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The folk-interpretation of human reproduction among the !Gui and !Gana and its implications for father-child relations

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Introduction

The !Gui and !Gana, African hunter-gatherers living in the Kalahari Desert, are known to have sexual relations without being married. By contrast, the !Kung, another San group, are reported to rarely have sexual relations outside marriage for reasons including a lack of privacy and, importantly, a social prohibition on such affairs.¹

Unlike the ‘illicit loves’ seen in other societies, extramarital sexual relations among the !Gui and !Gana are socially approved and are known as *zaā-ku* (Tanaka 1989). *Zaā-ku* functions socially by creating social relationships between people other than the specific individuals and families involved in any particular marriage. Tanaka (1989: 164) suggests that

while the San maintain a system of simple marriage, they often practice divorce, remarriage, polygamous marriage and even the *zaā-ku* relationship...the San are making great efforts to maintain their society by utilizing the complex network of inter-personal relationships.

Sugawara (1993: 250) suggests that ‘the relationships mediated by “sex” contribute the society of repeating fission and fusion to be integrated refinedly’.

Zaā-ku relationships differ from the socially regulated extramarital sexual relationships generally seen in African pastoral societies in that particular relationships are not always completely approved. For example, Sato reports on the existence of the *dumassi*, or love relationship outside of marriage, among the Rendille of northern Kenya. In Rendille society, ‘married women may live a comparatively free sexual life within the regulations of *dumassi* institution (open-lover institution)’ (Sato 1998: 218). The sexual freedom of married women is restricted to *dumassi*, a socially regulated relationship between specific age-sex categorized groups. Thus, Rendille sexual relationships outside marriage are institutionally controlled.

The !Gui and !Gana cultures are flexible so that particular relationships become socially accepted or approved by becoming common knowledge, although such relationships may be based on individual feelings of love. In addition, among the !Gui and !Gana it is commonly accepted that a stable *zaā-ku* is ideal, which supports the existence of diverse sexual relationships.

The aim of this chapter is to clarify the lGui and lGana consciousness of sex, and the formative process of the social relationships produced by sex; for instance, what they think of sexual relations outside marriage, and what kind of rites they hold to solve problems caused by *zaā-ku*. It also explores the lGui and lGana folk-interpretation of human reproduction, and addresses the questions of how, when a married woman is pregnant due to *zaā-ku* relations, a 'father' for the child is determined, and how that father should treat the child.²

***Sie-ku* (marriage)**

In the lGui and lGana language, marriage is called *sie*, meaning 'to take'. The phrases 'a man takes a woman' or 'a woman takes a man' indicate that 'they are getting married'. Also, *sie-ku*, which combines *sie* ('to take') with the suffix *ku* indicating 'mutualness', means 'a man and a woman are taking each other', that is, it refers to the state of being married.

In lGui and lGana society, although men are expected to pay women something at their weddings, this convention is not necessarily upheld in many cases. No property changes ownership, either at marriage or on divorce. A rite is held at the beginning of a lGui and lGana marriage, but they do not invite people to the rite and never hold a wedding ceremony. Neither do they register marriages with a chief, although the Bakgalagadi, a neighboring agro-pastoralist group, do so.

It is thus difficult to define what lGui and lGana marriage is, at least in a strictly formal sense. Nevertheless, marriage certainly exists among the lGui and lGana, and is socially sanctioned. A man and woman live in the same hut, have sexual intercourse, earn their living together, divide food between themselves, and raise their children together. The couple is recognized as 'a married couple' by everyone, so that it can be said that this state represents their typical style of marriage.

In some cases, people who are married practice frequent visiting and food sharing but do not live together. In other cases, it is sometimes ambiguous whether a couple is married or not, even when they live in the same camp with the man visiting the woman and sharing food. Hence, besides the typical style of marriage, there are diverse associations between men and women which involve varying sexual relationships.

