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M.G. Smith on the Isle of Lesbos: Kinship and Sexuality in Carriacou

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Abstract

In *Kinship and Community in Carriacou* (1962), M.G. Smith documents what he calls “abnormal” sexual relations between women in female-headed households on the island. These lesbian *madivines* represent statistically significant “deviations” from normative patterns of kinship and residence in domestic groups, and are associated with the shapeshifting witchcraft of *sukuyan* and *lougarou*. Linking Smith’s ethnography of “mating patterns” to transactional pathways of reproductive value—blood, money, witchcraft and sexuality—I rework his ideological explanation of Carriacou lesbianism (as a “mechanism” for preserving female marital fidelity) into a feminist model of female empowerment with comparative potentialities throughout the Caribbean.

Keywords

anthropology, kinship, lesbianism, witchcraft, Carriacou

Carriacou women are not feminists and cannot conceive of sexual equality.
—M.G. Smith

Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers.
—Audre Lorde

* This paper was first delivered from notes at the Sixth Caribbean Reasonings Conference on “M.G. Smith: Social Theory and Anthropology in the Caribbean and Beyond,” hosted by the Centre for Caribbean Thought, University of the West Indies, Mona, on June 14, 2008. I thank Christine Barrow, Wyatt MacGaffey, and Rebecca Miller for their comments in that venue. After years of neglect, I finally wrote up the notes for a panel on “Shapeshifting as History,” at the American Historical Association Meetings, January 5, 2013. I thank Peter Sigal for his extensive commentary on that draft, and Wyatt MacGaffey for his additional written comments as well. I also thank Donald R. Hill for his insights, generosity and specialized advice as a self-acknowledged outside reader for *New West Indian Guide*.

When the Centre for Caribbean Thought at the University of the West Indies, Mona, hosted the Sixth Caribbean Reasonings Conference in June 2008, honoring the life and career of M.G. Smith (1921-93), it was déjà vu all over again. Or perhaps, more accurately, the return of the repressed. Critics and defenders of cultural pluralism, Smith's analytical framework for the study of Caribbean societies, faced off once again, replaying the debates of the 1960s and 1970s with a bit more humor and nuance the second time around, but still in no small measure of controversy.¹ Nor were the debates purely academic, but carried the historic alliance of Marxists and black nationalists against Smith's elaboration of Weberian structuralism, in which racial, ethnic, and cultural "sections" are differentially incorporated into the public domain (with minimal attention to class formation). Although the bulk of papers addressed Smith's prodigious Caribbean output, Africanists engaged his historical ethnographies of Islamic emirates in Northern Nigeria, where he had initially conducted his dissertation research under the direction of Daryll Forde, at University College London.² In Douglass Hall's felicitous phrasing (Hall 1997), M.G. Smith was "a man divided": between West Africa and the British West Indies, social anthropology and poetry, rationalism and romanticism, academia and Jamaican politics, and his legendary mood swings.³ Such inner conflicts and contradictions, I am sure, informed his ethnographic insights into the regulative principles of sociopolitical organization and the destabilizing dynamics of power and desire. One well-known formulation of this dialectic—of segmentary politics (power) and hierarchical administration (authority)—lies at the heart of his theory of government, first formulated in his Curl Bequest Prize-winning essay "On Segmentary Lineage Systems" (Smith 1956) and applied systematically to the Zaria emirate (Smith 1960). Much less known, but no less significant, is his discussion of lesbianism and patriarchy in Carriacou (Smith 1962).

¹ Orlando Patterson dropped a bomb in his keynote lecture when he maintained that M.G. sexually consummated his desire for his mother figure, Edna Manley. Members of the Smith and Manley families in attendance were visibly upset, and Patterson suffered subsequent social death at the conference, although the question of Smith's vexed relationship to Edna, evident in Hall (1997), is by no means trivial.

² See Meeks (2011) for an excellent selection of these papers.

³ I was M.G.'s last dissertation advisee to finish while he was still alive during his final appointment in anthropology at Yale. He was a wonderful advisor, although I also experienced his dark side.

The publication of M.G. Smith's *Kinship and Community in Carriacou* (1962) was not exactly a watershed in Caribbean ethnography. For one thing, it took island marginality to new extremes. A dependency of Grenada on the periphery of the periphery, the Carriacou of 1953—when Smith conducted his fieldwork—was ethnically homogeneous, relatively unstratified, and tiny, with a population of just over six thousand living on thirteen square miles of land. If for Smith such a society writ small was a scientific virtue, allowing a “systematic study” of 224 households and “the mating histories” of their adult members (Smith 1962:6), the book appealed to specialists in kinship and family studies but had no major impact on Caribbeanists more broadly.⁴ The book was also written in M.G.'s often tedious style, combining mechanical prose with endless charts and statistical tables offset by those glimpses of local color and ethos that occasionally punctured the gloom. Indeed, his copious field notes reveal an extraordinary sensitivity to lived experience that rarely surfaces in the published text.⁵ Nonetheless, as Barrow (2011) has recently argued, *Kinship and Community in Carriacou* re-emerges in hindsight as an important, possibly pivotal text, by addressing female sexuality and institutionalized lesbianism in systemic sociocultural terms. Although framed in the hetero-normative language of sexual and statistical “deviance” and “abnormality,” Smith's discussion of sexual desire and lesbian relationships—as Barrow (2011:150-52) has argued—opened up a space for separating female sexuality from official gender ideologies and roles more focused on fertility and respectability.⁶

