Review Article

WILLIAM H. FISHER
College of William and Mary

THE CATCH OF THE LONG HAUL IS LARGE–BUT WHERE TO PUT IT? THE WORK OF WILLIAM H. CROCKER

The Canela (Eastern Timbira), I: An Ethnographic Introduction. **WILLIAM H. CROCKER. Smithsonian Contributions to Anthropology, Number 33. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990. xiv + 487 pp. $136.50 (paper). ISBN 0-8357-2753-X.**

Robert Lowie recognized the limits of what even an industrious ethnographer might learn during relatively short stays in the field: "all the techniques ethnologists have devised are still no equivalent for viewing the life of the Indian as it might have been experienced by an intelligent squaw-man or trader in a continued intimacy of twenty years" (1956 [1935]: xxi). The man who became Lowie's chief collaborator in Brazil was himself a devotee of fieldwork. He was an expatriate German who legally adopted his Guarani given name, Nimuendajú, and a tireless fieldworker (and erstwhile archaeologist) who spent at least part of every year during the period 1905-1942 as a participant observer among numerous indigenous peoples of Brazil. As befits a man who instinctively grasped the importance of naming in the constitution of identity, during the latter part of his life Nimuendajú settled on the Gê speaking peoples as his chief ethnological project. His work on the Gê produced several classic monographs and contributions to the *Handbook of South American Indians,* as well as articles co-authored with Lowie that appeared in English. Of Nimuendajú's writing on the Gê–to which all Gê students without exception are indebted–none are as thorough as the monograph on the Eastern Timbira. It is this tradition of Nimuendajú and his monographic treatment of the Eastern Timbira that looms as the silent interlocutor, forebear, and partner to Crocker's new book.

Crocker's work makes a notable contribution to several areas of interest, both to specialists in lowland South American societies and to other anthropologists. While Gê ethnography has always made demanding reading, the valuable commentaries in *The Canela* are inseparable from the ethnography in which they are embroidered. Some discussion of the findings below should help spotlight the magnitude of Crocker's contribution, although, of course the elaboration and detail of Canela life precludes any easy encapsulation.

The Eastern Timbira encompass a number of related peoples residing east of the Tocantins river in the Brazilian states of Maranhão, Tocantins and Pará–the Krahó, Krikatí, Pukobyé, Gavião, as well as the Canela[1] and Apanyekra. Inhabiting the savanna country that skirts the densely forested areas further to the north and west, the Eastern Timbira are renowned for their moiety and age organization and ubiquitous log races. As of 1986 the Eastern Timbira numbered approximately 3500 individuals while there were 791 Canela and 294 Apanyekra. Another related group, the Apinagé, were considered sufficiently different by Nimuendajú to set them apart as "Western Timbira." All speak closely related languages (identical in the case of the Krahó, Apanyekra and Canela) and refer to one another by the term "*me-hii.*" Crocker glosses the term as "indians like ourselves" and this turns out to be revealing of the changing configurations of indigenous identity in central Brazil. In the late 1970s Crocker found that the Canela included the more geographically and linguistically distant Kayapó within this category although they live far to the west. No doubt the Kayapo's current status as forceful indigenous advocates makes them desirable relations. At the time of Nimuendajú's study during the 1930s the *me-hii* term was restricted to the proximate Eastern Timbira peoples.

The organization of Crocker's volume is geared to providing an overview of the Canela and to provide a basis for subsequent in-depth publications on specific topics such as the relationship and festival system and cognitive orientation. The first section entitled "The Field Situation" describes Crocker's involvement with specific individuals from the Canela and surrounding areas while detailing his research orientation, technique, field routines, and experiences. The second section, "The Ethnographic Background," generally contextualizes the Canela in terms of ecology, subsistence and ceremonial cycles, linguistics, geography, history, and contact with wider regional systems over more than a century. Daily cycles of activity and the life trajectories of males and females receive attention and Canela sport, body painting, art, and artifacts are placed in a general cultural context. "Social Organization" is the subject of the third section in which Crocker outlines the socialization process and the categories and divisions comprising the ceremonial, political, and subsistence spheres. Canela kinship and marriage, and parallel institutions of formal and informal

friendship, receive extensive attention. The ethnographic background having been laid, Canela categories are described as they are invoked in the "Ceremonial and Belief Systems." The analytic contrast centers on the "festival system" involving the community as a whole and "individual rites" sponsored by kin of participants in life cycle ritual passages. Finally, the fifth section, "Canela Structural Patterns," attempts to give a sense of the pattern underlying Canela life by describing a cognitive orientation and phenomenological order derived from extensive discussions with the Canela.

