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Author(s)/ autor(es): *Vanessa Lea*

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The great name confirmation ceremonies of the Mẽbêngôkre of Central Brazil, and the fabrication of beautiful people

Vanessa Lea

This paper analyzes the interrelationship between ritual, power and hierarchy among the Amerindian Mẽbêngôkre (better known as the Kayapó) of Central Brazil¹. I began research with the Mẽtyktire subgroup of this Jê speaking people in 1978². They are one of the best known indigenous peoples of Brazil due to their stunning geometric body paint designs and their magnificent body adornments³.

During the first centuries of the Portuguese colonization of Brazil, the Indians who inhabited the tropical forests and savannahs of the interior, including diverse Jê peoples, were generically labeled Tapuia, a blanket category for all non Tupi–Guarani. The Jê language family was only defined as such in the late nineteenth century. And in the series *Handbook of South American Indians* [Steward, ed., 1946, 1949], the Jê were classified as marginal to the tropical forest, defined in terms of what they lacked, namely weaving, ceramics, canoes, and fermented

¹ This paper was presented in the symposium 'Hierarchy, Power, and Ritual in Pre-Columbian America', organized by Dr. Nikolay V. Rakutz of the Institute for Latin American Studies in Moscow. The symposium took place at the Third International Conference on Hierarchy and Power in the History of Civilizations, 18th–21st of June, 2004, in Moscow, Russia. I am grateful to the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP) for enabling me to participate in the conference.

² They live to the west of the Xingu river, in the states of Mato Grosso and Pará.

³ See, for example, Verswijver, ed., 1992.

tekononyms is to be regarded as peacemakers, sharing this in common with the chiefs. They should be listened to when disputes arise and their advice should be followed. They have the power to expropriate the clubs of the combatants in a duel (*aben tak*), and to take them home for safe-keeping. The combatants ought not to hinder this intervention.

One of the novel aspects of the division of Mēbêngôkre society into 'beautiful people' (*mē metx*), with 'authentically beautiful names' (*idji me kum-re*), versus those with 'inauthentically beautiful names' (*idji me kajgô*), is that each household (comprised of uxorilocal extended families) has both types of people. It is the first born children of either sex (*kutewa*) and those born 'in the middle' (*konetâ*) who are likely to be honored in a name confirmation ceremony. The last born of either sex (*kutapure*) represent the exhaustion of the procreative powers of their parents, together with their stock of heritable names and prerogatives. Worse than to be last born is to be an orphan (*uatî*), especially those who have lost their mother, leaving no one to paint them and adorn them with beads. The word 'orphan' is frequently evoked in a figurative sense, for instance, by a woman with neither a living mother nor siblings, whereby she is the eldest living representative of her matri-house in the village where she resides. The opposite of 'beautiful people' is not 'common or ordinary people' (*mē kakrit*); this term is reserved for non-Mēbêngôkre Indians, non-Indians, besides a legion of semi-human or semi-animal peoples, such as the 'bat people' (*kubē-nhep*).

The order of the matri-houses (or Houses) around the village circle is fixed in relation to the path of the sun, rising in the east and setting in the west. At mid-day it is above the men's meeting house at the village centre¹⁰. Although it is recognized that some Houses are the outcome of a process of scission from another House, each one considers its position (*djam djà*, 'standing place') to be rooted in mythological time, legitimizing its stock of ancestral names and prerogatives. A House is like a metaphorical uterus in than membership is lifelong and irrevocable. A House may be comprised of any number of dwellings; its uterine ties and legacy of immaterial wealth define it as an exogamous group.

