

Changing Issues in Heterosexual Unions in Northeast Brazil

L.A. Rebhun

67 F.R. Lillie Road
Woods Hole MA 02543
Rebhun@verizon.net

Abstract:

In rural Northeast Brazil, the last sixty years have seen a shift from largely rural to mostly urban residence, an expansion of state surveillance over hinterland areas with accompanying civil registration of marriages, greater penetration of both Catholic and Evangelical churches into issues of sexual relationship, and a shift from semi-arranged cousin marriage to a primacy of temporary, non-marital unions based on romantic attraction. This paper, based on original fieldwork, examines how women in this area negotiate the fractured structures of heterosexual congress and childrearing in contemporary interior Northeast Brazil.

I lived in Caruaru, a city of about 300,000, in the interior of Pernambuco state in Northeast Brazil, from 1988 through 1990, doing anthropological fieldwork on emotion, with a focus on emotionally-based folk syndromes such as evil eye sickness, “nerves,” shock sickness and the like. However, I found that what people really wanted to talk about was love, often phrased in terms of “what’s wrong with men,” “what’s wrong with women,” “young people nowadays,” or “old people as they used to be,” and hillbillies and city slickers; and most of all, sexual passion. Romance, courtship, heartbreak, and how things had changed seemed topics of endless fascination.

Discussion of love

Love life, one’s own and others’, is always a fascinating topic everywhere and you don’t need complex anthropological theory to figure out why people like to talk about it. But I do think that love and romance became even more perplexingly fascinating topics in the late 20th century in Caruaru for reasons that can be explained by social science and that is what I want to talk about.

Talking with locals on topics such as “*amor*” (love) and “*paixão*” (infatuation) inevitably brought up not only discussions of the complex difficulties of human connection, and the relationships among physical passion and emotional intimacy, but also considerations of family form and couple formation, and how they had changed during the massive urbanization of the second half of the twentieth century, when Brazil also underwent military coup, transition back to democracy, and an opening of its markets to international capital while inflation in Brazilian currency experienced heights for which whole new vocabularies had to be invented.

Region

When I tell people where I did fieldwork, I am always careful to specify “Northeast” Brazil, because Brazil’s Northeast is quite distinct economically and culturally from its South. The Northeast has a history of plantation slavery, and still produces sugar and pineapples on big plantations. Until the mid 1930’s it was primarily agricultural, and despite the authoritarian cast of national governments, the centralized state did not reach very far into the hinterlands until fairly recently. Life in Caruaru seems very old fashioned to urban sophisticates in Rio and São Paulo as much because it is in the interior, not the coast, as because it is in the Northeast. The past is always present in an old fashioned place like Caruaru, where daily markets bring farmers into town to sell their produce, animals, and handcrafts, and where donkey carts vie with automobiles for room on the mostly dirt roads.

Urbanization

The large urbanization that started in the mid 1930’s and has accelerated toward the present, has transformed many aspects of life in interior Northeast Brazil. One dramatic change involves how people think about heterosexual coupling. Often the participants in my study complained to me that whereas in the past people married, today they just shack up without regard to decency. This complaint responds more to an imagined than an actual past, by people’s own account.

Generational Structure

In a world where life expectancy is low and many women have their first child as teenagers, people in their forties are grandparents, and the “older” generation comprises chronologically younger individuals than here in the U.S. When I would ask these older people how they and their parents used to get married they would tell me of chaperoned

courtships, formal requests to fathers for engagements, and then finally, usually during the harvest festival of St. John in June, the young man, having prepared a house and land, would come in an ox cart to pick up the young woman, standing with her relatives in front of her father's house, the trousseau she and her mother had spent years preparing all packed up. Amid weeping by the women, the two would ride off to matrimony. Few people mentioned a ceremony, a dinner, or any gifts. As one woman quipped, "all I got was the groom!"

Invisible to State

If we take James Scott's suggestion and see this "like a state" we note the lack of clergy or registrar to formalize unions: this is marriage by small community recognition with no involvement by a higher authority. Neither state nor church sees this kind of arrangement, although some people remembered itinerant priests who would arrive every decade or so to baptize all the babies and bless all the cohabiting couples and leave the villages to their own customs once again.

