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Shamanism and Political Control among the Kuikuru

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Introduction

The Kuikuru are a Carib speaking group of horticulturists in the Upper Xingú region of central Brazil. Their settlement is politically autonomous and comprises nine houses, each of which shelters several nuclear families.

The nuclear family is a self-sufficient economic unit except that the cooperation of several men is needed for a few projects such as erecting the frame of a multifamily house and carrying a newly cut canoe from the forest to water. When needed, the cooperations of friends and kinsmen is obtained through the device of throwing a party for the workers. Communal activities are rarely undertaken, but when they are, a similar device is employed to mobilize labor. Whereas in many other Tropical Forest groups in South America the headman organizes communal enterprises, among the Kuikuru the labor for such activities is paid for with food and drink provided by an individual, who is referred to as the owner of the undertaking (Dole, 1959).

As these techniques for mobilizing cooperative labor suggest, formal leadership among the Kuikuru is extremely weak. Very few special obligations and privileges are attributed to the headman. These include titular ownership of the tribal territory, making decisions about when to move the settlement, and choice of its location. In addition a strong chief may call out daily plans for work and may harangue his people about preserving tribal customs. In actual fact, however, it is questionable whether any of these functions was performed by the man who held the position of headman when observations for this paper were made.¹⁾

In theory the position of headman is inherited patrilineally, but in actuality it often happens that when a headman dies his sons are too young to assume leadership. Under these conditions the role passes to an adult male in another family, so that men from several families have assumed leadership over the past few generations and the sons of all of them now have some claim to succession.

The Kuikuru have very few restrictive rules for social behavior. Not only does the headman not control social behavior, but the ceremonial system provides very few

¹⁾ This paper is based on notes from field work done by Robert Carneiro and myself among the Kuikuru between August, 1953 and March, 1954.

regulations. Most of the ceremonies are primarily secular, and there is relatively little fear of the malevolent power of spirits to punish one.

The tribal settlement is agamous, but in recent years spouses have been chosen from within the settlement more frequently than from neighboring tribes. The ideal post-marital residence is virilocal with respect to both settlement and house, but there is no strict rule of residence except that a couple is expected to reside for an initial period of a few months with the parents of the bride. The several nuclear families in most of the houses are closely related to one another, constituting extended families of various types, fraternal, sororal, bilateral, patrilocal and matrilineal. However, nuclear families not infrequently change their place of residence, making the extended family organization of the community unstable as well as irregular. The kinship structure is cognatic and the kinship nomenclature is a variant of the Generation pattern. (See Dole, 1957: 359 ff.)

From this brief summary it can be seen that Kuikuru society is very loosely structured. In keeping with the looseness of structure, social behavior is extremely permissive. An example of the permissiveness is the fact that most individuals have several extra-marital sex partners without fear of social sanctions, even when the identities of the paramours are known or strongly suspected. (See Carneiro, 1959.) Moreover, infractions of the legal norms often go unpunished. When thefts of personal property occur, for example, the owner has no means of redressing the wrong unless he actually catches the thief in the act of stealing, which is very unlikely. And even if the thief is caught there is no prescribed punishment for such delicts.

Theoretically a person may quarrel with the miscreant, but in actuality even this action is not taken because among the Kuikuru any kind of hostility is taken as evidence of malevolence and an indication that the disgruntled individual may take revenge through witchcraft. It is dangerous to be suspected of witchcraft, because sorcery is one of the few conditions which justify homicide. A few years ago a man was killed because he was thought to be working witchcraft on a number of children. The only close kin of the victim were his two daughters, who did not avenge his death. Some years before that incident another Kuikuru had killed a man from the neighboring Kalapalu tribe who was suspected of causing deaths that led to the extinction of more than one tribal settlement in the region. This killing also went unavenged, and neither of the killers was punished.