Until recently it was usual for anthropologists to consider Amerindians to lack any significant property as weighed, for example, against the importance of land and livestock in the African continent. In pre-colonial times, Amerindian peoples dominated territories but had no conception of land as a marketable commodity. They domesticated animals only as pets, brought back from the jun-

¹⁰ Some historic villages had an eastern and a western men's house, but nowadays there is only one.

gle after their mothers have been killed by hunters. However, a Mẽbêngôkre individual has as many as thirty names, some shared by mythological and historical heroic ancestors. In the Oxford English dictionary, one of the definitions of immaterial is: "Of no essential consequence, unimportant". This helps to make sense of why the property of peoples like the Mẽbêngôkre was regarded as insignificant for so long. Nevertheless, it should be emphasized that it is more appropriate to think in terms of the properties of people – their defining elements; in no sense does such property constitute commodities.

People acquire ownership of something by being the first person to appropriate it from some one else. In other words, the universe is conceived as comprised of a finite array of things that change hands over the course of time. The red hat is a good example. One could easily attribute the odd Indian seen wearing a red hat during ceremonies to 'acculturation'. However, it is one of the most jealously disputed articles of wealth, for it was a trophy taken from the first 'white man'¹¹ to have been killed by a Mẽbêngôkre. It is not a relic¹² because the original red hat has long since disappeared. The heirs of the ancestor who first acquired the red hat nowadays buy one, or request somebody to give them one.

Contrary to what we expect to find based on the teachings of Dumont [1966, 1985], who considered individualism to be an historical product and one of the defining characteristics of modernity, the Mẽbêngôkre prize exclusivity highly. People are proud to affirm that they are the single (*pydji*, one) owners (*djwoj*) of some specific adornment or role. When a name or adornment becomes vulgarized by excessive use it can be relinquished by its owners, based on the argument that many (*kràmpti*) people are using it. What complicates matters is that names and other forms of property are lent out, on the expectation that they will later be returned to the uterine descendants of the House where they originated (*djà kraj*; place beginning/base).

The social organization of the Mẽbêngôkre contradicts the distinction made by Durkheim [1933] between mechanical and organic solidarity. Houses are not conceptualized as self-sufficient entities comprised of undifferentiated individuals. It is the distinctive heritage of each House that produces organic solidarity at the level of the village community. This becomes apparent during rituals when individuals from different Houses perform their specific and complementary ro-

¹¹ The standard term for non-Indians in Brazil is 'Whites' (*brancos*), though it has nothing to do with skin colour, embracing people all along the colour spectrum, from white to black.

¹² For an excellent analysis of relics see Geary [1986].

les¹³. Lévi-Strauss [1979; 1983a,b; 1984; 1991] coined the expression 'house based societies' (*sociétés à maisons*) with reference to a type of social formation in which houses are conceived of as '*personnes morales*' ('moral entities/persons' or 'corporate groups')¹⁴. Lévi-Strauss formulated this notion with reference to cognatic societies, whereas the Mëbêngôkre correspond more closely to matrilineal societies, though their Houses are '*personnes morales*' with a legacy of material and immaterial wealth. I avoid referring to these matri-houses as 'corporate groups' due to the internal differentiation of the members of each House. The only characteristic shared by all members is abidance by the rule of exogamy. In terms of personal names and prerogatives, there is considerable differentiation among House members. English speaking anthropologists coined the expression 'corporate group' in opposition to 'corporations' in order to differentiate societies with a juridical apparatus from those lacking one¹⁵. However, Dumont translates 'corporate' as the equivalent to '*personne morale*' in French¹⁶.

My immediate ascendants in anthropology were keen to rid Amazonia of the dead weight of African models, notably unilineal descent¹⁷. One of the reasons that I have used the term uterine descent, rather than matrilineal descent, is that the distinction between lineages and clans is nebulous in the case of the Mëbêngôkre. For them, the House is a native concept not just an analytical one.

¹³ Durkheim [1933] formulated his concept of mechanical solidarity, where segments such as clans relate to each other as like units, in contrast to what he termed the organic solidarity characteristic of modern society, where occupational differentiation is held to create mutual dependency. The Mëbêngôkre conflate both types, showing the inadequacy of the Durkheimian typology, although this author himself recognized that these distinct ideal types of solidarity were not necessarily mutually exclusive [see Aron 1967: 13]. Mechanical solidarity implies not only a collective consciousness, such as a common value system shared by all members of society, but also the relative autonomy of each segment [see Nisbet 1974]. Mëbêngôkre cosmology corresponds most closely to the paradigm of organic solidarity, with the focus on the totality rather than on the autonomy of its component segments.

