Wolfgang Kapfhammer

A Clash of Cosmographies. Some debates and disputes within a fair trade project among the Sateré-Mawé Indians of the Lower Amazon, Brazil

The Sateré-Mawé of the Lower Amazon, where I have done fieldwork in recent years, are one of the larger indigenous populations in Brazil and one of the few indigenous groups left in the immediate vicinity of the main Amazon River. Due to their prolonged contact the Sateré-Mawé society has been exposed to a variety of historical changes. As a consequence of a staggering demographic growth the immediate surroundings of the villages have been largely depleted of game and fish, shortage of food has become chronic. Since 1995 a great deal of hope rests on a fair trade project, which commercializes Sateré-Mawé products such as guaraná and a host of other forest products. Although well established as an indigenous enterprise on an international market, the guaraná project up to now is still struggling to counter generalized misery in the villages on a large scale.

Of course, the guaraná project has supporters and adversaries on an indigenous, regional, national, and international level each with its own ideology, cosmology, or — as I prefer to call it: cosmography. Starting out with an anecdote, I will relate in the following of some of the “clashes” of these cosmographies on the field of project collaboration.
Associated with the Consórcio dos Produtores de Guaraná (CPSM) is a NGO called ACOPIAMA operating on the interface between indigenous producers and international market. The CPSM and ACOPIAMA contracted a professional of another NGO, ICEI, financed by the state of Italy. Besides some sub-projects with a direct ecological finality (apiculture, the release of turtles etc.) the ICEI functions as a consultant in optimizing administrative structures within the producers’ consortium. Recently, somewhat over the heads of the Indians themselves, a kind of dispute or even conflict arose between a representative of the ACOPIAMA, whom I will call Mario, and the representative of the ICEI, which I will call Fabio. However, it seems to me, that within this discourse two ideologies, or cosmographies, clash with each other that have to do with differential mode of relations with nature and its use. Besides a basic left-leaning ideology, which tries to attribute a resistant, anti-etatistic impact to the guaraná project, Mario of the ACOPIAMA recently represents an increasingly culturalistic point of view, which ties the value – also the market value – of Sateré-Mawé production to its cultural and spiritual grounding. In a recent e-mail discussing the introduction of “nusoken”, the mythic place of origin of the Sateré-Mawé as a brand name for Sateré-Mawé products, he argued that – because of this mythological embedding - the value of the project’s products has been added on a “higher place” than that of the market.

“nusoken”, trademark of Satereé-Mawé Fair Trade products
The French company *Guayapi Tropicale*, the most important wholesale buyer of Sateré products, occupies within the European fair trade scene exactly this niche market, which derives the added value of its commercialized commodities from the supposed or actual cultural embedding of their conditions of production. That is, *Guayapi Tropicale* commits itself towards its consumers, that the collecting or the cultivation of the products follows those proverbial “millennial” strategies and methods, for which the consumer, equally interested in the quality of the product as in the culture of its production, is ready to pay an appropriate price. Even when leaving aside the fact, that those “millennias” ago a market for surplus production might not yet have existed, one is hard pressed not to attest certain double-dealing here. Basically, according to this logic, there cannot exist any production at all for a market, in fact the product anyway is brought to the fore by the “millennial” ritual machinery of the specific culture. Actually, the point is not, that guaraná in the form of powder, although processed by a company-owned place in Parintins, does not necessarily correspond to a traditional form of preparation (that would be the guaraná stick, as promoted by Slow Food), also the point is not, that the majority of Sateré products offered by *Guayapi*, historically at best goes back to the tradition of extractivist exploration (like copaiba, andiroba, and not least guaraná itself), that is, we deal with a kind of indigenous neo-extractivism (Gudynas) although under “fair” conditions. The anecdote I will relate here goes deeper and comes down to a dichotomy of two classic nature-ideologies: one ideology, which declares wild, untouched nature as a sanctuary, and one, which cultivates experimental imitation of nature as a cultural achievement. It is about the old antagonism between “wilderness” (*silva*) and “garden” (*hortus*) as appropriate nature icon.
Certification of Sateré-Mawé products by Slow Food