Because suspected sorcery is punishable by death the Kuikuru try to avoid being suspected by being genial and noncombative, even when they feel they have been wronged. But the frustration that results from the virtual lack of recourse to legal sanctions in many instances may be very intense. On one occasion, in fact, the frustration was so great that a grown man wept in repressed anger because an irreplaceable item of considerable value had been stolen from him and he had no means of retrieving it or retaliating for the theft.

In view of the lack of effective social control in political and ceremonial structure, the possibility suggests itself that the Kuikuru may resort to other and less direct mechanisms to reinforce norms and preserve social cohesion. Such a mechanism is in fact to be found in shamanism. I will describe Kuikuru shamanism and discuss its function in supplying some degree of social control.

Shamanism

The primary function of a shaman is medical; he is hired to cure illnesses which do not respond to the herbal remedies that are common knowledge. A second important function is divining to determine the causes of illness and other misfortunes. The principal techniques used are removal of intrusive objects and trance induced by smoking native cigarettes. A shaman's services are paid for with beads, which serve as both ornament and currency among the Kuikuru.

Shamanism is not a hereditary role. In fact one shaman indicated that his son would not be a shaman, because smoking is bad for one. Rather a man may be motivated to become a shaman by receiving a «call» to do so. When a man undertakes to learn the secret techniques of shamanism he is tutored by a master shaman, who teaches him chants and the art of inducing trance by smoking. The pupil is secluded for a month in his mentor's house, where he fasts, dreams and practices smoking. In his dreams he speaks with a personal spirit helper, who is said to give him cigarettes and teach him how to smoke. The pupil also goes into the forest and communicates with one of the forest spirits which is visible only to shamans. It is thought that smoking enables shamans to see and hear things that are hidden from other people.

Finally the apprentice undergoes an arduous initiation administered by an established shaman. The body of the apprentice is annointed with a mixture of pulverized tree resin and water, which is rubbed especially on the fingernails and hair and in the ears. Then the neophyte demonstrates his ability to smoke deeply and induce a state of trance, or «die», as the Kuikuru say. When he is revived he drinks tree resin mixed with salt and water. This he must do twice, without vomiting. If he can perform this ordeal successfully he is then considered a fulfilled shaman.

There are five shamans in the Kuikuru society. These men are explicitly ranked as to their ability, and one of them, named Metsé, is said to be a far better shaman than any of the others. Although all of them frequently smoke in the evening «because they like to», only Metsé is called on to conduct shamanistic performances as a rule.

Curing

It is generally supposed by the Kuikuru that exuviae and other material of various kinds can be used to work sorcery, and that malicious persons inject objects into people in order to kill them. Illnesses of all kinds are attributed to this type of sorcery. In curing, the shaman smokes, seated on a log stool beside the patient's hammock. After inhaling very deeply he places the cigarette between his feet to free his hands, and blows smoke into his cupped hands. He then rubs his hands together and strokes the affected part of the patient's body. As he strokes the patient he says «Aakaaaaaaah!» and then utters a sequence of noises resembling a number of rapid and uninhibited hiccups with alternately ingressive and egressive sound, «*i* a *i* a *i* a», etc. Withdrawing his hands from the patient he inspects the contents, which may be a splinter, a piece of wet matted thread, a fishscale or some other very small item. Taking the cigarette from between his feet he inhales more smoke and goes to the thatched wall of the house, where he blows smoke on the intrusive object and blows it away into the thatch. Eight or ten such performances complete the treatment.

One of the lesser shamans threw some light on the nature of intrusive objects produced by shamans during curing ceremonies. He tore a narrow strip from a piece of canvas and secreted it among his private possessions saying he would use it later in curing.