If Smith's own perspective remained subordinated to the imperatives of patriarchy in Carriacou, his material reveals the stirrings of a social theory of sexuality, in which lesbianism figures as a form of sexual shape-shifting associated with the gendered witchcraft idioms of the *lougrou* and the

⁴ Of the six reviews that came out during the following two years (Balicki 1963, Nutini 1963, Rodman 1963, Rossi 1963, William-Ellis 1964, and Wilson 1964), only those by Rossi and Wilson substantially engage Smith's study. Raymond T. Smith offers perceptive criticisms in an important review essay of the broader literature (Smith 1963).

⁵ I thank Mary Smith for access to these notes in 1995.

⁶ Smith was not the first to note lesbianism among Caribbean “folk,” but he was the first to treat it systematically. As Wekker (1999:121) points out, a similar relationship, called “mati work” and “mati play” in Suriname, was first documented by the Dutch official Schimelpenninck van der Oye (see Roos 1912), followed by Comvalius (1935) and Herskovits & Herskovits (1936). Kempadoo (2003:75) notes that Herskovits & Herskovits (1947:128) briefly discuss “making *zanmi*” as a form of lesbianism in Trinidad.

sukuyan. Central to my reinterpretation of Smith's argument and material is a model of sexual economy that relates "mating patterns" and male out-migration to transactional pathways of gifts, money, and blood. Such a model by no means privileges a simple exchange of sexual services for money or gifts, although such transactions are included, but embraces a broader framework of desires, dispositions, and conversions that relate male and female sexuality to socially reproductive value. I should emphasize that Smith's position, if not wrong, was incomplete, excluding the complementary dynamics of female empowerment and agency in lesbian relationships.

Culture, Demography, and Sexuality

Kinship and Community in Carriacou is unusual among M.G. Smith's West Indian studies in two key respects. First, it is not theoretically framed by a specific question or hypothesis, in contrast, for example, to his *Stratification in Grenada* (Smith 1965a); and second, it focuses on a relatively "homogenous" society in contrast to the "plural societies" which consumed so much of his attention (Smith 1965b). The specific theoretical positions which Smith does critically engage with reflect battles he fought over the years; namely, his life-long critique of identifying New World "African survivals" as pioneered by Melville J. Herskovits, and his intellectual antipathy toward R.T. Smith, whose focus on the developmental cycles of matrifocal family types was for M.G. misguided in Carriacou.⁷ M.G.'s primary agenda, however, was both intensive and comparative. As a former French and then British plantocracy whose estate owners left after emancipation in 1838, Carriacou remained culturally Creole, with French *patois* and "broken" English, Christianity and ancestor worship, official monogamy and extraresidential mating, and English civil law and customary folk practices—including Big Drum ceremonies with African nations—forming a "systematic duality" of cultural registers among an ethnically homogenous population. What interested Smith was the island's *lack* of racial and ethnic pluralism, exemplifying "the simplest units of the Creole social continuum"

⁷ For Smith's methodological corrective to Herskovits, with its barrage of criteria for establishing African legacies in the Caribbean, see Smith 1957.

(Smith 1962:4) according to his plural society scheme. In this respect, a study of Carriacou's kinship system would reveal fundamental principles of cultural adaption and integration without the undue elite interference found in Grenada, Trinidad, or Martinique. Not that the island was economically isolated. On the contrary, the local economy depended upon remittances from male out-migration for the century and a half following emancipation, generating a demographically skewed sex ratio wavering between two and three adult women to men. What interested Smith was how, under such demographic strain, a localized "mating" system fostered "the most clearly organised family structure in this culture area" (Smith 1962:5)—one which extended beyond the household to form Carriacou "bloods" or agnatic lineages.

M.G. was therefore concerned with local solutions to the demographic challenges of male out-migration from an island where wage labor and economic opportunities were extremely limited. His primary focus was on family structure and mating patterns, and how these established integrative mechanisms for the community at large. Smith's copious documentation reveals what he considered to be a single system based on key arrangements and values. Official monogamy, recognized by church and state, was the preferred conjugal form, marked by formal betrothals, elaborate weddings, and virilocal residence in "wooden" houses associated with agnatic lineages. Such marriages were costly, and required social, economic, and ritual investments that many men could not easily afford. Those who accumulated the necessary capital often did so overseas, and became locked into patterns of migrant wage labor to sustain their families through remittances. To accommodate the surplus of women to men, a modified form of "monogamy" allowed married men to establish extraresidential mating relations with unmarried women, usually in different villages, while assuming financial responsibilities for such "keptresses" and their "outside children." Socially recognized if legally unofficial, such unions gave rise to matrifocal residences in less prestigious "dirt" houses made from daub and wattle. Finally, a third pattern of "keeping" emerged, in which couples cohabited in the woman's house, seen as a prelude to betrothal and marriage but sometimes stalled in a tenuous holding pattern that significantly limited male autonomy. "Whereas the husband is dominant in marriage," Smith (1962:217) writes, "the woman is the dominant partner in keeping" since "kept" men were barred from extraresidential mating and they lost

child custody when such unions dissolved. Statistically infrequent and structurally unstable, keeping posed a problem for patriarchy. His masculinity compromised, “the male member of such a union is accordingly mocked and teased and is not regarded as a full household head” (Smith 1962:118).