***Zaā-ku* relationships**

The term *zaā-ku* derives from the verb *zaā*, meaning 'to make a person one's sweetheart', combined with the suffix *ku*, meaning 'mutualness'. It refers to the state in which a couple has repeated sexual intercourse despite not being married, or to the relationship itself. Recently the word *zaā-ku* has extended to include all sexual relationships outside marriage such as romances between young people, and secret love affairs. *Zaā-ku* is also used to refer to 'an intimate friend' without any sexual relationship being involved.

However, the typical meaning of *zaā-ku* is that a married man or woman has a sexual relationship with someone other than his/her spouse but with the permission of latter. Importantly, the typical *zaā-ku* is a fairly open relationship with the permission of

one's spouse. When such permission is obtained, the spouse's relationship to the lover, that of a husband to his wife's lover or of a wife to her husband's lover, is called *!naa-ku*, a mutually-permitted relationship (Fig. 1).

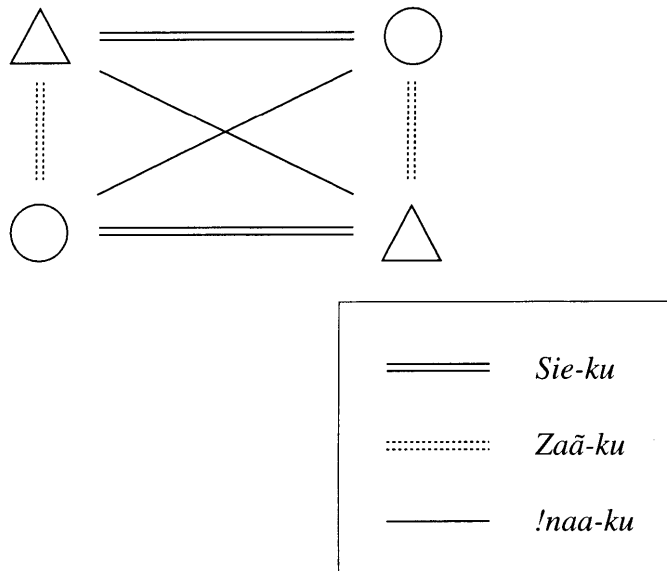


Figure 1 An example of a *zaā-ku* relationship

'Enormous zaā-ku'

The IGui and IGana regard the ideal type of *zaā-ku* as that in which two couples exchange partners, that is, partner swapping.³ They call this state 'enormous *zaā-ku*' or 'sharing huts' (Fig. 1). In 'enormous *zaā-ku*', two or more couples form a close community which extends beyond a nuclear family, sharing their food as well as their sexual partners. It is said that in the past, when the IGui and IGana lived a traditional nomadic life, there were actually several cases in which two couples formed 'enormous *zaā-ku*' relationships.

More recently, three couples formed an 'enormous *zaā-ku*' for about five years from 1967 to 1971 (Fig. 2). The three couples comprised seven persons in total, a man (X) with two wives (Gk and O) and two men with one wife each (Gs was married to Q, and N was married to A). X had *zaā-ku* relations with Q and A; Gs and O, and N and Gk were *zaā-ku*. The three families lived separately; between X and Gs was about 30 kilometers, and between X and N was more than 80 kilometers. The men were the main visitors between the *zaā-ku* families, which exchanged food (including meat) and sex. *Zaā-ku* refers to relationships not only between two people, but also between whole groups of people connected by sexual intercourse. So it is often said, for example, that 'We seven people were *zaā-ku*'.

