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Kamairaho: A Tapirapé leader

PROLOGUE

The Tapirapé are a Tupi-speaking tribe of Brazilian Indians. Their traditional territory lay in Central Brazil — west of the Araguaya River and north of the tributary which carried their name. In 1939-40, the author lived for over fifteen months in Tampiitawa (the village of the Tapirs), which contained some 150 Indians. At that time, the Tapirapé had already suffered from depopulation and from foreign disease but they maintained their aboriginal culture almost unchanged. They had rare contact with Brazilians; in fact the nearest Brazilian settlement was

several hundred kilometers away.

My companion during my residence with the Tapirapé in 1939-40 was Valentin Gomes, a Brazilian who acted as my guide and "camarada". Since 1940, the Tapirapé have been resettled on the Araguaya River and Valentin Gomes is now in charge of the Indian Post that serves them. I have visited the remaining Tapirapé Indians several times since 1940; my last visit was in 1965.

The essay which follows is one of several which I am writing on Tapirapé, Guatemalan Indian, and Amazonian-Caboclo individuals whom I knew well and who taught me as an ethnol-

ogist some important aspects of their way of life. Such sketches are highly personal in style and tone for it is my conviction that anthropological field work involves something of the "art of human relations" in which emotions, subjective attitudes and reactions, as well as subconscious motivations. My story of Kamairaho is not, then, a biography nor a life history. Rather it attempts to portray my own relationship to an important Indian leader and what I learned from him.

Kamairaho was in 1939 the man of greatest prestige in the village of the Tapirs. I had heard his name in the far away city of São Paulo from Herbert Baldus, the anthropologist who had previously visited the Tapirapé and I heard it again from Brazilians living along the Araguaya River who spoke of him as the "Capitão dos Tapirapé", (the Tapirapé Captain). Then, in late April when I entered the village for the first time, the men, women, and children who crowded around me kept pointing to one of the large dwellings saying Kamairaho! Kamairaho! And, I understood that I was expected to go to the house of this chieftain.

As I approached his house, several horribly emaciated dogs broke forth to be driven off with sticks by the villagers. Then, calmly through the door emerged a man of about forty-five years of age, short as are most Tapirapé, but strongly

built. He came to shake hands and embrace me in Brazilian style (he had learned this from the Dominican priests) and motioned me into the house. Exhausted by the fifty kilometer hike across the plains and through the forest, everything was confusing at first. But I sat in a hammock, drank water from a half gourd, and then ate the piece of wild pork and some of the rancid manioc flour offered by a woman who I learned was Kamairaho's wife, Kantuowa. Kamairaho stood silently nearby. He could speak only a few words of Portuguese but I felt that he had welcomed me. He invited me into the plaza to watch the lines of dancers, for I had arrived in the midst of *Kawihó*, the major Tapirapé ceremony marking the end of the rains and the beginning of the dry season. Kamairaho and I stood back from the dancers in the shade of the men's house — almost as honored guests.

As the afternoon wore along, I wandered about the village. At each house, people motioned me to enter and in each I met a mature man — Wantanamu, Urukumu, Kamanaré, Maeyma, and Karchiwanió — who were obviously men of high prestige. In each house, people pressed bananas, peanuts, yams, and other foods upon me. But, I soon returned to Kamairaho's house where I had left my belongings. I was still under the impression that Kamairaho was the chieftain of the village and

I aimed at working within the hierarchy of power.

My impression that Kamairaho was the single powerful chieftain continued for many days. It was he to whom our first presents were extended. Kamairaho made the arrangements for men to return to the river port to carry in the remainder of my baggage. I selected a site to build my house, no more than a shelter at first, just behind his dwelling. He seemed to have ordered the young men to cut the broad wild banana leaves to cover it. Each evening as the sun went down, I came to visit Kamairaho sitting beside him on a low bench in front of his dwelling talking very little but at least being seen by the villagers in the company of their leader. Through the young men who spoke some Portuguese, I learned that Kamairaho had decided to call me "*Chiriwura*" (my younger brother) and, as an eager field anthropologist, I learned that he was then "*Chirikaiura*" (older brother). Little did I realize the difficulties that would entail!