It is within the patriarchal framework of these mating patterns that Smith situates his discussion of lesbianism. With a high cultural value placed on female fidelity, Smith argued, women developed lesbian relationships of the *madvine* and *zami*, remaining “faithful” to their husbands while satisfying their own sexual “needs.”⁸ In this manner, men working away from the island for as long as ten years at a stretch could return to Carriacou with their honor—and households—intact. The system was reinforced by patrilineages or “bloods” that enabled resident agnates to keep an eye on such wives, referred to as “grass widows” while their husbands were abroad. Thus the dual imperatives of female sexuality and fidelity were fulfilled.⁹

Let us turn to Smith’s own account, which I quote at some length, since it not only summarizes his structural argument but also points beyond it, toward an incipient model of a sexual economy—involving complementary “currencies” of money and blood—which we can liberate from his text and develop further. Smith opens his discussion in straightforward demographic terms:

Married men often remain overseas for considerable periods, and sometimes they never return. Unless they intend desertion, they remit money to their wives and families in Carriacou as regularly as they can, and in this way maintain the marriage relation, fulfil their obligations, and demonstrate their wish to return. Nonetheless the grass-widows suffer sexual deprivation. Such women know the consequence of unfaithfulness too well to risk it. They rarely live alone unless they are pregnant or have several small children. To recall their husbands they generally allege some illness, but if this fails they may establish homosexual relations with other women.

Women who practise such homosexual relations are referred to in the French patois as *madvine* or *zami*. Not all *madvines* are married by any means, but many are said to have adopted this habit during their husbands’ absence overseas. Unwed girls may also enter such relations while living as wards of their senior collateral kinswomen.

⁸ As Barrow (2011:152) notes, for Smith female sexuality “is constructed more as urge and appetite than expression of desire and pleasure.”

⁹ Donald R. Hill has suggested that institutionalized lesbianism may have broken down by 1970 because more women were migrating and had access to cash (*NWIG* reader’s report).

Once developed, these Lesbian appetites may reduce the woman's interest in men considerably and eventually lead to a breach in the marriage relation. The active partner is always the elder, and has usually been married. Senior Lesbians may have several partners who must be kept apart to avoid the disorder that their jealousy provokes. The men are well aware of these relations but dare not discuss them with the women's husbands. Men say that "women are hotter than men"—that is, they have stronger sexual appetites—and consequently only women can satisfy each other. Female homosexuality is explained thus, and its existence is taken to prove this explanation. But, in fact, men often marry women several years their junior and then depart overseas, having imposed severe prohibitions on their wives' heterosexual relations, with the result that some wives adopt Lesbianism as the only alternative open . . . Once women cultivate this particular habit, they are unlikely to abandon it lightly. (Smith 1962:199-200)

At first read, Smith explains Carriacou lesbianism as a response to the pressure of male out-migration on female fidelity and sexuality. Understood locally in terms of stronger female "heat," objectively it developed as a cultural solution to demographic pressures on marriage and mating.¹⁰ For this reason, Smith (1962:200) maintains, "there is no male counterpoint to female homosexuality in Carriacou" because no sociocultural imperatives required it.¹¹

In effect, Carriacou Lesbianism is a form of deviance stimulated by the island culture and partially institutionalised in it; its existence demonstrates the remarkable constraint imposed on women by the mating system. The fidelity of Carriacou wives is the pride of their men and the puzzle of nearby Grenadians; but the Lesbianism which has developed in this context is not well known abroad. We have here a neat example of the way in which a culture and society may promote abnormalities among normal folk; and some knowledge of these abnormalities is necessary for a full understanding of this complex mating organisation, which is permissive for males, restrictive to females. (Smith 1962:200)

¹⁰ The argument remains cultural rather than demographic because of the value placed on female fidelity among wives and keptresses. See also Smith (1966:xxxix-xli) where he criticizes the demographic thesis of Otterbein (1965).

¹¹ The empirical validity of this claim raises important issues that only further research can resolve. Male homosexuality may well have existed at this time, but may have been more socially stigmatized and thus better disguised. Or it may have occurred beyond the horizons of explicit cultural categorization, as in areas of West Africa. In the early 1970s Donald Hill documented a gay Grenadian couple whom Carriacou men "considered amusing," and who seduced local teenage boys "for money." Besides this case, he added, "no other male homosexuality in Carriacou was discovered" (Hill 1977:281). Hill also objected to Smith's description of Carriacou lesbianism in terms of "deviance" and "abnormality" since such terms clashed with local understandings (Hill:280-81).