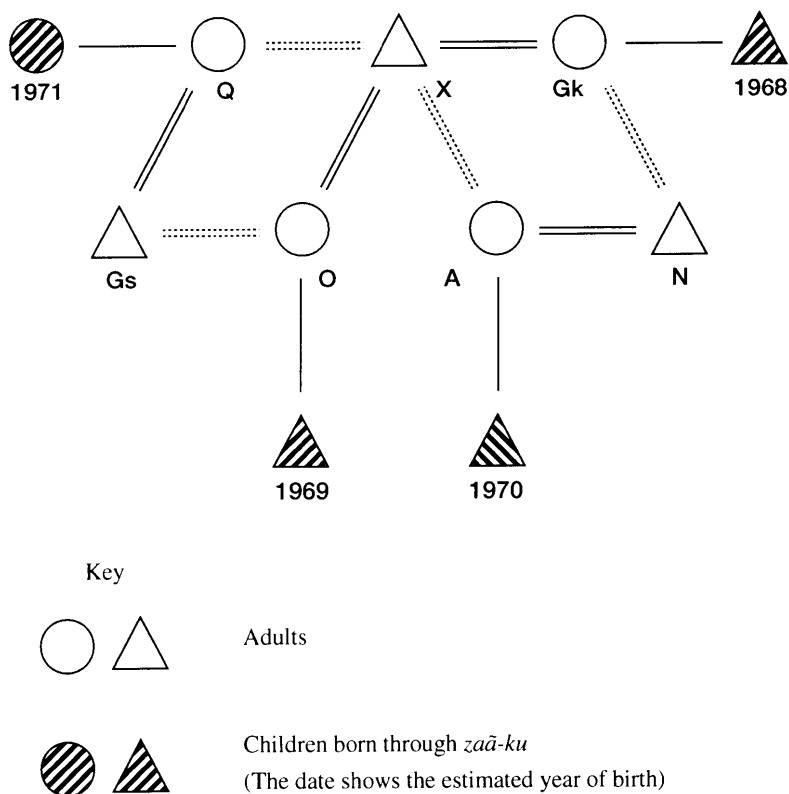


Figure 2 An example of *zaā-ku* relationships among seven people

'Dirt' hidden in social relationships

When the three couples mentioned above started their *zaā-ku*, they held a 'rite for dirt' following the suggestion of an elder in the camp. 'Dirt' is called */qx'ori* in the IGui and IGana language, and is the nucleus of their beliefs concerning disease. */Qx'ori* means both the visible dirt on one's body and hands, and also things hidden in the bodies of sick people and those entertaining lust and injustice. It is believed that */qx'ori* is spread by sexual intercourse, and that venereal disease is a typical example of illness caused by */qx'ori*. However, */qx'ori* is not equivalent to the western medical term 'pathogenic'. A brief outline of the IGui and IGana perspective on disease follows.

/Qx'ori is disease that occurs not in a single person, but exists in the connections between people. IGui and IGana believe that in any relationship, be it between parents and children, brothers and sisters, husbands and wives, or lovers, the matter which forms such a relationship accumulates in their bodies. This matter is physical and includes blood, semen, saliva, and so forth.

It is believed that once a couple makes a sexual relationship, they continue to be connected with each other by bodily substance even long after they are separated. Here, it is to be noted that there is a circular logic in this situation; the relationship itself, which

endows mere physical thing with a social character, originates from the exchange or sharing of these things through human bodies. I like to designate such a relationship based on bodily substance as 'connection-based-on-bodily-substance'(CBBS).

CBBS causes no problems while people are in harmony with one another. However, when problems occur in human relationships, for example, as a result of jealousy, hatred, desire, and so on, the CBBS of all related people becomes filled with /qx'ori and individuals become sick. Such /qx'ori does not gradually spread from sick to healthy people, instead, the people related by CBBS all suddenly suffer from /qx'ori at the same time. Sexual intercourse between several couples in *zaā-ku* creates /qx'ori between those involved. Sometimes it causes back pain, headache and pains of the sexual organs. /Qx'ori also spreads over the children who live with adults in *zaā-ku* relationships. Children fall victim to /qx'ori immediately, and infants develop poor health, suffering from diarrhea and fever. In serious cases they die.