In instances of serious illness several shamans may work together, as they did on one occasion to treat the wife of a minor shaman and mother of a potential successor to the role of headman. The woman had complained of stomach disorder and pains in her legs. At times she appeared to be in a coma. When her condition did not respond to herbal medicine the principal shaman was called in to treat her. With the usual ritual Metsé «drew out» some bits of wet matted cotton thread, which he threw away in the thatch of the house. As neither this treatment nor similar treatment by her shaman husband improved her condition, it was decided that her soul had been taken from her and that this was the cause of her illness. Then all five Kuikuru shamans together with a visiting shaman conducted a curing ceremony for her. They smoked, chanted and stamped rhythmically. In this procedure a special gourd rattle was used. This rattle is so constructed that the handle is slightly loose. When properly rolled against the forearm, the gourd chamber of the rattle moves on the handle, squeaking with each stroke. The squeaking sound is apparently thought to be the voice of a spirit.

Even this performance did not cure the woman, who then became delirious. During her delirium her husband asked her where she was and what she was doing, in an attempt to learn what she was «dreaming» about. Her answers corroborated the shamans' prognosis that a spirit-being had taken her soul from her. The six shamans then went a short distance outside the settlement and conducted a seance in which they talked with the spirit people. Matsé smoked, «died» and recaptured the lost soul. He wrapped it in a ball with vegetable fibers and held it close to his chest as he returned to the house of the patient. With the ball still held close to his own chest, he placed it next to the patient's chest, in order that the soul might reenter her body.

It may be that shamans are able to convince themselves as well as others that they can hear voices when in a state of trance. I am not prepared to discuss the question of whether or not they do hear such voices. However, the techniques of drama and sleight of hand used in curing are impressive, and they serve an important function in inspiring confidence in the shaman's ability to deal with the supernatural. General belief in his supernatural power does much to determine a shaman's success as a doctor, but it does more than this. Popular faith in a shaman's ability to talk with the spirits is at the base also of his success in divining, since this is what permits him to pass judgments and suggest punitive action without engendering resentment. This fact is illustrated by instances in which Metsé was asked to determine guilt for some misdemeanors.

Divining

On one occasion when some stored fruit was stolen, the owner hired Metsé to smoke and divine the identity of the thief. After his smoking seance Metsé named a teen-age boy as the culprit, and the boy's supposed guilt soon became common talk in the community. Although the boy was not confronted directly with the accusation and no steps were taken to punish him formally, the gossip of course served to darken his reputation.

Guilty or not, the boy had no recourse. It is clear that members of the society are thoroughly convinced of Metsé's supernatural power. They also respect and appreciate his efforts in curing and divining. By contrast the boy named in this case was the son of a couple who were generally disliked by others in the community. In fact a number of Kuikuru thought that his father was working witchcraft against them. The marked difference in prestige of Metsé as a master shaman and the person he named undoubtedly lent support to the verdict. Hence it would have done little good for the supposedly guilty boy to protest his innocence. Moreover, if the boy had argued or openly protested the verdict the community probably would have been inclined to suspect him of witchcraft, a situation to be avoided if possible. Under these conditions the boy who was accused of stealing fruit had no choice but to be amiable in the face of adverse public sentiment.

Another and more dramatic instance of divining to determine guilt was occasioned by a fire. An account of this incident will serve to illustrate both the technique of Kuikuru divination and its sociopolitical role.

At high noon on a hot sunny day one of the nine houses in Kuikuru settlement burned to the ground, apparently set afire through careless use of a cooking fire. House fires are always a major crisis for the Kuikuru because their houses are placed very close to one another. If there is any wind, many sparks fly and the tinder-dry thatch of adjoining houses is ignited. Then the probability that all the houses will be destroyed is very high. In this instance only one house was burned because the day was calm, and the few sparks that landed on adjacent houses were successfully extinguished by beating.

Because it was impossible to save the burning house most of the men merely watched the blaze and discussed its cause as they watched. They surmised that the fire had been caused by a flaming arrow shot into the thatch by someone from another tribe. However, they were not certain of this explanation, and the threat of complete disaster was so disturbing that the shaman was asked to determine the cause of the fire.

