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Nimuendajú, Curt. 1940. The kupá, a cultivated plant of the Timbira of Brazil.  
[Traduzido por Robert H. Lowie.]. In *Proceedings of the Sixth Pacific Science Congress of the Pacific Science Association*, held at the University of California, Berkeley, Stanford University, and San Francisco, July 24th to August 12th, 1939., vol. 4, p. 131-134. Berkeley: University of California Press.

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# THE KUPÁ, A CULTIVATED PLANT OF THE TIMBIRA OF BRAZIL

By CURT NIMUENDAJÚ

[This paper has been translated by Robert H. Lowie. Snr. Nimuendajú has been investigating the Timbira and Scrénte under the auspices of the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of California.

The reader of the paper explained that, according to Nimuendajú, the most important crops of the Canella were the yam and the sweet potato—in contrast to the surrounding Tupi-Guarani, who stress maize and manioc cultivation. On the subject of yams he quoted a letter from Mr. Burkill, the British authority (July 10, 1939), who suggests that the Canella yam may be *Dioscorea trifida*.]

AT THE TIME of my fifth stay among the Eastern Canella (1935) my attention was directed to the kupá, a cultivated plant of these Timbira (Gê stock) inhabiting the steppes of the interior of Maranhão, Brazil. Of its existence I had long been aware, but I had always regarded it as one of the numerous varieties of yam, *inhame* (*Dioscorea* sp.), grown by these Indians. Since my previous visits had all been limited to the dry season, I had never had a chance to see any part of the plant except its dried tendrils.

In 1935, however, I discovered that the kupá does not produce tubers at all, being a creeper with edible stems. I succeeded in catching sight of a fresh-leaved sample creeping up a palm trunk in an Indian clearing. The plant bore some resemblance to a grapevine.

Many untoward circumstances then made further investigation difficult, but I did bring a number of cuttings to Pará, where at the beginning of the rainy season (in December) they were planted in the Botanical Garden of the Museu Goeldi, as well as in my own orchard.



Fig.1. Kupá in a Canella plantation, creeping up a palm trunk.

The plants flourished splendidly, climbing by means of the prehensile disks on their tendrils up trees and fences, whence they extended aerial roots toward the ground and formed stems of the thickness of a finger, with smooth, gray bark. They did not develop blossoms; as a matter of fact, except for two informants who credited the kupá with small red blossoms, all the Indians I interrogated denied having ever seen a blossom.

With the dry season the plants lost all their leaves, and the tendrils died down to from 1 to 2 meters from the ground; however, a fair number of fragments of tendrils,  $\frac{1}{2}$  meter to 2 meters long, remained alive. These segments, no longer connected either with the ground or the mother plant, remained hanging from the dried tendrils in the branches of the tree, over which the kupá had spread. In September the mother plants again began to sprout, as did the remnants in the branches, which sent forth earthward aerial roots and appeared to develop into as many new kupá plants.

According to the Indians, the kupá does not occur wild, though an inedible wild variety allegedly occurs in the galeria forests of the Apinayé country. The Eastern Canella consider it a characteristic constituent of ancient Timbira culture. Personally I have seen it only among the Eastern Canella, but Indians from the Western Canella (Apányekra) and the now extinct "Mateiros" (Čakamekra) told me that it was a species cultivated by their tribes. It is likewise mentioned in a tradition I recorded among the Apinayé.

Neither the neighboring Guajajára (of Tupí stock) nor the Neo-Brazilian settlers of the region so much as divine the existence of this cultivated plant, nor was it familiar to any of the numerous people to whom it was shown in Pará. So far I have found a single brief literary reference, namely, in the "Memoria sobre as nações gentias" (*Revista do Instituto Historico e Geographico Brasileiro*, Vol. III, § 12, Rio, 1841), by Major Francisco de Paula Ribeiro, the first historian of the Timbira tribes. There he reports in 1819: "Usam tambem comer uma raiz ou cipó a que chamam cupá, bastante carnosa, porém falta de sabor que excita a appetencia." (They are also wont to eat a root or vine they call cupá, which is amply fleshy, but lacks flavor that would stimulate the appetite.)

Ribeiro's uncertainty over whether the kupá is a root or a vine proves that he had not seen it except in the cooked samples he tasted.

The kupá has not yet been determined specifically. It is not comprised in Piso and Marcgraff's list (1648) of plants used by the "Tapuya" of Rio Grande do Norte. However, two botanists, P. Torrend and A. Ducke, who saw it in Pará, assigned it to the genus *Cissus*, a result confirmed in the Botanical Garden of Berlin.<sup>1</sup>

The habits of kupá suggest a species indigenous to the dry zone of northeastern Brazil. (Further, its nonoccurrence as a wild form renders probable the antiquity of its cultivation by certain autochthonous tribes of Gê stock.) Hence it would follow that farming is not a recent feature of these people—say, a loan from comparatively recent Tupí immigrants—for the Tupí neighbors of the Timbira have no knowledge of the plant.

