this, Faublée placed the relevant folktale first in his collection of over three hundred. So once again, we turn to the story teller for our opening clues to the meanings of this taboo.

The Children of Sisters

There were two sisters who each had a child. One had a boy and one a girl. There was famine. They went out to find food, these two, leaving their children in the village. When the mothers returned, they heard their babies crying. The mother of the girl went over and picked up the boy and began to breast feed him. The other called out.

That one is not yours, but mine. For yours is the girl, mine the boy. Let us go and ask the old women who look after the children, for you don't even know your own child, whereas I certainly know to whom I gave birth.

Fine, let us not fight. Let us go and ask the old women.

We have been disputing over our children. She does not recognize her own. Perhaps you who care for the children can distinguish hers from mine, for I have no wish to argue with her.

It is the elder who has the boy and the younger who has the girl. So don't argue any longer.

I cannot agree, said the younger sister. I am going wherever I must to retain my rightful child.

Fine, go, said the old women.

She went to the king.

Greetings, King, I come here because the old women who care for our children, my sister's and mine, switched them while we were away. I know which is mine because he is a boy, and my sister has a girl.

Tell these old women, and your husbands, to come here before me.

You have arrived, said the king.

Yes, replied the old women.

I've brought you here because a woman complains that you have switched her child.

She is wrong, said the old women, hers is the girl, that of her sister is the boy.

That is not true, replied the woman.

You men, what are your thoughts? You, husband of the woman complaining, tell us, does your wife speak the truth?

Not at all, he replied, ours is a girl, not a boy.

There woman, agree, for your spouse speaks the truth. For you did not give birth to a male but you gave birth to a female.

I don't agree, anyway it is not the man who gives birth, but the woman.

Bring me the children. I shall find out the truth.

They brought the babies to the king.

Go far away and when you return, let each pick up her child. If they do not cry you can each take your own.

The woman who insisted she is mother to the boy picked him up and he cried.

There, said the king, he is not your child. Take your daughter.

Oh, I am so unhappy, King, give us permission to marry these two children together.

I don't know of any such custom. Go ask God.

So they arrived before God.

We have come here because our children were exchanged. Mine, a boy, was taken by my sister who has a girl. The king wished me to give him to my sister, but I refused.

That is not true, however, we asked the king for an enabling custom, but the king refused and sent us here to you, because you will know what custom to give us.

I will give you the custom. Since your children have been exchanged, I don't know which of you gave birth to the girl, and which to the boy. Go home and I'll send someone to announce the custom.

Go, messenger, and tell the sisters whose children have been exchanged, that the children of sisters cannot marry for they are exchanged children.

And it is for that reason that the children of two sisters cannot marry. It is not I who lies, but this lie comes from olden times.

Again, let us ease into this tale by first considering some of the manifest sources of humor for the Bara. One small point of humor is the complaining woman's dismissal of her husband's evidence. Of course, a man knows the sex of his child, yet behind her absurd obstinacy is the fact that women do ultimately have priority over men in all that concerns birth and children. The complaining woman keeps taking her case to higher authorities, each of which is less competent than the preceding one since each is less familiar with the case. The order of witnesses called by the king is likewise absurd. Having heard the impartial view of the old women and the word of the woman's husband, the king relies on the crying of a baby to decide the case. This silly sequence of higher authorities upholds an important Bara axiom that family matters should be solved at home. Only the party in error has anything to gain by appealing to higher authorities who are distant and ignorant of the facts.

The highest authority, God, is the most ignorant of all. Whereas everyone else is certain that the younger sister is wrong, God is unable to separate the two children properly. And so, ironically, the most important law of society, the prohibition of both sex and marriage between the children of sisters, results from the peculiar obstinacy, cupidity, and stupidity of woman combined with the sublime ignorance of God. In

the face of this female tenacity, the elders, husbands, and kings (with all their evidence and logical proofs) are helpless. The reason for this sexual prohibition is unknown, but it is rooted in the unique and mysterious qualities of the female. God forbids marriage because the children were exchanged, but beneath this *non sequitur* lie suggestions about the nature of the female attributes that are ultimately responsible. The children cannot be separated one from the other, therefore they cannot be reunited. Not only are the children of sisters inseparable, but this unity is based on confusion and disorder.