The image of the ox-cart also appears in local handcrafts, represented in block prints and ceramic statuettes; people say, "the ox cart is coming" when they want to convey the seriousness of a courtship. However, when I asked after people's own personal histories, no one could actually come up with either a personal experience or the name of someone who might have experienced a proper marriage like that: elopement after a clandestine courtship was much more common in practice. Therefore, the complaint that young people used to marry and now they just shack up does not seem to reflect any major difference in practice: people have been shacking up and calling it marriage for quite some time.

Urban Society

However, things are undeniably different in the city than they were in the countryside and I think this difference derives more from the contrasts between urban and rural communities than from anything else. The rural villages of the recent past constituted small, dense social networks, in which the widespread practice of cousin marriage meant that all residents were closely related, most people had lived there and known everyone there all their lives, and everyone knew everyone that everyone else knew. Urbanization in Brazil, as in most of the rest of Latin America, the Caribbean, and Africa for that matter, proceeded so rapidly, on such a large scale, and with so few state resources to assist it, that most migrants have ended up in illegal or semi-legal settlements, called *favelas* in Portuguese, most of them built by unskilled workers, unserved by paved roads, piped water, electricity, garbage collection, bus service, schools, or police patrols, for the most part only barely penetrated by the gaze of the state. The residents generally live without documents like birth certificates or the work record booklets required for legitimate labor: not only are the neighborhoods not legal, the residents have little legal recognition of their activities or indeed of their existences unless they take it upon themselves to obtain documents. However, unlike in small villages, where civil registrars simply did not exist, in cities people know that it is possible to register a birth, to register a worker, to obtain the legal benefits of full wages, medical care, and legal rights that registered people have, and that those without papers suffer a distinct disadvantage in comparison to those with them. Heterosexual unions unnoted by state or church have a different, lower, significance here.

Mobility

Another difference between the small villages and the urban setting involves social and geographic mobility. In small villages most people lived in one place their whole lives, migrating

only when forced by some kind of disaster, like a drought. There were few economic distinctions either; large swaths of land had no official owners, and those that did were organized like glorified patrilineages, with the ranch owner as paterfamilias to all the families of the workers who lived and worked as their parents and grandparents had done before them.

In cities, not only do people move from one neighborhood to another, they move among cities and regions. Many unrelated people cohabit as neighbors; the category “friend” replaces that of “cousin” to indicate a primary social relationship. The impersonal transactions of cash, when it’s available, begin to replace long-term gift exchanges, although both barter and a fractured form of the gift economy persist along with the unstable cash economy. Some people do better than others; more entrepreneurship, better education, better access to or exploitation of resources, better luck, and someone can move from an illegal to a legal neighborhood, job, spouse, etc.

Gendered Labor Migration

The economic differences among regions in Brazil tends to attract men to the larger Southern cities where they can find jobs in heavy manufacturing and construction, whereas in Caruaru and other Northeastern cities, women dominate the occupations of textile and handcraft production, domestic service, and retail. Instead of having complementary responsibilities in agricultural production, men and women earn separately, and young people do not have to rely on their parents for inheritance but can strike out on their own after wages. Although women also migrate South, men migrate in disproportionate numbers, and are more likely than women to migrate on their own, rather than with family members or as part of a couple. This migration leads to a gender imbalance in the Northeast, which exacerbates existing competition among women for men and tensions over male infidelity.

Reproductive Choice

Cities also offer access to modern medical care and with it contraceptives, sterilization, and abortion (available although illegal) allowing women to bear fewer children. Although infant mortality due to malnutrition and poor sanitation rises in urban areas compared to rural ones, a nation-wide campaign to promote oral rehydration and the use of boiled or filtered water has markedly reduced infant mortality in Brazil in the last twenty years. Unlike their grandmothers whose fifteen to twenty pregnancies produced perhaps eight to ten children who lived to adulthood, young women today can and often do bear two children and then get sterilized. Indeed, a nationwide debate in Brazil centers on the morality of allowing women in their late teens and early twenties to undergo tubal ligations, having already borne two children, and a whole generation of urban women is facing their prime reproductive years having already finished reproducing. The impact of this new reproductive pattern on their sexual relationships remains to be seen.

