

# Sexual Modernity in Amazonia

Written by Manuela Lavinás Picq and Josi Tikuna

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Gay prides and same-sex marriage tend to be perceived as symbols of modernity. The non-modern is in Amazonia, where Indigenous peoples live in a wild Eden untouched by global forces. Yet there are gay prides and same-sex marriages in Amazonia too. There are drag queen contests in old rubber towns. Tikuna women defend homo-affective relationships as part of ancestral rules of the clan. If Amazonia is in fact modern, then what is modernity about and where is it located? Sexuality approaches both debunk the collective imaginary of Amazonia as detached from world politics and disrupts associations of sexual liberation with western modernity. This article looks at Amazon sexualities to challenge conventional narratives of global modernity.

Claude Levi Strauss exposed a *Tristes tropiques* prey to external domination. Ecologists warn about global forces destroying Amazon forests (Hecht and Cockburn 2010) while anthropologists exacerbate the region's cultural otherness (Viveiros de Castro 1998). But a sexuality perspective reveals an Amazon embedded in global trends and partaking in modernity more than often assumed. Queer sexualities are daily business, unveiling rather *gay* tropics. In *Indians in unexpected places*, Phillip Deloria (2004) explored cultural expectations that branded Indigenous peoples as having missed out on modernity. Like a native woman in a beauty parlor, gay prides in Amazonia provoke chuckles because it disrupts expectations of modernity. Indigeneity is uncommon for international relations (Beier 2009; Picq 2014). If Amazon sexualities surprise us, it is because they signal modernity in unexpected places: queer Indigeneities and cosmopolitan Amazons.

Is sexual diversity stirred up by international forces or embedded in local culture? The adoption of LGBT discourse in the form of Gay Prides indicates the influence of global frameworks using an international language of sexual rights. Yet Tikuna homo-affective experiences within the clan show that sexual diversity predates international codification. Amazonians use the international grammar of sexual rights, yet they have engaged in diverse sexualities long before globalization gave them the political language to say so. It may be useful to think in terms of 'Indigenous queerness,' as do two-spirit activists, rather than superposing LGBT codifications onto Amazon complex realities. Practices like occasional anal sex during rituals, for instance, cannot simply be translated as 'sexually deviant' or homosexual behavior. In this article, a scholar of international relations joins efforts with a Tikuna anthropologist to explore sexual diversity in Amazonia. We combine ethnographic forms of inquiry with international relations to approach Amazon sexualities and question the association of modernity with homosexual liberation similarly to Momin Rhaman. We do not seek to explain Amazon sexualities but to question ideas of what political modernity is made of and why it cannot be taken to signify a western political core. We hope to destabilize divides between core and non-core in world politics.

We analyze sexual politics along the Amazon River and homo-affective relationships within Tikuna rules of exogamy[1] to show the extent to which the "local" and the "global" interact with and redefine each other. We then propose to approach native sexualities as queer and Amazon sexual liberation as cosmopolitan, rather than modern.

### Amazon Prides

Gay prides are common in Amazonia. In 2012, Manaus (Brazil) celebrated its sixteenth gay pride event. Iquitos (Peru) has been celebrating gay prides since 2005 and elects the Miss Amazonia Gay. Over 10 small Brazilian towns along the Amazon River have held such celebrations. Tabatinga and Mancapurú held over six gay prides;

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Itaquatiara, Rio Preto da Eva, and Presidente Figueiredo each held multiple celebrations. The infamous mining town Madre de Dios (Peru) also had celebrations of its own. The list goes on, but it is worth noting other events like the annual drag queen contest in Cavallococha (Peru). Once a booming rubber-town on the Amazon River, it fell into oblivion as the rubber economy collapsed and the riverbed moved away. Now, Cavallococha hosts an internationally acclaimed contest that attracts drag queens audiences from around (and outside) Latin America.

Manaus has a decade-old gay league of volleyball and is stepping up LGBT markets. The city gathered efforts to create a gay guide. The Brazilian airline company TAM sponsored a meeting of LGBT activists and entrepreneurs in the fashion and tourism industries to develop a marketing strategy focused on gay-friendly tourism. Amazon identities and economies echo global trends. Iquitos, a former rubber town, promotes rainforest adventure travel for openly gay men.