But now the anecdote: According to Fabio, an agro-technician, it makes sense to select the seeds of high-yield guaraná-plants and breed them in little plastic bags full of earth. In so doing the yield of the clone is assured. The idea is to minimize the factor of random in harvests, in the end a strategy used by horticulturalists and farmers since millennia. As Fabio one day pleaded for this strategy in the presence of representatives of Guayapi Tropicale, they were appalled. This would disagree with those "millennial" traditions of the Sateré-Mawé and, above all, pull the rug from under their own marketing commitments and, finally, undermine the mystic bond of the Sateré-Mawé as waraná membyt, as “sons of guaraná”. Indeed, according to mythology, the first human couple rose from the tomb of the guaraná-child.
The Sateré-Mawé producers nowadays dispose of a so-called protocolo, a mandatory bilingual guideline of how to produce guaraná sticks. There we can read under article 5:

1) as mudas transplantadas nas plantações devem ser principalmente ‘filhos do guaraná’, ou seja, mudas coletadas ritualmente na floresta virgem, germinadas aos pés dos cipós de guaraná nativo. É perfeitamente

and

sob a forma de arbusto e não de cipó; também é admissível o transplante destas mudas, mas não é admissível a seleção de sementes para plantação.

Thus, it is forbidden to select seeds, because (at least that is the causality constructed here) the seedlings have to be collected ritually from the primary forest, in fact as “sons of guaraná”.

The usual method of the Sateré-Mawé is indeed to pull out wild seedlings in the forest, in order to transfer them to the gardens. However, this activity does not appear to have any ritual meaning, actually it is rather the traditional method of the Sateré-Mawé, while the breeding in plastic bags is a method of the caboclos nearby.
Chief with wild guaraná seedlings:  
waraná mbyt, „children of the guaraná“

According to an interlocutor to collect seedlings in the forest “para nós já é suficiente”, while the plastic bag method “veio da cidade”

The spiritual character of a consubstantial relation between the guaraná plant and Sateré humans is however emphasized by the activists of the guaraná project and propagandistically enforced by enterprises like Guayapi Tropicale.

It is interesting that in the sateré translation of the paragraph in the protocolo hardly anything can be found which could designate “ritually”. In fact we read waraná kyt sese, that is: seedling (kyt) of the right (sese) guaraná (that is: not the wrong species that does not produce fruit, waraná ran).
According to my interlocutor “Sateré não precisa sacola”, simply because there would be enough seeds of any plant in the forest … Obviously, what is important here is that the plants are collected, and not planted.

While the semantic field of words that have to do with the activity of the transfer of guaraná seedlings points to an embedding of this process into the pattern of procuring / collecting economic forms, this activity can as well be interpreted as a form of interaction with nature analogous to mythological narratives in the sense of Tim Ingold. This “poetic involvement” (Ingold) or rather: re-embedding of affective relations with nature is indeed the intention and the pretension of the guaraná project, which claims to lay a counterpoint to the increasing alienation from their forest environment among the Sateré-Mawé.

However, the intellectual problem, how to reduce the diverse facets of the mode of “unconditional extraction” from nature (called “generalized predation” by Descola) to a common denominator, persists:
- This mode may rely on the unconditional care of a nature as mother imago (the animal mother *miat ehary* or *miat ty* in Sateré cosmology);

- However this childlike trust can easily turn into a harsh grabbing of resources, which, in the long run, can put enormous pressure on these resources under certain historical circumstances;

- At the same time a specific linguistic register (the “old words”, *sehay poti* in mythological narratives) is able to lend a poetic undertone to this mode of procuring, which can assume such a ruthless appearance, and turn an activity of collecting and procuring into an interaction with persons of the mythical world. However, this must not necessarily mean intimate heartiness with nature, but rather, that economic activities are tantamount to mythical conflicts:

- The blood of the son of Thunder, *Sururi pakup*, turns into the assai-palm fruits;

- The eye of the child of the woman *Uniawasap‘i* turns into the first guaraná plant

- Out of the dismembered body of the Jaguar daughter grows the first manioc plant.

All these supernatural persons have been killed by jealous uncles / sorcerers (*hamu‘in*).

In any case, the argument to maintain and revitalize the affective and emotional relationship of the Sateré-Mawé with their forest environment has a lot going for it.

