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CARAJÁ COSMOGRAPHY

By William Lipkind

The Carajá are an isolated people inhabiting a large territory slightly north of the geographical center of Brazil. During 1938 and 1939 I lived with the Carajá and collected a large body of textual material which forms the basis of the generalized presentation of Carajá world-view which follows.[1]

The Carajá universe is very small. Their own territory (Bananal), an island formed by a large fork of the Araguaya river is its center. To the west the great Chavante plateau stretches out to the huge river in which the sun goes down. All night the sun moves through the underworld and in the morning he comes up out of another river which is the eastern boundary of the world. If you paddle many days downriver, you will come to a village of the transformer Kanashiwe, the world's northern limit. An equal journey upstream will take you to its southern limit, another village of Kanashiwe.

The Carajá are perfectly acquainted with the middle portion of this parallelogram. Every beach, high bank, wood and lake along the Araguaya, every body of water and distinctive patch of ground within Bananal, is known and has a name. The tributaries are known in less detail and only up to a few days' journey from their mouths. Inland from the rivers their knowledge peters out after a short distance and you are soon in mythical country.

To the Carajá this world seems very large. The journey to its northern and southern limits is the initiation journey of the dead. No man since legendary times has gone very far toward the eastern and western boundaries, and, besides, there are two other dimensions, the underworld and the sky.

In the underworld, the original home of the Carajá, there was neither sickness nor death. As the emergence myth states, "More people kept being born. Nobody died. There wasn't room enough. When a man got old, he sat there in one place without moving. Kaboi couldn't add any more houses to the village. It was full. A new father was lying on the mat. It was time to eat honey. He went off hunting honey. While he was hunting he heard a *seriema* (Portuguese name of a bird) sing. He scooped a hole toward it and came out. He found fruit at once and decided to return. When he got back he gave his folk the fruit to taste. They found it very good and wanted to come out. They invited the others to come with them. Wobedu sent his folk out first and he went first among them. Kaboi came

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among the last. He got stuck in the hole. His belly was too big. He decided to go back. It was a dead leaf that he spied. He spoke to his wife, 'Let's go back. There is death there.' They went back again. Those that had come out were very happy. They were all happy. Then one of them climbed a tree. It was a child that climbed. He fell and died. They all mourned. Suddenly they got cheerful again. For this reason they were angry, his mother and father. His brother and sister, married to each other, were angry. For this reason there was keening. They say that there in the depths of the water there was no death."

In addition to being the original home of the Carajá, the underworld is also the home of the dead. Those who die a quiet death and are properly buried live there much in the same fashion as they lived on earth. But they are always a bit crazed and dangerous to the living. They must be placated by offerings and ceremonial observances. Otherwise they assume the form of poisonous snakes and bite those who neglect them. Those who die a violent death, who are clubbed or torn by beasts, become violent unappeasable ghosts. They are buried in the woods without arms or fire, in a position contrary to the traditional position in order to disorient them. A woman's girdle is tied about their eyes to blind them. Their desire is to kill, and especially to kill their closest kin. Their afterlife is extremely unpleasant. They wander about in a perpetual rage and feed on little birds which they eat raw.

The other dimension of the Carajá universe is the sky. Only the southeastern quadrant of the sky interests the Carajá. The rest is uninhabited forest. Starting at the Southern Cross virtually every star and constellation visible in the east is a named supernatural. The Milky Way is the shaman's road. When the shaman falls into his trance he goes up the shaman's road into one of the villages of the sky supernaturals. There he receives his power and knowledge and, if he has not eaten or drunk, thereafter is a curer. If he has, he becomes a sorcerer and killer. The good shaman after his death goes to live in the sky. He squats up there in the heat of the sun with his inexhaustible pot of food and gourd of water in front of him and his shamanistic rattle in his hand, held up to shade his eyes from the glare of the sun. At night he dances with the supernaturals. This is considered the happiest afterlife.

