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## RHYTHMICAL ASPECTS OF CANELLA LIFE

by

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Life among all peoples follows a certain system of time or perhaps we may say falls within a certain rhythmic system. Unfortunately few studies have been made of the role played in the social life by these dimensions of time. So far as I know Mauss was the first who ever made such studies, in his classical work "Essai sur les variations saisonnières des sociétés eskimo" (*Année Sociologique*, IX, 1904-1905).

In my field studies in Asia I have attempted such a study and I shall here very briefly try to give an account of the model I used and give an example with South American material in the rhythms of the Canella society.

Man's societies and cultures are built up on a foundation of long experience. The results of responses which man has made to often recurring situations have been integrated into a system. All kinds of actions require time, and time being in many cases limited, man has therefore been compelled to coordinate these actions, i. e. to organize his time. Thus the rhythmic system in a society is built up on an economy of time and furthermore on expectancies; one expects that certain well-known situations will be repeated. As a matter of fact every rhythmic structure is built up of several coordinated systems. Thus there are some which have a purely physical basis while some are purely social. In the first place, one must go by the seasonal rhythms and distinguish these from life rhythms, i. e. the events from cradle to grave. Both

of these rhythms are almost coordinated, something like two cog-wheels in a watch. But it is necessary to remember that it is a question of two different systems. To these purely physical systems man is always adding a great deal, the life rhythm can be increased to extend over several generations, and even the seasonal rhythms can be changed. But there are also purely social rhythms as e. g. the family's growth, its dividing up, the starting of a new family etc., the founding of villages, and the dividing up the old ones.

It is relatively easy to find out such rhythmic systems through field studies without living a very long time with a tribe. In the first place it is necessary to observe the annual cycle or perhaps still better the cycle of production on the one hand and the cycles of life on the other. These latter are relatively easy to find out by examining in the usual way the life of the individual from cradle to grave. The purely social rhythms, how the families and other social groups, the villages and other local groups, change rhythmically one can find out by studying small differences, both quantitative and qualitative, existing between the groups.<sup>1)</sup>

Within the rhythms there are often certain activities which dominate. Within the seasonal rhythms it is partly a question of subsistence activities and generally it is one such activity that is dominant. It is this one that determines the rhythms, the other activities must adapt themselves to this one. Everything thus is dependent upon that kind of ecological key factor which prevails. Thus it varies according to whether the people are farmers, hunters, collectors and so forth and according to the technique used. Within the life rhythms it seems to be the main values which dominate. If one has the belief, for instance, that one should preserve the life power of the dead, the soulstuff, or something similar, one can be sure that these values will influence all important ceremonies of life. The festivals which have to do with subsistence

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<sup>1)</sup> K. G. Izikowitz, Lamet — Hill Peasants in French Indochina, in *Etnologiska Studier*, vol. 17, Göteborg 1951. P. 358 *seq.*

appear in the seasonal rhythms. But the life ceremonies must of course be placed in some part of the year and through this placing they come to be connected with the seasonal rhythms. As a matter of fact the life ceremonies are exceedingly important points. The surplus of production is often accumulated just for these celebrations where all transactions are increased to a maximum.

I thus consider all such rhythms as entities and the individual activities within them should then complement each other for the final end. This is only a hypothesis, I cannot unfortunately illustrate sufficiently with the Canella material.

But all the activities are carried on within the frame of the structure. One can compare it with a picture where the structure is the horizontal cross section and the rhythms the vertical. The structure and the rhythmical systems thus complement each other.

What we thus can arrive at are some social dimensions, a part of the total mechanism of the society or a part of the great system in which the march of life flows on. What we can observe during our field work is only a cross section of time. But by finding out the rhythms we are getting a considerably more complete picture of the whole social life.

