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PUBERTY RITES AMONG THE TUPARI INDIANS

GUAPORÉ DISTRICT, WESTERN BRAZIL

by

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Towards the end of his first stay among the Tupari Indians, in 1948, the writer witnessed the start of a series of rites to which a fifteen-year-old girl, Nyainkiab, was being subjected. Nyainkiab had to fast for several days and for some time was shut away from the domestic community behind a dense partition. As the writer had to leave the tribe before the rites were completed, he learnt of the rest of the proceedings only by hearsay, the Tupari themselves describing it spontaneously. From the statements made by these informants at the time it seemed clear that the ceremonial was associated with marriage or, more accurately, defloration customs. This appeared plausible inasmuch as the rites began after the bridegroom of the hitherto unmarried girl had moved into his step-father's quarters a few days before and thus the marriage could be regarded as just celebrated.

These observations have been described more or less in detail in two previous publications⁽¹⁾. Then, in a review of a publication, HERBERT BALDUS raised the question of whether it was actually correct that the rites described were marriage customs, or whether they were not more likely to be associated with the puberty customs with which we are familiar from a number of other South American tribes⁽²⁾. The question might have remained unanswered if the present author had not had an unexpected opportunity, in 1955, of paying the Tupari another visit. Again there happened to be a girl in seclusion, and investigation showed that here, too, just as in the case partly observed in 1948, the rites were associated with puberty after the first menstruation, and not with marriage or defloration customs. The present study, therefore, aims at supplementing — and correcting wherever necessary — the previous observations described in connection with these rites on the strength of the more

(1) Caspar 1952: 192 sq.; 1953: 219-224.

(2) Revista do Museu Paulista, n.s. vol. VII (1953): 395 (Review of "Caspar, Franz: TUPARI").

recent investigation of 1955⁽³⁾. The manner in which the wrong interpretation mentioned came about and was subsequently corroborated by Tupari informants, need not be dealt with in detail here. This example may serve as a warning to young and inexperienced fieldworkers — and the writer was one himself at the time — on the necessity of being very careful about the manner in which he formulates his questions lest they act suggestively, and in particular as long as he has not an adequate command of the language of the group he is studying. — The following recounts first of all the events associated with the puberty rites, as yielded by the writer's diary for 1955, and then summarises them together with his observations from 1948 and the statements made by his Tupari informants.

1. Observations on the puberty rites of a girl, based on 1955 diary.

February, 19, 1955 (three days after my arrival among the Tupari)

As I had not previously paid a systematic visit to the dwelling quarters in the dark community house (15 families in a circular beehive-shaped hut 60 feet in diameter), it was only now that I discovered, in the quarters of the widow Waiká, a big mat screen such as I knew from 1948. Waiká told me eagerly that her daughter was sitting behind the screen waiting for the shaman Waitó to come and "bless her food" (see below). Now the girl was spending all her time sitting behind the screen spinning cotton, the mother explained. Her daughter was "kämtsoga", i. e. a mature young woman "with round breasts", and had no mate. The girl, she said, was in seclusion because of "the blood of her vagina". (It was only later that I learnt the girl's name — Tõã). She had no objection to my looking at the girl through the narrow opening in the partition, but was not very pleased when I photographed her by flashlight.

March 8.

The shamans, together with a couple of other men, go through a witchcraft ceremonial, including snuffing of paricá, but this has no connection with Tõã's seclusion. The people say the solemn ceremony for Tõã cannot be held yet because her brothers have not yet shot the necessary monkeys, inambús, etc.; it is raining very hard. — Today, Tõã's aunt, Pařãd (her mother's half-sister) removed the old cotton bands from the girl's arms and legs, probably to replace them by new ones later.

(3) The passage concerned has already been corrected in the English edition of the travel book "Tupari", London 1956, pp. 197 sq.; it will also be re-written in any other edition that may appear. — The theme is dealt with in a wider context in the monography on the Tupari Indians, now in preparation.

March, 13.

