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Tending the Emperor's Garden: Modes of Human-Nature Relations in the Cosmology of the Sateré-Mawé Indians of the Lower Amazon¹

The Construction of a Sense of Place

Within the “bioregionalist” strand of Western eco-politics, concepts like “geophilia” emphasize the powerful spiritual, social, and psychological bonds people should have with their environment and landscapes, bonds that lead to the development of a strong sense of place (Taylor 2000).² Although this kind of place-making was originally introduced as a concept by architects and city planners to counter the inhospitality of *urban* environments, advocates of bioregionalism support strategies of re-inhabiting *natural* landscapes, often citing as models indigenous peoples, whose sense of place is understood as solidifying through the application of religious, moral, and aesthetic meaning to their environment (Myers 2002).

While it is certainly true that indigenous societies avail themselves of powerful ways of structuring their world through lore and ritual (Århem 1998; Santos-Granero 2004), it is also true that in the (post-) colonial situation, many of these strategies have been contested by powerful external political forces. Thus, indigenous peoples have had to contend with environmental stress or degradation (logging, chemical pesticides, etc.), resulting gaps in ecological knowledge, and a loss of “poetic involvement” (Ingold 2000) with the environment, similar to the losses lamented by green activists in the Western world.

On the other hand, from a Western perspective, the Amazon is still presumed to be an Edenic landscape, primarily because the local indigenous peoples have developed millennia old cosmologies that are based on “sound” relations between what we call “humans” and what we call “nature.” Many scholars believe that it is exactly these cosmologies that draw a distinction between “destructive” and “non-destructive” human-nature relations.

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2 On the spiritual subtext of Western human-nature relations see Taylor 2010.

While cosmologies certainly offer guidelines for environmental conduct, I argue that it would be wrong to essentialize specific cosmologies as monolithic and immune to historical change. The Sateré-Mawé, whom I shall discuss, exhibit a pluralism of sometimes conflicting modes of human-nature relations in their cosmology. I will also argue that cosmology provides the backdrop for emerging strategies to deal with social, economic, and environmental crisis within the Sateré-Mawé's indigenous area.

The Sateré-Mawé Case

The Sateré-Mawé is one of the last indigenous groups in the immediate vicinity of the main Amazon River that continues to maintain its cultural identity. Mostly known as the original cultivators of guaraná, the Sateré-Mawé, today numbering about 12,000 people, have been exposed to prolonged contact with the encompassing Brazilian society in the form of early missionizing efforts, the socially and ecologically predatory local form of extractivism, and indigenous government agency. Indeed, cultural contact has led an increasing number of Sateré-Mawé to abandon their forested and riverine place both ideologically and practically, and seemingly to give in to the pull of Western consumer culture.³

The weakening of the Sateré-Mawé's attachment to place is clearly articulated in a narrative that explains the unequal distribution of goods between the Sateré and the white population. In the myth, *ase'i Imperador*, or Grandfather Emperor,⁴ leads his people out of the inhospitable "paradise" *Nusoken*. He asks the Sateré to go down to the river bank, where he will be waiting for them to take them with him on his ship. Halfway along the trail the Sateré get distracted by palms ripe with fruits, lose track of time, and miss the boat. The Emperor leaves without them, taking along all the industrial commodities. The Sateré are consoled by the Emperor's promise to send them the much-desired merchandise every once in a while.

This narrative may be interpreted as an elaboration of the historical experience of growing dependence on external Western commodities, an experience that has developed into a downright *cargo*-stance: a passive demand for commodities with no sug-

3 Cf. Kapfhammer 2004, 2007, 2009; for more information on the Sateré-Mawé go to <http://www.online.uni-marburg.de/satere/>.

4 This title probably refers to the Brazilian Emperors Dom Pedro I and II of the nineteenth century.

gestion of exchange or reciprocity.⁵ Interestingly, such a “demand-sharing” (Peterson 1993) mode of human-nature relations exists in traditional Sateré-Mawé cosmology, where the shaman ritually demanded game from a supernatural animal mother (cf. Bird-David 1990). Today this mode is echoed in the relations between chiefs and river traders, between recent political leaders and government agencies or international NGOs, and between citizens and the welfare state. However, this orientation of the Sateré-Mawé towards the exterior not only has to conceal the historical fact of asymmetric and hierarchic relations, of violence and exploitation during the era of extractivism; it also contributes to the Sateré-Mawé’s alienation from their forest environment by dislocating the source of salvation towards exterior urban spaces.