On the other hand, Fabio’s argument in the debate, which puts a “life in dignity” – whatever its cultural embedding – in the first place, is no less important. With “life in dignity” he means to assure at least the minimal standards of housing and subsistence. This minimal standard should be gained economically. E. g. according to him a quantity of production of less than 100 kilo of guaraná per year leaves no perceivable traces in the welfare of the producer and
This point of view is contrary to the point of view of the “culturalists”, who hold dear the anti-governmental resistance character of the project. According to them it would be better if 100 producers produce 1 kilo each, but engage with their environment in a tradition and alternative manner, than 1 producer who produces 100 kilo; an argument, which – according to Fabio – presumes to condemn the concerned to perpetual poverty.

Guaraná garden lined with rose-wood trees according to the Forest garden principle

Anyway, there certainly exists a “bio-political baseline”, beyond that one cannot retreat. Given the actual situation in the Al Andirá-Marau, one has to take into account the imminent danger of chronic malnutrition and its consequences for the physical and mental condition of a whole generation of children and adolescents. The potentially disastrous impact of malnutrition on the mental development of children is well known. The bio-political consequence of the present reservation regime is the growing up of a new generation in danger of falling behind on a physical, psychical and social level. So, the argument to increase or expand traditional production to assure at least a minimal standard of living certainly cannot simply be dismissed as bending over too much to the lure of capitalism.
In any case it has to be sure what exactly is the frame of reference, within which every producer would like to see his work realized:

- As a way to participate in urban consumerism (this would turn the project into a machine that transforms local high-quality products into heap commodities from regional supermarkets),

- As a canvas, upon which the producer, resp. the project managers project their political aspirations,

- As a way to regain an self-determined life,

- As a way to realize his notion of indigenous identity.

In a situation, where allaying the daily hunger \textit{(matar o fome)} as biological necessity completely absorbs personal agency, the production argument has priority over the culture argument. Nonetheless it would be a fatal error, to construe both arguments as irreconcilable contradictions for ideological reasons. The recovery of (productive) agency can also lead to a recovery of (cultural) embeddedness into one’s own environment, to new confidence in the forest.

If one tries to outline a scheme, which cosmographies meet or clash on this globally extended field of interaction, the following turns visible:

1. an unconditional, potentially predative access to the resources of the forest, which among the Sateré-Mawé is nowadays more charged with meaning by the historical “commodity fetishism” of the epoch of extractivism, than by the poetic interaction with the non-human environment.

2. a culturalist-essentialist narcissism, which allows the partners from Western industrialized societies to participate in the rainforest sanctuary and its primordial inhabitants.

3. a preoccupation inspired by a Benedictine work ethic with the capacity to earn a living by the sweat of one’s brow.

If we take a look at the last two cosmographies, we are once again reminded of the dichotomy I alluded to in the beginning of my talk: while the former constructs a “wilderness” and allows for human persons to act only “naturally”, as an “imitation” of their forest environment, the latter puts the human person into the foreground as acting “culturally”, using his / her garden as a laboratory to subdue nature.
A viable middle course for the guaraná project half-way between the wilderness phantasm and the dominium-terrae-commandment could be the principle of **stewardship**.

The CPSM actively endorses a specific reading of the myth of “Grandfather Emperor”, one of the most important myths of the Sateré-Mawé. This myth formerly resettled the source of all the desired commodities outside of indigenous territory. Every once in a while the *Imperador* will surprise his Indian friends with presents. The new reading however traces back to one charismatic leader of the Sateré-Mawé: instead of fuelling hope on *cargo* from the exterior, this version constructs the mandate of the Sateré-Mawé as stewards of the riches *within* their own territory.

![Soaking of manioc tubers](image)

Another aspect might be important here: perhaps the “predative” grasp for natural resources is a typically male domain, while the experimental, “selective” handling of plants is more a domain of women. Above all in manioc cultivation we observe a discourse and an exchange of manioc varieties building downright networks. A dynamic exchange of knowledge and practices takes place, whose final objective is to minimize the risk of lack of food. It is self-understood that this process in the long run implicates the selective use of plant material without ever leaving any traditional frame of reference. Such an approach that emphasizes
the dynamic and processual quality of cultural achievements is contradictory to the static, mystifying "wilderness" dogma, which prohibits the selection of guaraná seedlings.

Guaraná, as a ritual beverage, has much to do with the construction of social harmony by chiefly authority. It is certainly not by chance that the indigenous project management reflects these traditional male circles. So maybe a more gender-sensitive administration could contribute quite a lot to the proliferation to the social, political, economic and environmental values of the guaraná project.