Taken together, this and the other two stories map out the range of marriage options in Bara custom. The Bara make sharp distinctions among the three categories of cousins which to the Western mind seem to embody equally close relationships. The children of sisters are absolutely forbidden as marriage partners whereas the children of brothers are allowed to marry (if they perform the correct ritual). The third category, the children of a brother and sister, is not only permitted, but preferred among all possibilities. The reasons for these sharp distinctions are not given except that each is somewhat arbitrarily announced by some authority. Yet, as we have seen, there are suggestions in the stories of the sorts of mysterious attributes differentially associated with the connection of potential spouses exclusively through females, through males, or through a male-female combination. Children of sisters have, in a sense, a single life essence which makes them inseparable or so interchangeable that one is just like the other. The children of two brothers may belong to the same corporate group and their marriage may create awkward role reversals. However, their closeness (through males) is largely a social rather than a biological tie. These tales do not directly explore the favored cross-cousin marriage, but it is four times highlighted through various negative and alternative examples. For this relationship is neither (1) prohibited because of physical closeness like that through women, nor (2) absurd because of social closeness like that through men. It (3) approaches the utopian qualities of the forbidden brother-sister marriage, provided that the partners (4) remember, as those cross-cousins in the story did not, to celebrate the *tandra* ritual.

This strong contrast between Bara views of male-relatedness on one hand, and female-relatedness, on the other, is an important theme in Bara culture and a major structural feature of Bara society. In order to appreciate its implications for Bara conventions of sexual activity and marriage choice, we must follow the obvious path from marriage

and sex to conception and birth. Although Bara marriage preferences and prohibitions are largely arbitrary social conventions, they are also part and parcel of Bara notions of biology and of the nature of the person. In their characteristic (and quite different) ways, both Malinowski (1932) and Mauss (1938) demonstrated years ago the importance of such notions for anthropological analysis. And recent studies (Scheffler 1967; Wagner 1968; Strathern 1974), influenced by Lévi-Strauss' (1969) and Leach's (1961) highlighting of the widespread notion that flesh and bone come from the child's mother and father respectively, have shown how indigenous notions of sexual conception provide metaphors (for the ethnographer as well as for the people) for the interpretation of social organization and activity. The difficulty with such an approach is that the ethnographer makes more general and more systematic explanatory use of such idioms than do the people themselves and hence it is often difficult to know precisely where native usage leaves off and the anthropologist's model begins. This is an inevitable aspect of analysis and cultural translation, but the indeterminacy can be reduced through fuller exploration of such idioms in their own realm before transforming the indigenous metaphors into an external model.

Our description is, for the present, largely restricted to Bara notions of biology and holds in abeyance the extensions and implications of these for social and jural institutions. For one thing that often makes incest different from, say, adultery, is that it is seen to have automatic physical repercussions. The Bara viewpoint is that incest causes infertility in the partners or in their offspring. The purely social ambiguities of improper sexual liaisons are of quite secondary importance compared to the resultant imbalance and deficiency in the sexual basis of life. Furthermore, these physical consequences of incest are not distributed equally between the man and the woman. In the folktale, it is the woman who dies shortly after aborting, whereas the husband is in little danger. Bara uniformly state that illicit sex (rather than marriage) causes the death of the girl as a result of her stomach swelling unnaturally, and informants agree that the boy is rarely harmed. And so we must examine the nature of Bara notions of reproduction which see these physical consequences of incest as so much more grave for women than for men, and so much worse if the parties are related purely through females rather than through the intervention of at least one male.