As I learned more of the working of Tapirapé culture and something of the language I learned more of Kamairaho and his position in his society both from others and from Kamairaho himself. Kamairaho had had two wives, previous to his present spouse. The small girl of about 8 years old called Ampitanya, whom I had taken to be his daughter, was his wife's

daughter by a previous husband. The adolescent youngster called Kanchinapio whom I believed to be his son was his deceased sister's son. In fact, Kamairaho had no children of his own — or to put in terms of the Tapirapé, none of his wives had conceived by him. But, it was publically recognized that he was the "father" of three boys in the village, since he had had sexual intercourse with their mothers during their pregnancy. In Tapirapé belief, all males who have intercourse with a woman during her pregnancy are equally responsible for the making of the child.

Kamairaho's wife, Kantuowa, was at least ten years his junior, but although gossips assured me that she had many lovers in the past, she was known in the village as one of the few women who granted her favors only to her husband. There was certainly a queen-like air about her. She carried herself erect and proudly, clearly the wife of an important man. She treated Kamairaho with great respect, covering his body with coconut oil mixed with red *rucu* dye and searching his hair for lice. Kamairaho no longer wore wrist ornaments nor painted his body with elaborate designs. This was for younger men. Kantuowa publicly entwined her arms about her husband — for Tapirapé couples show affection openly. Her daughter, and Kamairaho's stepdaughter, was treated with special care and I was told that she was "a beau-

tiful child" — one selected for special attention — who would be a "Captain" later.

Kamiraho seldom left the village to hunt or make gardens, yet he spoke of his gardens and suggested we visit them. In the multi-family dwelling, he and his wife and their daughter, hung their hammocks in front of the only door — a favored spot — where they were less apt to be bothered by the smoke from the many cooking fires. Above their hammocks in the eaves were his property — many strings of beads, gifts from the missionaries and expeditions; several bush knives; and bamboo tubes filled with the tail feathers of the macaw which were used to fabricate head-dresses for ceremonials. His property multiplied as our kinship was solidified — he received from us an axe, scissors, another bushknife, a blanket, a women's dress, trousers, several mirrors, salt, and many more strings of beads. There was no doubt that Kamairaho was an important man and he looked and played that role. He was calm, serene, and dignified, and, I found, he had a thorough knowledge of his people.

In time, however, I came to realize that Kamairaho was not the head chieftain of the village. In fact, the village had no single chieftain but rather each large household had its leader. And while these men might be considered to form sort of a village council, they actually never met as a formal body. And

all was not well between them. Between Kamairaho and Wantanamu, whose household was every bit as large as Kamairaho's, there was a long term rivalry. The two leaders seemed to differ in their "policy" toward the *Tori* (non-Indians). Wantanamu was reserved, almost sulky or sullen with Valentin and me — and he had evidently been so with Herbert Baldus and the protestant missionary who had lived for a time in the village. He came to visit us when we were installed in our house. He accepted our gifts. But, he avoided coming to our house when Kamairaho was present and he was sensitive to insult. He left our house once in anger when he was asked not to sit on a bag containing photographic equipment. Kamairaho, on the other hand, was known to like the *Tori* and with dignity he sought us out. Because the villagers knew of his attitude, we were directed at once upon arrival to his house. And, unwittingly we had become attached to his household, his kinship groups, — and, in a sense, his faction of the community.

Like-wise Kamairaho was at odds with Kamairá, a quiet and rather stolid leader of another of the large households. The basis of this antagonism was that Kamairá in his youth had killed Kantuowa's father who was a famous *panché* (shaman), suspected of working evil sorcery. Kantuowa fed the rivalry and antagonism between the two

men. She gossiped about Kamairá's wife and on days when Kamairá and his male kinsmen were away hunting or clearing garden sites, Kantuowa set the younger women of her household to openly taunt Kuchinantu, Kamairá's wife. One day, Kochinantu was driven to violence and she attacked and pulled the hair of one of these women. Then, she broke into tears. Despite these difficulties, the relations between the two men remained controlled and ceremonious. If thrown together, they would converse politely but they took care seldom to be in the same group. Kamairaho, when shown a basket manufactured by Kamairá, looked at it with some disdain and said, "I will make a good one for you." The reputation of Kamairá as a leader with many younger kinsmen and as a man of action who had actually killed demanded that their rivalry be highly subdued.

