

Cross-Cultural Aspects of Kissing

by Marvin K. Opler

It is commonly assumed that kissing is a standard part of serious courtship among all humans and that it also accompanies genital sexuality. Freud's first stage of psychosexual development, the oral phase, was always considered a basic or fundamental accompaniment of human sexual interests because the mouth and lips are typified by Freud as the earliest used zone of gratification. As an anthropologist trained in psychoanalysis, the author has always been suspicious of a wholesale application of Freudian zonal therapy simply because cultures modify our human notions of erogenous zones.¹

No doubt, we are led astray in the assumption that kissing is a universal courtship and lovemaking practice because it is a western European emphasis which was rather widely advertised in the final clinch of the Hollywood movie. But, until recently, when nudity and a franker exposure of sexuality began to be allowed in Hollywood (probably to compete with Swedish, French, Czech, Polish and Italian films), this mass medium along with the theater and TV kept green the illusion that kissing was the one way humans expressed sexual attachments.

There is further basis for the erroneous assumption that kissing is a universal form of behavior. For one thing, it is a common mannerism of courtship and foreplay among birds and many other mammals. Furthermore, the mouth and the lips are heavily endowed with sensitive nerve endings. Indeed, as the Kinsey researchers put it, 'The lips, the tongue, and the whole interior of the mouth constitute or could constitute for most individuals an erogenous area of nearly as great significance as the genitalia'.²

Yet their exhaustive studies³ showed that kissing was not a universal expression of intimacy even in our own culture, being less common among the less educated segments of the population. At lower levels there are taboos on oral contacts and a lower class male may have had intercourse with very many girls and possibly kissed only a few. While the rationalization of uncleanness is often used, there may be no inhibition about drinking from a common cup or using another's eating utensils. On the other hand, a college male may have kissed dozens of girls and had intercourse with none. However, to at least some extent kissing does enter into the life histories of almost all individuals in our culture.

Cross-cultural distributions of kissing behavior

In general, the custom and practice of kissing is primarily centered in two major areas of the world, namely the Indo-European and American regions. Anthropologists have often pointed out that even such high civilizations as those of China and Japan in classical times did not practice kissing as a gesture in the lover's art. In Japan, until recently when this culture became profoundly influenced by the west, the Japanese male regarded the nape of his lady's neck as a more provocative stimulus than the fullness of her lips. More recently, when Japanese coastal cities became world ports, a thriving trade in blatant forms of pornography, including drawings, suggestive phallic objects, and crude depictions of coitus flooded the market. The embraces had little to do with mouth-to-mouth contact. While this aversion to mouth contacts is now disappearing due to increased familiarity with the west, the Japanese are still known for their tendency to consider mouth contact as being 'bad form'.

A wide variety of customs, such as the sucking in of breath politely when one is speaking, and also the use of gauze masks over the mouth when one has a cold, elaborate the same cultural theme. It will be remembered in this connection that Japanese marriages were arranged by an intermediary, or marriage-broker, and that one of the major hazards in spoiling a marital prospect was the taint of tuberculosis either in the prospective partner or in his family line. This particular danger, as serious barrier as insanity or venereal disease, was connected with prophylactic measures involving the mouth and upper respiratory tract.

In America, also, lip activities played a much more minor part in lovemaking among Indians and Eskimos than they did for the European Americans. The Eskimo, for example, are famous in regard to their custom of pressing or rubbing noses together.⁴ This is courtship behavior and also may occur during sexual contacts. Kissing is not referred to except among very acculturated groups.

Going south on the North American continent, John Honigmann has described Kaska Indian behavior in northern British Columbia and the southern Yukon.⁵ As with many Indian groups, a public display of affection is discouraged. There may be conventional signs proposing sexual contact (or even teasing without touching) and these are followed by rough and tumble grabbing leading to genital sexuality. Or winking and hand pressing may be the preliminaries which lead to pinching the face and thighs as manifestations of direct sexual interest. Honigmann adds that during coitus in the common ventro-ventral position some kissing may occur. This may also happen in the final embraces but the kiss is not used as a mode of approach, and this is also evident during dances when hand-pressing is used as the erotic overture. Of course such behavior changes among youth attending boarding school and those exposed to the Hollywood movie.

Farther south, in California, the folkways of the Pomo Indians were described in the 1920's by E.M. Loeb who noted that generally kissing as a habit was foreign to most primitive peoples.⁶ Among the Pomo, ordinarily a man did not kiss, his partner in any courting procedure although during actual sexual intercourse this sometimes did occur. The eastern Pomo limited their reference in the word for kissing only to the notion of a mother with her child. This act between married adults referred to the wife taking the initiative with her husband and required an additional phrase to indicate that the kiss was given in that direction.