For this, it is necessary to shift analytical gears from the approach used in examining folktales. The Bara story-teller, as we noticed, relies

heavily on irony and on explicit manipulation of known conventions. Bara notions of human conception, however, are not an art form; they are not explicit ideas to be played with and turned topsy-turvy for amusement. We shall, on the contrary, now be concerned with those ideas of the nature of human life which are so basic to the Bara that they admit almost no imaginable alternative. Whereas in the last section we had to deal with "lies, great lies", now we must elucidate ideas and attitudes which cannot be but implicitly and vaguely indicated in statements and deeds.

It is extremely important when investigating beliefs about procreation, to consider fully the roles of both the male and the female. For even though some cultures, including the Bara, give far more emphasis to the contribution of one sex than the other, it remains to be demonstrated that any population is ignorant of the fact that both male and female are necessary for mammalian reproduction. However, as must be clear by now, the emphasis, for many peoples in Madagascar, is so heavily weighted on the side of the female that one can almost forgive the one prominent anthropologist who discusses the issue (Southall 1971: 149-151) for his almost total neglect of the male contribution. For the Bara view is in some respects similar to the position of Aristotle who held that only the female transfers essential physical substance to the offspring; whereas the male is responsible, in some way, for merely creating form in the fetus.⁸ This distinction between substance and form is crucial for it means that not only do the male and female contribute different materials in procreation, but they do so in qualitatively different ways, which provide the basis for the logically different types of trope associated with the relationship through each parent. We shall return to these ramifications later, but first let us look at those Bara beliefs and idioms that bear most directly on the biological aspects of procreation. The Bara view can be summed up by saying that the semen of the father orders (*mamboatsy*) the blood (*ra*) of the mother. Although it is difficult to consider the one without the other, let us take a cue from the Bara (and from Southall) and discuss the more manifest female contribution first.

Bara are quite explicit about the fact that it is the blood of the mother that becomes (*manjary*) the fetus and then the child. It would be absurd to transfer our idioms of "blood relationship" to the Bara situation and say that they recognize this as passing in the female line only. Although this would be a technically true characterization of Bara notions, it is misleading because such an idiom is not particularly im-

portant to the Bara. They do not go around saying that so and so is or is not a "blood relation". None the less, the mother's blood is cited by virtually all Bara as the substantial physical element from which the fetus develops. And, given the observable facts of menstruation and childbirth, it is not surprising that beliefs of this general nature are common throughout much of the world. Furthermore, the Bara see blood to be the crucial life-essence, and this importance is indicated by the many metaphors focussing on the heart and the liver, the two reddest and bloodiest organs in the body. The Bara expression for suicide is to "kill the heart" (*mamono fo*) and the feared European sorcerers are thought of as "heart stealers" (*mpaka fo*) or "liver thieves" (*pagalan'aty*). These foreign invaders and their native assistants are believed to steal the very life-blood of the Malagasy people. Also, it is considered incestuous for a man to have sex with a girl and her mother, at least (according to some) during the same menstrual cycle.

The most common and important expressions pertaining to the female contribution to the child are those denoting uterine siblings. Children who have the same mother (but not necessarily the same father) are called *tampo raiky* which means literally "of one heart" (*fo* = heart).⁹ Because of the strong figurative uses of the word *fo*, heart, this connection has its mystical aspects of life-essence as well as the substantial connection. Another common expression for uterine siblings is *troky raiky*, "one womb" or "one stomach". This expression is used quite interchangeably with "of one heart" but refers more to the common and very physical source of the children than to a communally shared and received substance. Lavondès cites similar statements for the Masi-koro people of Madagascar, who state that uterine siblings are of "one blood" (*ra raike*) and of "the same entrails" (*iray tinainy*).¹⁰ The contrast is strong between the attitude towards uterine siblings who are of the same heart, blood, womb and life-essence and, on the other hand, those children who share a father but have different mothers. For these latter half-siblings, despite their shared lineage membership and common hamlet residence, are called merely "almost siblings" (*anaka piolotsy*).

