

Animistic ecological ethics within the Ramkokamekra-Canela indigenous community of Northeast Brazil

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1. Summary

This paper finds that the world view of the Ramkokamekra-Canela indigenous community of Northeast Brazil follows an animistic style of ecological ethics.

2. Introduction

The Ramkokamekra-Canela indigenous community of Northeast Brazil has been the subject of detailed anthropological studies by Curt Nimuendajú (1946) and William Crocker (1978, 1982, 1990, 1993, 2004), among others (cf. Azanha, 1984; Ladeira, 1992; Panet, 2010). Belonging to the Timbira linguistic sub-group within the Macro-Jê language stock, the Ramkokamekra-Canela community lives in the legally demarcated Kanela Indigenous Territory (*terra indígena*, TI) in the interior of Maranhão state, Brazil. While only around five percent of their ancestral lands, this territory includes areas for hunting, gathering, and gardening, as well as the village of Escalvado, where the majority of Canela¹ people currently reside. With approximately 2,000 residents, Escalvado is one of the largest indigenous villages in Brazil and in lowland South America as a whole (Instituto Socioambiental, 2005). Similar to other Jê-speaking indigenous societies in Northeast and Central Brazil, the Canela live in circular villages and practice matrilineal residence patterns, engage in elaborate ceremonies, and rely on a trekking-horticulturalist subsistence economy (Heelas, 1979; Seeger, 1981; Lea, 2001).² The community also exhibits socio-cultural traits common to the Timbira sub-group, including a circular village layout with radial pathways to the ceremonial center, seasonal rituals, and ceremonial log racing (Azanha, 1984). In many ways, the Canela have maintained their traditional practices, including language, village structure, subsistence livelihood, ritual complex, and overall worldview. This paper will explore the Canela worldview, particularly the ecological ethics that are central to the Canela way of life.

Historically, the Ramkokamekra-Canela have been in sustained contact with the larger Brazilian national society for over 200 years, a relatively long period compared to other lowland South American indigenous communities. Although the group signed a peace treaty with the Brazilian government in 1814, the Canela continued to engage

¹ Following Crocker (personal communication) and Panet (2010), the Ramkokamekra-Canela will be referred to in this text as Canela, the ethnonym commonly used by community members themselves. In the literature, the group is often referred to as the Ramkokamekra-Canela to distinguish them from their neighbours, the Apanyekra-Canela, both of whom speak the Canela language but are each a distinct indigenous community.

² Due to various factors, including the circumscription of indigenous territories, extended hunting and gathering trips (also known as trekking) are now a less common practice for many Jê-speaking societies (cf. Flowers, 1994; Seeger, 1981).

in warfare with their Timbira neighbours and with the Brazilian army and settlers throughout the first half of the nineteenth century (Azanha, 1984; Crocker and Crocker, 2004). Contact with the local Brazilian population, particularly folk Catholic traditions, certainly affected Canela beliefs and practices, as did the introduction of missionaries into the community in the late 1960s (Popjes and Popjes 1986). Perhaps the most striking example of a modified belief system is the 1963 messianic movement led by a Canela woman, which resulted in the re-location of the community to a neighbouring indigenous territory for four years due to violence from local landowners (Crocker, personal communication). Apart from this singular event in the community's history, however, many traditional beliefs and practices have remained an integral part of Canela cosmology, society, and ecology. Newer folk Catholic or evangelical Christian ideas appear to be interwoven within the traditional worldview, and indigenous practices are largely given priority over activities of a non-indigenous origin. The following section will discuss the Canela "animistic" worldview, while the impact of Christianity will be addressed in the final section of this paper.

3. What is the broader framework that influences ethics within the Ramkokamekra-Canela community? Evolved "animistic" traditions

Indigenous lowland South American (commonly referred to as Amazonian)³ societies have various linguistic backgrounds, socio-cultural traditions, historical trajectories, and environmental surroundings. While this lowland region is full of diverse communities with specific cosmologies and ways of life, an emphasis on human relationships with nonhumans appears to be common within many indigenous societies. In these traditions, humans and nonhumans are considered to possess similar inner "vitalities" (Descola, 2009) and intentional capacities. Due to these shared capacities, humans and many different categories of nonhumans are able to enter into multi-sensory, communicative relationships by accessing one another's perspective, or point of view. One of the most well known theoretical approaches to these human-nonhuman encounters is Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's (1998, 2011) perspectivism, which reverses the standard Western dualism of a single unitary nature and many different cultures. Perspectivism posits that all human and nonhuman Amazonian beings share a single culture and are differentiated by their distinct bodies, also known as multiple natures. Philippe Descola's animism (1994, 2009) is another way of theoretically engaging with the subjectivity of both humans and nonhumans. "Animism" in this sense is based on the notion that nonhumans are an integral part of society and share certain human characteristics. Descola conceptualizes animism as one ontology among others, including totemism, naturalism, and analogism, all of which reflect different ways humans interact with and conceive of nonhumans (Descola, 2009; Kohn, 2010).