Early in the morning I notice a group of women and girls sitting on the plaza in front of the communal house. Tõã is sitting in their midst, her head bowed. The women are tearing out her hair in handfuls, at the same time taking white ash out of a pot with their fingers and rubbing it into the girl's scalp. In 1948 I had been told that, some time before the hair was pulled out, the women treated the scalp with wet earth fetched from the stream in order to loosen the hair roots. I saw nothing whatever of such preparations. Apparently, however, the pulling out of the hair does not hurt the girl particularly, a fact which is specifically pointed out to me. No special attention is paid to the torn-out hair. The women simply throw it on the ground and afterwards sweep it away like ordinary rubbish. — Before the operation is completed, rain starts to fall. At first, the women shelter the girl under some matting. When the rain grows heavier, however, the whole group retires inside the house, and the women pull out the rest of the hair in the main entrance, near the doorway.

Waitó, the chief shaman, says that next day he will "paint" Tõã and the day after hold a snuffing ceremony (evocation of spirits) and "bless the food". Tõã, he says, will eat nothing more till the fourth day, counting from today. Tõã herself, her head pluckedbare, retires behind her partition.

March 14.

The chief shaman Waitó appears suddenly at an early hour, sits down in the doorway, facing outward, and starts making magic gesticulations and spitting like some feline animal. He charms a small pot standing on the ground in front of him. Then he turns to me and declares he is going to "paint" Tõã today, not tomorrow, because she would like to be able to eat again soon. Now Tõã herself, with her plucked head, comes out in the company of her mother. Waitó charms her with much gesticulation and then paints something on her legs. She at once gets up again and disappears in the direction of her cubicle. Waitó says her mother will now do the painting. Then he keeps me engaged for quite a while with a prosaic barter transaction. When I eventually get to Waiká's quarters to watch the painting of the girl, the procedure is already finished. And her mother will not allow Tõã to come out of her cubicle again to be photographed. The girl's head, body and limbs have just been painted with genipa juice. The pattern of the painting is quite different from the usual designs. There are three short, parallel stripes distributed evenly, but in irregular directions, across her trunk, arms and legs, and on

each side, extending from armpit to knee, two lines composed of small rectangles. The painting of the head covers the surface where, normally, the hair would have been. The painting of the face, too, has been done very carefully. Tõã is wearing new bands, woven from cotton, on her arms and legs. The bands are freshly dyed with urucú red.

March 15.

In the morning, the chief shaman blesses a pot of water in the doorway. A handfull of green leaves are floating in the pot. Slowly and silently, Tõã walks from her cubicle to the door and washes herself with the leaves and water. Then she goes inside again. There she is decked out by her mother. She is given three pairs of ear pendants, never worn together otherwise, and also labret, lip pins, collars, arm rings and a rattling armlet. Tõã looks apathetic, but not emaciated.

At 10 o'clock Alibó, Tõã's eldest brother, brings the food which Waitó is to charm: an armadillo, two Ateles monkeys, a plate of palm-beetle grubs, as well as three pots containing cooked foods and chicha. There is also a little ladle for the chicha. The dishes were cooked by Tõã's aunt the night before — first peanuts and then maize. But she did not cook them like ordinary food on her own hearth; instead she kindled a special fire right in the main doorway, on the spot where the shaman's ritual usually takes place.

Now a stone slab about 20 inches long is placed beside the food and on it a round stone such as the women use when making pottery. The slab is called "kwaidpãüd" (an archaic term which probably means "smooth stone skin"). Waitó explains that this slab was smoothed by Waledjád, a proto-sorcerer and culture hero, before ever there were any people on the earth.

Then eight men assemble in the main doorway for the snuffing ceremony. Among them are the two fully-fledged sorceres Waitó and Tadjurú, and also Alibó, Tõã's eldest brother. The snuffing-powder, prepared in the morning by Alibó out of paricá seeds and tobacco mixed with ash, is now brought to the main doorway on the snuffing-board. The second brother, Tõraí, does not take part in the ceremony. During the first part of the ceremony, which lasts about four hours and a half, there is nothing particular to be seen in comparison with other witchcraft sessions. Once Waitó gets up and fetches from inside two Evil Spirits (tarüpa) which have allegedly stolen in to eat and drink in the house. Waitó renders them innocuous with his magic and "casts them away". As usual, in the belief of the Tupari the snuffing of the powder and Waitó's magic have attracted many proto-sorceres (spirits) and also the souls of dead tribal sorcerers. However, the assembly is only visible to the shamans.