¹⁴ A discussion of house based societies can also be found in Macdonald, ed. 1987; Hugh-Jones 1993; Carsten and Hugh-Jones, eds. 1995; and Joyce and Gillespie, eds. 2000.

¹⁵ Fortes describes the Ashanti house as a segment of a matrilineage [1949: 64], while the latter is defined as a: "corporate group forming the basis of all political, jural, and ceremonial institutions" [1949: 60].

¹⁶ Dumont [1971: 82; cf. page 76] says, referring to the meaning of corporate groups: "nous dirions à ceux qui constituent une personne morale...".

¹⁷ This has been a major debate that originated in Melanesia with Barnes [1962 and 1968], before spreading to South America – Seeger [1975]; Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro [1979]; J.C. Crocker [1977]; W.H. Crocker [1977, 1979]; Albert [1985] et cetera. Kuper's 1982 article had a major impact, criticizing descent theory from the perspective of the African continent. My own writings

The members of a Mëbêngôkre House are not a monolithic group who acquire automatic rights over the legacy of their House. Not only are names transmitted from one specific individual to another, but all other prerogatives too with the exception of pets. The right to keep certain animals as pets is a female prerogative, but tends to be associated with a specific House as a whole. Ceremonial roles, adornments, and the right to eat specific cuts of meat are transmitted by an individual adult to his or her specifically chosen heirs. People can give lifelong usufruct of names and prerogatives to members of other Houses, but they can only do so with ones that originated in their natal House. When a person has merely usufruct of a name or prerogative it must later be relinquished in favour of the true owners, or transmitted back to one of them. Men leave their natal House in order to marry but return their names to their sisters' sons. Women lend out their names to their brothers' daughters and later retransmit them to their grandchildren (especially to their co-resident daughters' daughters). No two individuals ever have exactly the same names because each person acquires names from more than one relative at a time. This is equally valid for prerogatives, so no two individuals are exact replicas of each other. Besides the fact that the heritage of each House is distributed unevenly among its members, each individual also has usufruct of names and prerogatives from one or more other Houses.

The ritual and mythical pro-evidence of Mëbêngôkre Houses is not easy to correlate with socio-economic influence in general. One of the poorest dwellings during most of my fieldwork belonged to one of the most prestigious Houses in terms of its heritage. It was in bad repair because its owner was an old aged widow with no co-resident sons-in-law to build her a better one. It was known as the 'place that killed the bird' (*àk bĩ djà*; bird kill place), in reference to a myth concerning a harpy eagle, nowadays described as having been the size of an aeroplane, that killed one of the ancestors of the House.

The amount and the quality of *nekretx* varies from House and House, besides from one individual to another within each House. It is not even necessarily a question of who inherited what. Sometimes people shun a particular ritual role because they consider it to be too dangerous (the spirit of a former incumbent may try to kill them). Even when various people inherit a prestigious role, such as that of ceremonial leader (*ngrenhondjwoj*), very few individuals take it on,

[1986, 1992] fell largely on deaf ears, until Rivière's revision [1993] of the question of descent from the perspective of Lowland South America. The Panará (Jê) clans have long been recognized as such [by Heelas, 1979, and by Schwartzman, 1987], but only now has the question surfaced in print [Ewart 2003].

generally one per generation per village, so capability and willingness to learn can be as important as having the right to exercise the role¹⁸.

The role of chief is not hereditary within Houses, though it may be transmitted from father to son. It is relevant to the discussion of ritual specialists because the word for chief in Mēbêngôkre (*benjadjwàry*) means 'intoner of chants'. There is a specific chant for numerous different situations, though increasingly chants are relegated to ceremonial occasions. Nowadays the 'captains' (intermediary leaders created at the instigation of the government) have become so important that they are eclipsing the traditional chiefs. They are increasingly recognized as 'chiefs', even though they might not even know how to chant. What matters most to people nowadays are leaders who can negotiate with representatives of the government and other non-Indians.