While these two approaches conflict on theoretical points that are outside the scope of this paper, they both display the importance of the body and inner vitality or "soul" in indigenous Amazonian ways of engaging with the surrounding environment. Indigenous Amazonians conceive of the mind as an inseparable part of the body. The mind-body contrasted with a single "soul" or multiple "souls" appears to be a Pan-Amazonian concept (cf. Rivière, 1999) and is clearly evident in the Canela

³ In this paper, the term "Amazonian" includes indigenous groups such as the Ramkokamekra-Canela that live on the margins of the Amazon basin high gallery forests and the nearby *cerrado*, the savannah region of northeast and central Brazil.

worldview. The Canela conceive of two “vital principles” that are located in the body. One vital principle, *katswèn* or *caxwyn*⁴, is the “spirit” that exists in the core of the body and “feeds” the corporeal principle of *him* (Panet, 2010:69). *Karō*, the second vital principle or “soul,” continues to exist after the physical body dies and can be present in humans, animals, plants, supernatural beings, and even material objects (Coelho de Sousa, 2002; Crocker, 1993). This belief in the shared inner vitalities of both humans and nonhumans provides the basis for a Canela environmental ethics. The environment is not an object external to the human realm, but is instead comprised of diverse human and nonhuman beings, the vast majority of whom are potentially intentional subjects. Therefore, a Canela person living in the world must engage in various communicative relationships with other human and nonhuman subjects throughout his or her lifetime. These relationships are reciprocal, in that humans and nonhumans are both active participants in the environment in which they are embedded.

It is important to note that in the Canela society, as in much of indigenous Amazonia, the animistic worldview is not without some hierarchical elements. The predator/prey component of human relationships with animals and supernatural agents has been well documented in many indigenous Amazonian communities (cf. Fausto, 2007, 2008; Viveiros de Castro, 1992). In these types of encounters, the predator attempts to gain “mastery” over the prey’s point of view. Unlike the absolute control that humans are seen to have over nonhumans in the Abrahamic traditions, however, mastery in this sense is fluid and shifts over time. Humans can be in the position of predator or prey, depending on the specific relational entanglement in which they find themselves. There is also evidence that some human-nonhuman relationships, particularly between people and plants, involve different forms of mastery, often likened to that between a parent and child (cf. Rival, 2001). Finally, while relationships of mastery may be possible between humans and nonhumans, they are not always desirable. For the Canela, intimate communication with some nonhumans, including certain plants, is sought out and particularly valued. Meanwhile, engagements between living people and deceased kin (who still possess *karō*) are seen as dangerous and are avoided by everyone except skilled shamans. This avoidance is further complicated by the Canela belief that a dead person’s *karō* turns into a series of animals and then plants, eventually ceasing to exist (Crocker, 1993). Thus, it appears that indigenous Amazonian and specifically Canela animism is a multifaceted and complex tradition that involves shifting relationships between distinct categories of humans and nonhumans throughout time and space.

4. What is the broader outlook of the environmental concepts within the tradition? Ecocentric

4.1. Anthropocentric

No examples.

4.2. Biocentric

No examples.

⁴ The spelling of Canela words in this paper is largely based on the grammatical sketch of the Canela language in Popjes and Popjes (1986).

4.3. Cosmocentric

No examples.

4.4. Ecocentric

Similar to other indigenous Amazonian communities, the Canela conceive of society, cosmology, ecology, and even physiology as constituent parts of an integrated, holistic system.⁵ This worldview can be termed “ecocentric,” in that humans and nonhumans cannot be separated from their surrounding ecosystem(s) or environment. While Canela ecocentrism incorporates indigenous cosmology, this worldview does not display examples of cosmocentrism, anthropocentrism, or biocentrism. The Canela environment can be understood as a relational “domain of entanglement” (Ingold, 2006:14) that grows and changes alongside human and nonhuman life processes. Thus, the ecosystem in which the Canela live is not composed of objects outside the ethical realm, but rather of communicative and morally bound subjects. Communicative experiences between certain types of beings are given moral priority over others, thereby forming an ethical code of behaviour. Many cultivated plants, for example, must be engaged with to ensure their growth, and hunters must interact with game animals. Conversely, certain human communication with some animals such as snakes and jaguars is considered to be dangerous and is usually indicative of special shamanic abilities (Crocker, N.D.a). There are also strict rules, known in Portuguese as *resguardo*, surrounding plant cultivation, gathering, hunting, and food consumption that are linked to human and nonhuman life processes.

