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## A NOTE ON THE NORTHERN GÊ TRIBES OF BRAZIL

By ROBERT H. LOWIE

THE Gê stock is commonly conceived to comprise nomadic hunters ignorant of weaving, pottery, hammocks, and canoes, and in general approximating the Fuegian level. This view was appreciably modified by Ploetz and Métraux's joint survey of the sources on the Southern and Eastern Gê.<sup>1</sup> The Gê appeared as a questionable linguistic family, and even the two branches discussed proved to be definitely not a cultural unit. Specifically, pottery-making farmers, like the Kamakan, could be separated from such nomadic hunters as the Botocudo and Aweikoma (= "Botocudo of Santa Catharina").

The field researches of Snr. Curt Nimuendajú, eked out by his critical sifting of the earlier sources, further clarify the picture with reference to the Northern and Central Gê. The following summary statements rest on his recent publications<sup>2</sup> and the ample manuscripts and reports embodying the results of his inquiries (1935-1938) on behalf of the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of California.

The tribes specially studied were the Ramkókamekra (Canella), Apinayé and Šerénte. Of these the first two are classed as the Eastern and Western Timbira, respectively, but the Apinayé also show considerable affinity with the Kayapó. The Šerénte at one time formed a single group with the Šavánte, the schism being purely political; both are the surviving representatives of the Akwe division of the Central Gê. The Timbira, the Northern Kayapó, the Southern Kayapó (a distinct group), and the Suyá may be set off as Northern and Western Gê, from the Central Gê, who comprise the Akwé and the Akroá. In this instance the geographical coincides with the linguistic grouping.

The traditional antithesis of "Gê (=Tapuya) versus Tupí-Guaraní" distorts the facts of East Brazilian ethnography. In reality the area was inhabited by a series of tribes representing isolated stocks, such as the Gamella of Maranhão, the Fulnio north of the lower San Francisco, and the Otshukayana of Rio Grande do Norte.

The present paper does not attempt to sketch the entire culture of the

<sup>1</sup> Herman Ploetz et A. Métraux, *La civilisation matérielle et la vie sociale et religieuse des indiens Źe du Bresil meridional et oriental* (Revista del Instituto de Etnologia de la Universidad Nacional de Tucuman, tomo 1, Tucuman, 1930), pp. 107-238.

<sup>2</sup> Curt Nimuendajú and Robert H. Lowie, *The Dual Organizations of the Ramkókamekra (Canella) of Northern Brazil* (American Anthropologist, vol. 39: 1937) pp. 565-582. C. Nimuendajú, *The Social Structure of the Ramkókamekra (Canella)*, (*ibid.*, vol. 40: pp. 51-74, 1938. *id.*, *The Gamella Indians* (Primitive Man, vol. 10, July-October, 1937), pp. 1-10.

Timbira and Šerénte, but merely to draw attention to certain points of comparative interest.

#### MATERIAL CULTURE

The forest-dwelling Tupí were undoubtedly more intensive farmers than the Timbira and Šerénte, whose characteristic habitat, the steppe, is unsuitable for ruder forms of tillage. However, through the presence of galeria forests agriculture becomes possible. Among the Apinayé Villa Real observed large manioc plantations in 1793, and in their list of indigenous crops the contemporary Timbira and Šerénte include bitter and sweet manioc, maize, sweet potatoes, yams (*Dioscorea*) and the kupá (*Cissus* sp.). The last-mentioned plant, of which an inedible wild variety is reported from the galeria forests of the Apinayé country, is a creeper unknown to both whites and the Tupí. Its starchy tendrils are baked in earth ovens, the characteristic Gê cooking technique, which was in all probability once applied to manioc also, as it still is occasionally. The basketry press (*tipit*) is a recent loan, not from the Tupí but the neo-Brazilians.

