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A PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF SOME CANELA RELIGIOUS ASPECTS

by

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Most Brazilian ethnologists are quite familiar with the Ramkokamékra-Canela Indians of the southern part of the State of Maranhão through having studied the *The Eastern Timbira* (1), the most extensive monograph of the famous Brazilian anthropologist, Curt Nimuendajú. This matrilineal and matrilocal Jê-speaking tribe is located in the most northern savanna country of the Brazilian Central Planalto, about a thousand feet above sea level, within a few miles of the forests. In 1960 there were approximately 390 persons in this tribe living on a reservation surrounded by settlements of Brazilian hinterlanders. Though pacified since 1815, these people still maintain most of the customs of their ancestors, including their language. While aboriginally they were incipient horticulturalists, cultivating corn, sweet manioc, sweet potatoes, peanuts, yams, and other crops, they relied more extensively on the wild game of the savanna and adjacent forests for their major source of food. However, because of the present scarcity of game, farming has now become much more important than hunting. The streams of the area are so small that fishing has never been a significant source of food.

During the years 1957 through 1960, I spent 24 months living with this tribe (2). A subject which came to interest

(1) Curt Nimuendajú, *The Eastern Timbira*, University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, Vol. 41 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1946).

(2) See William H. Crocker, "The Canela Since Nimuendajú, A Preliminary Report on Cultural Change". *Anthropological Quarterly*, Vol. 34, N.º 2, April, 1961.

"Os Índios Canelas de Hoje: Nota Prévia". *Boletim do Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi*, Nova Série, Antropologia N.º 2, Julho de 1958.

me greatly at that time was their religious system, or what I will also refer to as their psychological and ideational integrative system. It seemed quite possible to me that if a person not trained in the social sciences were to be left in this community for some period of time, he would not be able to identify very much of the religious system. He would find no regular forms of prayer, worship, or institutionalized ways of glorifying or praising any sort of supernatural being. The Canela, in fact, do not even seek help regularly from any god, nor do they even try to manipulate supernatural spirits to bring about advantages for the group. It may be difficult to prove conclusively, but I doubt if they ever had supernatural beings whom they treated as gods.

The Canela do have supernatural conceptualizations of the Sun and the Moon. They were two "men" who inhabited the earth before the creation of "real" men. The savanna world in which these two entities in human form lived was the same as it is today, except that there was more game and the animals could speak. One day, the Sun created a handsome man by throwing a buriti palm log into a stream. When the man came out of stream in the place of the log, the Moon became jealous and tried to imitate the Sun's act of creation, but his man came out ugly and evil. Good and bad women were created in the same way. Although they certainly believe in these supernatural beings, the Canela do not treat these entities as gods or as divine and mysterious spirits. Instead, they are considered personages of ancient stories, who could perform magic and change their forms as the present Canela would like to be able to do. Also, they are contrasting personages, one generous, an initiator of activities, and a creator of objects, while the other was jealous and incapable - a bungler. This contrast sets a dual pattern for the support of Canela behavior and is epitomized in the juxtaposition of the Pépgahak and Tébyalkhwa Festivals. In the former, ideal behavior is exemplified while in the latter the Clowns take great pleasure in demonstrating how certain activities should not be carried out.

In addition to these stories, there are other myths which account for the origins of a number of things such as corn, certain festivals, some rites, the necessity of work, and today, the responsibility of the non-Indian to support the Indian.

Such myths, since they are about supernatural beings, could be seen as aspects of religion by the non-social scientist even though the expected orientations involving worship, ma-

nipulation, and intervention among mortals are relatively absent, but there is little else about the Canela system that could be seen as being religious. *

Other areas of Canela life which are parts of the religious system are the following: the festivals; ghosts and the curers; and the restrictive tabus.

The Festivals

The Canela festival system is without doubt very extensive, consuming a large portion of the tribal time and energy. During one third to one half of a year, some traditional festival is in progress. These community celebrations consist largely of pageants composed of a series of acts. The many components of each act usually symbolize aspects of traditional comportment. Important aspects of the various roles are dramatized in this way. For instance, during a festival (Pébye) in which the adolescent novices are trained in many aspects of adulthood, a procession of mothers-in-law and sons-in-law march around the village circle. The women hold in their hands cords tied around the necks of the youths. The symbolic meaning of this rite is all too clear, and this relationship between mothers-in-law and sons-in-law is, in fact, the pattern of the behavior carried out in ordinary day-to-day behavior. Such a performance serves to instruct both spectators and performers and to reinforce existing practices.

