

THE ASSOCIATIONS OF
THE ŠERÉNTE

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GENERAL SOCIAL STRUCTURE OF THE ŠERÉNTE

THE Šerénte of the Rio Tocantins are of the Akwé branch of the Central Gê, which further includes the Šakriabá, extinct since the beginning of the nineteenth century, and the Šavánte. The Šavánte and Šerénte, while politically distinct, are essentially identical in language and custom, so that as late as about 1850 they were still frequently designated by the joint name "Šavánte." However, their local separation was at that time a well recognized fact, accentuated by the recurring feuds between these closely related groups. Several efforts at consolidation failed and became hopeless when about the middle of the century the Šavánte abandoned the country east of the Araguaya, even discontinuing raids in that direction.

Notwithstanding a greater sense of tribal solidarity than is customary among Brazilian natives, each Šerénte village is a virtually autonomous unit with its own council of elders, chiefs, peacemakers, and associational leaders. The houses are ranged peripherally in horseshoe shape, with the šiptató moiety on the south and the sdakrā moiety on the north. The bachelors' hut occupies the center of the settlement, and each of the five associations, including the women's, assembles at a definite spot within the horseshoe. Contrary to Canella practice,² the exogamic moieties are patrilineal and divided into clans, each localized on the periphery; and residence is patrilocal. Without tracing their descent from the celestial bodies, the šiptató and sdakrā are connected with sun and moon, respectively. In consequence the former chant during solar eclipses, being merely accompanied by the complementary group, while at lunar eclipses the parts are reversed. The sun reveals himself to his moiety through planetary go-betweens, viz. Jupiter and Venus; the intermediaries between the moon and his half of the village are Mars and the Seven Stars. The solar planets grant visions in the daytime, the lunar stars at night.

¹ The material, including interpretation, is due to Snr. Nimuendajú, who investigated the Šerénte in 1930, and in 1937 revisited them under the auspices of the Institute of Social Sciences of the University of California. R. H. Lowie is responsible for the translation and arrangement of the information supplied in typescript by the field investigator. The present article is a preliminary communication. R.H.L.

² Curt Nimuendajú and Robert H. Lowie, *The Dual Organizations of the Ramkókamekra (Canella) of Northern Brazil*, *American Anthropologist*, 39: 565 sq., 1937; ei., *The Social Structure of the Ramkókamekra (Canella)*, *ibid.*, 40: 51 sq., 1938.

Each moiety originally comprised only three clans, but both trios were joined by an alien tribe, yielding a total of eight clans in the village. This addition, however, did not imply complete assimilation, the newcomers being still regarded with disdain by at least part of the older clans. Each clan regards as its *narkwá* that clan of the complementary moiety which faces it in a N-S line on the opposite arc of the horseshoe. When a man dies, members of the clan *narkwá* to his own invariably decorate and inter the corpse.

The Šerénte permit marriage with the father's sister's daughter, while prohibiting that with the maternal uncle's daughter. The levirate was formerly orthodox; monogamy prevailed, but the rare instances of sororal polygyny were considered quite proper. Correlated with patrilocal residence there is masculine ownership of house and cultivated plot.