There was a wave of attempts by missionaries to set up cooperatives in Indigenous areas around the 1970s. Some sectors of the Catholic Church regarded the Indians as the embodiment of 'primitive communism' (as discussed by Engels [1884])¹⁹. Such projects were often failures because despite the fact that territories are occupied collectively, garden plots are individually owned, often by women (as in the case of the Mēbêngôkre)²⁰.

Lévi-Strauss [1984:191] argued that Houses come into being when political and economic interests emerge in the absence of institutions to articulate them, so they are expressed in the language of kinship which they inevitably subvert. This has strangely evolutionist overtones, clashing with this author's insistence that formulas such as cross-cousin marriage are basic rather than primitive, and can thus be found both in the Amazonian jungle and in contemporary Paris due, not to diffusionism, but to their elementary nature. In other words, Lévi-Strauss is one of the anthropologists who has, in this sense, successfully demolished the divide between 'them' and 'us'²¹.

¹⁸ The summary relating to the symposium for which this paper was first written mentioned the probability of ritual specialists forming an elite. The ceremonial leader just mentioned is a role that can only be exercised by members of one specific House (heirs of an adopted bat boy).

¹⁹ One particular quotation cited in the Oxford English dictionary defines communism as follows: "1882 A.M. Fairbairn in *Contemp. Rev.* XLII. 870 Communism seems to the new-born religious society but the proper social expression of its brotherhood."

²⁰ There is a clearly articulated code of who gives what to whom, as I learned from contravening the norms, having been reprimanded for giving food to people who did not have the right to receive it. People are criticized for scrounging around for food in houses other than those of their close relatives.

²¹ Strathern's major work, *The Gender of the Gift* [1988], has received some criticism for perpetuating such a divide, opposing Melanesians transacting gifts, to Euro-Americans transacting commodities or

One major contrast between ‘them’ and ‘us’ is that the notion of invention or creativity is almost wholly absent in Amazonia. In recent years, anthropologists have given considerable attention to the notion of predation as a leitmotif of the region. A classical example from Mëbêngôkre mythology concerns the acquisition of fire; it was stolen from a jaguar. Similarly, when shamans abandon their bodies to engage in soul travel, they ask the names of beings they encounter, not just out of curiosity but in order to plagiarize them, acquiring ‘new’ names to transmit to their relatives. I was also told that certain people who claimed to be the owners, of a head-dress for example, had appropriated it after having slain an enemy.

A recent thesis on the Xicrin subdivision of the Mëbêngôkre analyses their contemporary ‘consumerism’ in terms of continuity with their quest for distinctiveness [Gordon 2003]. Bourdieu [1979] devoted one of his works to the study of taste, acquired through education and striving for distinction among different social classes, manifested in terms of differential patterns of consumption. I would argue that the quest for distinctiveness is as much a part of the social philosophy of the Mëbêngôkre as of Euro-American class society.

The irresistibility of the material opulence made available by modern technology is illustrated in the myth of the all women’s village. One old woman (Bëribëri) recounted to me that the women have given some of their daughters in marriage to non-Indians in exchange for *nekretx*, though she did not specify which goods²².

As far as the Mëbêngôkre are concerned, the evidence seems to indicate that they are increasing ceremonial activity rather than abandoning it in the wake of regular contact with the nation-State²³. In 1983 I visited a Mëbêngôkre village

merchandise. This does not detract from the contribution of the book to the theory of anthropology and to the ethnology of New Guinea, Melanesia and beyond. The writings of this author have been of fundamental importance to me personally, helping to reveal a new facet of Mëbêngôkre matri-houses, namely that they provide the materials for the fabrication of partible persons.

