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### THE KAYAPÓ ORIGIN OF NIGHT<sup>1</sup>

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The Kayapó Indians live in a vast *área indígena* in the Brazilian states of Pará and Mato Grosso do Norte. Today they number approximately 2,500, but aboriginally their numbers were far greater and they were one of the most powerful tribes of the Brazilian highlands.<sup>2</sup> Despite depopulation and encroachment on their tribal lands by *fazendas* and *agropecuárias*, the Kayapó traditional culture remains more or less intact.

Folk literature of the Kayapó, like that of other Gê-speaking tribes, is rich and diverse. Certain stories and songs belong to specific families or lineages and are inherited (*nekrêch*), but most are part of the public domain and are told by the Kayapó in public places.

The truly public folk literature is generally recited by the men in the famed Kayapó Men's House (*ngá*).<sup>3</sup> Animated oratory is commonplace and great prestige is attached to those who can recite the traditional stories with finesse and style.

The following narrative was recorded (transcribed from a tape) at Posto Gorotire, the largest of the Northern Kayapó villages, on July 8, 1978. It was related in the men's house and in the presence of several (6 or 8) *mebegnet* (men of the senior or elder age grade) by Beptopoop, also a *mebegnet* and shaman. It is a favorite story to be told to children by older men, but is one of the central Kayapó myths and can be heard in many cultural contexts.<sup>4</sup>

#### The Kayapó Origin of Night

Long ago there was only daylight. There was only daylight; darkness was not. Then a boy, maybe an Indian (but an enemy), the son of Nhyborway, called Joipekrô, was captured. He was captured and brought to here, where there was only daylight.

Everyone was suspicious of one another because in daylight no one could go about with another's wife. So Joipekrô said, "You listen to me. You should not lie to one another. You should not be suspicious of one another. Someone should go to my father, Nhyborway; he has darkness. Bring back some night from his house. Far away my father's land has darkness."

"Is that so?" someone asks.

"Yes. It is true. There is real darkness. My father knows about darkness/night."

They knew (had heard) there was a keeper of night. (So they believed Joipekrô).

Joipekrô told them about the path to his father's house. "Far away on the road are many worthless people (non-Indians). I will tell you all about them.

You just keep on the road to my father's house. My father has put darkness in a gourd. He keeps darkness in a large gourd in his house. He will give you some when you arrive. You can take out some darkness and you can sleep in it. Listen to me. There are many worthless people on the road: the buzzard people, the big-throat people, the penis-belt people, the ibis people. Just ask them the way. The worthless people will show you the way."

So they went to seek the road to Nhyborway's house. The worthless people showed them the main path and kept them from following the side (wrong) paths.

It was nearly dark when they arrived. It was dusk; it was just getting dark; it was the edge of darkness. It was almost dark.

So they called to Nhyborway. "What?", he answered. They called to him again: "Nhyborway!" Again he answered: "Where is my child? What have you done with my child? Where is Joipekrō?"

"Your child is away, far away, in our land. We are following your child's directions."

"Come here and tell me about my son. Is he still alive? I miss him. Bring him to me" (says Nhyborway).

(Someone replies) "Far away your child is alive and with us (our people)."

"Why didn't you bring my child to see me? Long ago they took my child. I still miss him."

"Well, I'll tell you about your child, Nhyborway. Joipikrō sent us here and we have arrived."

Just hearing the name of his son caused him (Nhyborway) to wail.

"Your child spoke to us about your darkness. We have come for it. We want to take it to our land and sleep in it. In our land, way over there, there is just light. In only light we sleep and wake up. There is not darkness at all."

"I will give you darkness to take to my child" (said Nhyborway). You must not touch it! There is something bad in it that will hurt you. It stings. No, you must not touch it! You must take it to my child; he will take it out so it will not sting. No, do not touch it!"

They spoke nicely to Nhyborway (to show that they agreed with his instructions), but they lied. They did not speak the truth to Nhyborway; "No, no, no, we will not take out the darkness; we will not touch it. Only your child Joipekrō will take it out."

They went back on the path to their land. They returned with the gourd filled with darkness. Nhyborway had filled the gourd with darkness. They carried it back to Joipikrō.

They slept in the light and awoke and went on and on. They went again and slept in the light and awoke and went on. They had nearly arrived at the village. Then one who spoke falsely said: "Oh! what are we taking this darkness back for. We must take some out now and sleep in it!"

"No!" (replied the truthful ones). There's something bad that hurts in the darkness."

"That is a lie. It is not true." (answered the untruthful one).

"No, we will break it open and ruin the darkness. It will hurt us."

"It is a lie."

Our ancestors always had those who spoke falsely. Always, even long ago, our ancestors spoke unreliably.

The wicked, unreliable one untied the gourd. Immediately there was darkness. He was frightened and threw the gourd far away. The darkness escaped. They could not put it back into the gourd. A scorpion escaped too and stung him. He cried aloud in great pain.

"Do away with him." (someone of them said). "He let out the darkness and turned out the scorpions to hurt us. Do away with him. Cast him away!"

Someone went to him, took his arm, and threw him out. He was thrown up and became a bird. He became the night hawk that cries like one in pain. He became the night hawk that brings evil and pain. His call is not like other birds.

He (the unreliable man) only wanted a little darkness, but it all escaped. He was untruthful and brought the sting of the scorpion to us.

Look! That is the story. It is an old story. It is a story of our ancestors, who wanted to sleep in the darkness. Nhyborway's child, Joipekrō, made it available. And now we go sleeping in it. Long ago there was only darkness. Our ancestors slept and woke up in light. Then Joipekrō brought darkness from his father. It was in a gourd and it is still with us.