The 'rite for dirt'

When a *zaā-ku* is formed all the members of the *zaā-ku*, both adults and children, get together and hold the 'rite for dirt'. The oldest person is in charge of the rite. All adults collect their urine in one spot, where they also cut their own skin to bleed. This should drive the /qx'ori out of their bodies and make it visible in the sun. Next, they mix the urine and blood with medicinal herbs. Since a wife or a husband started *zaā-ku* that person has already begun to 'connect' with their lover. This fact is recognized by releasing blood and urine and by mixing them. Then the /qx'ori changes to become powerful, effective 'medicine'. The medicine is rubbed into the wounds of all adults and children. In the case of the three couples mentioned above, since they had eight children, 15 persons were involved in that particular 'rite for dirt'.

The 'rite for dirt' has social meaning in that it makes the sexual relationship public to the spouses, families and relatives. The same rite is also held at remarriage. Thus, rather than distinguishing *sie-ku* from *zaā-ku*, the 'rite for dirt' is used for resolving physical and social problems caused by sexual intercourse in both types of relationship.

Another style of marriage

'Enormous *zaā-ku*' can be said to be 'another style of marriage' which is socially accepted alongside the more typical style of marriage. In IGui and IIGana society sexual relations are not restricted to married couples. Traditional sharing practices include not only the sharing of food but also having sexual intercourse in common and sharing information by making sexual relationships public. Although a stable sexual relationship between two couples is the ideal in IGui and IIGana society, recently few 'enormous *zaā-ku*' have occurred. The reason is that it is difficult to continue such a relationship without jealousy.

Love affairs of married women

Today almost all of the extramarital sexual relationships occurring in IGui and IIGana society take place between married women or men without their spouses'

permission. These relationships, elsewhere called adultery, tend to be regarded as morally wrong. This is expressed in phrases used to describe such relationships, for example, 'to steal somebody's wife/husband' or 'to rob a man of his wife'. Such relationships are, however, limited to those in which the spouse never allows his/her partner to have a lover and in which people in the same camp never permit lovers.

In fact, there are few cases of such relationships, and in most cases spouses reluctantly accept the existence of lovers as time goes by. Therefore, love affairs by married men and women are socially permitted as a form of *zaā-ku* in the broadest sense of the term. Compared with the situation in most other societies, !Gui and !Gana are tolerant of married women having sexual relations outside marriage.

Quite a lot of children are born as a result of *zaā-ku* relations. Table 1 shows the number of children born since the 1960s in *sie-ku* relationships compared with those born through their mothers' *zaā-ku*. Almost one quarter of the children (23.8%) were born through *zaā-ku*.

Table 1 The number of children born by *sie-ku* and *zaā-ku* relationships since the 1960s*

| | <i>Sie-ku</i> | <i>Zaā-ku</i> | Total |
|---------------|---------------|---------------|------------|
| Male | 64 | 22 | 86 |
| Femele | 67 | 19 | 86 |
| Total | 131 | 41 | 172 |

*55 mothers

When a married women bears a child following sexual relations outside marriage, the pater (social father) of the child is the husband of the child's mother, the man who married (*sie*) her. The question then arises as to whether !Gui and !Gana try to find out who is the 'real' father (the genitor) of the child.

Babies born through *zaā-ku*

The !Gui and !Gana interpretation of human reproduction

Before answering that question I want to explain how the !Gui and !Gana interpret human reproduction. A child is considered to be born through the mixing of male and female water. Male water is 'semen'; female water is called 'love juice' or 'amniotic fluid'. Menstrual blood is regarded as useless or disgusting. Thus, it is thought that blood has nothing to do with the formation and growth of a human embryo. Instead frequent sexual intercourse causes male water to eventually accumulate in the woman's womb, and when the womb fills with water an embryo will finally start to form. According to the !Gui and !Gana interpretation of human reproduction, there exists no moment of fertilization. That is, they believe that their lives break out in an analogical way, not a digital way. Also, even after an embryo starts to form, he/she is still under development and needs male water, accumulated in the womb, for 'food'.