An outstanding difference between Gê and Tupí farming is the relative importance of sweet potatoes and yams, which constitute the daily bread of the Timbira and Šerénte.<sup>3</sup>

Tobacco, though known, is not cultivated. On the other hand, cotton (Timbira: *kačád*; Šerénte: *kbazí*) seems to have been raised before contact with civilization. Incidentally, the Kaingang lacked cotton; and, strangely enough, so did the Arawak visited by Nimuendajú on the upper Negro, where there was not even a native term for the plant.

In the old days fishing was subordinate to the chase and gathering. The communal drive with grass-firing, once typical, lingers in ceremonial mimicry. The burity and babassú palms were of special importance; stands of the latter were sometimes fought over by Timbira tribes and by Šerénte associations claiming property rights.

Dogs, still lacking among the Kaingang of São Paulo in 1912, are presumably post-Columbian among the Northern and Western Gê, as is explicitly stated by the Apinayé. In contrast to the indispensableness of dogs for the guanaco-hunting Ona, those of our three Gê tribes are economically quite negligible. For the history of the dog in America it is worth correlating this fact with the failure of early sources to mention it among the Yaghan.<sup>4</sup>

Baking in earth ovens has already been mentioned as the characteristic

<sup>3</sup> Nowadays manioc and rice are gaining the ascendancy among the Canella.

<sup>4</sup> Martin Gusinde, *Die Feuerland-Indianer* (Vol. 2, Mödling bei Wien, 1937), pp. 461-470, 534-537, 560-568.

cooking process. In preparing a certain fruit the natives have recourse to stone-boiling—never in their coiled baskets, but in leaf-lined pits. The Timbira and Šerénte lack pottery. Other tribes of the same stock use both pots and earth ovens, while the latter are unknown to the Arawak, Carib and Tupí. The Kaingang pottery is crude, lacking painted or plastic decoration; indeed Gê vessels generally differ sharply from Tupí ware. Though it is reasonable, therefore, to regard the ceramics of oven-using Gê peoples as a recent acquisition, there is no warrant for deriving this feature from the Tupí. As stated in the beginning of this paper, there are other Brazilian groups to be reckoned with. To mention two examples, the Šukurú of Pernambuco were familiar with pottery in 1934; and Carlos Estevão visited a tribe on the lower São Francisco which made excellent painted earthenware.

As to looms and cotton hammocks, the traditional view stands confirmed: they do not occur among the Timbira and Šerénte, who sleep on platform beds, covered with mats. On the whole, the received definition of the Gê as ignorant of boats also holds. But, probably through Karayá contacts, the Apinayé once adzed dugouts, which are likewise reported for one group of Northern Kayapó, while the Suyá had nothing but bark canoes.

The mode of settlement is typical,—the houses forming a circle among the two Timbira peoples, a horseshoe among the Šerénte. This arrangement is intimately connected with social and ceremonial organization. The native type of dwelling presents an enigma. The contemporary rectangular, gable-roofed house strongly suggests neo-Brazilian models, which elsewhere in South America have demonstrably supplanted ancient forms with great rapidity. Actually, simpler bee-hive and conical shelters still occur for temporary and ceremonial use, but they would have been inadequate during the rainy season, as well as for the accommodation of platform beds, and for larger ceremonial groups, such as gather at a Canella initiation. What the aboriginal equivalent of the modern rancho may have been thus remains a problem.

#### MYTH AND RELIGION

The collection of Šerénte folklore is too meager to permit intensive comparison. Our tribes do share, however, three important narratives: (a) the Sun and Moon cycle; (b) Star Wife,—the reverse of the well-known Plains Indian legend; and (c) the Origin of Fire. The versions of the last of these narratives are virtually identical, involving a nesting trip, the cruel desertion of a boy by an older companion, a jaguar rescuer, his inimical wife, and a burning tree trunk in the lair, from which fire is obtained.