Although children are of their mother's blood, heart, womb and entrails, none of the common Bara expressions directly associates the child's flesh (*nofy*) with the flesh or blood of the mother. Although "flesh and blood" are closely allied substances in our own kinship idiom, and the beliefs about transformation of the mother's blood into the child's flesh are prominent in the anthropological literature for other parts of the world, the Bara deny such a direct physiological link. "Food

makes flesh" is the customary Bara expression. But this emphasis on nurture also highlights the intimate and physical bond that the Bara associate with the mother-child link. For the young child's food consists largely of its mother's milk, and the connection of blood between mother and fetus is continued after birth by a physical tie of milk. Milk completes what blood began.

The father is said to order (*mamboatsy*) the vital blood of the mother's womb during sexual intercourse. Without this potent male ordering, the vitality of the woman's womb remains unformed and is voided each month. The father does contribute some substance to the child, since it is specifically the semen that is responsible for conception, and not merely the mechanical action of the penis. Also, the ordering effect of semen is cumulative during the early months of pregnancy. A Bara man does not fear that his wife's child may have been "accidentally" sired by another, for he knows that the frequency of his own intercourse with her dilutes the slight contribution of a lover. Although the accumulation of semen in the woman's womb is seen as one immediate factor in the conception and growth of the fetus, this material link between father and child receives little emphasis in Bara idiom. It is the formative action of the semen that is emphasized, and not the transfer or transformation of material from father to child.

In comparison to the female links, the view of the male contribution to the conception schema is decidedly incorporeal. In discussing the male role, the Bara use a rather vague and common verb, *mamboatsy*. One hears this word every day referring to the building or repairing of some object such as a house or a dike in the rice paddies. The word's connotations are more specific than the verb *manao* which means simply "to make or do" (much like the French verb *faire*). And the use of the word is more general than other verbs connoting construction such as *mangady*, "to shovel", *miasa*, "to do physical labor", or *mamboly*, "to plant". Although *mamboatsy* is used in a number of general senses, it seems to refer primarily to the creation and reparation of the mud walls of a house or paddy dike, when a soft substance is shaped and then allowed to dry and harden. In trying to indicate the range of referents for this word, I must emphasize again, however, that this verb used by the Bara to describe the role of semen in conception is rather open-ended. The semen of the father, in some manner, gives form and structure to the otherwise formless blood of the mother, and this process of formation seems to be largely one of active hardening, solidifying and drying.

Since the notion of the male role is somewhat vague, it follows that people's views on the subject are less uniform than their views of the female tie. Beyond stating that semen "orders" the blood, explanations vary in the degree to which they impute an actual relationship of physical substance between father and child. Some informants maintain that semen probably solidifies into bone and hence provides shape for the fetus. These explanations vary, not according to the age, position or sex of the speaker, but according to the speaker's native inclination toward speculative thought. The precise mechanism by which the semen arranges the female blood to create a child is considered to be a mystery. Bara informants attempt in various ways to elucidate this mystery with comparisons drawn from the way the male ancestors order their social world.

It is at this point, then, that we must consider, not only Bara idioms about biology, but also how there are related to certain aspects of social organization. For whereas the notions about the mother's role have a primary, observable and biological locus, notions about the elusive male contribution derive largely from comparisons with customary social aggregations. Bara corporate kin groups (*tariky*) are ideally, although not exclusively, patrilineal and patrilocal. Furthermore, these groups are ordered on the uniquely agnatic relationship between the living and their immediate ancestors in the group's tomb. The Bara practice of secondary burial means that the tomb of the lineage contains only the cleaned and dried bones of agnates, carefully and lineally arranged. It is this tomb of permanent male bones that provides the structure for the descendent social group. Many Bara draw a simile from this in their explanation of the male role in procreation when they associate the child's bone with the father. The father's semen is said to order the fetus as (*tahaka*, as, like, similar to) the bones of the ancestors order social life.