GENERAL FUNCTIONS OF MEN'S ASSOCIATIONS

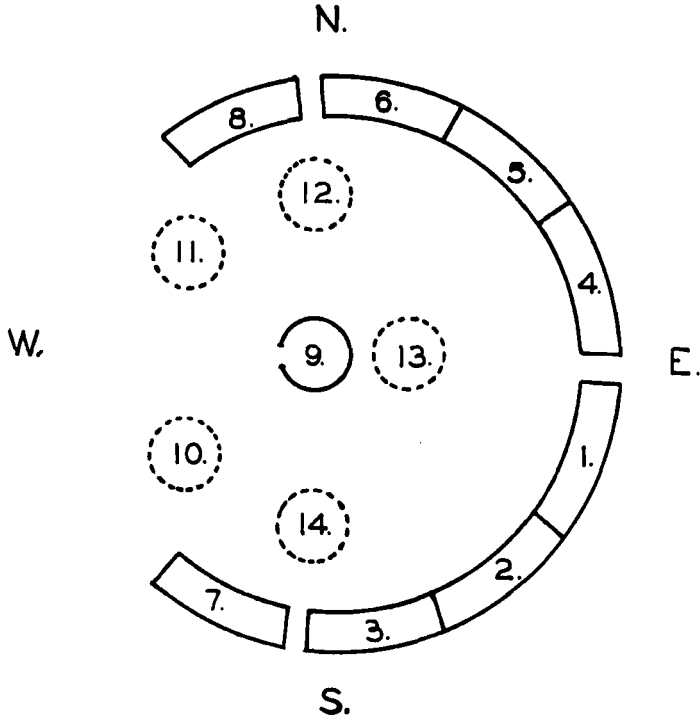
More important, both economically and ceremonially, than the moieties and clans are the four men's associations, viz. the *akémhã*, *krará*, *anñorowá* and *krierékmũ*. Every male without exception belongs to one of these, normally for life. As a rule, the elders of the village try to maintain approximate numerical equality in the four organizations; further, a boy does not generally enter his father's society. Apart from these considerations, allocation follows no fixed rule: As he thinks best, a father will assign his boy to this or that association, sometimes taking into account the lad's or the elders' wishes. The parent who chooses the *krará* decorates his son with their distinctive paint and emblems and leads him to that society's place of assembly within the horseshoe at some time when the members are performing some festive act in no way related to a novice's entrance. This incidental introduction, with the opening of a chance for the newcomer to act like his future fellows at a ceremonial occasion automatically makes him one of them.

The Šerénte in the aboriginal state³ hunt, fish, gather wild vegetable food, and farm. Conventionally the sexual division of labor can be formulated as follows. Women collect wild fruits. Angling, recently practiced by both sexes, was anciently unknown; the family jointly trap or drug fish, and men shoot them with bow and arrow; the chase is masculine except that women, too, may hunt without missiles, e.g. may dig out an armadillo. In farming, men make clearings; both sexes plant and weed; women harvest

³ The intrusion of neo-Brazilians has virtually eliminated hunting; in 1930 this was not yet the case, Šerénte of the aldeia Porteira being then almost economically independent. The above statement describes life prior to the inroads of civilization.

the tubers for daily use, being merely escorted to the plots by a man; and men bring in the maize crop.

Such a statement, however, ignores the important part played by the men's associations. Thus, the two most important wild plant species are the burity (*Mauritia flexuosa*) and the babassú (*Orbignia speciosa*) palms. The split burity leaflets providing cordage and basketry splints are so



PLAN OF ŠERÉNTE VILLAGE

1-3, 4-6 represent the clans of the siptató (Sun) and sdakrā (Moon) moiety, respectively; 7, 8 are the originally alien groups added to the moiety scheme. 9 is the bachelor's hut, 14 the site of the women's society, 10-13 are the sites of the men's associations.

generally utilized as to render native life inconceivable without them; on the other hand, the fruits are important, though not indispensable as food. The reverse holds for the babassú: Its extremely oily seeds are of primary significance, while the utilization of its leaflets in matting and ornament making is subordinate. Now, the stands of burity and babassú trees are not open to general exploitation, but are divided up among the four men's societies, and trespass would formerly precipitate a brawl.

Hunting, again, is predominantly a joint *associational* affair, as is the distribution of the game. If, as happens, two societies cooperate, the bag is divided into equal halves, each society then allotting portions to its individual members. Even a small group of, say, five hunters will share their spoils with all their fellow-members.

Again, in farming, it is not the individual head of a household who makes a clearing, but his society which performs the task for each and every member in turn: The two leaders' plots take precedence, being followed by the precentor's, then finally come those of the rank and file. Planting is a family affair, but for weeding a man may requisition the help of his society, in which case he goes hunting, has a pie prepared from his quarry, and with it entertains his mates at their regular place of assembly. Finally, while the women bring in tubers for daily use, the maize crop is garnered by a society for each of its members, successively.

In short, the associations figure so significantly in gathering, hunting, and farming, that the economic picture is distorted unless their role is indicated.