It is already half past two in the afternoon when Alibó at last puts the snuffing board and the appurtenant implements aside and replaces them in the middle of the entrance by various kinds of food. He does not quite know how to set about it, perhaps because when he was a boy he emigrated to the rubber tappers and has only recently returned to the tribe. The other men, however, patiently instruct him in low tones.

Now Waitó, the chief shaman, scratches with his thumb-nail a circle about 20 inches in diameter on the ground in the middle of the doorway. He appears to be charming something into this circle. The procedure takes quite a time. Then he takes hold of the invisible substance he has charmed, lifts it up and brings it to the other foods standing some way back. He charms the invisible substance into these dishes and sits down behind the pots, facing the door. Later it is explained to me that the circle scratched in the ground and the charmed substance are supposed to be a vessel and salt. With this the shaman then "seasoned" the various foods.

Next Waitó takes off his shirt and rolls up his right trouser leg, as this would apparently hamper the rest of the sorcery proceedings. Then he smokes a maize-husk cigarette (tobacco wrapped in maize husk) and begins to draw an invisible force or substance out of his bare right leg. In an aside he explains to me with a serious face: "Out of the right leg woman's food is blessed; out of the left leg man's chicha is blessed". Whereupon with a great effort he again produces an invisible something from his leg, holds it in his hand, spreads it out, spits in his hand, rolls something into a ball between his palms and performs some more magic gesticulations. Then he charms the magic force or substance into the dishes of food, the while giving me incomprehensive explanations in broken Portuguese ("Aqui cipó pinta... aqui taboca..."; meaning something like: "Here paints the liana... here bamboo..."). After which he dons his skirt again, but still keeps his right trouser leg rolled up despite the fact that the mosquitos are biting like fury today.

Again Waitó produces something from his right leg and energetically charms it into the food. Then he rises, draws something from the food with magic gestures, and carries it to the door. He sits down on the stool in the doorway. Alibó, Tõã's brother, brings him a plate of water. Now Waitó calls to the girl: "Ätsa! — Come here!" — Meanwhile he has rolled down his trouser leg.

Tõã walks slowly and solemnly out of her cubicle to the doorway, where Waitó is sitting. She is elaborately adorned — on her head she wears a bright-coloured feather crown which is quite different from the halo-like feather rings which the men wear on festive occasions. Tõã kneels down on the bare floor in front of Waitó. The shaman

hands her a little bowl. She sips repeatedly at the contents, each time spitting it out again into the circle drawn on the ground by Waitó's thumb-nail. She also drinks from a calabash which Waitó holds out to her, but spits the liquid out again.

Now Waitó begins reciting a magic incantation: "Unyãm tsikwa unya...", meaning "I rinse the mouth". Then he expectorates and the girl has to do the same. Then Waitó rubs his hands and, with various gestures, lays a spell on the girl's hands. She now rises, places one foot on the round stone lying on the slab, and then kneels down behind the pots containing the food. Waitó sits in front of his stool and recites his incantation: "Pokobka unyá, kãro...", which I was told means: "I bless food for you, you will shortly get something to eat." Waitó repeats the same formula endlessly.

A dog slinks up and starts sniffing at the roasted animals lying on the ground, and also at Tõã. Full of indignation and concern, the men drive the dog off.

Waitó then expectorates and again, with many gestures, lays his spell on the girl's hands, which she is holding over one of the pots. Then there ensues a moment of unrest, as if something were missing. There are calls for a "tsiãb tsin", i. e. a small mat. The girl's mother brings a small sitting-mat woven from a palm-leaf, and it is laid on the ground in the doorway. Tõã sits down on it, her legs outstretched.

Waitó goes on with his incantations over the food and then gives Tõã a palm-beetle grub and some other morsels, including a baked manioc root and a banana, a plate of bird's flesh and a second plate containing ground-nuts. Tõã eats of them all in silence. Then the chief shaman gives her three ladles of chicha. She drinks each in turn and sits down beside the food. Now, with magic gestures, Waitó draws something out of a palm-leaf and charms it on to her shorn head. Judging by his gesticulations, the shaman is charming hair back on to her scalp.