Notwithstanding the patriarchal register of sexual “abnormality” and “deviance” characteristic of the day, Smith’s discussion of lesbianism as partially institutionalized made space for a sociocultural approach to sexuality that can be extended beyond the dictates of patriarchal authority—the fidelity of wives—to embrace the empowering and disruptive dimensions of female eroticism and agency. To do this, we relocate female sexuality within the more transactional arenas of fertility, witchcraft and economic exchange in Carriacou.

Money, Gifts, and Blood

Economic opportunities for women in Carriacou were extremely limited, given that men dominated in the spheres of subsistence agriculture, fishing, and artisanal trades of shipbuilding and repair. Men also remitted funds from abroad, forging links between local and global economic orders by working throughout the Caribbean and further afield in England and North America. The articulation of external and internal economies was thus largely gendered, since male remittances to fiancés, keptresses and wives were largely committed to households where women ruled as domestic managers. According to the normative patterns of residential and extraresidential mating, women remained faithful in their conjugal unions in exchange for social recognition and economic security.

For island women, therefore, sexuality was a key avenue for gaining access to cash. Since, as Smith (1962:116) explains, “women are virtually excluded from the exchange economy of Carriacou, and depend on men for most of the money they need or receive,” they relied on their “facilities” in a range of sexual strategies that formed a moral continuum from betrothal and marriage down to commercial prostitution. As a precursor to the ideal legitimate union, betrothal was closely chaperoned, marked by regular visits and a flow of gifts to the intended bride, and by the approval of her parents. Premarital sex among betrothed couples was tolerated since pregnancy before marriage was valued as a kind of fertility insurance, although it also carried risks to social reputation if the engagement broke off afterwards. A successful union with a wedding ceremony would set up residence in a new wooden house provided by the husband, who assumed responsibility for domestic finances, and whose children belonged

to his agnatic blood. In socially recognized extraresidential conjugal unions regarded as less prestigious and secure, women received gifts “in cash, kind, or labour” (Smith 1962:222) designated specifically for themselves and their children, and resided in dirt houses rather than wooden houses. Such arrangements were subordinate to co-residential marriage, and less formalized: “Despite the help she receives from the man, the woman who mates extra-residentially has to provide for most her own needs, and there is no fixed pattern of economic cooperation since these unions vary widely in character and context” (Smith 1962:223).

For younger women in Carriacou neither engaged nor established in extraresidential mating relations, sexual strategies within the field of social and economic capital ranged from taking lovers to commercial prostitution. Here we encounter a descending scale in which sex was increasingly commodified. Single women seeking romantic opportunities would take “gentlemen” who offered monetary gifts called “principle” in exchange for the girlfriend’s “facilities.” It was important that such transactions were disguised by gifts, offered irregularly as signs of affection rather than as payments for sexual access. By accumulating such principles a woman could achieve considerable social and economic independence, enabling her to “buy her own clothes, household supplies, and small stock, or rent her own garden” (Smith 1962:117). Moreover, a woman managing multiple lovers accumulated more gifts than her betrothed counterparts, although by maximizing such gains she risked her reputation since jealous boyfriends could “broadcast her name,” lowering her social capital by labeling her as promiscuous. The negative valuations of providing principle increased in proportion to the woman’s easy virtue, when such sex was referred to as “paid-for-time” (Smith 1962:193). Not clearly prostitution, the so-called casual relation when increasingly commercialized could lead in that direction. If prostitutes in the strict sense were rare in Carriacou, they were nonetheless socially abhorred, occupying the lowest position in the hierarchy of sexual exchange. As Smith proclaims:

Women who grant their favours indiscriminately on a commercial basis and live by this means are classified as prostitutes . . . Since prostitutes are outcasts, few girls in Carriacou willingly remain in a situation that allows such gossip about them and instead marry, take a lover, or invite senior kin into their homes to protect their reputations. (Smith 1962:120)

We can thus discern the contours of a sexual economy ranging from legitimate marriage to commercial prostitution, where the exchange of sex for domestic stability and the reproduction of agnatic bloods are most highly valued, and the exchange of sex for money tout court is most negatively stigmatized. It charts a familiar transition from gift to commodity, in which female sexuality is narrowly monetized and stripped from its socially reproductive pathways. Prostitution in Carriacou, however, involved more than commercialized sexual exchange: it took additional forms associated with violations and inversions of patriarchal households and agnatic bloodlines. Exploring these additional forms is important because they relate the blood of sexuality to fertility, witchcraft and social reproduction.