This lack of a central leadership and the antagonism and rivalry between the household leaders made any cohesive action on the part of the community very difficult. Kamairaho, for example, gave orders for the young men of the village to carry my baggage to the river port when I left for Furo de Pedra (a Brazilian village) in September but the men of other households complied only after consulting their respective household leaders. Again, when at the end of the dry season in November, the roof on the

men's club house had to be renewed, no one leader seemed willing to give orders for a *apatxiro* (communal work party). Kamairaho ordered the young men of his own household to work and they were joined by the young men of Kamairá's household — and finally by those of another household (or other households) until, finally one day, in an all out effort a true "work party" took form. Throughout Kamairaho, among all the leaders, was the one who had the pose of a strong leader whose orders were the law.

Although Kamairaho was not, as I had supposed, the supreme chieftain of this village, he was probably considered by all the men of highest prestige. His high position, I learned, was derived from several important roles which he held in his society. He was the patriarch of a large household, he was a leader of one of the men's societies or clubs, he had come from an illustrious family and his very name carried prestige, and finally he was a *panché* or shaman. From the accumulated effect of all these roles, his social position was high in Tapiapé society.

It was clear that Kamairaho's most powerful role was that of the leader of his household. In his household, Kamairaho was a patriarch over a group of related females and their spouses and children. Among the Tapiapé, when a young man marries he moves to the house of

his bride and he owes allegiances and a certain economic servility to his father-in-law. Kamairaho had no daughters but his deceased sister had two daughters. Furthermore, a man calls the children of any brother or of any male cousin "my son" or "daughter." In this way, Kamairaho had taken several women under his care — daughters of deceased "brothers" whom he called "daughter". Thus, in the big dwelling lived besides Kamairaho, his wife, her daughter, and his sister's son, five other women with their spouses and children. The men were Kamairaho's "sons-in-law." They were the men who cut away the forest for gardens; Kamairaho went only to plant the plot which they assigned to him. He showed us "his gardens" and offered us manioc and yams from the gardens of his whole group. I saw him go to dig manioc roots and to collect yams and beans but I never saw him do any of the heavy work of agriculture.

Kamairaho told me that his father and his father's father before him were called Kamairaho. Of course, as all Tapirapé men he had carried several names during his life — a child's name, a name during adolescence, a name as a young man, and finally Kamairaho. And, this famous name would pass, he said, to his sister's son when he was very old since he had no son. All of his names were inherited from his father, but he might have received them from his own

maternal uncle.

Such names brought prestige just as titles of nobility do. But, as a child he was treated in accordance. He had been a "*chirikakantu*", "a beautiful child" or "favorite child". Such children were traditionally treated with special care. During childhood, they should not play with others, they were waited upon, they were decorated with elaborate body paint to be beautiful, they were told stories, and, if Kamairaho could be believed, water was carried to the house to bathe them so they would not have to walk to the stream. They were truly destined to be people of high status, thus Kamairaho's pose as a man of dignity and importance was something he had been trained to perform. His stepdaughter was being treated as a "beautiful child" for both men and women might be placed in such a role.

Trained as he was for high status, Kamairaho had a fine "coming out party." Like all Tapirapé men, as he approached adolescence his hair was cut short; and his entire body was painted black. But then at about 13 years of age, his hair was allowed to grow. By the time he was fifteen his hair could be made into a large pigtail. Then, one day at the end of the rainy season in April or May, he was initiated as a man; he danced for 24 hours with a large lip plug of quartz in his lip, wore an enormous headdress of red parrot feathers, and was

the center of a men's circular dance. His father provided the decorations and it was his kinsmen who led the dancing.