Waitó seats himself behind the food pots again and continues his magic; he has bared his right leg once more. He seems to be charming something out of the food, and goes to the door with it. Then he sits down in front of the food and converses with invisible beings. He tells them audibly what kind of food are at hand. Meanwhile, the young sorcerer Yübã makes a joke and Waitó joins in. Then Waitó turns to me and explains: "Now the wamoá-apogapod are eating the food". The "wamoá-apogapod" are the souls of dead tribal sorcerers⁽⁴⁾ who are always offered food at such unusual witch-

(4) Cf. Caspar 1952: 187-190, or 1956: 192-194.

craft ceremonies. Judging by the gestures it is assumed that these spirits are sitting inside the house behind the food pots, where Tõã has just received her first meal from the shaman's hand after days of fasting.

Then the shaman makes a gesture of "sweeping" some of the food out through the doorway. Turning to me, he explains this is for "Wadjurúi". This spirit, who otherwise dwells somewhere far off, though on the earth, is also given food — and presumably some other spirits as well. Unlike the souls of the tribal sorcerers, these spirits remain outside, on the plaza. Waitó's witchcraft continues, and now the second sorcerer, Tadjurúi, joins in them. The witchcraft ritual seems to be drawing to a close, for Tõã retires inside the house, to her family's quarters, taking with her the plate of food handed to her by Waitó. The men who have taken part in the snuffing ceremony also disappear one after the other with their stools. Alibó, Tõã's brother, now brings the food pots to Waitó at the door. The shaman rolls down his right trouser leg once more and lights a maize-husk cigarette. He divides the meat between himself and the other shamans; and I, too, am given a piece of the armadillo. However, it turns out that it has already gone bad. The witchcraft session is over; it has lasted about six hours. —

Throughout the ceremony I was sitting in a hammock right beside the main entrance where the rites were performed. I was free to make notes and, despite extremely bad lighting conditions, to take some photographs; I was not allowed, however, to use the flashlight during the actual evocation of spirits. In fact, I have never been permitted to do so at evocation rituals. I now go to Tõã to buy from her the ornaments she has worn at her puberty festival. She is an extremely hard bargainer. On the other hand, she allows herself to be photographed without difficulty until her otherwise very amiable mother says it is enough.—

In the meantime, Tõã's family has removed the partition from the house. From that evening on, Tõã lived together with her family like any other girl and resumed her part in the work and pleasures of the family and the domestic community. Even before the special pattern that has been painted on her body for the puberty festival had disappeared, she began to paint herself once more with ordinary designs like other members in the tribe. Slowly the hair began to grow again on her head, but until it really covered her scalp, the part of her head where it should have been was painted with genipa juice. Incidentally, babies' scalps are similarly painted until a growth of hair appears.

Just as before the puberty ceremony, Tõã now continued to live as an unmarried daughter in her widowed mother's household,

together with a younger brother. As I soon learnt, there were two young men wooing her favour and they made no bones about their rivalry and mutual hatred, though they were cousins and brothers-in-law. One of them was Moam. Tõã had been betrothed to him when she was still a little girl. In 1948, during my first visit, she was regarded as his "wife", though she was then only about eight years of age. But then he had gone off to "São Luís", to the rubber tappers, and had married another girl. He had got tired of waiting. He wanted a woman with whom he could copulate at once, he is said to have declared. In the opinion of the tribe he had flagrantly "deserted" Tõã and no longer had any right to her. Nevertheless, he now wanted her as his second wife. He argued that when Tõã was a little girl he used to bring her food and other presents, so the girl belonged to him.

The other suitor was Konkwad, the son of chieftain and head shaman Waitó, brother of Moam's mother. Konkwad was married to Moam's sister-in-law, but had as yet no children and it looked as if his marriage was about to break up. Konkwad believed he would fare better with Tõã and cursed his cousin Moam, who would not simply leave the girl to him.

Tõã, on her part, was evidently not in a hurry to decide in favour of either, or possibly for a third suitor. Moam and Konkwad were both known for their periodic brutality to their wives, and for the time being she was well off with her gentle mother and her three brothers, all of whom lived nearby. —

In connection with the puberty ceremony for Tõã the Tupari told of a similar though simpler ritual which the boys had to undergo. Of this, more anon.