The Timbira tribes, in addition, share the myth explaining the origin of the second initiation phase, which is created by two boy heroes when pre-

paring to kill a man-destroying giant falcon. Both mythologies have vultures carrying a diseased man to the sky; and they likewise share the Sharpened-Leg motif of the North American Plains.

Some of the narratives cited have known parallels in other areas of South America; thus, the Star Wife turns up in the Chaco, and Sharpened-Leg in Guiana. Evidently the extent of such outside homologues must be ascertained before any attempt at defining the proto-Gê mythology can be fruitful.

More positive results can be offered as to supernaturalism. The three groups all practice magic; concern themselves with the spirits of the dead; and attach religious, not merely mythological, significance to Sun and Moon, both of whom are supplicated, though Sun is clearly more important. Still more interesting, however, are the regional differences.

With the Canella, absorbed in sport and ceremonial for its own sake, subjective religion recedes. They pray to their major deities for good crops but receive no revelations from them. It is only the spirits of one's dead kin that appear in dreams or visions, aid their relative in distress, and after his death conduct his soul to its resting-place. A sick man goes into seclusion to invite a visit from one of these guardian spirits. Here disease is never explained by soul-loss, nor are medicine-men credited with the power of dispatching their souls to remote regions.

The Apinayé not only pray to the Sun to protect their plantations, but may see him in visions, which are highly prized. This solar cult requires neither astral intermediaries, as among the Šerénte, nor human go-betweens, for the medicine-men enjoy no special powers in this respect. The Moon reveals himself more rarely, but he also is supplicated in connection with farming. In contrast to Canella custom, the average Apinayé shuns intercourse with the dead. This is confined to a few individuals, whom their deceased kin introduce into spirit society so that they may acquire magical and especially medical knowledge. If the spirits fail to come to such a medicine-man in the hour of need, he is able to send his soul to them, a procedure that involves smoking and going into a trance. This performance, unknown to either Canella or Šerénte, has a foreign (possibly Tupí) flavor, especially since the Gê did not raise tobacco.

Apinayé pathology recognizes soul-loss as a cause of disease, especially in the case of little children, whose shadows are easily kidnapped or lost. Secondly, the shadow of some edible plant or animal may enter the consumer's body producing symptoms revealing the species. The leech diagnoses the case, sucks out the intruder, and applies a specific prepared from a plant intrinsically related to the cause as its antidote. Thus a plant with pods

arranged in horn-like fashion counteracts a deer shadow. A third cause is sorcery by means of evilly potent substances placed in the victim's path, but never by the use of his nail parings, hair, etc. An object may also be injected into the body and is then sucked out by the healer.

The Šerénte greatly reverence Sun and Moon; and their major festival, the Great Fast, is a prayer to the Sun to relieve them of a severe drought. However, they never have visions of these deities; these communicate with men only through astral emissaries, who also appear on their own volition, never in response to artificial means of inducing a theophany. The visitant instructs his protégé and gives him sacred articles of magical potency. Doctors extract illness by suction or by means of a magical wand. Soul loss is also reckoned a possible cause of illness; one Indian, twice threatened with death in this way, was in each case saved by the planet Venus, who restored his soul.

Certain negative traits are likewise noteworthy. Except for the entrance of spirits into Canella novices at the first stage of initiation, possession seems to be lacking, though by no means uncommon elsewhere in South America. Another contrast to alien stocks consists in the use of the rattle merely as an instrument, never as a shamanistic appurtenance. Masks, too, are emphatically not esoteric objects. Finally, the bull-roarer, though appearing in the Canella initiation and the training of Mars visionaries among the Šerénte, is not conceived as taboo or fatal to women, as it so emphatically is in Bororo belief.<sup>5</sup>

#### SOCIAL ORGANIZATION AND CUSTOMS

Various features suggest historical unity. We may cite moieties definitely localized in each settlement; the predominance of monogamy, tempered only among the Šerénte by rare sororal polygyny; the formal bestowal of personal names; a class of "wanton" women, not ostracized but of lesser prestige; the avunculate; the parent-in-law taboo; the passion for relay races with heavy logs; the imposition of definite taboos on the slayer of an enemy.