It is a sign of the times, of course, that today a monographic treatment of a tribal people focusing on such topics as social organization and a broad range of observational and other kinds of data not neatly and explicitly erected in support of some theoretical exposition appears as something of an anomaly. However, the essential ingredients that characterize Crocker's work need to be seen within a tradition of ethnology of native Americans of which Nimuendajú and Lowie are prominent. The introduction by the late Charles Wagley, long-time observer and recorder of Amazonian indigenous and backlander traditions, serves notice of the link between Crocker's work and that of the earliest modern ethnographic treatments of the Gê. If Nimuendajú's work is currently regarded as formative it is because of his wide ranging data, particularly regarding ceremonials and social organization. Nimuendajú was also acutely aware of the theoretical interest among broader anthropological circles in issues such as dual organization to which he paid close attention.[2] This is the dual tradition of the Timbira and their monographic treatment by Nimuendajú to which Crocker is heir. Crocker's anthropological goals and method of presentation must be understood against this backdrop. The work eschews the trendy in remaining faithful to an attempt to provide a multiform documentation of the changing lifeways of an indigenous people. The only caveat is that the rich material throughout the monograph tends to overwhelm and undercut Crocker's tentative use of an acculturation paradigm to explain change among the Canela. In rethinking the process of "acculturation" it is worthwhile to ask questions about the Canela ideology of incorporation and articulation expressed in ritual and social organization against and in engagement with the political economy of the backland savanna of Maranhão. One hardly detects a single acculturative movement among the Apanyekra or the Canela but rather a dynamic to which both the indigenous communities and outside forces contribute.

The book's organization makes it ideal for an overview of topics, consultation, and cross-referencing but rather daunting reading. An elaborate system (truly Gê-like in its complexity) heads each paragraph or group of paragraphs with a series of letters and numerals so that it may be located on a similarly coded outline of the book's subject matter. The ethnologically minded reader, wishing to find easily accessible comparative material on kinship, social and ceremonial organization, socialization, and cognitive orientations of the Canela will find much to be thankful for both in content and method of presentation. In this sense one can envision a role for this monograph much like its acknowledged predecessor, Nimuendajú's *The Eastern Timbira*. There is a generosity of spirit revealed in the organization as well. The presentation mainly aims to enhance the work as a reference to the empirical material it contains rather than to celebrate the author's own erudition. This is a book perhaps destined to be reread rather than read, as was (and is) Nimuendajú's original monograph and the early publications of the Bureau of Indian Affairs.[3]

Crocker first began his fieldwork in 1957. Since then the Canela have suffered many changes, as has the field of anthropology. The reader is forced to ask how the material, as a product of observations made over decades and in different conditions, was pummeled into shape for presentation. Where and how does the author come to rest, tie things up, draw lines around the theory and subject matter? How does one deal with change when it simultaneously encompasses one's subject matter, theoretical perspective, one's audience, and the potential use the exposition will be put to? Although Lowie hints it should be the case, experiences of twenty years (or more) as a recorder of a people's lifeways do not overcome the shortcomings of field techniques—they add to them! In part this feeling of having no resting place of either a sociological datum point or an academic landing field reflects itself in the text, although the issues remain largely unacknowledged. Indeed, many social scientists are currently concerned with problems of boundaries, historicity, and representation. In short, exactly the kinds of concerns involving the organizational and methodological decisions made to order the material in its present monograpic form have themselves been made the topic of investigation and critique. But in this respect such anthropological critiques show themselves to be partial, less undermining or excluding of certain approaches than in examining the epistemological status of what passes for anthropological knowledge.

While a discussion of the issues that long-term fieldwork raised for Crocker would have been welcome, the book is largely successful in providing a comprehensive overview of Canela life. One learns a lot about the Canela and their surroundings and is treated to an extremely detailed account of fieldwork procedures. There is an admirable exposition of Canela as individuals and their interactions with Crocker and how these interactions were shaped by their social position within Canela society. By placing the ethnographer in the action and by showing how the action itself changes over time, the presentation actually tends to undermine the functionalist auspices under which the presentation is organized. Photographs are interspersed with the text and also comprise a concluding

15487180, 1992, 2, Downloaded from https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/jlca.1992.4.2.75 by Johns Hopkins University, Wiley Online Library on [22/06/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

album of almost eighty pages in which food preparation, household tasks, products of Canela manufacture, the natural environment, ceremonies, bodily adornment, as well as individuals and even the nearest towns are shown. The wealth and quality of the information cannot be overstated, and Wagley's introductory praise does not exaggerate: "with the publication of this monograph, the Canela become one of the best known aboriginal societies of lowland South America" (p.xiv).