I should like to illustrate this with the Canella society and the material for this is taken from Curt Nimuendajú's very valuable field work on the Eastern Timbira.<sup>2)</sup> That I turn especially to the Canella is because his description of the ceremonies refers to this tribe. There is also a personal reason, and that is my pleasant memory of my friend, who during his visit to Göteborg spoke so much about the Canella. To Nimuendajú's excellent field work and publications we are greatly indebted.

Nimuendajú's material is extraordinarily rich and each detail is thoroughly described. But the thing that is true for all field work is that when one wants to consider the material from a new point of view, there is not always

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<sup>2)</sup> Curt Nimuendajú, *The Eastern Timbira*. University of California Publications in American Archaeology and Ethnology, vol. 41, Berkeley 1946.

a sufficient amount of it. His material is very rich in descriptions of ceremonialism and symbolic actions, which are not always easy to interpret but can possibly first be interpreted through thorough comparisons.

In the Canella society the social ceremonialism plays a dominant role. It has become the main thing and therefore it is not always easy to reconstruct the values and principles on which the ceremonies are based.

Even if one in many societies can establish the role of the ceremonialism, it is not always easy to interpret its meaning. One must assume that every social action has or has had a goal, and to reach this the esthetic manifestations play an important role. After the original dominant goal has been reached the ceremonies often remain. Such has been the development in many societies with extremely old rites which finally have been changed into festivals.

At the same time, however, this ceremonialism is of great importance to the unity of the group and the maintenance of the structures. As long as the ceremonialism is repeated, the social system and its rhythms are maintained.