Kamairaho was a "Parrot". Champukwi had explained to me what this meant, so when Kamairaho told me this I was not surprised. All Tapirapé men are members of one of two men's clubs — or in anthropological terms of ceremonial moieties. A man is either a "White Bird" or a "Parrot". Membership is inherited from one's father. Since Kamairaho was a "Parrot", and I was his "younger brother," I also became a "Parrot". But the complication does not end here. Each moiety or club has three grades according to age — boys, younger men and mature men. Old men retire from the clubs and take the side lines. Thus, White Birds were divided into *Wurancingá* (the boys or small white birds), *Wurancingió* (the young men or middlesized white birds) and *Wurancingó*, the middle-aged men or large white birds). Likewise the Parrots were divided into *Wurakuran* (boys or small parrots), *Anantxa* (young men or middle-sized parrots) and *Tanawe* (middle-aged men or larger parrots). Both clubs shared the same men's club house but each was assigned one half of it. When Kamairaho became a man he passed into the middle-aged section of the parrots (*Anantxa*) — the group that was most active in group hunts and in festivals. He soon became a

leader of *Anantxa* section for he could sing well and he was a good hunter. Had not his father before him led *Anantxa*? By the time I knew him Kamairaho had graduated to *Tanawe*, the oldest section of the *Parrot* association, but as his "younger brother", I was assigned to *Anantxa*, the group with whom I danced, during festivals and with whom I went on communal hunts.

In addition, Kamairaho belonged to *txankanipera* ("the place of the alligator"), one of the eight "Feast Groups" which were still functioning during my residence in the Village of the Tapirs. People told me that in the past when there had been fine large Tapirapé villages that there were more than eight "Feast Groups" but that some had disappeared as their memberships were diminished by deaths. The remnants of several groups had joined one of these eight. Both men and women belonged to "Feast Groups". A man inherited his membership from his father; women belonged to the Feast Group of their mother. The origin of these groups was explained in mythology: "The place of the Alligator", Kamairaho explained, referred to an original ancestor who long ago had ridden on the back of a huge alligator during his travels. Likewise, the names of other Feast Groups referred to an ancestor who lived in the mythical past. Feast Groups were active in the "summer" or dry

season. During this season, on some evenings, each group unites at its traditionally assigned place in the central plaza of the village to eat together. Often this is preceded by a communal hunt, or an expedition to gather wild honey; but, in any case, each adult member of the group should bring a contribution to the meal. Sometimes, man and wife are members of different Feast Groups but it is thought preferable for both to be of the same group so they may eat together. After sundown at the end of the meal, the groups sing their traditional songs long in the night.

Again, I was assigned to Kamiraho's *tantaoapao* or Feast Group since I called him older brother. And, less than three weeks after my arrival in the Village of the Tapirs, a feast of all groups was held. I brought "rapadura" (cakes of brown sugar) as my contribution to the *Txanukanipera* meal which was much appreciated for the only source of sweetening was the rather acid wild honey. Others brought a piece of roasted wild pork, manioc flour, boiled yams, and lima beans, recently harvested from their gardens. In an effort to ingratiate myself, I sent a cake of *rapadura* to each Feast Group. Then, my own group demanded more which Valentin begrudgingly provided from our larder. A total of fifteen to sixteen large cakes of *rapadura*, each weighing about one pound, were consumed. Some two months

later Valentin and I remembered this feast bitterly as we drank coffee without sweetening for we had run short of both refined sugar and *rapadura*. *Txanyanipera* was a strong Feast Group with many members and Kamiraho's rather generous contributions to their meetings brought him prestige.

Finally, Kamairaho owed high status, in part, to the fact that he was a *panché* or shaman. He was not the most powerful shaman in the village for Urukumu, Wantanamu, and Panteri were more famous for their cures and their relations with the supernatural. Still, Kamairaho had performed many cures and he was able to enter into relations with the supernatural. Kamairaho learned to be a *panché* from *Taowu*, his present wife's father who had been killed by Kamairá. His period of apprenticeship lasted only "one moon," he explained, but other young men may spend "moons" learning. During this time as a novice shaman, Kamairaho learned to "eat smoke" — that is, to engulf great drafts of tobacco smoke from his mentor's tubular clay pipe. Soon, the neophyte becomes ill and vomits violently with nausea. Often he loses consciousness but when he regains his senses the pipe is placed again in his mouth until he falls back ill and groggy again. Finally, helped to his hammock the novice should dream and in his dreams he encounters supernaturals — mythical demons of the forest or sky and ghosts

of the dead — who will become his familiar helpers in curing.

