CHAPTER 2

Religion among Guaraní-Speaking Groups in Brazil

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Introduction

In anthropological and historical literature, all ethnic groups that speak the languages of the Tupí-Guaraní family are compounded under the label ‘Guaraní’: in Brazil, this includes the Kaiowá, Mbyá and (Guaraní-) Ñandéva. In 2008, the total Guaraní population in Brazil was estimated at 51,500, making the Guaraní the second-most numerous Indigenous grouping in the country. The following pages describe religious thinking and practice among Guaraní-speaking groups in Brazil.

There is no word for religion in the Tupí-Guaraní languages. Looking for a translation, we may resort to the expression ‘our good way of being’ (ñandé rekó katú), which includes among its meanings ‘religious experience.’ The expression indicates that what we consider to be the religion of Guaraní-speaking peoples is not something that stands apart from the cultural system but, rather, something essential in the thinking and everyday life of the group (tekó). It is strongly linked with the group’s aim of perfecting what they consider to be theirs (ñandé), to be good and to be their own (katú).

Tekó porã and the variant tekó katú are constant markers and touchstones of the identity of the group regarding society and religion as a whole. The Kaiowá refer to these principles as meaning good habits, traditional normative ethics and the original system which guides the lives of the divine and divinized beings. The Mbyá identify them with the way of life of the original inhabitants of the ‘first Earth,’ who then set up rules for governing their lives.

Another Guaraní expression close to what we call religion is tekó marângatú. It indicates, like in ñandé rekó katú, the value (good) that the Guaraní peoples lend to what they consider theirs. Especially among the Kaiowá, tekó marângatú today means sacred habits, spiritual knowledge and religious traditions.

An early survey of the Guaraní religious universe appeared in German in 1914, under the title Die Sagen von der Erschaffung und Vernichtung der Welt als Grundlagen der Religion der Apapociwa-Guaraní. The author, Nimuendajú (Curt Unkel), focused on a small group of Ñandéva (Apapokúva) immigrated from Mato Grosso at that time (Nimuendajú, 1987 [1914]). Based on this and later ethnographic and ethno-historical works (Schaden, 1998 [1954];
Chamorro 1995; Chamorro 2003; Chamorro 2004; Chamorro 2010; Melià 1991; Cadogan 1992), this chapter will sketch some of the most salient features of Guaraní religion. We begin by answering the question of how the Guaraní imagine the supernatural world of other-worldly beings and deities. This depiction may serve to offer a paradigm of the construction of the supernatural by the Guaraní.

**Jasuká: Principle of Being and Supreme Creative Principle**

A first cycle of mythical narratives shows that the Kaiowá and Mbyá groups perceive the divine as the active principle of all Things. It is named Jasuká or Jasukáva. It is the sacred name of the female bonnet and of the woman herself. Jasuká Sy Eté is the Original Mother. Jasuká vyapú is the religious name of the woman, meaning 'the sound of Jasuká.' It is also a ritual chant basket, a musical instrument used exclusively by women.

Jasuká is associated with the life fluid of plants. Among those plants which have a religious significance, it usually refers to bamboo, out of which is made the women’s rhythm stick. A cedar is considered to be the mother-tree, while a palm tree sustains the world. The Kaiowá think of Jasuká as a smooth and tender rain which creates, recreates and perfects human beings. The Mbyá describe the Original Mother as a source of water located in the center of the Earth: “For the Guaraní Indians, the universe and anything contained in it, including the Creator himself and the gods who accompany him, raises up from a ‘primary element,’ a ‘vital ether’” (Cadogan 1962: 47).

We can infer that when these Indigenous groups imagine the supernatural as a creative and supportive substance, they rescue the image of this female entity as a synonym of life. This archetypal female is different from the women of later mythical tales. Ñandé Sy (‘Our Mother’) is confined to being a pilgrim of tragic destiny. The impact of the colonial experience contributed to effacing that positive female image which in ancient times had inspired the tales about Jasuká. Nevertheless, Indians aspire to meet again with the Original True Mother Jasuká who according to some sources lives in the depths of darkness, and according to others dwells within the “Earth without evil.” In any case, those beliefs may be related to a fact discovered lately: in the ancient territories

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1 It is to be noted that, beside the elements foregrounded in the present entry, fundamental features of the Guaraní religion and Weltanschauung are: the image of a living earth; the agency of a godly logos in humans; the common experience of the dependency of humans on the vegetal and animal universe; confidence in shamanism and witchcraft as arbiters of life and death; and belief in an original epoch of peace and affluence to be restored.