Expectably the Eastern and Western Timbira agree in a number of features that set them off from the Šerénte. Their monogamy is absolute; they do not practice the levirate as an institution in Šerénte fashion; house and farm ownership is invariably feminine in direct antithesis to Šerénte law; residence is strictly matrilineal, while a Šerénte couple after a brief initial period with the wife's kin settle patrilocally; only the Timbira have an hon-

<sup>5</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *Contribution à l'étude de l'organisation sociale des Indiens Bororo* (Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris, Vol. 28, 1936), p. 297.

orary chieftainship for aliens.<sup>6</sup> The Timbira moieties are matrilineal, those of the Šerénte patrilineal. Cousin-marriage is unknown among Canella and Apinayé; the Šerénte permit it, though only with the father's sister's daughter. Timbira boys must pass through two phases of initiation before marriage; among the Šerénte there is no such ceremony for all males, only one of their four associations holding an equivalent performance. Only the Šerénte have a bachelors' dormitory, subdivided into lesser age groups and with insistence on the sexual purity of the inmates, a trait that sharply divides it from the Bororo men's house.

In a few respects, however, the Šerénte are closer to one or the other of the Timbira groups than these are to each other. The Canella and the Šerénte, but not the Apinayé, have moieties *exogamous*; the Šerénte men's societies seem equivalent to the Canella age-classes, which are without Apinayé counterpart. The Šerénte and Apinayé link their moieties with north and south, the Canella with east and west. More doubtfully, the six Šerénte clans—localized divisions of the moieties—may be equated with the six Plaza groups of the Canella,<sup>7</sup> while the Apinayé have nothing to correspond.

Most striking of all, *each* of the three tribes has achieved a differentiation that would hardly have been expected from natives occupying the same economic plane and subject to a fairly uniform environment. The Apinayé moieties have nothing to do with marriage, which is regulated by four unlocalized units called *kiyé*. These are not clans, for while a male infant enters his father's group, a female belongs to her mother's. Except for this invariable separation of brothers from sisters the matrimonial arrangements would have an Australoid flavor, for an A man may marry only a B woman; a B man a C woman; a C man a D woman; a D man an A woman. For women the reverse sequence holds: an A woman does not marry B, but D; and so forth. This *kiyé* system is thus altogether unique, certainly—so far as we know—in America.

The Canella age-classes and the Šerénte associations likewise represent independent achievements even if, as we suppose, there is an historic bond between them. The essence of the Canella scheme is the periodic, spatially visualized promotion of companies of coevals who were jointly initiated.<sup>8</sup> No such rotation occurs among the Apinayé, who merely divide males into status grades of uninitiated boys, warriors (both single and married) mature men, and elders. The Šerénte men's associations may be reasonably derived

<sup>6</sup> Nimuendajú, *op. cit.* (1938), p. 69.

<sup>7</sup> Nimuendajú and Lowie, *op. cit.*, 571 f.

<sup>8</sup> Nimuendajú, *op. cit.* (1938), p. 59.

from the four sportively active age-classes of the Canella; though not now forming an age-graded series, they so figure in the origin myth, which is confirmed by the contemporary use of kinship terms to a traditionally younger society, as well as by the startling fact that *only* the traditionally youngest of the four has an initiation ceremony. However, even on this hypothesis, which we favor, the Šerénte organizations are not an instance of sheer decadence. They have, indeed, dropped the age factor as an essential for membership; but they have also added features absent from the supposed model; more particularly the extraordinary stress on economic functions, which the Canella age-classes quite subordinate to sportive and ceremonial aims.