The Crow Indians of southeastern Montana were described by R.H. Lowie about the same time.⁷ The Crow had certain minor dances during which two couples went into the center of the group and danced facing each other, followed by kissing in public. Lowie regarded this as being a courtship procedure which was publicly known and hence openly symbolized in this fashion.

To obtain some perspective on the question of why most American Indian tribes did not structure any behavior relating to kissing, either formally or more spontaneously, one could refer to A.R. Holmberg's careful study of the Siriono Indians of eastern Bolivia.⁸ A trained anthropologist, Holmberg lived with these nomadic hunting and gathering Indians and closely observed all aspects of their way of life. Because of the exigencies of their food quest he reported in summary that their strongest anxieties and appetites centered in food problems and effective attitudes toward food. Holmberg noted that the Siriono data pointed toward the overwhelming importance of strong anticipatory responses toward food. Consequently, anxiety centered in the hunger drive and fear of actual food deprivation. Noting that a hunter might have to travel as many as 20 miles a day through dangerous jungles, often suffering intensely from heat or rain, the fatigue and pain associated with hunting, fishing and food gathering were associated with the basic biologic needs of hunger and thirst. While much was made of food, romantic love, in the conception of these naked Indians, was an entirely foreign concept. Sex, like hunger, became a drive to be satisfied. There was little inhibition through attitudes of modesty or decorum. Holmberg tells how the term for finding something enjoyable would be applied indiscriminately to food or a necklace or a female partner. Virginity was not valued and a man was permitted to have intercourse not only with his own wife or wives but with their real and classificatory sisters, the same applying to a woman and the classificatory or real brothers of her own husband or even potential ones. An interesting aspect of this courtship behavior in which kissing, as a custom, is not in the least structured was the use of food as a lure for obtaining extramarital sex partners or as a means of seducing another potential wife. The Siriono also have curious fears about eating so that frequently this is done in solitude and at odd hours during the night in order to obtain more nourishment and to avoid the crowds of nonfamily members which always gather to beg for morsels.

Turning from hunting and gathering tribes of the Americas, where the structured form of kissing behavior is certainly rather deficient, we can next consider a South Pacific people whose erotic approaches have been fully described in an entire volume by the great British anthropologist B. Malinowski. In his book, *The Sexual Life of Savages*, Malinowski states that kissing is not widely practiced outside the Indo-European horizon.⁹ The people he describes are the Trobriand Islanders of northwestern Melanesia. This is a gardening culture of people who live in villages and who are therefore more sedentary in their habits than are American hunting tribes. As one might guess, lip and mouth activities are directly involved in sexual approaches. This suggests a principle in cultural evolution, although there may be other elaborations of erotic approach and enticement in other agricultural societies, such as in the Orient.

If one defines kissing more exactly as prolonged pressing of mouth against mouth as in the sexual preliminaries of Europe and the United States, the Trobriand kiss is perhaps more perfunctory and perhaps more directly a genital accompaniment. Malinowski is clear that kissing is never an independ-

ent form of petting nor a necessary stage in lovemaking as is widely presumed in western culture. The real point, as he observed it, was that Trobriand Islanders regarded this as a rather insipid and silly form of physical amusement. The Trobrianders do not use the kiss as a regular form of greeting nor as an independent expression of affection. With the Eskimo of the far north, the Trobrianders agree that the rubbing of noses is a possible form of greeting, especially between very close relatives. Thus, parents and children or husbands and wives would signalize reunion by nose-rubbing after long separations. It can be added that the Trobrianders are also like many primitive peoples who, when petting small children, will frequently touch them with cheeks or lips, more as a tactile gesture than as a kiss.

Thus kissing in the form found in the west does not occur in any valid sense among Trobriand natives. It may simply occur almost as an accident in the fuller setting of caressing a child or as a random accompaniment in more direct forms of sexual intercourse. In the latter sense the Islanders bit each other's lips, or may suck tongues, or typically scratch or even bite eyelashes in passionate embraces. Malinowski remarks upon the Trobriand Islanders' mimicking and disdain of European practices which they feel are pallid and formalized – or certainly less emotionally charged – by contrast with their own expressions of sexual ardor.

It may be added that the Trobriand natives and the Siriono have leisurely preliminary stages of mutual grooming, including catching each other's lice and eating them as well as touching and feeling bodily surfaces. It was Malinowski's opinion that in the rough phases of passion, the Trobriand woman was far more active than her European counterpart. There are also terms for the scratches which are discussed as hallmarks of success in the amorous life. As to the eyelash biting which is mentioned at the points where westerners might refer to kissing, Malinowski mentions that he did not see a single youth or postpubescent girl in the Trobriands who had eyelashes of natural length.