Accordingly Metsé divined. He and four other shamans sat on log or bark stools and smoked native cigarettes. Only Metsé inhaled deeply, and as he finished one cigarette an attending shaman handed him another lighted one. Metsé inhaled all the smoke, and soon began to evince considerable physical distress. After about ten minutes his right leg began to tremble. Later his left arm began to twitch. He swallowed smoke as well as inhaling it, and soon was groaning in pain. His respiration became labored, and he groaned with every exhalation. By this time the smoke in his stomach was causing him to retch. He swallowed with audible gulps in an obvious effort to keep from vomiting.

The more he inhaled the more nervous he became. He rubbed his eyes, scratched his head and chest, blew his nose and wiped his hand on his leg. He took another cigarette and continued to inhale until he was near to collapse. A helper now supported his back as he continued to grow weaker. Suddenly he «died», flinging his arms outward and straightening his legs stiffly. At this point the log stool was removed from beneath him, and three men held his rigid body horizontal about chest high for a few moments. His tendons snapped as he writhed slowly in this position. Soon he relaxed and was lowered to a sitting position on the ground, his head hanging limply and his back again supported by the helper.

During his «death» Metsé breathed continuously, but in a very subdued manner. After some minutes his eyelids fluttered. He remained in this state of collapse nearly 15 minutes. From time to time toward the end of this period he moved his limbs slightly, breathed more deeply, and uttered some incomprehensible noises. As he began to revive, he rubbed his eyes, scratched his head several times and looked about in a startled manner as if listening for something. When Metsé had revived himself two attendant shamans rubbed his arms. One of the shamans drew on a cigarette and blew smoke gently on his chest and legs, especially on places that he indicated by stroking himself. Then Metsé began to speak.

He called to him the owner of the burned house and conversed with him with much feeling, unfolding the account of how the fire had been caused. As he did so the attending shamans, as well as several other male onlookers, commented from time to time on what Metsé had said. He drew out the account of the happenings, almost sobbing as he related parts of the story and apparently deeply moved by the tragedy. This procedure reveals two important techniques of divining which contribute to its success. First, the shaman expresses sympathy for the victims of the disaster, a technique which certainly functions to gain popular approval for his efforts. Second, he sounds out public opinion by exchanging comments with his audience. This device of course makes it possible for him to formulate a verdict which they will accept.

The gist of Metsé's narrative follows: The previous evening three men had been prowling around the settlement. When all the Kuikuru were asleep they had tried to enter Metsé's house in order to place an image of lightning inside it. (This is a form of sorcery which would have drawn lightning to his house and would have resulted in the death of Metsé himself.) Because the door was barred the men were unable to enter his house and entered the adjacent one instead, — the house that later burned. They camped nearby during the night, and about noon the next day they shot a fire arrow into that house. Metsé was unable to learn the identity of the culprits during his trance because they had shirts over their heads and spoke a language he could not understand.

Thus the cause of the fire turned out to be exactly what people had suggested earlier, with one remarkable detail added. This was Metsé's statement that the culprits had tried to enter his own house with an image of lightning in order to destroy him. Although this detail did not seem very important at the time, it suddenly took on special significance two weeks later when lightning actually did strike Metsé's house and set it afire during a thunder storm. Metsé was thrown from his hammock by the lightning bolt and was badly bruised. Within two minutes his burning house collapsed. This double disaster convinced Metsé that he was a marked man.

The next morning, unable to withstand the rigors of divining himself, he asked another shaman to divine for him and find the image of lightning which he believed must have been placed in his house and which was responsible for drawing the lightning. The performance of this shaman tells much about the skill of the primary shaman. The secondary shaman was an elderly man, as Kuikuru ages go, although he was still vigorous and healthy. He was unable to go into a trance, although he inhaled deeply and swallowed smoke. He appeared to become violently ill — hiccups and involuntary

retching repeatedly preventing him from inducing trance. After several unsuccessful attempts he moved about in search of the image of lightning but with no success. Finally Metsé himself arose from his hammock, danced about the ruins of the house with a running step and then began to search also. They both failed to find the image, because, it was said, it is very difficult to find such an object in the daylight.