Of course, the !Gui and !Gana know that menstruation stops when a woman is

pregnant. They think, however, that the embryo finally starts to be shaped after two months have passed since the mother's last period. They also believe that only with male water accumulated in the womb for two months, can a woman become pregnant. They do not regard the two months after last menstruation as part of pregnancy, and consequently conclude that an embryo is in its mother's body for seven months.

Since male water is the food of the embryo, a married couple is expected to have sexual intercourse even after the development of an embryo, to produce a healthy child. They should have sexual intercourse for about two months until the embryo starts to be formed, and should also continue during the pregnancy. Therefore, for married couples, it is thought to be hard to get pregnant and to give birth to a child. The !Gui and !Gana believe that it is absolutely impossible to have a baby after a single, isolated act of sexual intercourse.

Who are their 'fathers'?

Given the !Gui and !Gana folk-interpretation of human reproduction, how can children be born through *zaā-ku*? Let me outline a case in which a wife has a lover and becomes pregnant through sexual intercourse with both her lover and her husband. The situation is explained as follows: she becomes pregnant with the mixture of the two male waters. Even if her husband has been away for a long time before and after she becomes pregnant, his male water is thought to be still left in her body from previous sexual intercourse. So, to some degree a husband must contribute to his wife's pregnancy. In this case, the genitors who give the child life are both the wife's husband and her lover. The genitor is not limited exclusively to one person (Fig. 3). The !Gui and !Gana state that 'two men have met at the baby', or 'two men bore a baby together'. Of course, there is a tendency for people to try to identify a particular person as the genitor of a child born through *zaā-ku* by conjecturing about who the child resembles. However, there remains the possibility that the husband is a genitor of the child. They sometimes say, 'As for this

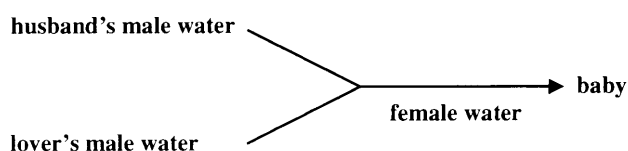


Figure 3 Their explanation of how babies are born through *zaā-ku* relationship

child's birth, the husband's water was small while the lover's water was large'.

As the child grows up, he or she is told about the role of his mother's lover in his birth as a natural part of life, and sometimes calls the lover 'Little Father'. However, the lover rarely takes responsibility for or has obligations to the child. This is because in 'good *zaā-ku*' when a lover visits the mother of the child, he should behave moderately, and should leave as soon as problems occur, for example, when her husband shows strong opposition, or when she becomes pregnant.

According to the !Gui and !Gana, male water can become 'good' or 'bad', just as food consists of good 'medicine' and bad 'poison'. When a husband and a lover do not

accept each other, the water or food from both of them, which is now making a baby's body, changes the */qx'ori* through CBBS. The */qx'ori* then causes a miscarriage, or makes the child seriously sick. Also, the */qx'ori* attacks all the family. Consequently, the husband and the lover need to forgive each other and hold the 'rite for dirt' to save their families.

Father-child relationships and *zaā-ku*

A woman's husband raises all her children without discrimination, both those born through *zaā-ku* and those born solely as a result of his sexual relations with his wife. For example, a father very often plays with his children near his huts. I was very impressed to see some fathers taking their children to their visiting places, holding them in their arms or putting them on their shoulders, and riding on donkeys with them. Children frequently sit on their fathers' knees and try to reach food or drink offered to their fathers. A father never cares if his children consume meat or spend money that he has obtained himself. Also, a father teaches his sons the method of trapping when they reach seven or eight years old.

I asked several IGui and IGana males what they thought about children born through their wives *zaā-ku*. All of them replied, 'Though I was filled with anger against my wife's *zaā-ku*, the child has nothing to do with the *zaā-ku*. It is clear that each of my children is mine'. The men are sure of being the fathers of their children because they believe that their sexual intercourse with their wives certainly contributes to their children's births even if only to a little extent. Also, as mentioned in association with the explanation of */qx'ori* above, part of the reason may be because they believe that fathers and children are connected by CBBS.