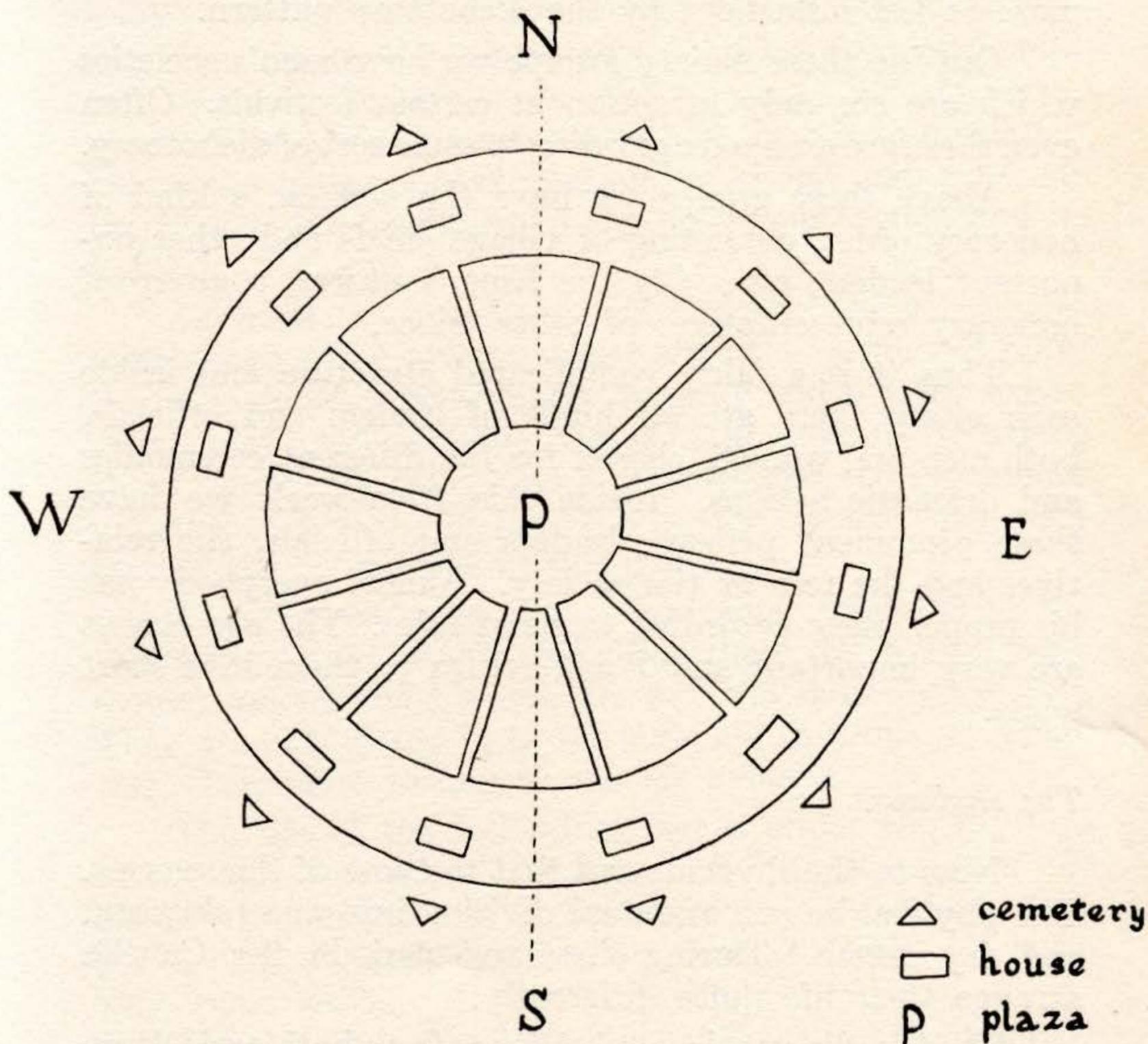
#### *Structural features.*

The Canella are organized in extended matrilineal families which are matrilocal and where the women are the owners of houses and the land. The men visit each day their original family and are cared for there in case of illness. They are buried back of their mother's house.

The village is round, the houses ranged in a circle round an open place, or plaza, which is the center for ceremonies. From this point there are radial paths to each house. And from the village there are straight roads on which the famous log-races are held.

The village is divided into two halves, an eastern and a western half, corresponding to two exogamic moieties. This moiety organization has no ceremonial significance, but is only concerned with regulation of marriages. The pattern of moiety is repeated and in addition to those

moieties just mentioned they are also non-exogamous, rainy season moieties and plaza moieties. These seem to have been associated formerly with the exogamous moieties but are nowadays independent and have other functions than their original ones.



Schematic plan of a Canella village

During the rainy season (April — September) there are no larger ceremonies, and at that time the community is arranged in rainy season moieties which are also east and west halves, and even with other antitheses such as day and night, etc.

The so-called plaza groups which consist of six men's groups are also divided into two moieties, even these having nothing to do with the exogamic moieties. Their function is ceremonial. Nimuendajú supposes that these are original clans. We have finally age moieties according to which the age classes are divided. But everything is more or less influenced by the dichotomy pattern.

Outside these moiety groups we have men's societies which are six, only in action at certain festivals. Often even these are grouped according to some sort of dichotomy.

Above these groups we have the *hamrén*, a kind of honorary order, consisting of village chiefs and other important leaders, especially the King Vultures, a group of honorary representatives of other tribes.

Thus it is a fairly complicated structure and inside each group there are all kinds of leaders and officials, both men and women, chosen for the different ceremonies and dramatic actions. Inside this framework we have these prominent persons, leaders and officials, the relatives and the rest of the society. Almost everybody has his proper place according to strict rules. The age classes are very important and I will return to them in a short while.

### *The rhythms.*

Now to the rhythms and first to those of the seasons. The physical base is the dual division into one rainy and one dry season. During these two periods, the Canella arrange their life quite differently.

The Canella get their subsistence from both agriculture and hunting. Collection and fishing play an inferior role.