Ritually, the societies play no part in the principal Šerénte festival, viz. the Great Fast, but they organize the next ceremonial in importance, i.e. the feast in honor of a distinguished deceased member. A wholly secular performance, with impersonation of a male and a female anteatr by mummers, is executed for a number of years by the same association, whereupon the right devolves on another society according to a definite rule of sequence. Further, in battle, each society forms a tactical unit with a fixed position, the akémhā being in the van, while the krierékmū form the rear guard.

Every association organizes its own races with heavy logs. However, it is only on the rarest occasions that one society is pitted against another, the alignment normally following a tribal dichotomy that cuts across both associational and moiety lines. At possibly eight years of age, every boy is arbitrarily assigned to one or the other of two teams, to which he belongs until death. In an ordinary race, then, the society is split up into two opposing groups on the basis of this life-long team affiliation.

While the moieties own and bestow masculine names, all girls receive their names from the men's associations, each of which controls a distinctive series of feminine names, to be formally conferred with songs and dances when a girl is between three and five years old. She never gets her name from her father's society, but the precise principle that operates remains uncertain.

In the bachelors' hut, the obligatory residence of all boys who have

received as their status emblem a girdle and a neck-cord, the societies hold their distinctive sections. The anřorowá, who occupy the western segment, are followed eastward by the krará, akémhã, and krieriekmũ, successively. This arrangement is combined with a moiety division, so that the sdakrã are in the northern half and the řiptató in the southern half of the hut.

OFFICERS

Each society has two leaders, kwatrperekrdá, one from each moiety, who are selected by the elders' council and retain office for life or at least until very old. A former incumbent instructs them in their duties, which consist in directing all the numerous associational activities. The leaders of the krieriekmũ are privileged to go ahead of their tribesmen at the beginning of the great hunting period (October to January) and to select the site of the collective chase, being themselves preceded by two scouts.

All the leaders and their wives were honored after death by a mourning festival.

In every society there are two attendants, dawarnikwá, one being appointed from each moiety by the elders. Such functionaries are part of the řerénte pattern, being as typical as the girl auxiliaries are of the Canella.⁴ There are dawarnikwá at the Great Fast (p. 411), as well as for the bachelors' group. Even the boys' company, which prepares members for future participation in the men's organizations, has at least one of these associates.

These attendants, who carry as their emblem a wand colored red with urucú pigment, serve their respective societies for many years, but minister solely to associational, not private needs of members. Thus, they fetch firewood for the nocturnal gatherings within the horseshoe, provide drinking-water, make race-logs, carry the runners' clothing and weapons for them, and act as messengers. They are especially conspicuous in the mourning festival (p. 411), inviting all the other societies, erecting wind-screens for the guests, and presenting them with genipa for bodily decoration. They also furnish the mourners with basketry bowls to clap on their heads and smooth their hair for them with huge rod-combs. An attendant has the prerogative of giving members nicknames and otherwise making them ridiculous. The victim is not supposed to resent such treatment, but when abused beyond reason may seize his tormentor, lift him and hurl him into a thick bush, but so as to preclude serious injury.

⁴ Nimuendajú, *op. cit.*, 60 sq., 1938.

INITIATION

As explained, admission to a society occurred without definite formality. However, in about five-year intervals the akémhā—and no other organization—have a genuine initiation for members who are about fourteen years of age. The novices are secluded from the rest of the tribe for a period lasting up to three years, during which all communication with outsiders is through two boys. The neophytes' supervisors keep them from sleeping as much as possible; quarreling, singing, loud speech or laughter are prohibited. There are no special dietary taboos; as before seclusion, the boys abstain from liver and young animals. They hunt in groups of four or five to supply their needs, but also get food from the village through the two errand-boys. Each novice is painted daily with black and red pigments. Instruction relates exclusively to ceremonial.

Approximately in the last May of the last seclusion year a large new bachelors' hut is erected, and the candidates there join those youths from other organizations who are already of bachelors' status. Various performances follow, terminating in a log-race, and ultimately the novices receive the girdle and neck-cord which in other societies are conferred without seclusion (p. 412). Henceforth, like other wearers of these emblems, they are obliged to reside in the bachelors' hut of the village until marriage.

The last akémhā initiation occurred in about 1927.