The remainder of this review will partially unpackage for the potential reader, some of the major issues raised in the course of the monograph. One of the underdeveloped areas of Gê studies is gender symbolism (and sexual antagonism) and its relation to kinship and the oft mentioned dualist village layout and nature/society distinction. The issues are complex and the required brevity of this review prevents full discussion here. Nonetheless, I am convinced that Crocker's elaboration of agency, dualism, and ceremony goes much further than previous Gê ethnographers in assembling the relevant elements for a description of gender symbolism and relations.

Those who aspire to fieldwork as well as those who have already had the pleasure (or agony) will learn much from Crocker's account of what kind of information he collected, how he did so, and how he dealt with field logistics. The first chapter on "The Field Situation" would be a good assignment for those contemplating fieldwork in rural Brazil. The final chapter describes an innovative study of cognitive patterns and relates these to the dualist worldview and dual organization characteristic of the Gê. Chapters on kinship, social organization, and ritual elaborate the connections between institutional forms, social action, and nature/society relations that are of great comparative interest for lowland South Americanists. The extensive historical information and Canela representations of history and world view greatly extend our understanding of the articulation of Gê societies and the larger world of the changing Brazilian frontier.

We learn much about field procedure and one of Crocker's central achievements is in collectively and individually convincing the Canela that his inquiries were important enough to dedicate vast amounts of their time and energy. This requires skill in cross-cultural communication and creation of forms of participation that are personally fulfilling to indigenous people who must commit their time and their minds in circumstances not always easily reconcilable with their personal aspirations. One key source of ethnographic information was a Canela research council convened by Crocker in order to answer, discuss and clarify issues raised by the ethnographic inquiry. There is a good description of council members, and a discussion of why they were selected by Crocker. Crocker also describes the changing composition of the council over the years. Readers will be convinced that this group contributed in a number of ways to the quality of the information presented. Clarification in the case of disagreements was reached by means of consensus. The process of reaching consensus, of course, raises the issue of the exercise of power and the role of ideology within Canela society. The production of a single authorized view in place of multiple coexisting views is in itself a process of considerable importance. As Bourdieu's discussion (1982) of the uses of ambiguity in symbolic schemes reminds us, caution is warranted when rendering symbolic practice as a unified objective representation. As a corollary, there are many places in the text where Crocker relies on observation of behavior and one wonders about what is involved in reconciling consensual statements by the council with individual incidents of behavior. Such issues are basic to the ethnographic endeavor and Crocker's monumental data and long-term field experience seems ideally situated to contribute to such a discussion of method. This is all the more true because of the intriguing project of soliciting individual diaries over a sixteen year period. As the project evolved and continued even during Crocker's absence from the field, skills and interests of individuals were reflected in diverse roles within the project. In 1979, twelve writers were involved in the project, five as translators, five writing only in Canela, and three writing only in Portuguese. In the period preceding 1979, there have been 78,400 manuscript pages and cassette recorded spoken diaries produced by the Canela on their own lives!

The discussion of Canela cognitive patterns comprising the concluding chapter would have been impossible without the assistance of Crocker's research council. The unique contribution that Crocker has made to the study of cognitive systems of the Gê lies in his assumption that conceptual categories are not merely means of classification but arise in the course of structured interactions with the environment. In effect, he tries a method which combines approaches of both psychology and social theory (cf. Bloch 1985). He examines the dual aspects of classificatory schemes as both ideology of social arrangments and as orientations toward the environment, and through inductive methods constructs three basic schemes which alternately may be viewed as models of relationships or cognitive referents upon which relations are constructed. Crocker's method insists that patterns of relationships be consciously explicated and that such patterns of relationships be applicable to a variety of experiential domains—the former requirement is at variance with structuralist methodology and the latter with the methodology of ethnoscience.