Commentary

The missionary Horace Banner was the first white man to establish prolonged, friendly contact with the Kayapó in 1939. He was amazed to find that the Kayapó believed that the world was in perpetual light in the ancient days and darkness had to be introduced into it. This opposition to the Western view that light was brought into the world of darkness fascinated Banner. He saw this as evidence that the Indians had indeed "fallen" into darkness through the dark forces of the devil and sin. The question of which was first, darkness or light, continues to be a pivotal philosophical dilemma for the small indigenous Christian church in Gorotire. This is indicative of one of the basic contradictions in Kayapó and Western culture.

The Kayapó believe that in the ancient days they lived in the skies (there are various sky layers). It was in the sky (*kaikwa*) that they learned how to organize themselves into villages and social and political units. At some later point in time, part of the Kayapó found their way down a cotton rope to the present world. Some Kayapó remained in the skies and their campfires (stars) can still be seen as evidence of this.<sup>5</sup> The Origin of Night myth, however, refers to the early Kayapó who descended to the earth.

Elements of the myth reflect traditional Kayapó values and concepts. Nhyborway, for example, is the man sought out in this narrative for the secret of night. Within the Kayapó culture there are many ritualist specialists. There are dozens of types of "curers" (*pidjô mări*), as well as shamans (*wayanga*) who "know" forces that are utilized to discern the future and manipulate the present. Even today the Kayapó will make long journeys to consult a shaman who has the reputation of being especially powerful. Thus the mythological journey to visit Nhyborway is paralleled in modern culture by those who travel long distances to consult wise and powerful *wayanga*.

The son of Nhyborway, Joipekrô, is a captive of the Kayapó. The Kayapó have a long-standing reputation for their raids to take hostages.<sup>6</sup> In the modern village of Gorotire, over 1% of the adult population is composed of individuals taken as children in raids. The Kayapó take great interest in the cultures of their captives and know a variety of songs and stories from other non-Gê speaking tribes (e.g., Karajá, Mundurucú, Parakana, etc.). Thus, there is an ancient tradition reflected in this narrative, not only of taking hostages, but also of learning from them. It is significant to note that raiding and the taking of hostages is really a type of cultural exchange and leads to rather complicated alliances that can shift over time. In this case, Joipekrô serves as the guide to the secrets of night possessed by his father.

In the quest for the secrets of night, the Kayapó voyagers were too eager. They do not do as they are told and they "let out" the night from the gourd. As a result, too much night escapes and along with it the danger and curses of the night. These "evils" are represented by the scorpion.

The Kayapó of today are not fond of the night. They seldom go out into the night and are horrified if caught alone in the darkness. There are some practical reasons for this, since night does bring out the nocturnal scorpions, snakes and jaguar that are indeed deadly. Darkness is also associated with death, and many sounds of the night (for example, the night hawk and certain crickets) are thought to come directly from dead ancestors. The worst thing about the night is that it is uncontrollable and the jungle and savanna habitats so familiar to the Kayapó blend into an unknown mass of darkness. Night is the unsocialized part of the Kayapó world. This is somewhat compensated for by ceremonial dancing and singing, which often lasts the entire night. According to the narrative, night was sought for sleeping and for the anonymity of darkness for extra-marital sexual activity. Kayapó ceremonies often incorporate communal sexual activities, and birth patterns are tied to seasonal variations in the ceremonial calendar.<sup>7</sup>

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Thus, night is good for it facilitates sleep and is a time for the ceremonial life. The curses of night came only because men did not do as they were instructed and were overly anxious and greedy. Patience and generosity are highly valued characteristics in the Kayapó culture and these traits are surely reinforced by this important myth.

The myth of the Origin of Night, therefore, reflects a variety of historical and current social practices. In addition, the myth is clearly instructive by setting out certain values and warning of dangers against greed and breaking established social norms.

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Translation of this myth took place in Brasília, October, 1978, with the assistance of Micky Stout of the Summer Institute of Linguists of Brazil. The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research generously supported this research.

<sup>2</sup> This is discussed in greater detail by Darrell A. Posey in "Kayapó Mostra Aldeia de Origen," *Revista de Atualidade Indígena* III(14), Jan./Feb. 1979, pp. 50-57. Also see Darrell A. Posey, *Ethnocentomology of the Gorotire Kayapó of Central Brazil*. Ph.D. dissertation, University of Georgia (Athens), 1979.

<sup>3</sup> For more complete accounts of Kayapó myths, see Anton Lukesch, *Mito e Vida dos indios Caiapós*. São Paulo, Brazil: Biblioteca Pioneira de Estudos Brasileiros, 1976; and Lux Vidal, *Morte e Vida de uma Sociedade Indígena Brasileira*. São Paulo: EDUSP, 1977; and Johannes Wilbert, Editor, *Folk Literatures of the Gê Indians*. Los Angeles: UCLA, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> See Horace Banner, "Mitos dos Índios Kayapó." *Revista de Antropologia* N. S. 5, pp. 37-66, 1957.

<sup>5</sup> See Chapter II of Anton Lukesch, *Mito e Vida dos Índios Caiapós*, São Paulo, Brasil: Biblioteca Pioneira de Estudos Brasileiros, 1976, for a complete discussion of myths concerning "man and the universe."

<sup>6</sup> This is documented by Charles Wagley, *Welcome of Tears*, New York: Oxford Press, 1977, Chapter 2.

<sup>7</sup> Terence Turner gives a detailed account of the sexual activities associated with certain Kayapó ceremonies in his Ph.D. Dissertation entitled "Social Structure and Political Organization Among the Northern Kayapó, Department of Social Relations, Harvard University (1965). The relationships between the ceremonial cycle and birth rates is discussed in Darrell A. Posey, "Cisão dos Kayapó," *Revista de Atualidade Indígena (FUNAI)*, No. 16, 1979, pp. 53-58.