During another act (Pépgahak Festival) youths carry house utensils and weapons as they dance around in a circle. If a family woman wants one of these items, she orders one of her daughters to throw a burning stick at the youth carrying the item. Whether or not the stick hits the youth, he drops the object so that the girl can pick it up and take it to her mother. His sister, thereupon, comes running to pour water on his back. He had experienced danger. At such a

(*) The *comunicação* based on this manuscript was presented in São Paulo on the day, the 10th of July 1963, of the armed attack through which the Ramkokamékra-Canela were driven from their lands by 190 *bandoleiros* summoned and hired by the neighboring *fazendeiros*. In the revitalistic movement, with messianic and cargo cult aspects, which contributed significantly to provoking this attack, the degree of Canela reliance on the supernatural as a source of authority for cult behavior was very high. This shift in the responsibility for decision-making and the giving of orders from natural to supernatural agents is being considered an important qualitative change in the orientation of the Canela religious system.

crucial moment a sister must always support, comfort, and help a brother.

Values are dramatized in a similar manner. Youths in the training festivals (Pébye and Khetuaye) have to undergo tests of endurance, passing certain periods without food, water, and sleep. Also, those people who have socially needed skills or attributes, are required to give these for the benefit of the group. For instance, in the festivals dance leaders are summoned to make their social contribution. No matter how tired they are, they can scarcely refuse to perform the required service of leading the youths and girls in singing and dancing. Similarly, the women associated with certain social groups are required to provide sexual outlets for all the men of the group. These traditional festival acts, repeated as they are in the same form from year to year, constitute a dramatized code of ethics which provides a background and a basis for behavior in non-festival periods.

Ghosts and Curers

Turning to another religious aspect, a central feature of the Canela conception of the supernatural is the role of the spirits of the Canela dead. The capabilities of these ghosts are interesting and crucial to the comprehension of the system. Limitations of time, space, and form do not exist for them. They can travel to any place almost instantaneously and can change into any living form. As animals, they may be visible to ordinary Canela and may even be killed as game. They are not thought of as being immortal. As spirits in the human form, they can be seen and communicated with only by the curers, or *kai*. Moving around in one form or another, a ghost is likely to observe almost anything that a Canela may be doing and since the ghost can communicate this knowledge to other ghosts, a curer talking with some ghost can find out almost anything that is going on in the Canela world. If a machete was stolen or if certain tabus were broken, the curer (*kai*), by consulting the ghosts, may be able to identify the culprit and expose him publicly. There is no reason to believe that these revelations are not accurate, but in the case where they are not, it is scarcely possible that an accused but innocent person could go against the force of public opinion backed by the conviction that such information was of supernatural origin. The fear of possible discovery and exposure by a *kai* related to an injured person serves as a

powerful motivating factor in preventing the breaking of many tabus and restrictions.

When specific relatives are sick a man must refrain from eating certain foods and from having sexual intercourse. Should he do these things the strong effect on his blood, which as a healthy person he can withstand, might spread to the sick relative thought to be sharing the same blood system. A person weakened by sickness might not be able to withstand the effect, and consequently become sicker and even die. The *kai* tending the sick person will ask a ghost if certain relatives broke such restrictions. If that ghost did not see the infraction, it will search for the information among other ghosts. Upon being exposed, the relative who broke the tabu must follow certain prescriptions given by the curer in order to relieve himself of the effect so that the patient's blood can also be cleared.

This is one of the ways through which a cure is brought about. In this case and in almost any other, the supernatural is used as a source of information and as a basis for validating such reports. The responsibility for concealing or revealing such "facts", and for how they are used, is attributed entirely to the *kai* rather than to the ghost or the supernatural world. In this way, quite characteristically, the Canela attribute less to the supernatural than is often the case in tribal groups.

It is within this same pattern that *kai* (curers) "throw black magic" into an enemy in order to make him sick. Needed information may come from the ghosts, but the power and ability to throw the magic is the property and responsibility of the *kai* himself. Such sicknesses or even deaths are not generally attributed to ghosts or to the supernatural world, though there are some special situations in which this is the case. That the responsibility and power in such performances is placed with the *kai* rather than with the ghosts is characteristic of the Canela's limited use of the supernatural as a psycho-cultural projective mechanism.

The principal situation in which the agents of the supernatural world are seen as performing some sort of positive action with respect to individual members of the natural society can be found in the pattern of the initial relationship between the ghosts and a *kai* when the latter is obtaining his power. Individuals who receive magical powers may or may not have sought this gift. This ability to cure and to

throw black magic, however, comes to an adolescent youth (never a girl) when he is in a weakened condition, usually brought about by moderate physical exhaustion and by abstinence from food, especially from any rich foods, though it may also be received at the time of a serious accident. A ghost or ghosts, in human or animal form, appear as hallucinations or in dreams to young men in this strained psychological state in which their reality-testing ability is likely to have become affected. Initially, the ghosts appear mainly to cure the individual. Usually there are additional visitations to pass on the power and to teach the youth how to utilize it. Once the technique is learned, the visitations cease, but the newly formed *kai* can see and speak with ghosts who happen to be passing by, though such beings are undiscernable by the Canela except when they cause noises by moving earthly objects, such as dry leaves or the palm thatch of houses. The curer retains this power for the rest of his life unless he indulges himself too extensively and too often in rich foods and sexual relations. It is his maintenance of these restrictions which sustains his power, not further contacts with the supernatural. The responsibility is his.