²² Beads would surely be one possibility, given how highly valued they are by the Mëbêngôkre. Other recent research, such as a study of the Cinta-Larga Indians of Rondônia, reveals them to be just as consumer-minded as the Mëbêngôkre [see Dal Poz 2004]. This supports my claim that the desire for distinction is a pandemic. The Guarani Indians are an exception, something apparently explicable in terms of their spirituality, but there is not space to examine this issue here.

²³ On February 29th 2004, just before I began writing this paper, a television documentary was broadcast concerning the Karajá Indians (macro-Jê) of the island of Bananal, neighbours and former enemies of the Mëbêngôkre. Their spokesman stressed the importance of the performance of ritual in order to maintain their cultural identity. Some villages have abandoned their rituals, but they are presently trying to reacquire the habit of performing them.

whose lands had been invaded by gold-seekers²⁴. The Indians had acquired a small portion of the revenue from the gold-panning activities and spent some of the proceeds on a lavish ritual, with plane loads of biscuits and soft drinks flown in to enhance the supply of traditional food stuffs [see Lea 1984]. Competing chiefs strutted about like Big Men, boasting their own planes, and they had solidly built houses, the style of which was based on those of missionaries who had worked among them.

Harrison [1990], in a study of names among the Manambu of New Guinea, has not only highlighted the importance of immaterial wealth, he has also made interesting suggestions concerning ritual as a barometer of the existing status quo²⁵. He claims [1992] that it is possible for the content of a ritual to remain in tact while its significance changes (a novel insight); one of his examples being the appropriation of Christmas by the Nazis.

The relevance of this for the case under analysis is that ritual assumes a fresh significance in the modern world. On the one hand, the elders complain that the young are shirking their ritual responsibilities. On the other hand, one leader who earned a wage from the Brazilian Indian Foundation (something everyone now aspires to) told me that people have to choose between ritual and work, as one cannot, for example, get heavily involved with commercial crop cultivation and simultaneously leave the village to make extended hunting and gathering expeditions to stage ceremonies. Within the context of national society (the Mētyktire having had official contact since 1953), the performance of ritual has become a measure of authenticity [see Conklin 1997].

In Brazil, the category 'Indian' includes a wide spectrum of peoples and cultures. Some have been in contact with national society for up to five centuries and have lost their language, their culture and even an indigenous physiognomy. During the past few decades there has been a wave of 're-emergent indigenous groups' due to the democratization of Brazilian society. In sum, there are still some groups who know nothing but the forest whilst there are others who now reside in shanty towns of major cities (such as São Paulo). The public performance of ritual is becoming increasingly important to all of them, but people like the Mēbêngôkre enjoy the advantage of having maintained their body paint designs, adornments, and the vigor of their singing and dancing. They were a regu-

²⁴ It is the village called Gorotire, located to the east of the river Xingu.

²⁵ A discussion of the analogy of the significance of names for the Manambu and Mēbêngôkre can be found in Lea, 1997.

lar feature of the national Congress during the voting of the new constitution passed in 1988. That same year they mobilized worldwide media coverage in Altamira, protesting against plans for a hydroelectric dam. And they protested in the streets of Belém, singing and dancing, when one of their leaders was charged with rape at the time of Eco 92 held in Rio de Janeiro.

To return briefly to mythology, I would not agree that mythology explains the existing order in the case of the Mëbêngôkre²⁶. It explains the origin of things but not their distribution among different Houses. I suspect that (as Harrison observed among the Manambu) groups that enjoy demographic strength are at an advantage to appropriate things from weaker groups. This sounds somewhat like a Darwinian argument, a question of survival of the fittest. Whilst wishing to reject such an outlook, there is no doubt that in a society like that of the Mëbêngôkre relatives are a form of symbolic capital, as the stigma attached to orphans makes clear²⁷.