Some men, and in the past a few women, showed a tendency to dream like *panchés* while still small children. But Kamairaho had to learn and during the period of apprenticeship he observed the taboos against bathing, sexual relations (he was already married), and eating animals that “walk at night” such as the tortoise and monkey. He was rewarded by dreams in which he saw *anchunga* (ghosts of the dead) and several supernatural demons of the forest.

But Kamairaho explained to me, “I learned to dream only on the level of the earth” indicating that he was not as powerful as Panteri who had “visited (in his dreams) *é é chó* (the Pleiades) and *Kopia xawana*, (the Jaguar of the Skies)” where the most powerful supernaturals are found. But even so, one of Kamairaho’s dreams related to me late in my period of residence was dramatic enough. After treating a young man by the name of Anei, who was ill with fever, he retired to his hammock and in his sleep he traveled far away to a former village site. There, he saw the old houses (which had long since fallen down) and the ghosts of many Tapirapé. He saw and recognized one ghost as that of a man who had died six or seven years ago; the ghost carried an animal over his shoulder which he had just killed; he was all white and scattered a white

dust as he waked. And, in his dream, Kamairaho saw Anei. He knew when “he returned” (for dreams are travels to the Tapirapé) that Anei suffered from an encounter with a ghost.

I watched Kamairaho treat the next evening. He knelt by Anei’s hammock and began to engulf tobacco smoke, he became nauseous vomiting violently. Then, in a semi-trance, he blew smoke over the young man’s body, massaging his body toward the extremities as if ridding the body of a substance that coated it. Bystanders said that this was the “white dust” (invisible to us) which the ghost had cast upon the patient. Then Kamairaho staggered off to his hammock to dream again, and his dream predicted the recovery of Anei. And, in time this came about and Anei was well.

It was Kamairaho who tried to “cure” me when I suffered from malaria. My illness according to his diagnosis was caused not by a ghost but by another shaman (he hinted that perhaps it was Wantanamu) who sent a fish bone into my body. Although I did not see it, he massaged my body working upward toward the forehead and then sucking with his mouth he withdrew the “fish bone” spewing it forth in one of his attacks of vomiting induced by the tobacco.

Another success of Kamairaho as a shaman had to do with “calling a child” for the wife of Maeymi. The Tapirapé fully

realize the relationship of sexual intercourse to conception but they believe that the shamans control fertility. It is the shaman who, in his dreams, attracts the spirit of a child to a woman, so that with continued intercourse, she will conceive. Wanting a child, Maeyni's wife brought wild honey as a present to Kamairaho. This would induce him to dream and, so he said, it did. Sometime later, the woman conceived and she had a small daughter.

But Kamairaho played down, rather than made a display of, his shamanistic abilities. He was fully aware of the danger of being known as a powerful shaman — he knew several shamans who had been murdered during his own lifetime. During the rituals at the height of the rainy season (December) when the Shamans exhibit their powers by defying and "fighting" Thunder, Kamairaho was struck down sooner than others by the "Arrows of *Topu*", the small beings which Thunder sends down against the shamans. As a result, he was rigid in a trance until one of the more powerful shamans brought him around by blowing smoke over his body and massaging him. And, when his sister's son, Kancinapio, was ill, Kamairaho paid an ax, a pocketknife, a pair of scissors, and five tail feathers of a red parrot to Urukumu and a bushknife, and two strings of beads to Panteri to cure the youth. He said that he did not have the powerful su-

pernatural aids to allow him to make the cure himself. Then, when he himself was ill, three shamans took turns treating him during most of one night. It was characteristic of Kamairaho that he knew well how to draw the line between using the role of shamanism for prestige and power without allowing shamanistic power to carry over into the realm of growing suspicion — as it did for Urukumu.