For the Canela, all objects have spirits (*mégarõ*) whether animal, vegetable, mineral, alive or dead. Shadows are a manifestation of these spirits and dreams are composed of the spirits of "real" things. When one person dreams of another, it is thought that the spirits of the two persons concerned have left their bodies to visit each other. Ghosts eat the spirit of a piece of food, not the visible form. After a person has died, the relatives usually leave some food behind the house in the evening so that if the ghost of the deceased relative is hungry, it will satisfy itself with that food. Otherwise, it might enter the house to search for food in the proximity of the relatives, in this way endangering them. When the spirit of such food has been eaten by a ghost, it is said to have lost most of its flavor.

The main difficulty that non-*kai* people experience with ghosts occurs when there is contact with relatives or spouses who have died recently. These newly-turned ghosts long for their former associates and may try to contact them, but can only appear to Canela who still have strong feelings for the particular ghost. Such a visitation comes in the form of a dream or an hallucination and usually causes the death of the Canela. Sexual intercourse with a ghost necessarily results in death through illness within a day or two, but ver-

bal communication alone results in a sickness that may not be mortal. During such a period, if the patient becomes unconscious, a *kai* may explain that he saw a ghost-relative lead the soul of the patient away from its body. Any *kai* may also learn from other ghosts that the ghost-relative took the soul to the ghost-village in order to interest the soul in ghostly life. The form of these villages and the life therein are very similar to the regular Canela existence except that all aspects of such living are only weak imitations of natural existence. Water is warm, meat has a bland taste, sexual intercourse lacks vigor, singing and dancing are performed without energy, and affections are not strong. The main advantages of ghost life, on the other hand, are thought to be the abilities of ghosts to change into animal forms and to go anywhere quickly. Since ghosts can scarcely be thought of as enjoying their lives, a Canela feels sorry for them and has little incentive to become one unless he longs to be with a particular ghost.

Orientation to the Present

This attitude of mild abhorrence of the supernatural is characteristic of the orientation to the present which pervades many sectores of Canela life. Relatively little attention and concern is focused on either the past or future. Concerning the past, stories of famous chiefs and important incidents of the 19th century are told in the plaza in the evenings for all to hear, especially the young people, but these accounts serve more to teach current values than to glorify the past. Also individuals cannot always report the names or activities of their grandparents and very rarely give any information about their great-grandparents. With respect to the future, non-seasonal plans are seldom made more than a few weeks in advance. In addition, the Canela are usually not sure which summer festival will be presented until the time is ready to make the initial preparations. They also find it difficult to save in the present for future needs, especially with respect to food. They were essentially savanna and forest hunters rather than agriculturalists, and living in a world of game surplus as they did, they must have become psychologically oriented to receiving their needs, and satisfying their wants, in the immediate present. It was easy to obtain more game, gather more fruits, or pull up root crops stored in the ground the moment the supply of food in the house was exhausted. Except for a limited amount of corn,

there was no need to store foods or to ration the consumption of a harvested crop to furnish nourishment throughout the year. So preserving staples was not a factor, as it often is, in obliging the Canela to orient themselves around planning and conservation for the future.

Restrictive Tabus

Another important aspect of the psychological and ideational integrative system of the Canela is the very developed system of restrictive tabus. To enter into any career such as becoming a song-dance leader, a *kai*, an effective hunter, or even just to carry heavy logs in the inter-moiety competitive races, it is necessary to maintain an extensive complex of restrictions for several years just after puberty. The extent of these tabus lessens with age but any person who is serious about maintaining his excellence in any of the activities requiring skills and energies must sustain these restrictions to a lesser degree for as long as he continues to carry out these roles. These tabus exist principally in the areas of food and sex. A youth must not eat the very gamey meats and the flesh of certain animals that do not withstand the hot savanna sun. Sexual relations must be carried out infrequently and only with strong and healthy older women. A youth who has received magical powers often loses them because he cannot maintain these restrictions, and an old *kai* may say that his curative powers have become weak because he has eaten too many rich foods.