Farming has become more and more dominating as hunting has been reduced, because of new settlers and the rapid disappearance of game. Before this happened hunting was a dominating factor and collecting played also a big part. Farming in the galeria forests was a very primitive kind, one clears a bit of forest and starts sowing and planting, later returning for the harvests. In olden

times maize, yams, a species of *Cissus*, and sweet potatoes were the main crops. But later on the people went in more for manioc and more especially rice which require more care and labour with the effect that agriculture seems now to dominate the rainy season.

Hunting is, however, still important, particularly because it was necessary for the ceremonies. Collective hunting is therefore a common feature at every festival.

Thus during the rainy season there are few ceremonies and they have mainly to do with farming. For the sweet potatoes one has a ceremony which comes immediately before the maize is harvested and a special man conducts the rites at the beginning of the maize cultivation and its harvest.

As usual there is log-racing and the few ceremonies which take place are organized after the pattern of rainy season moieties. Sometimes the rainy and the dry season ceremonies overlap. This Nimuendajú explains by saying that formerly the rainy season moieties and the exogamous moieties coincided and that the western moiety then took care of the ceremonies to this point.

The dry season is almost exclusively devoted to the year's important ceremonies. But these dry season ceremonies among the Canella are not the same every year. They are only fitted in to the seasonal rhythms, although they themselves belong to the life cycle.

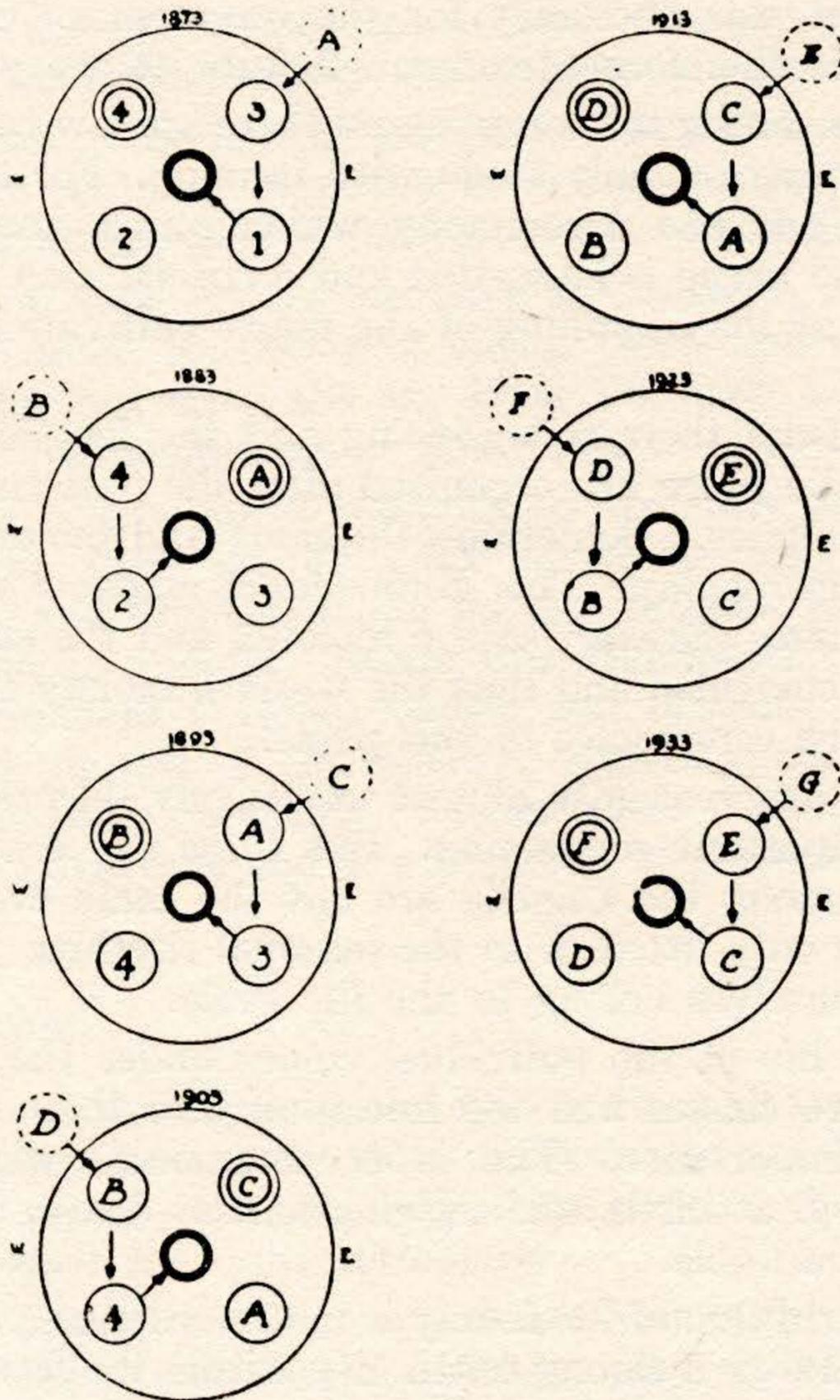
The life of the individual comes under the rhythms of the age classes and the initiation into these is of the utmost importance. The other ceremonies which take place, e. g. at birth, name-giving and at death, are in no way remarkable.