Formerly the Eastern Canella grew the kupá on a much larger scale than nowadays, when its part in the native diet is virtually negligible, its occasional cultivation being only a reverential tribute to ancient tradition. The retrogression of kupá raising is due to the tedious mode of preparation: nowadays, with the possibility of boiling a potful of rice within half an hour, people are not willing to spend twelve hours on thoroughly baking the kupá.

When on my sixth sojourn among the Eastern Canella (1936) I attended

<sup>1</sup> Letter by Dr. H. Sneathlage, May 19, 1936.



Fig. 2. Kupá in my garden in Pará.

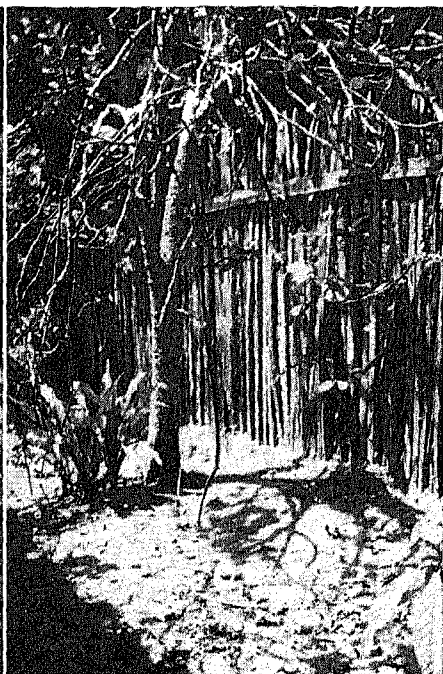


Fig. 3. Segments of tendrils hanging from branches of a tree, with fresh leaf buds and aerial roots.

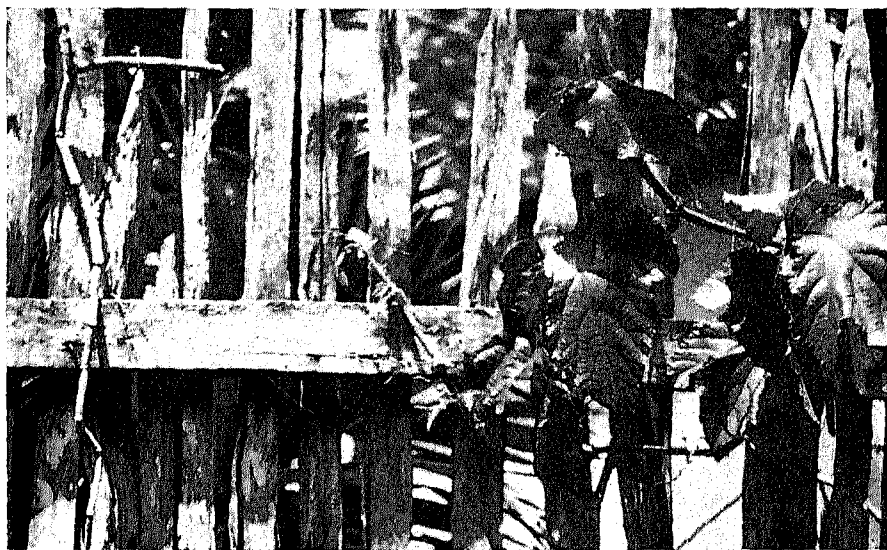


Fig. 4. Kupá tendril.

the culinary process, which started at sunset. The stems, about a finger in thickness and two spans in length, were tied together in little bundles and baked by the distinctive oven technique that characterized Timbira cooking in contrast to boiling. A heap of firewood supporting a number of rocks about the size of a fist was kindled. When it had burned down, the Indians spread out the remnants, put green foliage on them, and, next, the kupá bundles. The heated rocks came on top, and everything was covered with earth. The next morning, at sunrise, the earth was cleared away to remove the kupá, which was offered to the council of chiefs and elders, then as usual assembled in the central plaza of the village. Young people are forbidden to eat kupá, for its consumption would cause them to fall down in racing.

It proved easy to remove the bark, below which was a yellowish mass, obviously very starchy, with a thin woody center. The taste was agreeable, recalling that of boiled sweet manioc or of chestnuts. The best morsels were those only about 15 millimeters in thickness; bulkier ones were somewhat fibrous.

In earlier times a certain ceremonial accompanied the eating of kupá. While the women were gathering the stems from the cultivated plots, some men went hunting, and others, several kilometers beyond the village, prepared a couple of huge hardwood racing logs, "kupá-yōpí." In the evening the returning hunters' kill was made into meat pies, which were baked in earth ovens behind the houses, while the kupá ovens were prepared in front of the dwellings. Early the next morning there was a race with the logs from the site of their manufacture to the village. The competing teams were the age classes camped on the east and the west side of the plaza, respectively. When the runners had reached the goal, the kupá was extracted and presented to the councillors in the plaza, while the meat pies were served to the young people.