The best data on African tribes are strictly comparable to Malinowski's elaborate materials on the Trobriand Islanders. One of the best studies of an African people is .A.Junod's.¹⁰ In the first volume on social life, Junod included very complete materials on sexual customs. These people, the Bathonga, practice as vigorous a sexual life as the Trobrianders. At the same time, they consider such European customs as kissing and even the adult handshake as both being unhygienic and disgusting. Like the Trobriander, the Bathonga will refer with distaste to the possibility of ingesting another person's saliva. The hand is similarly thought of as often being dirty. However, such views must not be assumed to be constant or the same throughout Africa. For example, the Masai, while agreeing with the Bathonga that handshaking was both unhygienic and silly, nevertheless had a custom whereby older men might spit in the face of a promising young man to signify that they thought well of him and that he was a promising member of his age-grade group.

Another African tribe which has been extensively studied by Schapera is the Kgatla of Bechuanaland.¹¹ They attach much importance to sexual vigor, but at the same time do not emphasize kissing very much. Schapera mentions in passing when discussing sexual technique that sometimes a boy kisses his girl during sexual preliminaries, but that many girls will not allow this, for they regard kissing as 'an awful thing'.

Turning next to the Australian continent, the fullest account to date is the work by R.M. and C.H.Berndt.¹² While their account is detailed and graphic, one searches throughout for any emphasis on kissing. It would seem that tactile approaches are made with the hands rather than the lips, and that direct genital sexual behavior after such preliminaries, as with the Bathonga or the Trobrianders, is the standard practice.

Implications of cross-cultural data

Data from the circumpolar Eskimo, the Indian tribes of the American continents, from Australia and the South Pacific, China and Japan, and from certain classical studies of African tribes document that the custom of kissing both as perfunctory greeting and as passionate overture has its clearest distribution only in the Indo-European tradition and its modern American offshoot. Of course, kissing as a female form of greeting in western Europe and the United States must be distinguished from the male greeting in which two men embrace each other without kissing as is practiced in such countries as France and Russia. Apparently the friendly male embrace, without sexual connotation, is a Mediterranean folkway which has spread into Slavic-speaking countries affected by French and possibly even Grecian influence. The greater interest of the western European and American female in additional mouth contact, both in greetings and in intersexual behavior may stem from similar sources in the Indo-European tradition.

Victorian attitudes toward sexuality were such that direct sexual contact came to be viewed as limited to marital behavior or exploits with prostitutes, both regarded as indecent in various degrees. The consequent romantic displacement to kissing as an important erogenous activity may well have been influential in drawing the attention of Freud to this zone as an infantile and later an adult center of libidinal gratification, despite its general unimportance in the non-European cultures of the world. Freud's more perceptive analysis of the European led to the notion that infantile attempts at mastery might center in the mouth, in sucking, and in even more diffuse gratifications involving eating. No quarrel is made with Freud's notion of oral control or mastery, nor is there challenge to his stress upon the possibility of oral fixations in cases where gratification and a sense of control were somehow never fully achieved.

Yet evolution of individual behavior must always merge with an evolution of social behavior, which includes a more total sense of one's identification in relation with other people. The western European form of orality may be quite different from that of people like the Siriono whose lifelong anxieties apparently center more in food-getting than in sex and who, as adults, may obviously be more plagued by the pangs of hunger than the need for release of sexual tensions, which are very simply and directly gratified. The European model, both of development and socialization, simply does not apply to the Siriono for whom the use of mouth for food ingestion is obviously more important than its use for erogenous purposes. While Freud did much to indicate how genital sexuality might be diffused to other erogenous but non-reproductive zones, he was not equipped anthropologically with sufficient cross-cultural information to realize that the conditions of cultural existence might profoundly change human notions of psychosexual behavior.

An interesting sidelight may also be seen in L.Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata* which likewise represents the attempts of another European genius to grapple with some 'universal solutions' regarding sex. Tolstoy, like Freud, noted that the disparity between Victorian inhibitions and biological sexual tensions constituted a distressing factor in the Westerner's total adjustment. He consequently argued for systematic release of such tensions, especially for young people. Yet the anthropologist, viewing these matters from a broader and more evolutionary perspective of cultures around the world can add that the human organization in societies of sexual behavior has often been more responsive of real needs and interests than the pallid and romantic post-Victorian models would illustrate. Meanwhile, the European model has come to include long periods of education and, until recently, deferred gratification. Young people today seem to be less satisfied with the movie and theatrical illustrations of romantic love and have moved beyond the stage of kissing or even heavy petting. Some have even suggested that inner explorations with dangerous drugs are another means of deferring or beclouding the sexual gratification interest. It would seem that those who do not stop at that point among our youth, but instead proceed to more direct sexual behavior have come full circle back to the generally franker and more realistic values of so-called primitive peoples. The kiss, both as a major symbolization of sexual interest and as a possible carrier of mononucleosis may, if matters continue on their present course, become a mere sexual accompaniment or it may – if the Siriono, the Trobriand Islanders and the Bathonga are any measure – become relatively incidental.

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