The rhythm of the family is not mentioned and apparently it shows a strong continuity within the frame of the matrilineal extended family.

The same thing is true of the local groups, especially the village rhythms. The Canella villages are not very stable. And a split is possible due to the fact that the land belongs to the entire tribe and not the village itself. Unfortunately there is no material about this. We must

therefore concentrate on the rites of initiation and age classes. I have already mentioned that these are divided into two moieties.

In each such moiety there are two age classes and each of these has its special place on the plaza.



The position of the age classes on the plaza during seven different initiations.  
Broken circle : uninitiated boys. Double circle : the *pepyé*.

When one has been initiated into the Western moiety one begins in the Northwestern corner and is then later removed after twenty years down to the Southwestern

corner, after which in another twenty years one comes into the center of the plaza and belongs to the councillors, no longer to any age class. The moieties alternate so that the initiates come in one time from the West and next time from the East and at the same time the rearrangements are carried out.

The initiation ceremonies take place only during the dry season which is called the *vu'té* season. *Vu'té* are girls associated with the age classes. If there are no initiations going on during the dry season, other ceremonies are scheduled for that time. They are of three different kinds and are performed by the men's societies. They are generally very well organized and different officials function. There is a special sequence of songs, dances of all kinds, distribution of food and other ceremonial gifts and above all log-racing, the famous competition between groups of moieties of various kinds. This is, as is well-known, the national sport of this people. Log-racing goes on between two teams representing two moieties. And the logs are of many different kinds, some very small and light, others very heavy up to about 100 kilograms. The distances run vary from short distances up to about 17 kilometers across the hills, sandy slopes etc. and require most impressive strength. This log-racing is in almost every ceremony and there are strict rules to follow.

There is one important thing about these ceremonies, and Nimuendajú stresses it several times, and that is that they have rarely anything to do with religion. Religion does not seem to play any very important part with the Canella. Nimuendajú's descriptions are tremendously rich in detail and for those who are interested in social ceremonialism his description is a real gold mine of valuable facts.

There are, first of all, always opening and closing ceremonies, some of which are more or less dramatic, with the men's societies in action. Unfortunately it is very difficult and in most cases perhaps impossible to interpret the meaning of all these dramas.

*The initiation.*

All boys must go through the initiation and when they do this they at the same time form an age class which keeps together throughout life. The age classes are thus a product of the initiation.

Already at six years of age the boys begin to have some sense for age class solidarity, sometimes they like to play initiation, imitating the older boys.