ORIGIN MYTH

According to a tale, Sun and Moon successively demonstrated to the Šerénte the krará, akémhā, and anñorowá societies; and they decorated themselves accordingly,—the youngest villagers forming the akémhā, the next older the krará, a still older group the anñorowá. Subsequently a supernatural deer appeared to an old hunter in the steppe and ordered him to organize the krierékmū by gathering together the oldest men of the settlement.

The origin myth thus indicates a graded series, each society at first embracing only approximate age-mates. Interestingly enough, even nowadays the anñorowá address the krará as "sons," and the krará apply the same kinship term to the akémhā.

CANELLA HOMOLOGUES

Superficially, the four men's organizations might appear to correspond to the six festive societies of the Canella, but they are homologous rather

with the age-classes.⁵ This equivalence is suggested by the following considerations:

(a) The origin tale, postulating age-grading, is supported by such survivals as the above-mentioned use of kinship terms, as well as by native adherence to the legendary grading, which contrasts with recent facts since the organizations do not differ in point of age.

(b) The localization within the village periphery of the four assembly places for Canella age-classes and the four Šerénte organizations is similar.

(c) In both tribes membership in a preparatory boys' club, a veritable age-class, precedes affiliation with the men's societies.

(d) The restriction of an initiation ceremony to the akémhā is unintelligible in the recent setting. It is at once explained if the akémhā were once the youngest men's class, hence the one created by an initiation. Naturally, the initiation would adhere to the originally youngest group.

These parallels justify, then, the assumption of a common origin for the Canella age-classes and the Šerénte societies.

WOMEN'S SOCIETY

According to the myth quoted, immediately after the origin of the three earlier men's societies a young woman organized the women into the *ainōwapté* or *pikō* society.

The association assembles south of the bachelors' hut, but at only a short distance from the periphery. There is no formal entrance; female infants are taken to the reunions by their mothers so that as adults they cannot recall any time when they did not belong there. Like their masculine counterparts, the *pikō* have two leaders and two attendants, the former being chosen by the elders' council from among the wives of the leaders of the men's associations. The women selected must not be too young. At ceremonies they bear their husbands' decorative paint and carry long, plain staffs. The attendants are *krará* men selected by the elders; appointees are manhandled and exposed to ribald jests on the women's part. These attendants render services of the same type as their equivalents in the other organizations and likewise have the right of giving nicknames to their members. However, they hold office only between two successive *Wakedí* festivals, the most important function of the *pikō*, who lack any economic or religious significance.

This festival involves conferring the name *Wakedí* upon two little boys. Every morning and evening the women gather at their spot. Led by a precentress swinging a rattle, they proceed from their site singing and

⁵ Nimuendajú, *op. cit.*, pp. 52, 58 sq., 1938.

dancing round the village, then go back again. One of the attendants walks ahead, pretending to remove obstacles from the ground with a stick.

Towards the close of the celebration the societies of the maternal uncles of newly dubbed Wakedí boys go hunting for three weeks and pile up quantities of smoked game some distance from the village, the meat being separated in two heaps according to the hunters' moieties. At a signal the women race thither, each appropriating a slice from the pile deposited by the moiety not her own. The hunters race homeward with logs. In the final ceremonies the women decorate the two boys and dance with them. Throughout the festival the women organize numerous log-races. In these their leaders assign single members to the two tribal teams, while a wife belongs to her husband's team.

At the dance held on the last morning of the celebration the *krará* revenge themselves upon the women for the indignities inflicted on their two members when appointed attendants for the women. In a disguise the *krará* pounce upon the dancing women, attacking them with the horribly malodorous leaves of a swamp plant. For the *pikō* it is a matter of honor to withstand the assault and unflinchingly keep up their song; or—especially in the case of wantons—to repel the attack, which leads to a free-for-all fight.

Such attempts at intimidating the women are not unique. At the opening of this festival in 1937 men armed with sticks and poles pretended to bar the dancing women's path, but withdrew after menacing gestures. Sometimes, on the other occasions, two one-time attendants were seen sneaking near the women's site. One of them would utter a roar and beat the ground with a club, the other would wail in a shrill falsetto,—the joint act symbolizing the killing of a woman. While, of course, no woman seriously believed in such a possibility, the gruesome realism of the actors did not wholly miss fire.

Whether this performance should be either psychologically or historically connected with, say, the terrorization of Ona women remains a haunting question.

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