The trend is tangible in smaller towns like Benjamin Constant, a quintessentially Amazon town on the Javari River accessible only by boat at Brazil's border with Peru and Colombia. The town has a gay soccer team since 2002. The players were originally booed but as they brought joy to the games (and won), they became as popular as other teams. The town also has a gay Carnival bloc called "As Marias," whose queen Jackie was elected the overarching queen of all carnival blocs. Individual lives also shape the region's sexual diversity. The high school of Atalaia do Norte, a town upriver that shares the dead-end road with Benjamin Constant, has an unusual math teacher. Silvana lives her personal life as a woman, but works as a man. She shares a home with her husband and is accepted as Silvana by neighbors. Yet every morning she switches back into her old masculine self to teach. In 2011, Benjamin Constant held its first Gay Pride, with transvestites dancing to the gay anthem "I Will Survive" in sexy glittering outfits. Mothers carried young children on honking motorbikes, grandparents mixed with Indigenous lesbians, and soccer players paraded alongside sex workers.

### Homo-affectivity within Tikuna Exogamy

Tikunas, one of the largest Indigenous groups in the Amazon, consider themselves direct descendants from Amazon rivers.[2] They maintain an isolate language[3] and cultivate unique traditions like the ritual of the *moça nova*. [4] They also have clan rules that respect same sex couples. The "rule of nations" organizes conjugal exchanges among clans in rules of exogamy. In Tikuna cosmology, 'to marry well' is to marry people from different clans. Thus someone from the clan of the bird (*weri*) could be with someone from the clan of the jaguar (*ai*). Unions are judged by clan belonging, not sexuality. Unions that do not follow this rule are considered incestuous (*womatchi*)[5] because they dirty the land all people return to.

Scholars have written about Tikuna marriage from the conventional perspective of heterosexual unions (Cardoso De Oliveira 1959; Nimuendaju 1982; Oliveira Filho 1988; Goulard 2009). They analyzed forbidden unions within the clan, but failed to see the permissibility of homo-affective unions. Tikuna women, in contrast, defend homo-affective relationship as consistent with clan rules of exogamy. They defend homo-affective ties as strengthening the rule of nations, as belonging to Tikuna ancestry. For them, there is little doubt that sexual diversity is intrinsically Indigenous whereas sexual discrimination was brought in by a vogue of evangelical religions.

The arrival of neopentecostal churches changed marriage expectations in Tikuna society. Homo-affective unions became a form of sin, abominable in the eyes of God, clandestine. Churches introduced lesbianism as a forbidden love, permeating Tikuna cosmology with exogenous moralities that signal the power of religion over Indigenous peoples. For Tikuna women what is detrimental to their culture is the foreign imposition of religions by non-Indigenous missionaries. Metchincüna blames discrimination on dogmatic religious intervention. "It cannot be wrong, if it were it should have been since the beginning and not something new. Those are people who truly love each other, who understand each other. Our ancestors experienced people living homo-affective lives but never interpreted it as something malicious, it is religion that came to interfere with our culture trying to evangelize us, arguing with needed to know God." [6]

### Natively Queer

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Local Gay Pride celebrations reflect the adoption of international sexual rights. They provide means to express sexual diversity in forms that are recognizable to a foreign gaze. Yet the demand for such events is intrinsically locally grown. There is nothing foreign about sexual diversity in Amazonia, even if it invokes the legitimacy of global practices. Sexual diversity is neither a novel phenomenon nor a global import. It has long existed in Amazonia.

In Tikuna language, *Kaigüwecü* is the word that describes a man who has sex with another man; *Ngüe Tügümaêgüé* that for a woman who has sex with another woman. Estevão Fernandes indicates wording signifying plural sexualities in other Amazonian languages. In Tupinambá, *tibira* is a man who has sex with men and *çacoaimbeguira* is a woman who has sex with women.[7] Other languages have words for queer practices: *cudinhos* in Guaicurus, *guaxu* in Mbya, *cunin* in Krahô, *kudina* in Kadiwéu, *hawakyni* in Javaé. It is worth remembering that various anthropologists described homo/bi sexuality across Amazonia, including Lévi-Strauss (1996), Clastres (1995), and Gregor (1985). Indigenous queerness is tangible even where it lacks formal conceptualization with wording.