While an important part of Canela ecological ethics outlines appropriate conduct between humans and nonhumans, another central aspect focuses on the shared sociality of intentional beings. “Society” includes humans and nonhumans, and nonhuman beings are often considered to behave in a manner similar to humans. Snakes are said to live in “villages” and possess “artefacts,” although only skilled or apprentice shamans are able to visit these villages (Crocker, N.D.a). Canela gardeners claim that conceptually significant crops such as peanuts, sweet potatoes, squash, beans, and maize, can make decisions, hear, become happy, and remember (Crocker, personal communication). In this ecocentric framework, the body and vital principles are the primary means for humans and nonhumans to engage in the world. Learning the skills necessary to live in the Canela environment, such as gardening, hunting, gathering, creating artefacts, bearing and raising children, and performing ritual activities, among other things, involves a series of long-term embodied and even “ensouled” encounters between humans and nonhumans. These experiences often involve the sharing of human and nonhuman bodily substances such as blood, saliva, sweat, animal meat, and vegetable and fruit matter (cf. Coelho de Souza, 2004; Panet, 2010). Through consubstantiality, or the sharing of these substances, the Canela community of interdependent subjective beings is created and maintained. The next section will demonstrate how this combined society, ecology, and physiology is interconnected with Canela cosmology, as seen in mythic storytelling.

⁵ See Vilaça (2009) for a description of the interrelatedness of Amazonian sociology and physiology.

4.4.1. Ecocentrism as seen in mythic storytelling

Canela myths clearly reveal their ecocentric worldview and animistic traditions. Origin myths in particular display how the Canela conceptualize human and nonhuman ethical behaviour. Three origin myths are central to Canela cosmology: the origin of the Canela people, of fire, and of cultivated plants. The transformation of mythic storytelling over time is a common occurrence, and the interplay of myth and history is apparent in some of these stories (cf. Fausto and Heckenberger, 2007). A brief analysis of these origin myths will lead to a better understanding of the combined cosmological and historical aspects of Canela ecological ethics.

The Canela believe they were created by Sun (*Pùt*) and Moon (*Putwrè*), mythical figures who lived on the earth at the beginning of time. While working on their gardens, Sun and Moon decided to create the Canela people from the trunks of palm trees (*Mauritia flexuosa sp.*) and build a village in which the people could live (Panet, 2010). In these early days, the Canela were the only people to roam the earth, living peacefully and eating rotten wood and meat cooked by the heat of the sun (Crocker, 1978). During this era, the majority of Canela people possessed special knowledge and abilities (*amyi ya*khre-pey*) that enabled them to talk with and transform themselves into animals. Animals could also converse with humans, thereby enabling both groups to easily gain access to one another's perspectives.

A series of mythical events irrevocably changed this epoch of inter-species communication. The Canela obtained fire by stealing it from a female jaguar. While the people had previously known of its existence, they were unaware of its utility until seeing it used by the jaguar (Crocker, 1978). In addition, the Canela acquired cultivated plants from Star-Woman (*Katsêê-ti- 'khwèy*), another mythical figure who came down from the sky to teach people horticulture and how to gather wild fruits, nuts, and roots. Maize stalks and other crops had been growing near the bathing hole, but the Canela were unable to perceive the plants as food prior to Star-Woman's arrival (Nimuendajú, 1946; Wilburt, 1978). Both of these myths display the importance and utility of human communication with nonhumans. Relationships with animals and with supernatural beings are seen to bring new skills and techniques into Canela society, but these new practices do not come without a cost. In another set of myths, a series of disasters results in animals losing their capacity to speak and humans losing much of their unique knowledge capabilities. Consuming meat cooked on a fire and cultivated plants also contributed to the loss of these special abilities. Thus, in current Canela society, only experienced shamans (*kay*) who have practiced strict food restrictions or *resguardo* can access the powerful knowledge that all Canela people used to share (Crocker, 1978, N.D.a).