Commercial prostitution was unusual in Carriacou because it presupposed improbable social conditions. "Prostitutes of this kind," Smith (1962:120) explains, "must have land and a wooden house of their own, no senior kin to control them, and other kin willing to assist; but since this combination of conditions is quite unusual, such prostitution is rare." Clearly such prostitutes were quite well off, having the financial means to possess their own land and wooden houses. The social autonomy that such resources conferred was enhanced by the *absence* of controlling senior kinsmen and the presence of "other kin willing to assist." Smith fails to explore the implications of these conditions, but they challenge male patriarchy in important ways. That such prostitutes lived in wooden rather than dirt houses—on land that they owned rather than rented—has major implications for Carriacou household and lineage organization, since post-marital residence in a wooden house was the ideal form of conjugality for perpetuating agnatic descent. By meeting these conditions without husbands or senior kinsmen, such women established powerful matrifocal households with associated kindreds of their own, thereby challenging the "patrilineal" system with incipient female matrilineages or bloods. As we shall see, Smith's material reveals a much greater variation of uterine and materterine kinship patterns than the official agnatic ideology would suggest, and these crop up around female household heads or "principals" who take care of illegitimate children born to them or their kinswomen. Relegated to Appendix B in his study, Smith (1962:330) mentions that "these ties are traced mainly by women through women to women, and since women are the custodians of the unlawful children begotten in extraresidential unions, the majority of the resident collaterals of female principals will be

their kinswomen's illegitimate issue." What we see here is the formation of incipient female bloods or matrilineal lines generated by extraresidential mating, posing a threat to patrilineal descent by drawing away unrecognized offspring. Smith's claim that such children are usually attached to the mother's agnatic kin is obviated by the absence of senior kinsmen around the prostitute's household, providing women full domestic and social authority. The so-called prostitute in her wooden house structurally resembles a male lineage founder. Her crime of selling sex may well be conflated with her appropriation of household and lineage headship. One wonders whether the real crime of such designated prostitutes was the conversion of male into female bloodlines.

Evidence for this more structural reading of prostitution is provided by two further types which Smith identifies in Carriacou. One appears as a structural abomination of keeping patterns of residential mating. We recall that keeping between unmarried men and women was always in the woman's dirt house, and it diminished the man's autonomy and reputation by demanding sexual fidelity and subjecting him to her authority. Keeping was also understood as a step toward marriage, although it could drag on indefinitely or eventually dissolve. If keeping occurred in a wooden house, associated as it would be with the woman and her family, such a woman was classified as a prostitute or "whore."¹² As Smith (1962:119) explains:

According to the social logic of Carriacou, it is self-contradictory for unmarried people to keep in a board house, because keeping is a prelude to marriage, and a board house owned by the couple is the prerequisite for marriage. Thus, by living with an unmarried man *as his keeper* in a wooden house, the woman repudiates the ideal of marriage and accordingly declares herself not a keeper but a whore. (my emphasis)

It is unclear in what sense such a woman "declares herself . . . a whore" since more likely she was referred to as such within the official discourse of patriarchal authority. It is also not clear why living in a wooden rather than a dirt house would make her a "whore" unless one considers the implications

¹² Note the explicit disdain and contempt associated with Smith's slippage from "prostitute" to "whore," most likely reflecting local patriarchal discourse. Although Smith's field notes include extended interviews with women, particularly pertaining to child-rearing and ritual protection, his data on lesbianism come primarily from men, and thus he may confuse male ideologies of lesbianism with the practices themselves.

for agnatic descent. Like her commercial counterpart, the keeping prostitute threatened the perpetuation of patriline. By setting up in a wooden house and *keeping her man*, the woman became a household head with lineage claims on their children and wards.

The final type of prostitution, and according to Smith the most repugnant, was when a woman had sex *and bore children* with two men of the same blood “within the range of second cousins” (Smith 1962:120). If such sexual relations were likened to incest, “the same way that sex relations are taboo between close kin,” the crime appears to have been most closely identified with the birth of two different brothers’ children from the same womb; not with sex itself but the offspring so conceived. Smith writes:

Perhaps prostitution of this sort arouses the greatest horror or all. No mitigating circumstances are taken into account; the woman is branded for life as worthless, while the men who thereby “mixed the blood” are ritually impure and will be punished by the old parents for this breach of “the rule of the blood” . . . Such anomalous sex relations rarely come to light except when there are children. These will belong to their fathers’ blood, despite their irregular conception, but their fathers are more ambivalent about them than others and accordingly contribute less. Meanwhile, the mother will be disowned by any kin she may have in the village. (Smith 1962:120-21)