Urban Social Networks

In the dense, family based social networks of rural villages, people can rely on ascribed characteristics like gender, parental status, birth order, etc. to help them find a place within the local society. Urban social relationships are both more loosely constructed and more subject to individual creativity. People make their own place to a greater extent in the city, while still finding ascribed characteristics blocking their place-making. Forming sexual liaisons has an enormous impact on women's ability to create a social network for themselves. Social networks are keys to survival: through them both women and men find work, housing, protection from aggression by outsiders, and both general economic support and help in an emergency.

Whereas men can create bonds with other men through work and recreational activities, women's social relationships with other women often depend as much on connection through a man as work bonds, neighborliness, or cousinship. Liaison with a particular man can create a link between a woman and the man's female relatives, especially if she bears a child. Having sexual relationships with more than one man, especially sequentially, and especially if she bears children to more than one man, can enable a woman without other resources to build a network around herself. These social bonds, both sexual and non-, tend to be much shakier and less permanent in the city than in the countryside.

Forms of Household

The working class people I interviewed in Caruaru utilized a variety of living arrangements. A very few lived as legal man and wife with their own children supported by the husband's labor. Although often presented to me as the norm, this arrangement encompassed a minority of households. More commonly, couples cohabited without the blessings of either church or state for varying amounts of time, women contributed as much income as, if not more than, their male companions to household maintenance, or women supported children alone, with men either absent or visiting.

Visiting men fell into one of several possible patterns. Many men traveled to the capital or to Southern Brazil in search of labor, leaving a wife or primary girlfriend and children behind, but sending remittances during long absences. Many such men maintained secondary households in their place of labor which they tried to keep secret from their Northeastern family. Other men lived traveling, either as truck drivers or as self employed entrepreneurs in the local market circuit; such men might have two or more households along the way, sometimes secret from one another, often competing with one another for his attention and resources.

A few men maintained two or more households within the same community or in neighboring communities. I encountered several households in Caruaru in which an upper class man maintained one or more households with children in addition to his legitimate wife and heirs. In other cases, the man did not have a much higher social class than his various baby-mothers; rather, they either arranged their status in terms of who had been with him longer, or openly competed with each other for his resources. In addition, many men with one primary conjugal household also engaged in occasional or frequent short term flings or had relationships with prostitutes without becoming so entangled with “outside” women as to end up paying them money over the long term.

Response to Infidelity

The ways Caruaruenses respond to male or to female infidelity reflect both a hierarchy of personal value based on both male and female sexuality, and also recent changes in couple formation and concepts about the emotional content of conjugal. In addition to the broad hierarchy of social class, within classes men and women rank one another as well. Some of this ranking relies on clues to material status. Markers such as access to piped water, access to electricity, the nature of construction materials for houses, the quality of furnishings, the detail of decoration, etc. also indicate microlevels of social hierarchy, especially for women.

In addition to these material markers, such achievements as basic literacy and educational level count highly in status, as do markers of taste such as cleanliness, quality and condition of clothing, etc. Number of children and sexual behavior also constitute an important marker of status, and here, criteria for men and for women, at least on the surface, reflect opposite values. That is, men gain status to the extent that their associates believe they engage freely in sexual relations and have children with many women, whereas women lose status to the extent that

people believe they engage in sexual relations outside of specific cultural boundaries, and the extent to which they bear more than two children.

Both the enforced promiscuity of men, and social pressure toward chastity of women respond to the same hierarchy of statuses among men. When a man has sex with a woman, he is said to possess (*possuir*), eat (*comer*), or know (*saber*) her, among other, ruder terms. She becomes his to protect against sexual depredation by other men. Her chastity demonstrates his ability to control his own women; his promiscuity, his ability to defeat other men and take their women. Together male promiscuity and female chastity support men's status vis a vis one another.