Indigenous queerness permeates not only Amazonia, but also the Americas at large. In Oaxaca, Mexico, Juchitán de Zaragoza is famous for its acceptance of “muxes,” some Zapoteca equivalent of gay, who are more visible than in other places because they are not discriminated against. In the US, Native Americans refer to sexual variation through the concept of Two-Spirits, and at least three tribes have formally recognized marriage equality for same-sex couples. Inter-governmental institutions now recognize indigenous queerness. On March 16 2013, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights of the Organization of American States heard the testimonies of elected officials at a panel “Situation of the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex Indigenous Persons in the Americas.”

Indigenous queerness predates the global LGBT framework. The global framework permits a political mobilization of rights discourse, the recognition of civil and economic rights. Gay soccer teams, gay-friendly tourism and gay prides invoke international discourse to open public venues to make sexual identities visible. They do not create new sexualities.

### Cosmopolitan Amazonia

Are Tikuna societies modern because they permit homo-affective love? The stories of sexual diversity told above invite us to reconsider assumed cartographies of modernity. They debunk notions of natural peripheries isolated from global modernity and embedded in colonial processes. Amazonia is not that disentangled from global dynamics nor a land without (sexual) history. Similarly, narratives that posit sexual liberation as a western, modern phenomenon need reframing (Rhaman 2014).

It is a trap to posit Amazonia or Indigenous peoples as modern, to claim the periphery as central. Instead, we can approach Indigeneity as cosmopolitan. Nikita Dhawan defines cosmopolitanism as “a transcultural competence of negotiating cultural difference, a move beyond narrowly territorial understandings of identity and belonging.” She defends cosmopolitanism as an expansive global consciousness that opposes narrow loyalties, entailing a belonging to the global community based on shared pasts and entangled futures, irrespective of religious, ethnic or gender differences. If Kant was right, this ability to negotiate transcultural differences toward a pluralistic society is as cosmopolitan as it goes.

Amazon sexualities do not oppose local and international systems of belonging. They complement global narratives of sexual rights with Indigenous cultural rights. They show a transcultural competence of negotiating (sexual) differences. Tikuna peoples are cosmopolitan while maintaining and valuing their origins. Their sexual politics are not about modernity nor should we invoke colonial narratives to validate them. Amazon politics, Indigenous and non-Indigenous disrupt, rather than reiterate, conventional narratives of modernity.

### Conclusion

Sexual perspectives matter because they reveal ‘modernity’ in unexpected places. The analysis of gay pride celebrations and homo-affective Tikuna couples tell ‘unexpected’ stories. First, it is a story that disrupts assumptions

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of political modernity altogether. It breaks binary assumptions that lessen Indigenous emotionality; it reveals the constant changes at play in Indigenous society. The core is not the creator of sexual liberation- queerness exists in bodies and politics across the non-core, including Amazonian societies like the Tikuna. Second, it is a story that suggests a cosmopolitan Amazon to counter ideas of an isolated wilderness scarcely inhabited by peoples without history. It reveals communities that creatively negotiate bridges to articulate global norms within local systems of sexual rights.

To queer Amazonia is a theoretical project. Queer in the sense of moving beyond categorizations and political borders. Queer in the sense of making visible how colonialism and sexuality interact within the perverse logics of modernity. Scholars exposed the heteronormativity of colonialism (Smith 2010), insisted on the value to decolonize queer studies and queer decolonial studies (Driskill et al. 2011; Rifkin 2011). Amazon sexualities shed light on the complementarity of queer and Indigenous perspectives for thinking global modernity.

## Notes

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[1] Exogamy refers to the custom of marrying outside one's community, clan or tribe.

[2] Tikunas identify as Magüta, "people fished with a pole by the God Yoi."

[3] A language isolate has no demonstrable genealogical relationship with other languages. Tikuna is a language isolate with no common ancestry with any other known language.

[4] The Tikuna ritual of the Moça Nova during female puberty marks the passage from childhood to adulthood, when the girl becomes a woman.

[5] "Womatchi" means to live a forbidden relationship in Tikuna culture, for instance if two members of the *Japó* clan are together the relationship among clan brothers is considered incestuous.

[6] Interviews by Josi Tikuna, Alto Solimões, Amazonas, Brazil (2012).

[7] The documentary "Tibira is gay" shows the variety of sexual identities in Indigenous communities.

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