The earth and underworld are also inhabited by supernaturals. Every pool, every deep spot in the river, every bit of forest or savannah, has its supernatural owners. These are of two kinds. Many are amiable and beautiful beings who have friendly relations with humans. They are invited to feasts and impersonated in the masked dances. The others are ugly and dangerous monsters who cannot be placated. Their woods are avoided and nobody fishes in their pools.

The sorcerer has a wide variety of techniques at his disposal. He may

request a ghost to do his killing. In this case the ghost takes the form of a wild beast, usually a leopard. He may request a supernatural either to enter the body of his victim, or to turn loose on the victim his subject animals, particularly the alligator and piranha. The curing shaman sucks out the intrusive supernatural or persuades the ghosts or supernaturals to withhold their attack.

The dichotomy of ghosts and supernaturals is quite clear in Carajá religion. Ghosts are placated by calendrical feasts, run by a hereditary priest. Supernaturals are invited to the masked dances by a shaman who takes complete charge of this cult. There is little relationship between the two cults. There is a momentary appearance of masks during the Big-house Feast of the ghost cult, and an occasional offering to ancestors during the mask cult ceremonies.

What is of special interest is that there are many maleficent supernaturals who cannot be approached at all. There is no technique for handling them except keeping out of their way. The violent ghosts really fall in the same category as far as their relation to humans is concerned. And yet they are chiefly the best men of the Carajá who have fallen in battle against their enemies. In this curious bit of fantasy there seems to be a projection of the fear and aggression which are overtly present in the social life.

In recent years a few Carajá have been able to visit Rio and Belém. They have brought back a somewhat different picture of the extent of the world, a picture with which many Carajá are now familiar. It never intrudes into Carajá life. It is reserved solely for discourse with outsiders. No contradiction is felt because the two conceptions are never brought into the same universe of discourse. I was not able to detect any signs of skepticism. The Carajá is perfectly sure that he has a clear view of the true character of the world. The peculiar beliefs of outsiders are in keeping with their quaint behavior and lack of good breeding. A Carajá will not dispute about such things. He listens to the opinions of others with courtesy and curiosity but cannot be induced to take them seriously. It is much easier to pretend to agree. If you are a missionary, you will give him presents. Later he may have the additional pleasure of expounding your fantastic ideas to his fellows.

Two factors seem to me to contribute largely to the maintainance of this attitude. In the first place, the old way of life is still intact. When a man is able to find full occupation and joy in his activities, it is difficult to get him to doubt the premises on which they are founded. Secondly, every important feature of life is validated by mythical tales which are the Carajá history. The emergence myth, given above in its simplest and shortest variant, is one of many. I can do no more than mention some of the most important here. The full form of the emergence myth gives the names of all the ancestors who emerged and the precise social divisions which they

began. There are numerous tales of the transformer, recounting how every beast got his present form. There are accounts explaining the origin of other peoples. There is a myth validating the men's cult. Others explain the origin of the staples of life, manioc and corn. There is a myth accounting for the behavior of the sun and the moon. This body of history lends depth to the Carajá picture of the world. He feels that he knows more clearly how things are disposed because he knows where they came from or, at least, how they were arranged at an earlier time.

In conclusion, I should like to mention another curious point. The Carajá, who, after hundreds of years of contact with white culture and nearly a century of close contact, cling so resolutely to their beliefs, are not a bit fussy about details. The stories are told differently by almost every teller. The amount of variation in important details is enormous. A single example must suffice here. I heard two versions of the emergence myth quite different from the brief one given above. In one a woman detected the presence of death in the upper world and in her resentment at not being listened to shut the hole to the underworld, thus locking the others out when they tried to return. In the other Kaboi did not let them back again because he feared they might bring death in with them. A Carajá who travelled with me from village to village heard all sorts of variants of this kind and accepted them all with almost equal confidence. It was not that he did not see the discrepancies. They did not matter to him. A similar laxity is found in all Carajá religious observances. The pattern of a ceremony is more or less definite but every performance varies greatly. Such flexibility would seem to invite the penetration of foreign matter and yet I can detect the presence of little that may be considered borrowing from white culture. It will be of interest to compare the beliefs of the Carajá with those of other Brazilian tribes with whom they may be supposed to have had fairly recent contacts.

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