From an ethical standpoint, these origin myths establish guidelines for appropriate interspecies relationships. In the beginning, all species lived peacefully together and could easily communicate with one another, an "original" state that is commonly referred to in Timbira and broader indigenous Amazonian mythic storytelling (cf. Viveiros de Castro, 1998). The origin of fire and horticulture, however, set the Canela apart from other species in important ways. Cooking meat on a fire and cultivating crops became uniquely Canela human activities. According to some Canela, the era of great disasters was meant as a punishment to the people for practicing incest and killing too many animals (Crocker, 1978). This belief may be influenced by local Brazilian Catholic traditions, revealing the historical aspect of Canela myth making. Overall, though, the ethical lessons imbued in these myths stem mainly from the Canela animistic tradition. There is a particular focus on balance and

respect for other species. The Canela themselves were made out of palm trees, thereby displaying an original embodied connection to nonhuman beings. While the acquisition of fire and horticulture represent gains to Canela society, these events also resulted in a significant loss of communicative abilities. Relationships with nonhumans are no less important today, but nowadays the Canela must work hard and make sacrifices (seen in *resguardo* practices) to engage with nonhuman beings.

5. Human-environmental relationships: Symbiotic

5.1. Symbiotic

Within the Canela animistic tradition and ecocentric worldview, the environment is comprised of multifaceted symbiotic relationships among a variety of human and nonhuman beings. As illustrated in myth, humans must learn to co-exist with nonhuman beings such as animals, plants, and supernatural entities. The Canela environment is infused with meaning, and many everyday activities become ritualized to facilitate interaction with other human and nonhuman beings. While individual Canela people engage with their environment in diverse ways, one of the primary objectives to a fulfilling life appears to be the maintenance of intimate, consubstantial relationships with one's co-residential kin, with the larger Canela community, and with the animals, plants, and supernatural "spirits" that form part of the Canela eco-society.

The symbiotic nature of human-nonhuman relationships is also clearly demonstrated in ritual activities. Village life is marked by ritual ceremonies, which are often linked to plant growing seasons. Most crops are planted in November, and a particular ritual chant must be sung to each important cultivar, including maize, sweet potato, squash, and bean. Performing these songs is necessary for the plant's happiness and growing capabilities, which are seen as interchangeable. These crops are said to "hear" the human singing and, if performed well, will respond by growing fast and providing a good harvest (Crocker, personal communication). In this way, the chanting rituals reveal how human and plant lives are intertwined, with the life of the latter dependent on an intimate relationship with the former.

The interdependence of people and plants is clearly seen in maize planting, growing, and harvest festivals. Sweet potato, squash, and peanut crops are also given harvest festivals, but maize is especially ritually emphasized during each stage of its growth process. In the maize planting ritual, a song leader sings to the maize kernels prior to their being planted. This communicative act is intended to please the kernels, who seem to listen to and understand the ritual songs. After this event, a small amount of maize is planted and a ritual feast of hunted game takes place the following night. It is thought that the "ghost" of the maize participates in the feast, and that this activity increases the growth and size of the maize crop (Crocker, N.D.b). The maize growing ceremony in January or February is characterized by male log racing, an archetypal Timbira ritual performance. Adolescent men, divided into two ritual groups, race while carrying buriti palm logs carved to resemble maize cobs. The groups also compete by throwing corn husk-padded arrows at each other, and both activities are meant to help the maize grow. Harvesting maize at the beginning of the dry season is an elaborate, multi-stage event that emphasizes the growth and abundance of maize, individual Canela, and the society as a whole. Prior to the harvest, elderly male leaders must taste a few ears of maize to appraise the crop. A portion of the harvest is set aside for processing and consumption as maize-meat pies during a ritual feast (Nimuendajú, 1946). This feast is followed by a series of athletic

competitions including log racing, lance throwing, and tossing shuttlecocks made out of cornhusks. The number of times a shuttlecock can be batted into the air without falling on the ground is thought to directly correlate to the maize harvest's abundance (Crocker, 1990, N.D.b).

The maize ritual complex is a clear example of the direct link between human actions and the growth processes of cultivated plants. Humans have a direct responsibility to engage with their plant neighbours, and socialize with them through song and shared feasting activities. Eating with maize "ghosts" is particularly interesting, as it displays the importance of sharing substances, in this case game meat, to create and maintain ties between the Canela people and maize plants.