And so the Bara provide an interesting ethnographic example of the widely reported pattern of beliefs about the female source of a child's flesh and the essentially male association of his bones. However, the Bara idioms are rather complex. For, as stated earlier, the tropes involved are of different types; and, in the connection between biology and society, the idioms for the male and female aspects extend in opposite directions. For instance, observed aspects of the physical relationships between mother and child are metaphorically extended to have far-reaching implications for the structure of Bara society. The social bond (and sexual taboo) between the child and its maternal kin

is, therefore, a derivative of the natural biological tie with the mother. On the other hand, the unknown physiological process of insemination is illuminated by similes drawn from social reality, and the child's ties to the father are largely a socially derived ordering, the ideal form of which is the tomb of agnatic bones. If the Bara view the ties through females as primarily of biological substance (related to birth) and the ties through males as largely ties of social form (related to the dead), then it is not surprising that sexual prohibitions (protecting fertility) are stronger following the female line.

The collection of notions about procreation relates not only to this prohibition, but also to the strong preference for arranging marriages between the children of a brother and a sister. Such marriages can be assigned a number of social functions, not the least of which is the one cited by Lévi-Strauss, the maintenance of an existing affinal exchange relationship. Accordingly, the Bara consider such marriages to be socially stable since they take place within an already well established pattern of relationships. Also, patrilateral cross-cousin marriage is the slightly preferred version because of its tendency to balance out relations between allied families. But most importantly, the Bara consider both types of cross-cousin marriage to be safer in terms of incest than that with the prohibited matrilateral parallel cousin or the tolerated patrilateral parallel cousin. These cross-cousins, although the immediate offspring of full siblings, share neither the same maternal life essence nor the same male association of bone, ancestor and corporate group membership. The Bara give a number of reasons for shying away from marriage with the father's brother's child reflecting their uncertainty as to whether the father/child relationship has an organic as well as a social component. Although they generally emphasize the custom against the common hamlet residence of brothers-in-law, Bara also recount some fear that these marriages to patrilateral parallel cousins are just a bit too close (*marikitsy*) in terms of incest. In light of Bara notions of embryology, the cross-cousin union provides the ideal marriage which is safe from the dangers of incest, but is surrounded by established family relations which in turn are strengthened by the marriage.

V

Society and Biology

Given the problems with anthropological approaches to incest prohibition, problems bequeathed to us by an emphasis on the origin and

definition of social man, what can we usefully conclude from this analysis of Bara institutions of sexual prohibition and marriage preference? The fact that the Bara situation differs from those postulated in most general theories can neither prove nor disprove those theories. For the Bara cannot represent primal man, nor do their particular customs negate the usefulness of the postulated incest taboo as a heuristic device in Western social thought. None the less, it is well to note in conclusion the most salient contrasts between incest theory in its grand forms, and customs relating to incest in this one ethnographic context. The most striking contrast is in terms of the complexity, subtlety and ambiguity of incest prohibitions *in viva* in comparison with the logical simplicity of incest in most grand theory. This comes as no surprise, for one could hardly expect society to have its earliest beginnings in anything as complex as Bara customs of sexual regulation. Also, theories of incest, postulating origins or used as axioms, must by definition be simple and unambiguous. None the less, this contrast is worth emphasizing since the legacy of incest theory tends to lead us falsely in search of simplicity in just that area of human behavior that is most problematical: the relationship between sexuality and morality.

This contrast between the complexity of a specific institution of incest prohibition and the simplicity of general theory may be explored briefly along the two dimensions of "biology" and "society", parallel to Goody's (1956) point that there are separate incest rules deriving from each realm. It will, however, be quickly apparent that this separation is in reality absurd. The contrast between the grand theories and the Bara example is quite clear along the "social" dimension. Grand theory (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 43; Murdock 1949: 284-313) would lead one to expect a simple logical relation between sexual prohibition, on one hand, and marriage prescriptions, preferences, or tendencies, on the other. If one category of partners is sexually forbidden, it is expected that marriages will generally take place elsewhere. Fox (1967: 55), Leach (1970: 103) and others have noted that this relationship must be demonstrated rather than assumed. The first jolt the Bara provide to our theoretical expectations is the combination of strong incest regulations with endogamous marriage traditions. This seeming illogicality soon passes, however, as we adjust our categories from unilineal to cognatic and remind ourselves that "endogamy" and "exogamy" are but two crude glosses for a variety of forms of the same phenomenon (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 47). Yet, even after making this adjustment in our analytical categories, we are left with a certain overlap between pro-