Kamairaho's story is not, however, entirely one of success. He had difficulties in his society. Among the Tapirapé, he had many detractors, especially among the kinsmen of his rivals — Wautanamu and Kamairá. People complained, but seldom in my presence, that he was *ankantaum* or "stingy." They pointed out his behavior during the annual harvest ceremonies in May of 1940 just before I ended my stay in the village. At the time of the harvest ceremonies, men of prestige must give gifts to those of lower status who drink of *kawihó* — a brew made of water, a few grains of maize, manioc juice, and other odd ingredients. An individual offers this brew to a man of high prestige; he takes a mouthful spitting it out on the ground. Then, the individual of lower status dips out a large quantity of *kawihó* from the pot in a half-gourd container drinking it all. *Kawihó* causes one to vomit but the next day, the one who drinks it may demand a present of the chieftain whom

he has invited to "drink" with him. A man of prestige can be almost materially wiped out, if he accepts the challenge of several people but he gains in renown and prestige. But, he may reject the invitation, and if the first leader to be so invited to drink *kawihó* refuses, the pot is overturned and no more challenges will be made that year. In 1940, Kamiraho who had accumulated considerable merchandise mainly from the resident anthropologist was offered *Kawihó* first; he refused, thus ending the challenging and gift giving for that year. I was rather glad for as a younger man of some prestige, I was highly vulnerable and my stock of gifts were running low. Kamairaho, however, lost status in the eyes of his people by his "stingy" behavior.

On the whole, I came to agree as the months went by with some of his critics who thought him "stingy". Perhaps, by then, I had come to think somewhat like a Tapirapé. Also, it seemed to both Valentin Gomes and me that we had been rather steadily exploited by Kamairaho and especially by his wife Kantuowa. Both of us came to look upon her as a veritable shrew. She would come to our house with Kamairaho and survey our belongings and surreptitiously attempt to look into our packing cases. Then, she would send back women and younger men to beg. She kept a mental account of what gifts we gave to each Tapirapé

individual and she knew exactly who brought us maize or manioc and how much. Sometimes, it seemed as if she were stimulated her behavior by Kamairaho and it was certain that he schemed to relay the beads and hardware we brought as presents into his hands or that of his close kinsmen. As the months went by both Valentin and I came to resent Kamairaho and his apparent control over us. We became more friendly with Kamairá, one of his rivals. Even Champukwi became openly critical of Kamairaho, after all he had been raised by Kamairá and perhaps fed our irritation. Perhaps, our irritation was the result of *mal de forêt* — of being cut off from people of our own culture for so long.

But as the time for us to leave approached, Kamairaho planned the initiation Ceremonies of Kancinapio, his sister's son. For him this was a big occasion. He restrung his numerous beads, he fabricated the enormous headdress of red parrot feathers, brought out the long white quartz lip plug, and his wife and daughters spun cotton string for wrist and arm ornaments — all this for Kancinapio's initiation. His household was busy for days preparing food for the occasion. Then, on the day that Kancinapio danced in all of his finery, I stood by Kamairaho's side proud for his accomplishments. My irritation at Kamairaho, even his wife Kantuowa, vanished. I un-

derstood that he was a man who understood his own society and culture. And, he had exploited me to achieve the means to give prestige to his sister's son. After all, it was as if a naive Rockefeller, rich in beads and other objects, had suddenly appeared in the midst of a group of college presidents. He had protected my interests, yet gracefully, and with dignity, he had mildly manipulated the strange *Tori*.

Kamairaho had taught me much about *Tapirapé* life as a "key informant" — for while he was never as patient as Champukwi or as wise about shamanism as Urukumu he made a point of consciously instructing "his younger brother." But, more important, he had given me a position in the *Tapirapé* village, a position in the social structure. As Kamairaho's "younger brother," I had kinsmen, was a member of associations, and by extension a member of a household. So with my new found objectivity, I made presents to Kancinapio, who after all was also my "sister's

son" and who always treated me with great respect and deference. For, as the *Tapirapé* have it, "a boy never lets wind that his mother's brother does not smell." The next day when I left for New York, Kamairaho accompanied me as far as the river port. Kancinapio carried my personal belongings.

In 1953, when I returned to visit briefly with the *Tapirapé*, I found Ampitanya and Kancinapio — my "elder brother's daughter" and my sister's son. Kamairaho had died several years before. His wife had survived him, but then after the savage Kayapo had attacked and the *Tapirapé* had been driven to the Indian post, she too had died of a common cold. Ampitanya and Kancinapio and their spouses lived in a large dwelling with a few remnants of their kinsmen. They had carried on the tradition of friendliness to outsiders for they spent much time with the "Petites Soeurs de Jesus", three French nuns, disciples of the famous Père de Foucauld who had come to live with the *Tapirapé*.

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