Crocker confirms Lévi-Strauss' intuition that Gê dualism is imposed on a triadic system of relations. On the basis of Canela analysis, he proposes three triadic models–"fixed," "modifying," and "generating,"–that approximate the way Canela perceive relationship

15487180, 1992, 2, Downloaded from https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/lca.1992.4.2.75 by Johns Hopkins University, Wiley Online Library on [22/06/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License

structures. These are based on either "complementary" or "oppositional" pairs which inher in many domains of experience, including kinship and social organization, the natural world, subsistence, and qualities of morality. Crocker-Canela phenomenological investigations into space, time, and person hinge on the dynamic aspects of relations between oppositions, particularly as these are mediated and transformed. This processual logic mandates certain human activities and appears to make triadic formulations ubiquitous in Canela thought. Consideration of this evidence leads to a reevaluation of structuralist representations of social life in which human intervention motivated by culturally framed interests are absent.

The consideration of structural dynamics raises another important contribution Crocker makes to the study of Gê societies. His outline of kinship and social organization, the ritual and ceremonial cycle and the Canela explication of the social acts implicated in institutional arrangements lay the basis for a deeper understanding of indigenous notions of agency. The processual stress of Crocker in his description of ceremonials and cognitive patterns places notions of indigenous agency squarely at the heart of the kinds of dual oppositions and triadic structures formulated by the Gê. Cosmological and natural processes and their mediation are the focus of ritual activity, and Crocker describes ideas of cosmology, pollution, and shamanism as centrally related to the kinds of social action involved in ceremonials. When we have a better idea of how rites accomplish the action of establishing kin relations or life cycle relations we have a better basis to understand the pragmatic, symbolic, and political dimensions of institutional relations as these are modified or maintained in the often uncertain swings of frontier life. Crocker's analysis is based on the fundamental division between festivals carried out by the entire village, individual rites undertaken by family houses, and rituals dominated by the *prókhamma* council of elders but performed and owned by women or men of specific houses. This proves to be a particularly appropriate analytical level for developing comparative understanding of the Gê because the determination of what is "public" or "domestic" constrains the different social mechanisms through which resources are controlled and hence helps us understand Gê politics.

Comparisons with other Gê peoples reveal ensembles of comparable elements and structural relations whose ritual formalization has different *political* significances. These differing significances stem from the diverse ways relations are socialized within opposing domestic and public contexts, and which thus became subject to different sorts of domestic or public authority. Clearly, the Canela are regional actors who employ symbolic and organizational strategies in response to regional opportunities and pressures. For example, although invented only in 1907, the highest Canela status is a political and symbolic innovation which needs to be understood in the context of an indigenous system of meaning and authority rather than as an example of progressive acculturation. Crocker shows a greater awareness than other Gê ethnographers of the potential influence that the practices and beliefs of Brazilian backlanders may have exercised on indigenous groups. He also demonstrates an awareness of the multitude of traditions to which the Canela have been exposed. This kind of understanding, which is often neglected, is critical to reframing descriptions of Gê social organization and dualism. Anthropologists can now make use of the precedent established by Crocker's treatment of the Canela in which he both narrows the analytic field in order to take into account examples of strategy, politics, and conflicts, and he expands the temporaral and social frame to include regional networks within which Gê social institutions and related symbolism are situated. Crocker's data and insights will be providing material for comparative reflection for a long time to come. One now hopes that the many proposed publications based on the Canela and Apanyekra material that Crocker plans will quickly follow. They promise to yield a veritable barrage of insights and data of significant comparative importance and provide a new impulse to the study of indigenous Amazonian societies.

NOTES

1. Referred to as the Ramkokamekra Canela in some of the anthropological literature.
2. One could recall that accounts of Australian indigenous society by Fison and Howitt took their direction from Lewis Henry Morgan's interests in "primitive" marriage. Those of Spencer and Gillen were linked to the formulated interests of James Frazer on totemic organization (Kuper 1988).
3. Recall Lévi-Strauss wandering through New York City's bookstalls and his delight in obtaining used copies of these bulletins for a pittance in *Triste Tropiques*.

REFERENCES

Bloch, Maurice
1985 "From Cognition to Ideology." In *Power and Knowledge: Anthropological and Sociological Approaches*. Richard Fardon, editor, pp. 21-48. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press.

Bourdieu, Pierre
1982 *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, translated by Richard Nice. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Kuper, Adam
1988 *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion*. London: Rutledge.

Lowie, Robert H.
1983 [1935] *The Crow Indians*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.

Nimuendajú, Curt
1946 *The Eastern Timbira*. Los Angeles: University of California Press.

15487180, 1992, 2, Downloaded from https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1525/jlca.1992.4.2.75 by Johns Hopkins University, Wiley Online Library on [22/06/2026]. See the Terms and Conditions (https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/terms-and-conditions) on Wiley Online Library for rules of use; OA articles are governed by the applicable Creative Commons License