The Canela world is full of such restrictions which are encountered when almost any undertaking is attempted. The day before going on an extensive hunting trip, a man must refrain from sexual relations if he expects to be successful. It is believed that the wild game has a liking for a hunter who maintained a high level of post-pubertal tabus and who is still keeping them to a lesser degree. It is believed that the game will actually come to such a hunter so that he can kill them more easily, but that game will avoid a hunter who has maintained his restrictions at a low level. Again, the responsibility is with the Canela rather than with the agents of the supernatural.

Interpretive Summary

A number of aspects of the Canela ideational integrative system have been presented. The description is not complete,

and there are other aspects which could be discussed in a more detailed and lengthy report. It is possible, however, to make a few interpretative observations along functional or operational lines at this time.

As part of the integrative nature of the relationship between a religious sub-system and its over-all socio-cultural system, one well-recognized contribution of such a sub-system to its socio-cultural system is to provide answers to questions about the origin and nature of many aspects of the universe. For the Canela, many of these answers are found in their myths. Another religious contribution to the total system is the support of a set of behavioral patterns sufficiently extensive and integrated to enable a society to operate. Some of these Canela patterns are found again in the myths, but many more are portrayed in the festivals. Still another relationship between a religious sub-system and its society is the contribution of factors toward the formation of the personality of each individual so that his behavior will be relatively consistent with the traditional patterns. This is brought about in many ways among the Canela not mentioned herein, but some of the more important mechanisms are the following. On the positive motivation side, involvement in the festivals and the favorable attitude toward them contribute to positive enculturation of these patterns. Also, the complex system of tabus tends to reinforce the principal careers and activities by establishing the conviction in the individual that if he maintains the restrictions, he will necessarily be a good performer. These restrictions also contribute on the negative motivation side (avoidance) because when they are broken, relatives, and sometimes non-relatives, suffer in one way or another and, therefore, put social pressure on the individual to maintain his restrictions. The whole tabu system, in turn, is reinforced by the mechanism of the *kai's* being able to use supernatural infallibility and omniscience to validate his discoveries of tabu infractions and to establish them as social facts.

Our visitor not trained in the social sciences would see most social and personality patterns of this sort as being established and maintained in any society by traditional practices such as divine revelation, a theology, codes of ethics, group worship and adoration of gods or a god, prayer, confession, and many other mechanisms. Since the Canela lack these institutions, with the exception of certain aspects of their mythology, the person not trained in the social sciences

is likely to think they lack religion. Whether they do or do not is actually more a question of definition than a problem for scientific investigation. The major point herein, however, is to add a little more evidence to the already well-known point of view that a "religious" system can take various forms in its integrative relationship to its society.

The Canela utilization of the supernatural is important and crucial to the operation of their religious system. The extent of the involvement of the system in the supernatural, however, seems quite limited and less developed than in most other societies. The mythology includes no gods, in the festivals no supernatural beings are addressed, and there is no attempt made by groups or by individuals to influence supernatural agents or bring about advantageous changes. The utilization of the supernatural is limited to the explanation of origins (cosmological and personal magic power), the obtaining of information, and the validation of the information received. This leaves the Canela relatively more consciously in command of his world than is often the case. The responsibility for the use and maintenance of his own magical power is considered to be his rather than a supernatural agent's.

Another observation, which may be related to this last one, is that Canela ideological aspects are also not very well developed as a system of expressed ideas. The myths explain relatively few cosmological aspects, what might have been a narrated code of comportment and values is found as actual behavior in the form of festivals, and the conception of the supernatural world is not very ramified or complex.

This relative lack of development with respect to the supernatural and ideological sectors of culture is an aspect which can be seen as being quite consistent with the characteristic Canela orientation to the present and to the more material components of their existence. Since their focus on current and concrete things is so outstanding, any investigator could hardly keep from wondering what relationship there might be between this orientation and certain environmental factors. Such a problem is too complex to be resolved without the analysis of numerous contrasting studies, but some of the factors which might be considered in such a project could be the following: (1) the absence of natural disasters, such as floods, droughts, earthquakes, and great fires, in the area; (2) the former relative abundance in food supplies; (3) a predominantly hunting and gathering econ-

my supplemented by root crops without a specific harvest period which could be left stored in the ground and obtained at any time; (4) the occupation of a relatively sparsely populated area so that population pressures were low; and (5) a tradition lacking extensive and regular warfare practices. The hypothesis to be tested here is that in relatively non-threatening environmental conditions lacking the necessity of food proportioning control, there are relatively few serious conflicts in the psychological and ideational integrative system of a society so that the reduction of tensions by the usual projection of human responsibility and ideological content matter onto a supernatural scheme of beliefs can be minimal.

A summary account and preliminary analysis of certain Ramkokamékra-Canela religious orientations has been presented above in order to provide some data to serve as an aid in understanding Eastern Timbira religious behavior until more detailed and complete studies have been published.

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