Although the Sateré-Mawé partially uphold the idea of unconditional relations between humans and their environment, their cosmology actually demands a rather disillusioned stance towards what we might call “nature.” As in many agricultural groups, the transition from childhood to full, adult personhood requires a ritual. In the case of the Sateré-Mawé, adolescent boys are subjected to the painful stings of poisonous ants. As it is explained in the myth, the symbolism of the rite could not be more explicit: the ants originate from the vagina of a snake woman of the aquatic underworld. The caring relationship with the animal-mother is disrupted, to be replaced by the dangerous and violent relation to *Uniamoire’i*, the Snake Woman. Contrary to clichéd Western convictions about the harmoniousness of indigenous life in and with nature, reaching full personhood for the Sateré-Mawé means confronting nature’s “toxicity.”

On the one hand, this mode of human-nature relations stabilizes emotional attachment to the environment and, as such, strengthens the Sateré-Mawé’s sense of place. This demanding, “cost-intensive”⁶ regime, which is based on balanced, reciprocal exchanges with the different domains of the cosmos, comes close to what Reichel-Dolmatoff (1976) paradigmatically has described as “cosmology as ecological analysis”: a world vision whose implicit environmental ethics attract Western agencies as potential partners for collaboration in sustainable development projects.

5 So called “cargo-cults” have been observed among indigenous peoples in times of cultural contact. They refer to the sometimes religiously-fuelled expectation of Western merchandise.

6 In contrast to the unconditional mode of human-nature relation, this mode requires a person to meet obligations, to “invest” in relations. This is how I use the term “cost-intensive.”

On the ground, this system, which requires a daily routine of prescriptions and precautions regarding nutrition and health, is prone to accusations of sorcery, which ensure that the system is characterized by cycles of violence. This instability is potentially explosive when mixed with conflicting regional and political interests, and the situation has reached a crisis point several times. One such crisis occurred during a particularly violent boom cycle of rosewood extraction in the 1960s, and today a staggering population increase has made chronic shortage of food a social reality in the *Área Indígena Andirá-Marau*.⁷ Engaged as they are in internal struggles, the Sateré-Mawé are ill-equipped to deal with external issues.

Sateré-Mawé Responses: A New Sense of Place

These crises have prompted much discussion among the Sateré-Mawé; possible solutions, as I will show, could be interpreted as a revitalization of the Sateré-Mawé's sense of place.

One response of Sateré-Mawé society to the critical situation has been the establishment of an evangelical Christian counterculture, starting in the 1960s and reaching a peak in the 1990s. Today, the evangelical movement has largely lost its impetus due to the death of its charismatic leaders. It has disappeared from the public stage to consolidate itself within the intimacy of parochial life. The first-wave evangelicals distanced themselves rigorously from the prevailing “cost-intensive” system of human-nature relations precisely because of its symbolic, ritual, and everyday violence. What was lost, though, was the sense of nature as an actor to be respected. The stance of the evangelicals increased the society's alienation from the forest environment.

Subsequently, a new wave of evangelical Christians emerged, increasingly critical of “civilization” and its “contaminating” effects. However, instead of returning to the cost-intensive system, they “Edenize” forest space. This novel environmental discourse relocates the “toxicity” of the “wilderness” as it is established in the initiation rite. The pathogenic *satek*, the poison, is no longer associated with the cosmological domains as in the initiation rite (see above), but with the space of civilization—that is, of the village (*tawa*)—where the contaminating impact of the fringes of Western culture makes itself

7 The Indigenous Area of the Sateré-Mawé is situated on the Lower Amazon, south of Parintins, on the border between the Brazilian federal states of Amazonas and Pará.

felt. This new “toxic” space is now pitted against a “safe and sound” forest (*ga’apy*), an Edenic realm of purity. This moral discourse, with its nativistic undertone, may have the potential to *re-politicize* and *re-ecologize* the evangelical movement.