Clearly this most egregious type of prostitution on the island is defined by the breach of lineage taboos rather than by commodified sex. If the sex acts with male agnates only come to light with the birth of offspring, it is the children per se who confound lineage categories, materializing the impure mixing of blood. For Smith, the disgust triggered by such troubling unions upheld patrilineal descent and lineage exogamy, and further “protect[ed] the lineages against disorganisation through competition over women” (Smith 1962:120). This position, however, is less than convincing. There is nothing intrinsic to the logic of patriliney that is undermined by such cases of “lineage” prostitution since the children remain members of their father’s blood. Indeed, if systems of agnatic descent *sui generis* were structurally vulnerable to such mixings, the widespread incidence of the levirate in patrilineal African societies would be culturally “ungrammatical.” Something else is going on, related to the incipient formation of matrilineal bloods. Like the so-called prostitutes living in wooden houses, the mother of children by two lineage “brothers” threatened the integrity of the agnatic blood because there was something in her own blood that drew

her children into an incipient matriline. If such matrifilial “pulls” were normally counterbalanced by the jural authority of the patrilineage, rare cases of women bearing the children of two lineage brothers had a subversive rechanneling effect, in that such offspring *as a sibling group* shared all of their mother’s blood but only half of their father’s blood in common. Diagrammatically we can see how such sibling groups skewed parental heritage in the mother’s favor, generating stronger maternal bloodlines between the children of close agnates to foster the emergence of matrilineal bloods (Figure 1).¹³ Smith may have overestimated the strictly agnatic character of bloods. Hill (1977:305-6) argues that Carriacou bloods are actually matrilineal, complementary to the agnatic family thereby generating a system of double descent with competing affiliations and sets of demands. From this more fluid bilinear framework, children from extraresidential unions move into their mother’s bloods, “draining” the patriline of its outside progeny.¹⁴

Whereas Smith (1962:121) explains the three types of prostitution in Carriacou as “polar opposites of engagement and marriage,” that is, in relation to the mating system, I have emphasized their implications for empowering women as *de facto* household and lineage heads; that is, as matrilineal challenges to patrilineal descent. To deepen this interpretation, I turn to local ideologies of fertility and witchcraft in relation to blood and sexuality.

Fertility, Witchcraft, and the Blood of Lesbians

Carriacou theories of fertility and conception do not simply mirror ideologies of descent, but relate idioms of sexual exchange to wider spheres of production and circulation. Bringing desire and eroticism into his discussion of conception, Smith sketches a libidinal economy of the body in Carriacou

¹³ Children of such taboo unions—of the same mother and different fraternal fathers (approximating a *de facto* form of Tibetan fraternal polyandry!)—subvert the normal pattern of agnatic lineage segmentation between half-brothers of the same father and different mothers precisely because they are of the same mother and different fathers who share the same blood. Banishing the mother while retaining children of such unions prevents matrilineal fission within the patriline.

¹⁴ Although he did not identify full-fledged matrilineal families, Smith (1962:305) admitted that “the dual mating organization . . . also maintains the cognatic family as an alternative reference group with a more variable form and function.”

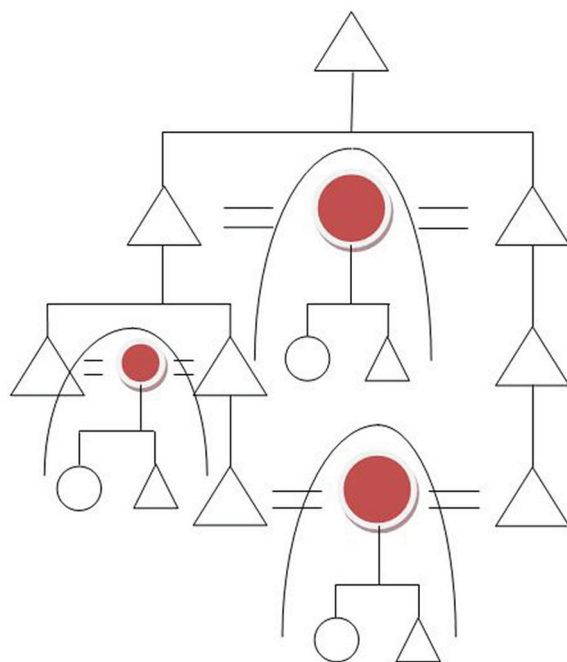


Figure 1. Lineage “prostitution” as the mixing of “fraternal” blood.

etiologies of procreation. Women are hotter than men, we are told, because they have stronger sexual appetites, even if held to a higher standard of heterosexual fidelity. A woman’s heat is in her blood, which will rise to her head and cause severe headaches after long periods of abstinence. Such women were advised to “take exercise”—or “copulate” (Smith 1962:132)—and were known to summon their overseas husbands on doctor’s orders for sexual healing. As we have seen, it is in this context of libidinal necessity that lesbian relations were ambivalently accepted, keeping women healthy while their husbands were away. But here I wish to highlight how the blood of women combined fertility with the pleasure principle, since a fit and fertile woman required blood circulating properly throughout her body, sustained by regular “exercise.” Indeed, conception involved the reciprocal exchange of blood and pleasure between the sexes. According to Smith (1962:132), “Many also believe that conception can only occur at simultaneous orgasm.”