In terms of whether ritual supports the social order or conserves and regenerates it²⁸, I prefer Harrison's perspective [1992], that it mirrors the existing status quo. For the last quarter of a century, two Mëtyktire Houses have provided all the significant leaders; furthermore, these Houses themselves are interpreted as the product of a former scission. This does not imply that relations between the leaders are harmonious; on the contrary, there is strong rivalry between them. Nevertheless, their children, especially the boys, are at an advantage over other children, for they are more likely to attend school and to have opportunities for contact with the outside world, bringing chances of relative upwards social mobility. I was struck by the yuppie like appearance of those who attended the course for training indigenous teachers in 1998, with their 'smart' hair cuts, dark glasses, digital wrist watches and fancy clothes²⁹.

²⁶ This was something mentioned in the call for papers for the above mentioned symposium (see note 1).

²⁷ Some Houses constitute a sizeable proportion of a village, whilst, at the opposite extreme, one man is presently the last living representative of his House. When a House becomes extinct, in the one case that I knew of, its names and prerogatives are taken over by the next of kin. This is described altruistically, as saving (*utā*) the wealth from extinction.

²⁸ This was another question raised in the call for papers (see note 1).

²⁹ However, filiation is not an absolute guarantee of success. My 'adoptive father' is a very important leader, and yet one of my brothers was struck by lightning, an event attributed to sorcery, provoked by some one who was angry with my 'father' over his distribution of goods from the city. Another one died, or was killed, in mysterious circumstances; a third brother has mental problems that some have attributed to the pressure of being the son of such an important figure. And since having written this paper, a fourth brother died in a motor accident, along with ten other 'warriors'.

As for religion, I have never been convinced that it is a universal category. I prefer to talk in terms of cosmology and cosmogony. The question of the transformation of pagan cults into Christian ones recalls the transmutation of mythical heroes into biblical figures³⁰. In Brazil, though it is probably a universal strategy, missionaries have been most successful, in terms of conversion, when they have managed to match native personages with Christian counterparts. The Mëbêngôkre have had some contact with missionaries, mainly Protestants, and I was told that it was Jesus-God who had introduced the shot gun, after having been taught how to make it by a snake, and having first tried it out on his mother-in-law (being a shaman he managed to bring her back to life).

In terms of hierarchy, there is the important issue of gender relations that I am unable to touch on here for lack of time³¹. And what one defines as ritual is largely a matter of perspective. During a seven month stint of fieldwork, from 1981-2, the Mëtyktire men siphoned a large proportion of their energy into the extension of a runway, built by hand, with the men sitting on the ground breaking stones with hammers. The objective of the exercise was to allow larger planes to land, increasing the supply of industrialized goods. This and other attitudes are reminiscent of the cargo cults described in Melanesia, and millenarian movements are a well-documented phenomenon in lowland South America.

I hope that this case study may shed some light on certain aspects of existing paradigms of hierarchy and power. It can show archaeologists that it is possible for societies to have elaborate notions of wealth without leaving any traces to serve as clues. And it shows that non-material things, such as personal names, may constitute a significant form of wealth. The jealous disputes that they engender disappear along with those involved in them.

Recent research is showing that the pre-colonial societies of what is now Brazil were more elaborate and had higher population densities than previously recognized³². As the paradigm of pre-colonial isolated indigenous communities is gradually being undermined, new hypotheses point towards ancient trade routes, connecting peoples of the low lands with the highland civilizations. If the Mëbêngôkre had not survived until the present day they are likely to have been

³⁰ This was another question that was raised in the call for papers (see note 1).

³¹ This comment referred to the oral presentation of this paper, but I have maintained it here because the complexity of gender prevents it being dealt with summarily. The question of gender is developed in other publications [Lea 1994, 2000, 2005].

³² See, for instance, Franchetto and Heckenberger, eds., 2001, and *Antes: Histórias da Pré-História*, 2004.

dismissed, erroneously, as an assemblage of primitive nomadic 'hordes', reduced to meager subsistence on the savannahs. This ecological zone is only now beginning to attract more systematic scientific research, though it is increasingly threatened by deforestation, cattle grazing, gold extraction, and the recent tsunami constituted by soya bean monoculture for the world market.

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