

**PUBLIC SEX
IN A LATIN SOCIETY**

Jacobo Schifter, 1999

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PROLOGUE

This book seeks to answer several key questions. What could have happened to make a traditional gay Latin culture drastically change the rules of the game and take over public places to exhibit what was once forbidden? What factor or factors have triggered this change? Do these public places constitute a danger for the spread of HIV? How was Costa Rica's gay community able to reduce HIV infection and the numbers of gay men with AIDS? Is it possible for homosexuals to significantly change their desires and sexual practices? What are the typical public sex places in a Latin American setting, how do they work and how do they evolve? Who are the main actors, what are their motivations and their problems? How do the different groups that participate interact and influence each other and what are the main communication problems? Why are gay men murdered and how could these killings be prevented? Is public sex in a Latin country always "progressive"?

To answer these questions, the Research Department of ILPES began a qualitative and quantitative investigation in 1989 which has taken almost a decade. Our main mission, as always, was to investigate patterns of gay behavior in order to take effective prevention measures against HIV infection. It has never been our interest to denounce these activities nor to persecute those who practice them. On the contrary, we believe that public sex provides a number of opportunities that enable a sector of the population to "work through" certain problems of sexual communication and even to learn about safe sex. Therefore, we have replaced the names of people and places with fictitious names and have changed the locations and some of their characteristics to protect the people who have helped us so much in this investigation. We are also aware of the great dangers that lie in wait for participants and have thus paid considerable attention to these. In recent years, many gay men have been murdered by clients who frequent public sex places and we believe that our study can offer some basic safety rules.

One of ILPES' objectives is the empowerment of sexual minorities. However, we feel that these groups have not had much of a voice, and still less have been the subject of social research in Latin America. While traditional studies usually quote their interviewees, the latter tend to remain under the dictates of the author who provides us with the overall and final interpretations. In our case, we have tried to give a greater participation to our respondents, respecting their language and their way of seeing things, as well as giving them a voice in many of our analyses. We have found, for example, that criminals can analyze their own crimes better than we can, and also that active participants in public places can be excellent ethnographers. However, this way of "democratizing" a research project also has its problems. There were times when we would have wished that much of the data gathered were more "politically correct" and that the language used by these minorities were less coarse and rude to sensitive ears. We would also have preferred a less homophobic brand of humor from our interviewees, including the gays themselves. But we believe it is better to portray them as they really are, without the terrible censorship of their language which is so characteristic of Latin American social science.

This study was carried out by a team of professionals who are in the vanguard of research on sexual minorities. Among them are Rodrigo Vargas, a statistician and key organizer of this study; Dino Starcevic, a journalist; Luis Villalta, coordinator of the "Listen to your Voice" project for

former prison inmates, who carried out the research with the police officers; Antonio Bustamante, director del “El Salon” program for juvenile delinquents in street gangs; Abelardo Araya, coordinator of the “Movimiento 5 de Abril” program for gays and lesbians who assisted in the ethnographic observation of public places; Lidia Montero, director of the ILPES publishing company, and Hector Elizondo, coordinator of the “2828” program for young street gays, who helped me contact many of the sex workers. As always, Julian Gonzalez was the main editor of our work and David Gorn designed the cover.

To all of them, my most sincere appreciation for their great work.

While democracy is our goal, it is important to have a single victim who can be sued for what is written in this book. So, despite the enormous debt I owe to all who participated in this study, the responsibility is mine alone.

Jacobo Schifter Sikora

INTRODUCTION

THE PORNOGRAPHY REVOLUTION

According to Michel Foucault, history has no predetermined course, nor is there any evidence to suggest that knowledge and experience are cumulative, or that changes take place as a result of scientific progress.¹ Instead, change is provoked by accidents and interruptions. In his analysis of the origins of the clinic, this philosopher and historian shows us how the plague and the concentration of corpses, rather than scientific discoveries, led doctors to begin carrying out autopsies. This fortuitous event was responsible for the shift from symptomatic medicine, in which disease was diagnosed on the basis of sight and hearing, towards modern medicine based on touching and internal examination.²

Along with Foucault, we believe that accidents and fortuitous events generate small revolutions in thinking. It is quite probable that if homosexual culture in Costa Rica -- and possibly in Latin America in general -- had not been confronted with an historic trauma, it might have remained hidden in the closet.