hibitions and preferences, and an apparent contradiction in indigenous principles of action.

General approaches lead us to expect a particular mode of decision-making regarding incest prohibition and marriage. At least those sociological theories that view the taboo as a jural and moral rule constraining individual action for the sake of some wider social welfare (Lévi-Strauss 1969: 43) predispose us to emphasize those choices that fall along the axis of altruism versus self-interest. After all, this has been part of the compelling mystery of the taboo: Why have people instituted a taboo serving the broader and longer welfare when this welfare was not perceptible as such and when narrower and shorter considerations would seem to recommend a more *laissez-faire* attitude? Regardless of the particular solutions that have been proposed, the formulation of the problem has led us to grant the distinction between altruistic and interested action a certain logical and motivational primacy.

Following this, the Bara do view certain aspects of incest prohibition according to distinctions between altruism and self-interest, between broad moral concerns and narrow practical goals. For instance, many Bara state that the former ruling clan (the *Zafimanely*) greedily married too incestuously too often; and for compromising this moral value, they paid the inevitable price of demographic decline. Similarly, this sort of self-interested fiddling with the general moral injunction characterizes much of the hanky-panky between distantly related adolescents leading to the performance of atonement rituals. In these areas, Bara behavior is similar to the Merina.

However, this mode of guiding and judging such acts is quite absent from the complicated scheme of marrying extremely close cousins. Here, as we noted above, both the taboo against and the preference for such close unions are equally rooted in general moral values and in the tactical interests of the parties involved. Although general theories of incest taboo as the primary jural rule of society lead us to consider the altruistic versus interested mode of action as the most plausible, this mode of action is but one among many and has no necessary priority regarding incest and marriage.¹¹

The "biological" dimension of classical incest theories rests partly on whether or not primal man (or his supposed counterpart in societies lacking our scientific knowledge) is capable of perceiving the deleterious genetic results of close in-mating, and hence accordingly instituting a prohibition. It has been held that the genetic consequences of incest

could not be apprehended inductively and therefore some other cause or function must be found to explain the seeming universality of the incest taboo. In a paper referred to at the beginning of this article, Burton (1973) suggests that the possibility of the ill results of mating primary kin being apprehended as such is by no means ruled out. He cites the fact that people in many societies maintain that incest produces "bad stock" and he argues that under *certain* demographic conditions, incestuous mating would produce a high enough percentage of physically and/or mentally feeble children for the causal link to be recognized and remembered.

As we have seen, the Bara maintain quite staunchly that the result of incest is fewer and weaker offspring. But Burton's concern whether this indigenous notion is arrived at empirically seems a bit naive in the face of the complexity of the issue. For if the Bara, or any other people, are to perceive the causal genetic connections between incest and bad offspring, they can do so only through their own culturally specific sets of categories. The Bara, for instance, may have noted that incest produces bad offspring, but even so, this scientific fact can be apprehended only through a complex set of notions about blood and bone, female and male, substance and form, spirits and ancestors that relates somewhat remotely to the genetic situation. This problem of whether peoples recognize the results of incest is subordinate to the complicated, recently debated issue of how peoples understand the connection between intercourse and pregnancy (the "virgin birth" controversy). Notions of embryology are based, not on genetic operations, but largely on the observable regularity of physical processes. If certain aspects of sexual prohibition seem rather similar throughout the world, surely it is in part a property of the uniformity of this observable biology and the logical limitations of reasonable interpretations. In this sense, incest prohibition resembles another classic anthropological issue, the nearly universal use of left/right symbolism for the expression of moral and social values. The ethnographic investigation of a society's sexual prohibitions leads, on the "biological" dimension, ironically, but directly, to the Hertzian problem of body symbolism, an issue notably absent from the grand approaches to the incest taboo.