The symbiotic nature of human-nonhuman relationships is also evident in the *resguardo* restrictions placed on gardeners, hunters, and shamans. Planting and tending different plant species requires gardeners to undergo specific restrictions that are often similar to those necessary for the parents of human children. Peanuts, for example, can only be planted by men, and the male gardener must speak to his peanut children, telling them he is their father and will take care of them (Crocker, N.D.b). Until the peanuts are harvested, the Canela peanut gardener must engage in the exact same food and sex restrictions as the father of a newborn baby. Male and female gardeners must also "parent" other species such as squash, yam, manioc, and bean. The restrictions surrounding these crops usually display an embodied connection between humans and plants, whereby the consumption of a prohibited food on the part of the human will result in negative consequences for the plant child's growth. Shamans and hunters also avoid certain foods and sexual practices before and during important shamanic and hunting activities (Crocker, N.D.a). In these cases, the emphasis seems to be less on solidifying a parent-child relationship and more on purifying oneself of harmful pollutants in order to establish certain ties with nonhumans, especially supernatural beings and animals.

5.2. Integrationist

No examples.

5.3. Apocalyptic

No examples.

5.4. Managerial

No examples.

5.5. Apathetic

No examples.

6. Conclusion: Ramkokamekra-Canela worldview and its relationship with the broader frameworks of Christianity, globalization and modern technology

As seen in myth and ritual, the Canela ecocentric worldview has maintained its importance throughout the past 200 years of sustained contact with outside influences. At the same time, some external factors have affected Canela traditions. One is the influence of Christianity, both local Brazilian folk Catholicism and evangelical Christianity introduced by missionaries from the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the late 1960s and more recently continued by German missionaries. While the missionaries have supported the traditional Canela way of life in many ways, there has also been a significant conversion movement, and nowadays many Canela

consider themselves Christians and participate in religious activities. Folk Catholicism has had a more general socio-cultural influence, exemplified in myth and a larger focus on “other-worldly” affairs (Crocker, 1993). One of the most important Canela myths centres on *Awkhêê*, who is simultaneously seen as a Canela mythical figure, Jesus Christ, and Don Pedro II, the nineteenth-century emperor of Brazil. *Awkhêê* is credited with letting the Canela choose between a shotgun, representing industrialized Brazilian society, and a bow and arrow, representing indigenous traditions. The Canela chose the bow and arrow, which some argue mythically solidified their “inferiority” to the larger non-indigenous society (cf. Azanha, 1984; Crocker, 1978). In the early 1960s, a Canela woman claimed she would give birth to *Awkhêê*, thereby reversing the Canela/Brazilian⁶ dichotomy and making the Canela the superior society. She advocated stealing cattle from nearby landowners for continuous festivals, which resulted in a violent reaction from the cattle ranchers and ended the messianic movement (Crocker and Crocker, 2004). This unique moment in Canela history is significant in that it demonstrates the failure of a movement that was centred on notions of extreme excess as opposed to traditional notions of ecological balance.

The second external factor that has had an impact on the Canela way of life is the overarching process of globalization and the introduction of new technologies. Electricity was introduced into the community in 2005 through a government-sponsored programme, and many homes now have television sets and refrigerators. Some villagers are now taking academic and technical training courses in nearby towns, and the majority of people speak Portuguese in addition to their native Canela language. Overall, it appears that these new developments are being incorporated into the Canela ecocentric worldview rather than replacing it. New equipment for processing manioc has not displaced the importance of hand processing techniques, and subsistence farming is still the primary means of obtaining food despite growing access to processed foodstuffs. Additionally, certain new technologies are lauded for their environmental success in other communities. The neighbouring Krahô community, also a Timbira group, collaborated with a Brazilian governmental agency and a non-governmental organization to recuperate a traditional variety of maize, obtained through a national seed bank (Ávila, 2004). Some Canela have expressed interest in this project, as they are also concerned about the loss of native species and of biological diversity in general.

In all of these ways, then, it appears that the Canela animistic and ecocentric tradition is flexible and able to incorporate some new ways of life while discarding those that are incompatible with the main aspects of Canela ecological ethics. Western religious beliefs and new technologies are utilized in innovative ways that allow for their integration into already existing practices. Some technological advances, such as the use of seed banks, are desired in order to maintain traditional Canela ecological ideals. In sum, Canela ecological ethics is clearly a living set of concepts that remains central to community life. The focus on intimate, communicative human relationships with nonhumans has direct environmental conservation implications as well. The Canela people in general appear to value and respect their nonhuman counterparts, and are beginning to seek out ways of engaging with larger organizations to maintain this tradition. Taking the Canela worldview seriously is an important step in

⁶ The Canela refer to themselves as *mehim* and to non-indigenous or “foreign” people as *cupê*, which is usually glossed as *os brancos* or “whites” in Portuguese. For simplicity’s sake, the term “Brazilian” is being used here as a placeholder for all people of non-indigenous origin who come into contact with Canela society. See Panet (2010) for a detailed description of both these terms.

respecting and valuing not only indigenous peoples, but the nonhuman beings that live in these societies as well.

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