2. Summary of the various observations and information concerning puberty rites.

a) *The rites for girls.*

When a girl has her first menses, she tells her mother. The latter has a matting partition erected in her living quarters. If the girl has a husband, which mostly seems to be the case, it is he who weaves the necessary matting out of palm-leaves. If she is single, the work is carried out by her father or a brother. The partition is so erected that, in connection with a portion of the roofing of the communal house, it forms a kind of little hut. Quite narrow, it is from 10 to 13 feet long and 3 to 5 feet wide. There is thus space enough to hang a short hammock. On one side of the cubicle, that next to the mother's quarters, there is a narrow opening. Apart

from the hammock, the place contains nothing more than the girl's spinning tools and, occasionally, a calabash or a clay dish with food and chicha. The girl is to remain in seclusion behind this partition for two or three months. I have not been able to determine the exact period.

First of all, the girl has to fast strictly for a number of days. Then the chief sorcerer Waitó blesses a small pot of maize beer, whereupon the girl is allowed to interrupt her fast and drink some of the beer. In the case of Nyainkiab, in 1948, the fast lasted four days; the shaman blessed her chicha on the fifth day. Formerly, I was told, the girls had to fast five full days and were given chicha only on the sixth. During the ensuing period of seclusion the girl has to abstain from meat and fish. She sits behind the matting and allegedly does not leave the cubicle even for urination or defecation. Nor does she wash when in seclusion, and her hair is not cut during this period. Her only occupation is spinning cotton thread to be used in making a hammock for her present or future husband.

When the prescribed time has elapsed, the girl undergoes a number of ritual ceremonies and is released from seclusion. In 1955, the ritual acts prior to the lifting of seclusion took place in the course of three days, during which the girl again had to fast strictly. The shaman and other informants stated that formerly the girl fasted not three but four days. Other information put the period at five days. — On the first day of fasting the women pluck the hair from the girl's head. Participation in this act does not appear to be restricted to special women. In Tõã's case they were her immediate neighbours and friends, including the wives of her brothers. Her mother and her aunt did not take part.

On the second day the chief shaman charms a little pot of paint, applies some to the girl's legs and then lets the mother paint the girl with the patterns apparently reserved for this purpose. The mother uses a special three-ended brush of jaracatiá bast to paint with.

The main ceremony takes place on the last day of fasting. The girl washes herself in the morning with blessed water. Then the sorcerers and adepts assemble, together with at least one male representative of the girl's family, and hold a witchcraft ceremony. There follows a number of charms to bless the animals killed in the chase by male members of the family, and the food cooked by a female relative the night before. Then the chief sorcerer lays a number of charms on the girl herself. These are evidently intended to protect the girl from dangers and to endow her with the ability and strength which she will need as a woman. Unfortunately, I was given no

coherent explanation of the rites, so that I have to restrict myself to what I was told casually by Waitó and other informants. The girl rinses her mouth with salt water so that the beer brewed by the woman will taste good. The proto-sorcerers evoked by the chief shaman during the ceremony magically convey to the young woman some of the salt which they have in their knee and elbow joints, so that the food she cooks will be appetising. The circle which the shaman scratches in the ground at the doorway with his thumb-nail at the beginning of the witchcraft ceremony, is also concerned with magic salt for seasoning the food. In the course of the ritual the girl steps on a round stone; this represents the heart of the proto-sorcerers from which strength shall pass through the girl's body and into her own heart to render it just as "hard", i. e. resistant, as the hearts of the proto-sorcerers. The banana placed among the blessed food is — according to the shaman Tadjurú — intended to make the young woman unafraid for her husband's penis in future.

This latter piece of information brings us to the question, important for the explanation of the function of the customs described, of whether or not the girls already have sexual intercourse before the first menstruation and the ensuing puberty ceremony. And this question refers both to the unmarried ones and to the apparently numerous girls who are betrothed to a man in their early childhood and who often live in his household. The data obtained from the various informants indicates clearly that, ideally, there ought to be no sexual intercourse prior to the first menstruation. A most reliable young informant, Alibó, thought that many men copulated even with their still immature wives, but that the latter said nothing about it to anybody. Various unmarried girls — Nyainkiab, for instance — were reputed to have had sexual intercourse before the first menstruation and the puberty ceremony, particularly on the occasion of the big drinking feasts. Nyainkiab's father had been most indignant about it. Pava, too, who had lived among the rubber tappers with her husband Toptö, was said to have had normal marital intercourse with him at least a year before her first menstruation. When the menses set in, the 13 year-old girl was already living with her second husband, Tjaptjéi, and submitted to the prescribed ceremonies and the ban on sexual intercourse during the following months. —

As regards the attitude of the women to the rites to which they were subjected, the information I received in 1948 was confirmed, viz. that two young women refused to undergo the prescribed ceremonies and the fast; it was not time, however, that they did in fact succeed in evading the compulsory tribal custom⁽⁵⁾. Actually, despite their resistance, they were obliged to undergo the fast, the seclusion and the head-plucking.