That evening Metsé himself divined. After reviving himself he reported that the reason the lightning image could not be found was that it had already been removed. He now stated further that the person responsible for both fires was another shaman, a Kuikuru who had left three years previously to marry a woman of the neighboring Kalapalu tribe and had never returned.

This verdict appeared to surprise some of the Kuikuru, who indicated that the culprit had been a good man. But there were social complications which may explain Metsé's reason for pointing the finger at this shaman. The accused had been expected to marry a teen-age Kuikuru girl some time before, but although the girl had waited for a very long time in puberty seclusion her fiancé had made no move to claim her. His failure to fulfill this obligation engendered some resentment among the Kuikuru, where there were several bachelors and no other marriageable girls. Finally Metsé's younger brother had proposed to the girl by leaving firewood at her parents' house. His suit was accepted, but on the very next day the house in which she was secluded burned! About 10 days later she and Metsé's brother began living together as man and wife. A few days after that Metsé's house burned also.

The man who was indicated had only one close adult relative, a very weak and effeminate brother who had recently been living in the Kuikuru settlement. But there was considerable tension between this brother and some of the other Kuikuru, — so much so that he was reluctant to go outside his house during the daylight hours. A few days before the second fire, he too had left the Kuikuru settlement and joined the Kalapalu.

As soon as Metsé disclosed the identity of the guilty person a party of avengers including Metsé's brother set out, *without consulting the headman*, to execute the supposed culprit. This mission was unsuccessful because their intended victim remained inside his house and surrounded by his family. After the return of the avenging party Metsé's fear of the malevolent power of the other shaman intensified. He predicted that fire would strike again. He became ill, seemingly unable to move about, and had his brother carry him to and from the lake to bathe. He remained in this state of debility for several days. Then a second attempt was made to destroy the other shaman. The accused was taken by surprise and killed. Thus a potential rival of both Metsé and his brother was eliminated, and Metsé recovered his strength rapidly.

No retaliation followed the killing. Among the Kuikuru there is no tradition of blood feuds. Moreover, the victim's closest relative, his own brother, did not have sufficient strength of personality to avenge his death.

Discussion

It seems certain that Metsé's family felt some anxiety about taking a girl who had been spoken for by another man. The occurrence of two house fires in close association

with the marriage of Metsé's brother to that girl emphasized the rivalrous aspect of the marriage and served to direct attention to the potential rival. Anxiety in this instance could have been alleviated by giving over the girl to her fiancé. But in spite of the fact that her fiancé had not released her from the engagement, there was no indication that he intended or wanted to claim her. Therefore Metsé's family chose to eliminate the source of anxiety by getting rid of the potential rival.

There is little doubt, however, that following Metsé's account of the events, the society viewed the revenge killing as a device to protect their settlement from the threat of more fires and the loss of their principal shaman through sorcery. In this instance, as in the case of the stolen fruit, there was no dissent from the shaman's verdict. From these instances of divining it becomes apparent that the focal point of whatever legal apparatus operates among the Kuikuru is not the headman but rather the principal shaman. In effect he functions as an arbiter. His effectiveness in this role is based on a belief in the operation of supernatural forces, both through sorcery and through detection by divination.

Metsé's influence as a diviner depends also on his personal ability to convince the society of his power to deal with supernatural phenomena. Without this advantage his people would be less ready to accept the judgments he makes and to follow his suggestions to the point of committing homicide. Metsé's performances in curing are indeed impressive and do much to win him the appreciation of his fellow men. Moreover his truly masterful inducement of trance has earned him their deep respect. In addition his skillful sounding of public opinion helps to make his pronouncements credible. Of course an occasional coincidence of divining which adumbrates actual events adds much prestige to the shaman's performances. Such spectacularly successful predictions are always the most clearly remembered. His impressive performances as a curer and diviner, therefore, have placed Metsé in a quasi political role, and he is regarded as a valuable social servant.