The bestowal of personal names also illustrates independent variation. Logically enough, among the matrilineal Timbira a maternal uncle transfers his names to a sister's son; but while the Apinayé have a corresponding transfer from maternal aunt to niece, the Canella insist on reciprocity, so that a man may give his names to a nephew only if the transferrer has a daughter to whom his sister (= the girl's paternal aunt) may transfer *her* names. Among the Šerénte altogether distinct principles prevail: the men's associations own and bestow names on girls according to a rule not definitely ascertained; the boys get their names from the moieties, which own the masculine series and transfer a name from paternal grandfather or great-uncle to grandson or great-nephew. Here again there is not decadence, but differentiation.

To cite another case, the Šerénte have a women's association not found among the Timbira; and the mock attempt by men to intimidate women as a class does not appear in the two other tribes.

The bachelors' dormitory, again, is not only peculiar to the Šerénte, but is creatively coordinated with both the moiety and the associations, the north side being allotted to members of one moiety, the south side to its complement, while simultaneously the area is divided by N-S lines into four sections for the several associations. By further refinement the bachelors are divided into six age-classes with distinctive decoration.

Another Šerénte peculiarity is the dichotomy of males into two permanently constituted racing teams distinguished by their body paint. While Apinayé log-racers are pitted against each other according to hereditary moiety membership, also associated with distinctive paint, a Šerénte father arbitrarily assigns each son to one or the other team by investing him with the appropriate decoration. The Canella follow several principles all distinct from the preceding: during the ceremonial season pairs of age-classes run



against each other; during the rainy period the competitors represent the non-exogamous Rainy Season moieties; and for certain special occasions the non-exogamous dualism of the Plaza groups is in force. Evidently, our tribes solved the problem of fixed rival teams along different lines; the concept of "degeneration" seems wholly inappropriate to any of the regnant plans.

#### CONCLUSION

In a letter dated Campos Novos, August 22, 1938, Professor Lévi-Strauss, for whose judgment I entertain the highest esteem, objects to a previous suggestion of mine that the appearance of matrilineal moieties on the Bororo-Canella level indicates the local origin of such institutions among hunters-gatherers or at best incipient farmers. He voices the contrary view that the Brazilians in question have merely retained the social organization as the last vestiges of a cultural totality that has vanished but which existed in a relatively recent past with an economic type comparable to that which accompanies matrilineal institutions in North America (Hopi? Choctaw?). The idea naturally recalls the Graebner-Schmidt conception of parallel organizations in Australia.

I gladly admit that the possibility indicated by Professor Lévi-Strauss should be kept in mind, but until a particular model is produced of which the Bororo-Canella organization is the demonstrably attenuated replica, either alternative seems equally admissible.

Irrespective of this point, I am more than ever impressed with the amazing fertility of ideas that confronts us on the ruder levels. In material things hunters, gatherers, incipient horticulturists are doubtless at a disadvantage, but even here their results are not nil. The cultivation of *Cissus* by our Gê may well have been stimulated by an alien farming pattern primarily applied to other plants; it remains none the less a creative achievement because the domestication of a wild species requires more than merely taking thought. In social custom and religious belief the disabilities of an inferior technology are much less of an impediment to the burgeoning of new ideas. That is precisely what our Gê illustrate.

Even if not only matrilineal descent, but the very idea of a moiety were derived from a higher plane, there has been subsequent *evolution*, not *deca-*dence. The combination of dual divisions with ceremonial, with log-races, with the Šerénte bachelors' dormitory, is a creative synthesis. The Canella age-class scheme with its complicated mechanism of advancement may have been engrafted on a simple age-grading borrowed from elsewhere; but it is a

vast elaboration, not bowdlerization. Similarly, Apinayé pathology and marriage regulation or the astral visions of the Šerénte must be reckoned evidences of cultural individualization. The dogma of human uninventiveness has played a legitimate part as a counterblast to evolutionist exuberance in the history of our science. Today it is time to recall that human beings are not automata and are not likely to remain utterly stagnant for millennia, even if full weight is given to the stimulation due to outside impulses.

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