Costa Rica is a small country in Central America and one of the few nations in the world with an official religion. As in Iran, there is no separation between religion and the state. Thus, the public education system includes religious instruction for all students. All Costa Ricans contribute through their taxes to the salaries of senior clergymen. The Church is represented at all official government functions and there is no aspect of national life that is not influenced by it. On Christian feast days, the entire nation is paralyzed to make way for celebrations. Until a few years ago, people would even throw stones at vehicles that drove around during the holy days of Easter Week, and government buildings are still filled with religious images. Prayers are still said in public and private institutions. The majority of the country's villages are named after some saint and God is even invoked in the televised weather forecasts. "Tomorrow, God willing, it will rain", says the weather reporter.

¹ Michel Foucault, **Histoire de la Sexualité. La Volonté de Savoir**, Vol. 1, Paris: Gallimard, 1976.

² Michel Foucault, **The Birth of the Clinic**, Mexico: Siglo XXI, 1991.

When a new government takes office, its first official act is to visit the Virgin of Los Angeles, the “national patron”. Once a year, when the Virgin is flown by helicopter from her permanent home in Cartago to the capital, San Jose, the archbishops ask the faithful to take out small mirrors (to reflect the sunlight) to greet her as she passes over the rooftops of their homes. An article published by “La Nación”³, Costa Rica’s leading daily, reports that “this week-end, the Virgin will be in Talamanca”, as if she were a living person. Anyone who is not familiar with the customs of the Costa Rican people might conclude that the small stone statue had gone on vacation.

The Church has the power of veto in many public and private decisions. When a group of lesbians tried to organize a conference in the country in 1987, the Church protested to the government for having given permission to the organizers and stirred public opinion up against the event.. In response, the then Minister of Security, who later became the President of Congress, declared that he would not allow the foreign participants to enter the country. The Minister boasted that the lesbians would easily be recognized at the international airport. People made jokes about him, saying that this brilliant politician had invented a “lesbometer” to spot them.⁴

To date, the Costa Rican government has been unable to offer sex education in the nation’s high schools. The Catholic Church rejected the instruction manuals that were prepared for this purpose, arguing that the texts contained “moral irregularities”. The Church demanded changes to embrace its own vision of sexuality, which is opposed to pre-marital sex, non-reproductive sexual practices, abortions, most family planning methods, respect for sexual diversity and condom use. The Church has also asked that the instruction manuals be imparted, among others, by those who are the least expert in the subject: priests.

It is hardly surprising that religious censorship promotes ignorance. For example, approximately 40% of young people are not sure or don’t know whether a girl’s first menstruation signals the start of her fertile period, and only 30% know when a woman is most likely to get pregnant. In addition, there are many myths: approximately 55% of young people of both sexes believe that masturbation is harmful and a slightly lower percentage believe there are vaccines to prevent sexually transmitted diseases.⁵

Costa Ricans traditionally conduct their sex lives by compartmentalizing them. In other words, they separate in their heads theory from practice. The Church’s sexual discourse is not questioned, but, in heterosexual relations, people do otherwise. This pattern is similar to what the “criollos”

³ **La Nación**, Viva supplement, 18 April 1998, p.1

⁴ Jacobo Schifter, **La formación de una contracultura. Homosexualismo y sida en Costa Rica. (The development of a counter-culture. Homosexuality and AIDS in Costa Rica)**, San Jose, Guayacán, 1989.

⁵ Jacobo Schifter and Johnny Madrigal, **Las gavetas sexuales del costarricense y el riesgo de infección con el VIH (The sexual drawers of the Costa Rican and the risk of HIV infection)**, San Jose, Imediex, 1996, p.5.

(Spaniards born in the New World) did during the colonial era with respect to the laws of the Mother Country: “I obey, but I don’t comply”, in other words, I don’t question authority, but I do what I like.

In the New World, slavery, the subordination of the indigenous people and the need for cheap labor made it impossible to uphold Christian rules that allowed sex *only* within marriage. Costa Rica’s poverty during the colonial period and its remoteness from the seat of political power, which for centuries was based in Guatemala, made for a poorer Catholic Church with fewer resources to impose its vision of sexuality.⁶

The Catholic Church preached chastity before marriage and prohibited adultery and divorce. However, it also had to coexist with a population exposed to undermining forces. The shortage of workers during the colonial period and the country’s incorporation into international markets through coffee exports in the nineteenth century, created a great demand for labor and for migrant populations, which in turn encouraged acceptance of children born out of wedlock.