Moreover, as one IGui man said, 'Even though I feel angry at the *zaā-ku* of my wife, I am forgiving her and giving our embryo male water in the same way as I am giving food to and raising the child after his/her birth'. This makes it clear that sexual intercourse is parallel to supporting children, and that 'male water: sexual intercourse' corresponds to 'food: supporting children'. It seems that the relationship between a father and his child tends to be considered as directly involving only those two parties and excluding the wife/mother.

Conclusions

Zaā-ku is a socially accepted system of extramarital relations which is basically regarded as the concern of the couples involved rather than being a social regulation as is, for example, the *dumassi* of the Rendille. *Zaā-ku* stands somewhere between social institutions and individual behavior. IGui and IGana men do not control the sexual behavior of married women. In their society, husbands accept the *zaā-ku* relations of their wives, and form direct associations with any resulting children.

The fact that men are the fathers of all their wives' children is demonstrated in their daily relations with their children. They attach great importance to the reality concerning their interaction with their children. This is based on their perspective of disease which is that 'if we don't accept the reality of relationships already formed, */qx'ori* will spread to

all of the related people’.

In accordance with the !Gui and !Gana folk-perspective on disease, all the people involved in a *zaā-ku* relationship are connected to each other by CBBS. If problems occur in their relationships, for example, through jealousy and hatred, bodily substances change to ‘dirt’ which causes illness to prevail among all those involved. So all husbands and wives concerned in *zaā-ku* must admit to the relationship and hold the ‘rite for dirt’. The ‘rite for dirt’ has a supernatural meaning and promotes an open society.

The !Gui and !Gana folk-interpretation of human reproduction provides conceptual support for the paternal actions of men towards their wives’ children. Even when a woman’s lover is genetically and biologically the father of a child (from the viewpoint of western scientific knowledge), the woman’s husband can be specified as not only the pater but also the genitor. According to their notion of conception, it is not necessary for a genitor to be only one person. Therefore, a woman’s husband can be considered to have complete paternity of his wife’s children, whoever their genitor may be.

In !Gui and !Gana society, supporting children is not a major responsibility for parents. Children leave their parents’ huts at a comparatively young age, and start to support themselves with some help from other people. Children are almost never expected to help their parents as laborers (Draper 1976). Fathers do not have to use a commanding manner with their children, and the !Gui and !Gana just seem to consider raising children as pure pleasure and enjoyment.

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Notes

- 1) In *The !Kung of Nyae Nyae* Marshall concludes that ‘!Kung society has an overall prohibition against any sexual relations outside of marriage’ (Marshall 1976: 279). She also reveals that ‘the impossibility of maintaining secrecy exerts a control over extramarital relations’ because ‘they [the !Kung] register every person’s footprints in their minds, and read in the sand who walked where and how long ago’ (Marshall 1976: 280). Shostak reports that !Kung people sometimes have lovers even when they are married, but ‘actually extramarital sexual encounters seem to be infrequent, because of the lack of privacy in !Kung life’ (Shostak 1983: 268). Howell (1979: 264) also notes that ‘extramarital breeding seems to be unusual among the !Kung’.

- 2) The original data for this chapter was collected by asking !Gui and !Gana informants about their notions of conception, what is *zaā-ku*, how they felt about *zaā-ku*, and so on, during three periods of field research (in 1994, 1995 and 1998) for a total of approximately 11 months in the Xade area of the Republic of Botswana.
- 3) Marshall (1976: 279) describes */kamheri* in !Kung society: '*/kamheri* means that two men may agree to exchange wives temporarily, provided the wives consent'. This arrangement seems to resemble the !Gui and !Gana *zaā-ku*. However, Marshall states that 'no actual instance of */kamheri* came to our attention, and we failed to find out if it is now practiced'.

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