In order to be initiated the boys have to perform twice two distinct ceremonies, the *ketuayé* and the *pepyé*. These four ceremonies are spread out over approximately ten years. After that it takes about forty years to enter the council, whose place is in the center of the plaza. In this very long time rhythm the whole society or the whole village takes part. Thus it is a part of the whole village rhythm. This is true because everybody or almost everybody has got some official function. As a matter of fact all these ceremonies are actually one big ceremony and all the smaller parts, the different dances, songs, dramatics and sports are part of a whole that goes on over a long period of time. They thus must complement each other towards the same goal and if we knew what this goal was I suppose that it would be possible to interpret the different part actions. Unfortunately this is not always possible in this material. Both *ketuayé* and *pepyé* include an approximately three-month-long period of seclusion culminating in a final celebration. The *pepyé* seclusion is far more rigorous than that of the *ketuayé*. The terminal celebration of both phases finishes with a hunt and a log-race.

The principal object of the *ketuayé* is to bring the boys into contact with the spirits of the dead, the only association of religion with the ceremonial organization of the tribe. Formerly, according to a description by Pohl in 1819,<sup>3)</sup> the Canella often visited the cemetery to speak with their dead. The soul of a person first gains importance after death, and communion with the souls of dead people is the most conspicuous part of the Eastern

<sup>3)</sup> Pohl, *cit.* Nimuendajú, p. 234.

Timbira religion. The original belief, according to Nimuen-dajú, was that the spirits of the dead, lured by their own songs as regularly chanted by the boys, enter the body of the novices, who henceforth behave like the spirits themselves until these are removed by ceremonial purification.

Seclusion is an important part even of other ceremonies. In the second part of the initiation, the seclusion is said to develop the boys as rapidly as possible into strong young men. It has been said that it was invented by two boys who went into seclusion in order to avenge their parents killed by a giant falcon. The purpose of the seclusion seems to be to enter as a boy and emerge as young man. This might be a "Verschlingungsmotiv" or rebirth which in different form also appears in other Timbira myths.

The entire initiation is a prerequisite to matrimony, but the initiated are not obliged to marry. The *pepyé* ceremony includes instructions about the choice of spouses and married life. In the final ceremony the prospective mothers-in-law lead the initiates by a rope. There is often a marriage ceremony at the conclusion of the initiation. And it is then quite usual that several couples are married at the same time.

#### *Other feasts.*

Those dry seasons which are not taken up with the initiation ceremonies are filled out with other festivals of which there are three kinds. Only one of these is chosen at a time. One of these is a mask dance executed by the Mummies' society, one of the six men's societies, and is purely secular. In two of these festivals the rebirth motive reappears.

Two other societies collaborate with the Mummies. Their masquerade costumes are wholly secular, completely lacking religious significance.

The "Verschlingungsmotiv" is even found in another of these festivals, the *pepyarkwar*, translated "the

fish song". In this case there are seven ceremonial groups collaborating : the six plaza groups and the Clown society. There are a lot of dramatic scenes performed. Finally we have the *pepkahák*, imitating warriors. This festival is a result, according to Nimuendajú, of the desire of the last-initiated age class to enjoy once more the amenities of prolonged seclusion.

### *Summary.*

Summarizing, then, this all-too-short review of Nimuendajú's material, we may say : it is clear that we here have to do with the following systems :

a) moieties : the exogamous matrilineal moieties including the families.

b) the principle of dichotomy is repeated, thus giving several kinds of moieties with different functions. Nimuendajú considers that there was originally *one* moiety system and because the different moieties have had different functions, they have separated from the original one. In my opinion this is connected with the fact that they have appeared in the ceremonies as men's societies and that the ceremonial traditions have been inherited by different groups. The rainy season moieties and the exogamous ones would thus have been the same, so that one of the moieties functions during the rainy season and the other one during the dry season. By this I don't mean to say that principle of dichotomy is necessarily derived from nature's own rhythm.

Since the people more and more have gone over to farming and have done less hunting, they have not had sufficient time during the rainy season which has meant that the dry season has become the festival season, which coincides with harvests and plenty of food. The initiation has thus become dominating.