Faced with a different economic and political reality, people opted to disregard many of the religious principles. Catholic writers admit that in spiritual matters Costa Ricans were more concerned with form than with content. The Catholic Church had to adapt itself to the reality that “conversion was never total”. With respect to the Hispanic population, Blanco notes that the Christian faith was assimilated more by form than by intellect.⁷

To profess the Catholic faith and not obey its moral dictates has been characteristic of the Costa Rican people and of Latins in general: 42% of all births take place outside of marriage; men have an average of 10 more sexual partners than women; 18% of babies are born to mothers under the age of 20; 45% of pregnancies are unwanted⁸; the annual divorce rate is 20%; 35% of all women endure physical or psychological aggression from their partners; 27% of university students have been victims of sexual abuse as children⁹ and every year nearly 5,000 abortions are induced.¹⁰

⁶ Victor Hugo Acuña, “Historia económica del tabaco en Costa Rica” (“Economic history of tobacco in Costa Rica”), **Anuario de Estudios Centroamericanos, No.4**, 1978.

⁷ Ricardo Blanco, **Historia eclesiástica de Costa Rica. Del descubrimiento a la erección de la diócesis (1502-1850)** (Ecclesiastical history of Costa Rica. From the discovery to the establishment of the diocese (1502-1850), San Jose: Editorial Costa Rica, 1994.

⁸ Jacobo Schifter and Johnny Madrigal, **Las gavetas sexuales del costarricense y el riesgo de infección con el VIH**, San Jose: Imediex, 1996, p.5.

⁹ Jeannette Cover, **Abuso sexual infantil en poblaciones universitarias (Childhood sexual abuse in university populations)**. Thesis for post-graduate degree in psychology. University of Costa Rica. 1995.

¹⁰ Isabel Brenes, **Actitudes y prácticas del aborto inducido en Costa Rica (Attitudes**

and practice of induced abortion in Costa Rica). Thesis for masters degree in statistics.
University of Costa Rica, 1994.

In Costa Rica, the people with scant education and those from the lower social and economic groups are the ones who, on average, have the highest birth rates. Whereas the fertility rate among the middle classes is 3.01, among the lower classes it is 4.17, or 30% higher.¹¹ It is precisely this sector of the population who is most religious and is most affected by the Church's anti family planning policies.¹² For the middle and upper classes of society, when family planning measures fail, there is always the possibility of having an abortion in Miami.

However, for the Catholic Church to go against the infidelity of the majority of the population is like swimming against the tide. Its response has been to close its eyes to the "moral failings" of the Costa Ricans and of its own priests, some of whom have recognized their own children publicly.

If there is a double standard in heterosexual relations, it is not hard to imagine what happens with homosexuality.

In this sphere, people also say one thing and do another, though in a very different context. During the 1950s, for example, the police would raid gay bars and shave the heads of clients so that they would be recognized in the street. These practices continued without formal resistance until 1987.

Up until the mid-eighties, the attitude of Costa Rican gays was no different from that of heterosexuals: the dominant Catholic discourse on sexuality was not questioned, nor was it followed to the letter. Costa Rican gays, along with their fellow homosexuals in the rest of Latin America, learned to live a double life in which hiding one's homosexuality was as important as practicing it. While there was never an explicit agreement between the state, the Church and homosexuals, certain rules of coexistence or minimum tolerance levels were established:

1. It was forbidden to question the prevailing religious discourse and the lack of respect for minority rights, as well as the normality and morality of heterosexuality.
2. Gay sex was to remain totally hidden from the public. The issue of homosexuality was banned in the press, in sexual education and in artistic productions.
3. A small number of gay bars was allowed to operate and only to prevent homosexuals from meeting in the streets, but there would be no official recognition of their activities. Much less would there be acceptance of public gay venues such as restaurants, leisure centers, hotels and other venues. The few bars that were tolerated had to pay bribes in order to remain open.

¹¹ Victor Gomez, **Encuesta Nacional de Salud Reproductiva. Fecundidad y formación de la familia (National Reproductive Health Survey. Fertility and family education)**. San Jose: Department of Preventive Medicine, Reproductive Health Program, CCSS, 1994.

¹² Ibid

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