The ultimate grand contrast between Western analytical approaches and the Bara concern with incest is that between the way the relation between society and biology is conceptualized. In spite of the differences among theorists, their approaches reflect to varying degrees the often noted separation of mind from body that is so pervasive in Western

thought. For these theories, forging links between biology and society, between nature and culture, between biological family and social alliance seems to be highly problematical. On the other hand, the Bara tend to see these aspects through unitary formulations that hardly admit the possibility of distinguishing the purely biological from the socio-biological from the purely social. "Male" and "female" form the primary categories of a simultaneously physical, moral, and social humanity. Admittedly, their view is not very effective from either a medical or analytical perspective, but it displays a striking wisdom toward delicate human issues regarding social sexuality.

NOTES

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- ¹ There are several important exceptions. Wolf's (1968, 1970) study of adopted brides in Chinese families, and Talmon's (1964) and Shepherd's (1971) studies of Kibbutz mating patterns explore aspects of the Westermarck hypothesis. Beidelman's (1971) study explores, among other things, the Freudian issue of the ambivalence of intra-familial relations in an African matrilineal society.
- ² I did field research for eighteen months (1970-71) in eastern Bara land, residing in a small village in the Menarahaka Valley, where I returned briefly in 1973 and again in 1974. All research was conducted in the Bara dialect of the Malagasy language, no other language being spoken in the village. The research was supported by fellowships from the Shell Foundation and Duke University.
- ³ The Bara view incest as part of a general schema of taboos of the ancestors (*fadindraza*) the breaking of which are said to result automatically in misfortune, illness or even death, depending on the importance of the broken taboo.
- ⁴ As a result of the cognatic and endogamous emphasis of Bara kinship, notions of affinity tend to be subsumed under notions of consanguinity. This will be discussed in a forthcoming paper on Bara marriage and "reverse bridewealth".
- ⁵ See Huntington 1973a: 158-162 for a discussion of this conflict as it related to marriage arrangements for the same girl. The kin tie is through the girl's father. But for various reasons relating to his early death, the status of his marriage to the girl's mother, and complications in his lineage (Huntington 1973a: 162-167), there is some ambiguity over who has jurisdiction over the girl.

Figure 1

- ⁶ One notes here the parallel with South Asian material. "Close-kin endogamy in South India and Ceylon seems to me to serve the same purpose — to preserve and enhance the ritual quality of the smallest circle." (Yalman 1967: 350)
- ⁷ This closing remark is used throughout Madagascar, and, indeed, as far away as Borneo. The Bara, however, delight in turning its usual meaning "I am not lying, for this comes from the past" upside down.
- ⁸ One is reminded of Leach's (1961: 19) distinction between "common substance" and "mystical influence" regarding Kachin and Trobriand notions of conception.
- ⁹ Abinal & Malzac. *Dictionnaire Malgache-Français*, "fo" and "iray tampo" p. 176.
- ¹⁰ Quoted in Rakoto (1971: 82) from Lavondès' thesis. The information does not appear in detail in the published version of Lavondès' study.
- ¹¹ Concerning Malagasy ethnography, these observations do not question Bloch's emphasis on altruism versus self-interest in his analysis of Merina marriage. His categories seem to derive legitimately from the Merina and reflect the differences between the structures of Merina and Bara societies. It seems that for the Merina, the emphasis on lineal values and close cross-cousin marriage gave way to the development of the kindred as the corporate group. Thus, what I have referred to as the inner boundary of the Bara endogamous category has for the Merina merged with that outer boundary between restricted distant cousins and unrelated fair sexual game.

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