It is of importance to notice that even if there is competition in the ceremonies it is, however, not compe-

tition of the kind we meet for instance on the Northwest Coast. One does not gain prestige or honour if one wins a log-race. I should rather interpret the races as complementary actions. It is a case of two opposites which belong together and interact. The names of the rainy season-moieties also indicate this, sun and moon, fire and fire-wood, dry and rainy season, east and west, earth and water, day and night, and so forth. It may be that such a thought or principle is usual with many people. The strange thing is, however, that a complementing in a form of masculine and feminine principle does not exist.

Outside this dualism in nature's and the society's structure and rhythm we have the actual life rhythms. These are dominated wholly by the initiation. The marriage rites which are not especially striking are a consequence of the initiation, which is life's turning point. Here there takes place the communication with the spirits of the dead. The goal of the seclusion is to hasten the growth in order to become a grown-up member of the society so that the integrity of the village can be defended. Even though there are seldom performed any religious rites it is clearly necessary that the bodies of the dead are buried near the village. It is always stressed that every effort is made to bring the dead person back to his village. And according to Nimuendajú it is likely that the log-race is actually a way of practising bringing home the fallen warrior to his matrilineal family. This training has later become a pure ceremony, a sport. It is a moral duty to bring a dead warrior home.

To the initiation belong the age classes and their rhythmical changing of status. But this is a lifetime rhythm and influences the whole society.

Furthermore there are some other phenomena, the *hamrén*, which are supposed to have a special magic faculty and which are buried inside the village. And finally there are the men's societies. These latter are outside the whole thing and are a quite different kind of institution. They do not belong to the permanent structure or division of the society. They are instead a part of the struc-

ture of action. Their work is to dramatize the actions, to reach a goal through esthetic means. It is clear that they are specialists in dramatics, forming a society, i. e. the whole thing has been institutionalized. Is it possible that these dramatic seances are old festivals, which have had to make way for the initiation rites? But of this I don't know anything for sure.

It is in any case clear that many of these things represent rather late changes :

1) A change in the status of farming through Brazilian colonization, shortage of game, and new grains etc., with a placing of the ceremonies in the dry season, where the initiation rites become dominating.

2) Finally it is probable that the Canella society has become ceremonialized, that is that the situations which created the ceremonies in the past no longer exist. The social ceremonialism has become predominant and has influenced all parts of the social life. It has become a medium of maintaining the integrity of the village, without which this would likely dissolve.

What we have seen here are two rhythmic systems which are interacting and bound to each other but both of which can be considered as entities. In the one the ecological key factor dominates the rhythms of the year and in the other it seems to be the value system. This latter, however, does not appear directly from Nimuendajú's text and it can only be used as a hypothesis to explain such things as that the sick man must be brought back to his mother's dwelling, that he must be buried in its vicinity, and that the injured warrior must be quickly carried home, as on the whole is the case for all dead persons. There must exist a common world view or conception which is the base of those actions, an idea that the man must be brought back to his home or his village. It is possible that the dead form a unit with the relatives or that the dead in some way by his power is to influence coming generations. It is not sufficient to explain this only by the fact that one wants to maintain the continuity. It

is also necessary to indicate the conceptions reflected in these actions. Even if we cannot discover what these conceptions are it is obvious that whatever their nature, it is necessary that the injured warriors be brought home, which in its turn is connected with log-racing, fortifying of the body, and with this all the ceremonies involved in the complicated initiation. Therefore, the life rhythms, in which the individual, the family or the moiety are included, are adjusted to the satisfying of these predominant values which determine the Canella life rhythms within the frame of the social structure.

However, this is only an example. There are a great number of different systems of various types which certainly would be worthwhile to examine. In the cases where one knows the predominant values, one could probably explain not only the rhythmic systems but also the norms and customs which direct the actions and which guide them to the values sought for.