Divination exerts a direct influence on social behavior. Even when no formal punishment is meted out the drama of divination serves to demonstrate the shaman's ability to «see» the guilty one in a supernatural manner, and everyone is thereby made aware of the danger of being found guilty. Fixing blame on a person by divination places him in an uncomfortable position at the very least. Because people wish to avoid this consequence, the knowledge that misdemeanors can be detected tends to deter individuals from breaking social norms.

If a person should be accused of a serious crime, as for example killing others through sorcery, he might himself be killed as a menace to the society. And since anti-social attitudes such as anger are taken as evidence of inclination to sorcery, the Kuikuru are constrained to be genial and cooperative. The ideal Kuikuru personality is very amiable and lacking in aggressiveness. By cultivating such a personality one inspires trust rather than suspicion and is therefore less susceptible to being accused.

It should be pointed out that persons who are killed for supposed witchcraft and those who are accused of minor delicts as well are individuals who lack social support, either because they have no close kin who could avenge them or because they are not well integrated into the society, or both. Singling out such individuals as victims functions to prevent retaliation and feuding. It also fosters social integration. Of course

individuals may not be able to do much to insure having strong kinsmen around them, but they can and do cultivate friendly and cooperative relations with other members of the society.

As already suggested, the suspicion of sorcery is always present as an explanation for misfortune and is a major factor in Kuikuru social control because supposed sorcerers may be killed without reprisal. But in spite of the strong belief in sorcery, the actual practice of it does not appear to exist among these people. Informants had little knowledge of how sorcery was accomplished because, they said, «those who practice it do not tell anything about it». Moreover, there was no apparent fear among the Kuikuru that their own shamans would do harm through sorcery, and when asked whether he could work counter magic on his enemy after the second fire, Metsé himself seemed at a loss for an answer. Clearly if the Kuikuru had had evidence that their very able shaman (said to be more able than his enemy) really could work magic against his enemy, they would not have killed the other man outright. Nor would Metsé have shown such unmistakable terror until his enemy was destroyed.

Reasons for the absence of sorcery among the Kuikuru probably include a high degree of freedom from stresses, which may be attributed to the general lack of either restrictive rules of social behavior or competition for subsistence resources. The Kuikuru do not practice either strict patrilocal or matrilocal residence, customs which have been shown to create special stresses on the inmarrying women and men respectively. (See Titiev, 1951; Schneider and Gough, 1962.) Moreover, their subsistence economy provides an abundance of food and there is no economic oppression or exploitation to generate antagonism. (Cf. Kracke, 1963.)

But if the permissive nature of Kuikuru culture minimizes stresses, the lack of traditionally structured political leadership does create some problems. The use of divination to determine guilt may be interpreted as a substitute for adjudication and punitive action by a political leader. However, political influence such as the shaman exerts is only one of several possible solutions to problems created by a lack of traditional leadership. Another possible solution would be direct retaliatory or punitive action by individuals with or without the consent of the society. If resorted to extensively, this course of action would soon destroy the small Kuikuru society. Another solution would be the actual practice of counter sorcery to avenge antisocial acts. This also would have destructive consequences and might well lead to the disintegration of the society through fear of sorcery and the conflicts that would arise from widespread suspicion. Or, as still another solution, individual families might move away and amalgamate with other settlements in order to avoid or escape from hostility. This course would surely soon result in the disbanding of Kuikuru society.

All of these possible solutions would decrease the cohesiveness of the society if not destroy it altogether. By contrast divination by the shaman tends to preserve the integrity of the society by reducing anxiety and conflict among its members and supporting the social norms necessary for its peaceful existence. The political role of the principal shaman among the Kuikuru suggests that a comparative study of societies with very permissive social behavior might reveal a correlation between the absence of strong political leadership and the use of shamanistic divination to reinforce social norms.

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