This hierarchy among males has a strong impact in how people discuss women's social status. Although Caruaruense women maintained a traditional discourse on the shortcomings of men, more common in everyday speech were condemnations of women on the basis of reputed sexual behavior. Both women and men tended to refer to women with words that classified them into types defined by public opinions about their sexual relationships with men. Although on the surface this vocabulary of girlfriend types seemed rigid, in practice it had enough flexibility to respond to emergent circumstances. The commonality of male sexual infidelity breeds its own vocabulary for types of relationship, including many terms of varying vulgarity. Formally, a married man who supports a woman with whom he is engaged in an extramarital sexual relationship has a *concubina*: in common speech, she may call herself his *mulher*. His wife or primary girlfriend has a wider range of terms for her, of which the least vulgar is *a outra* (the other woman) in contrast to her own status of *a legítima* (the legitimate wife).

This girlfriend typology is not a system about tender sentiments uniting lovers, nor about women owning their own sexuality; rather, it responds to a world in which men's control over

women serves as an important constituent of men's relative statuses. That this system includes dominance of feminized men by hyper-masculine men does not obviate its heteronormativity, but rather emphasizes the importance of dominance of others for definition as masculine.

Class and Sexual Morality

So far, I have been describing a set of customary ideas that have historically underlain hierarchies of status among men and between men and women. Working class status plays into these ideas in complex ways. For example, although working class men may play out games of status with one another, they have a permanently lower status than wealthier men, against whose predation of women they have few defenses.

Working class women, on the other hand, face an even more complex set of contradictions when it comes to status based on sexual fidelity. On the one hand, the subordination of their men to more powerful men makes them, as a group, unable to guarantee their own chastity, since their men cannot protect them from upper class sexual predation. Also, strict female chastity has a greater social import in the upper classes, where legitimacy of offspring affects issues of inheritance of property. So, on the one hand, lower class women do not necessarily need to act as ostentatiously chaste as upper class women – they can smoke, or drink, or curse, or engage in a variety of sexual adventures without affecting their children's inheritance – since there is no property to inherit. Individual lower class women may also perceive an advantage in making a liaison with an upper class man, who might give her a house, monetary support, or even recognize one or more of his children with her, giving them economic and social opportunities an impoverished father could not.

On the other hand, vulgar behavior and sexual incontinence are markers of lower class status, so women with aspirations toward middle class respectability may feel even more

strongly than their wealthier sisters that they need to behave with virtuous decorum. All of this is complicated by the very complex politics of color in Brazil, especially in the Northeast, where the majority of the population has a mixture of European and African ancestry. Despite its official ideology of non-racism, color bias remains strong in Brazil. A general tendency to equate African ancestry with stereotypes of hot-bloodedness, both positive (friendly, passionate, rhythmic, musical) and negative (promiscuous, volatile) dominates racial attitudes. As the proverb has it, money whitens – which means that poor people tend to be classified as “blacker” in color than wealthier people. The lower the economic class, the more likely a person is to be seen as black by his or her neighbors, and the blacker the person’s classification, the more likely he or she is to be associated with sexual promiscuity, in a racist hierarchy that coincides with the socio-economic hierarchy of male and female sexual statuses. Attributed color, microlevel of social class, and a woman’s estimation of the possibility of social mobility for herself and her children all affect the choices lower class women make in their sexual behavior.

Lower class women thus face contradictory pressures: having relationships with several men can help them build female social networks, and can insure that in a world where men are scarce there is always someone to turn to for support. For men, having several on-going relationships allows them to avoid girlfriends who are pregnant, menstruating, or angry with them, and to play one woman against another for advantage. On the other hand, these relationships can be both emotionally and monetarily expensive for men; for women having more than one baby-father, or more than one cohabiting boyfriend can lead to condemnation as vulgar, impeding attempts to rise in social class. How important these contradictory pressures are in women’s sexual choices depends partly on their individual personalities, but also on the presence or absence of other complicating factors such as color, family status, etc. The looser

social networks of cities provide greater opportunities for individual expression at the same time that they can lead to increasing isolation, especially for women, and to the abandonment of family by men, leaving women to both support and raise the children while bearing the major burden of the disapproval of social mores. The free individual choice promised by modernization projects finds itself constrained by the necessity to consider economic impacts both when choosing to participate or choosing to abstain from a sexual relationship, especially for women.