Another response has been to link up Sateré-Mawé products with the global fair trade market. At the peak of the evangelical movement in the 1990s, its charismatic leaders were able to integrate religion, politics, and economic interests. Their tenure coincided with the start of a fair trade project to commercialize guaraná and a great many other forest products of the Sateré-Mawé area. It was a stroke of luck that guaraná not only met the demand of a European fair trade market, but also rooted itself squarely in a traditional ritual complex of chiefly authority and the construction of social consensus.⁸ However, as the political power of the evangelical movement went into decline, the cultural acceptance of the “guaraná project,” once praised as the way out of misery, also diminished.

Recently, the indigenous guaraná company reinvented itself by founding the *Consórcio dos Produtores Sateré-Mawé* (CPSM)⁹—an attempt to regain space lost in political conflicts. Along with its business endeavors based on global fair trade ethics, this new group of actors actively endorses a cosmological change of perspective, calling for a specific reading of the myth of the “Grandfather Emperor.” This reading traces itself back to one of the deceased evangelical leaders: instead of relying on external commodities, it constructs the mandate of the Sateré-Mawé as stewards of their forest environment. However, the activists began to realize that this novel kind of “stewardship” may only be sustainable culturally if it is supported by an aesthetic and affective “re-embedding” of human-nature relations; in other words, they need to be *re-spiritualized*.

Essentially this is achieved through the economic activities of the fair trade project.¹⁰ By returning to autonomous productivity within their forest environment, the Sateré-Mawé realize a fundamental message of their mythology. In one of the major cosmogonic myths, a violent conflict gives rise to the riverine landscape of the Sateré-Mawé. *Sururí*

8 As a ritual beverage, guaraná accompanied reunions in the chief’s house. Based on the origin myth of this plant the Sateré-Mawé consider themselves as the “Sons of Guaraná.”

9 See <http://sites.google.com/site/filhosdowarana/>.

10 By opening so-called “*roças consorciadas*” (inter-cropping gardens), the Sateré-Mawé producers not only meet the certification requirements of the Western project partners, but also contribute considerably to the aesthetic of the place.

tunug (Snake / Thunder), the Master of the Water, creates a new spatial order: using his shamanistic tools, he transforms an indiscriminate flood of water into a river with two banks. By blowing tobacco he creates the sinuous line of today's rivers; his rattle and feather-sticks become the *patawá*- and *burití*-palms that dominate river banks today. The blood of a boy, whose bursting body had started the excessive flood, is transformed into the much-appreciated *assai*-palms.

On the one hand, this myth recalls the concept of the cost-intensive relationship. Relations between human beings and the enchanted landscape are shown to have a negative, violent aspect: the blood is the rain of the wet season, known to bring sickness and death; the serpentine form of the river further alludes to the fact that this is the domain of the Snake Master and his powerful but pathogenic substance *satek*. On the other hand, the shaman's tools that were transformed into the landscape metonymically stand for transformation itself: the *autonomy of production*—of “producing production” (Turner 2009)—that is transmitted in the narratives and written into the places with which human beings interact to reproduce themselves.

Regaining a sense of place also means regaining agency and autonomy of production, with nature no longer being dismissed in favor of external commodities, but rather being given a status equal to that of its inhabitants. The version of the *Emperor* narrative that establishes the Sateré-Mawé as stewards of an “ecological and cultural sanctuary” does so by way of a cosmographic re-orientation of spatial relations: while the “cargo” versions allocate the means of production towards the exterior, the “stewardship” version reappropriates “production power” (Turner 2009)¹¹ for the Sateré-Mawé and their forested and riverine environment.

From the case of the Sateré-Mawé we can conclude more generally that, while Western environmental thinking profits from looking at varied relations to nature, it will continue to do so only if it acknowledges the structural complexities and historical conjunctures that shape such regimes in the global struggle for planetary existence.

11 The website of the CPSM catches the eye of the viewer with the headline “*Nossa luta é produzir*” (“our struggle is to produce”).

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