(5) Cf. Caspar 1953: 223.

b) *The rites for boys.*

In 1948 I witnessed and heard nothing in connection with a male counterpart to the puberty ceremony described for girls. The rubber tappers of "São Luís" on the Rio Branco, however, told me in 1955 that once a number of Tupari boys with heads plucked bare had come out of the maloca and that there was some connection with a big festival. Later, the Tupari explained to me spontaneously the significance of the plucked hair. It turned out that boys undergo a ceremony similar to that performed for the girls after menstruation. The last ceremony of this kind, I was told, had taken place a few years previously, presumably in 1953.

At that time seven youths of various ages, apparently ranging from sixteen to twenty-one, had to fast strictly for three days, and all the hair was plucked from their scalps. On the fourth day the sorcerers held a big witchcraft ceremony, at which drug powder was snuffed. Then Waitó blessed various kinds of food and worked lengthy charms on the youths. In the end he gave them some of the food to eat and chicha to drink. Afterwards a big feast was staged, with a great deal of singing, bamboo tube music, dancing, and chicha drinking. Waitó had invited Indian friends from the entire district to the party. Some twenty or thirty men of the Arikapú, Makuráp and Jabutí tribes who were not working full time at "São Luís" accepted the invitation, some of them with their wives and children. After the feast they gave their host, Waitó, numerous necklaces — ostensibly as presents, but actually to pay for the chicha drunk.

According to various corroborative reports, the boys are not allowed to have sexual intercourse after this feast until their hair has grown again to a certain length. This applies in the same way both to unmarried youths and to young married men. To the question of how long it took to do so, I received only vague answers. My informant Alibó tried to name an approximate period; he said "Three... or perhaps five months."

I could learn nothing as to the function of this custom. The resemblance with the puberty ceremonial for the girls after the first menstruation points to the definite assumption that in the case of the young men it was also a kind of maturity ceremony.

The chief differences between the customs for the girls and those for the boys are the following:—

1) The rites are not associated, in the case of the boys, with any single, temporally definable event or occasion (such as the first menses of the girls);

2) This makes it practicable for several young men to undergo

the ceremony together. The difference in ages may be as much as five years.

3) The period of seclusion behind a matting partition or something similar is only practised with the girls. This corroborates the explanation that the partition is an "eye-coverer" (Tupari: "äpa-pokab"), so that people cannot see "the blood" (menstruation blood).

4) The initiation of the boys, in contrast to that of the girls, is celebrated with a big feast to which representatives of friendly tribes are also invited. —

Besides this ceremony, which has its counterpart in the rites of the girls, another act is performed with the boys some years earlier, viz. the solemn first donning of the penis cover ("támaram"). I heard of this festival already in 1948 and have reported on it in my earlier paper⁽⁶⁾. The only noteworthy supplementary fact is that it is not the shaman but a chieftain that fastens the "támaram" on the boys for the first time. This question had remained unclear in 1948, but was answered in 1955 by the information that in the case of Konkwad it was not his father, shaman and chieftain Waitó, who performed the act, but Kuarumé, the chieftain of the neighbouring group. It can thus be assumed that, unlike the puberty rites proper, the solemn donning of the penis cover has no magical significance, or at least not primarily a magical significance, but is a secular, social affair. I have not ascertained any distinction between the status of youths with and without penis covers, i. e. between younger and older boys. However, I was never told of any boy without a penis cover who was married; possibly, therefore, the wearing of the cover is a matter of course when a boy is to be given a "wife" (who may, for instance, be a girl six years of age). Of course it is quite possible that the act of donning the cover for the first time used to be a formal and functionally significant promotion to a higher age class, and this may also have been the case with the puberty initiation rites of fasting, hair-plucking and blessing of food.

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BALDUS, HERBERT: 1954 — *Bibliografia Crítica da Etnologia Brasileira*. S. Paulo.

(6) Caspar 1953: 208.