If female blood is sexually stronger according to Carriacou accounts, male blood has a stronger vital principle in creating new life. Smith elicits a number of statements that uphold the ideology of agnatic descent. “We are one blood from the father. Is the father that make children . . . A woman only convey children, that is what the womb is for.” Other analogies from the local economy recapitulate this dogma through different figures: “If you have a cow and don’t bring it to the use of the bull, you don’t get no calf . . . The man make the children, the women only bear them.” Smith (1962:268) further recounts: “The man ‘gives’ the woman the child as ‘seed’; the child owes its being to its father and has its father’s blood, blood being the symbol of vitality and life. The woman ‘conveys’ (carries) the child in her womb as a schooner conveys passengers.” And finally, “women cannot transmit the blood, only men can.” Smith points out a subtle distinction between men “giving” and “making” the child in two of these accounts, but he is not sure what to do with it. His examples, however, deploy images of male production in the “making” of new life, and of exchange—in the form of “giving” seed but also of conveying people and commodities. In one account the womb is likened to a schooner that conveys passengers, as if adding exchange value to productive male seed. In a similar explanation collected by Hill (1977:305): “a man ‘cannot make no baby without the woman. For the woman is supposed to be the basket that carries the goods from the market. The man has the money to put the goods in the basket.’” In this procreative parable of commodity exchange, the male sperm is equated to money itself, which purchases the “goods” that are brought home from the market in the woman’s basket-like womb.

Thus we see three expressions of production, gift-giving and monetary exchange in the sexual economy of human reproduction; one that maximizes pleasure, maintains circulation, and produces new life through the proper mixing of blood. Infertile couples are afflicted with “a fault in the blood” (Smith 1962:133), or worse, are victims of blood-draining witchcraft that sucks up fetuses and also devours newborns. As *blocked* exchange, witchcraft, or *kakomé*, is the inverse of fertility, draining life and consuming blood to sabotage childbirth and delivery. Its essence is negative reproductive potential, which in the sphere of sexuality involves cannibalism, sterility, and mystical shape-shifting. Smith discusses three kinds of witch that prey upon infants and abort new life. The first two are nocturnal shape-shifters; the male *lougarou* (from the French *loup-garou*, or werewolf) and

the female *sukuyan* “who roam abroad at night and suck the blood from sleeping humans and beasts... [they] are old or middle-aged persons who live nearby and have the power of metamorphosis through witchcraft” (Smith 1962:89). The *sukuyan* is known to shed her skin and adopt the form of various animals. A third kind of predatory spirit *La Jablesse* (the *diabliesse*, or devil-woman) does not consume the blood of the living, but represents “sirens with cloven hoofs, who destroy the men they enchant by making them mad” (Smith 1962:89). Part human and part beast, they cast seductive spells based on *unproductive* sexuality and thwarted delivery. The *jablesse* is said to manifest the souls of women who died in childbirth, and had also destroyed their own fetuses. In one account collected by Smith, “the numerous little pigs that follow these cloven-hoofed beauties are the infants they aborted while alive” (Smith 1962:133).

It is within this corporeal economy of fertility and witchcraft that Carriacou lesbianism takes on new meanings, less amenable to patriarchal authority than Smith’s “adaptive” interpretation suggests. It is to Smith’s credit that the richness of his ethnography allows us to recast lesbianism as a variety of witchcraft in which the blood of female sexuality opposes that of fertility. Consider two taboos pertaining to pregnant women. The first points to the cannibalistic appetites of pregnant wombs when intimately aligned: “Two pregnant women must never sleep together, since the child of one will ‘suck the blood’ of the other, thus causing a stillbirth” (Smith 1962:134). Here we see the witchcraft potential of all pregnancies when the blood of wombs is insufficiently insulated from the appetites of other fetuses. Moreover, the prohibition is generalized to all fertile women whether pregnant or not. “By implication,” Smith adds, “this means that no women should sleep together before the menopause” (Smith 1962:134). The *madivines* and *zamis* of lesbian relationships are thus implicitly witchlike since their wombs and bloodlines are dangerously close and can become inadvertently entwined. The second taboo simply states that “no ‘long-foot woman’ may step over the legs of a pregnant woman, or the delivery will be made more difficult.” Carriacouans believe that taller, long-foot women have greater difficulty during childbirth than “short-foot” women, “and if a long-foot woman steps over the legs of a pregnant short-foot, she transmits these difficulties” (Smith 1962:134-35). Smith mentions that lesbianism on the island “may provide a possible ground for these restrictions,” but we can read the prohibition from the other direction, as a commentary on the

dangers that lesbianism—like witchcraft—poses to safe pregnancies and deliveries.¹⁵

Lesbians, like witches, can thus sabotage childbirth and absorb a fetus from another womb, thereby diverting and consuming the blood of reproductive pathways. A man can lose his issue to his wife's lesbian lover, who not only consumes it through her womb, but appropriates it into her own bloodline; snatching the child, as it were, from her lover's husband and incorporating it into her own lineage blood. Nor are such appropriative pathways limited to children, but equally apply to flows of money and gifts. Smith describes how the wives of wealthy men redirect their economic support into gifts for their lesbian lovers, weakening the marriage itself while establishing the wife's authority vis-à-vis her lovers:

Lesbians exchange gifts, the senior receiving perfume, as becomes a male in this culture, while the junior is given earrings, underwear, and the like. The wives of prosperous men may have several junior partners since they can afford the necessary gifts. If these women reject their husbands, their marriages may break down, as in this case. A rich man's wife had an attractive partner. The wife rejected her husband's attentions, and he then made advances to her Lesbian mate. Being well off, he left his wife, acquired another home, and moved there with his wife's concubine . . . The man's wife lost some of her influence with younger women in consequence of his withdrawal of economic support. (Smith 1962:200-201)

In this telling passage, the husband effectively re-appropriated the resources diverted by his wife to her lover, at the expense, however, of the marriage itself. Rejecting his wife and taking up with her "concubine" in another home, he blocked his wife's access to his wealth and reestablished control over his domestic gifts and finances. The abandoned wife, in turn, lost influence among the younger *zamis*, whom she could no longer satisfy with gifts. A strong *madivine* requires redistributive resources. Like the wood-house prostitute, she could become a household head with resident kinsmen, junior wards, and other men's wives share-tending and share-cropping her property (Smith 1962:205). In such uterine households of female community and solidarity, sexuality itself devolved through female

¹⁵ Wyatt MacGaffey (personal communication) has informed me that the expression "stepping over the legs" in Kikongo refers to sexual intercourse, suggesting a direct connection between lesbianism and problematic delivery.

bloodlines. Not only was the proclivity for lesbian love understood as inherited from mother to daughter, but sexual relations between *madivines* and their adopted junior kinswomen were accepted, without violating incest prohibitions.¹⁶ Lesbian love was a double-edged gift. It could sustain patriarchal households with absent husbands by preserving the marital fidelity of wives, but it could also destroy such households—by rechanneling their resources and appropriating their blood.

Conclusion

Smith's patriarchal interpretation of Carriacou lesbianism upholds a sexual double standard for men and women on the island. If men are permitted extraresidential mating and the freedom to indulge in outside affairs, women must remain faithful as keptresses and wives, and can take lesbian lovers to maintain heterosexual fidelity. Thus, Smith (1962: 216) argued, "Carriacou women are not feminists and cannot conceive of sexual equality." Following the flows of money, gifts and blood through the transactional pathways of the sexual economy, however, a more feminist interpretation of lesbianism emerges in which women control their own resources and sexuality.¹⁷ As Barrow (2011:152) has already demonstrated for Smith's landmark study, "if we read between the lines, women's sexual agency is constructed as a potentially disruptive force, a challenge to the norms of male dominance, the gender double standard and heteronormativity." Narrowing her approach, I have located my own reading between the lineages. Indeed, if women can appropriate both the blood and bloodlines of men, lesbianism, like witchcraft, represents a form of collective agency and empowerment. By diverting money, gifts, and blood into female households and lineages, the lesbian—like the wood-house prostitute—re-channels male reproductive pathways. In this capacity, the *madivine* is a sexual shape-shifter. Like the nocturnal *sukuyan* or cloven-hoofed *jablesse*, she

¹⁶ For similar relations between older senior and much younger junior partners among Afro-Surinamese women, understood as "initiation into the mati work," see Wekker (2006: 184-87).

¹⁷ The Carriacou musician, choreographer, and playwright Winston Fleary explained that lesbianism is most common among entrepreneurial women of the Ibo and Temne nations on the island because they resent and resist male interference with their financial affairs, and in their lives more generally (interview in Carriacou, June 3, 2013).

changes into something else. Recall Smith's glimpse of lesbian prestations: "Lesbians exchange gifts, the senior receiving perfume, as *becomes a male* in this culture, while the junior is given earrings, underwear, and the like" (1962: 200, my emphasis). Here we see how the spirit of the gift, redirected from male into female pathways, transforms lesbian lovers into seniors and juniors, butches and femmes, husbands and wives, and thus senior lesbians into "men."

Support for this shape-shifting aspect of lesbianism associated with the blood of mothers comes from writer-poet Audre Lorde, herself the daughter of a Carriacou lesbian, who repossessed her matrilineal heritage by embracing her queer sexuality. As DiBernard (1991:216) explains:

There is a strain within black feminist literary criticism which names strength and woman-identification in black women as "lesbian." Barbara Smith, Lorraine Bethel, and Wilmette Brown all take this approach. In this view, as well as in Lorde's, the lesbian is "not-woman"; that is, she is a female who does not play out her societally defined role as powerless, giving primary allegiance to men.

In Audre Lorde's *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*, powerful "Black dykes" who bend their gender form a migratory matriline from New York City back to Carriacou, where women "work together as friends and lovers" to build female solidarity and community. If these women manage households, pool resources, share root work, and challenge patriarchy, the secret of their power *is* their lesbian sexuality, which devolves from mothers to daughters. In the very last sentence of her "biomythography," Lorde writes of her maternal homeland, "There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood" (Lorde 1996:224). Perhaps it is time to revisit the debates on Caribbean kinship and household organization with witchcraft, sexuality, and the blood of lesbians in mind.¹⁸

¹⁸ See e.g., Blackwood (2005) for a significant move in this direction. For a bold and innovative ethnography of lesbian relationships among Afro-Surinamese in both Suriname and the Netherlands, see Wekker (2006).

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