

EAVESDROPPING ON A CROSSED-LINE BETWEEN THE MANAMBU OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA AND THE MĒBENGOKRE OF CENTRAL BRAZIL

VANESSA LEA

In this article,¹ I would like to explore the analogies between the Manambu of Avatip, Papua New Guinea, as portrayed in Simon Harrison's book, *Stealing People's Names: History and Politics in a Sepik River Cosmology* (1990) and certain central Brazilian groups, above all the Mēbengokre, a Northern Jê-speaking group, as described in my doctoral thesis, 'Names and *Nekrets*: A Conception of Wealth' (Lea 1986).² Reading Harrison's book gave me a bizarre sensation of *déjà vu*, as if I was overhearing a telephone conversation between the Mēbengokre

1. This article is based on a paper given at a colloquium on Melanesia and Amazonia, organized by James Weiner and held at Satterthwaite, Cumbria, England, from 29th April to 1st May, 1994. Resources from the Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP) allowed me to attend the colloquium. I thank participants for their comments, and Anthony Seeger for his suggestions, while remaining responsible for what is said here. It was on that occasion that I learnt of Harrison's second monograph (1993), which is not dealt with in this paper. It would be interesting to compare it with Verswijver's study of Mēbengokre warfare, published in 1992. Although these two monographs on warfare are written in different styles they permit interesting parallels.

2. My thesis was written in Portuguese and is not yet available in English.

and the Manambu, while at the same time listening to a soliloquy addressing my own concern with the significance of personal names.³

It is not only the parallels but the contrasts between the Mēbengokre and the Manambu which provide food for thought. The most important parallel between them is an obsession with personal names. In both societies, names are jealously guarded property which can be lent out, stolen, lost and retrieved. Harrison characterizes names as 'immaterial' property, an adjective which shows how language tends to imprison us within our own folk categories. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines 'immaterial' as 'not material, incorporeal; *of no essential consequence, unimportant*' (my italics). I prefer the neologism 'non-material', as it is less ambiguous.⁴ It is not that Harrison is being duped by language: on the contrary, this problem of language merely reveals why he goes to such lengths to justify treating names as property. Our respective data advocate a reconsideration of the universal validity of the Western world's separation of the material and immaterial world.⁵

The first significant contrast between the two societies is that, for the Manambu, names and magical and ritual powers constitute a single category. Knowledge of the 'real' names of the totemic ancestors provides access to magical spells, allowing one to invoke the ancestor immanent in a particular name. For Manambu women, names constitute the personal identity of their children. For men, certain names have an underlying significance involving secret prerogatives in the men's cult, known only to initiated men. Names, spells and secret prerogatives belong to patrilineal subclans. For the Mēbengokre, names and prerogatives belong to matri-houses (or Houses),⁶ i.e. uterine descent groups, whereas knowledge of magic is not attached to descent groups and tends to be passed from father to son.

Among other peoples who comprise the category known as Northern Jê, the Timbira (divisible into at least six peoples) tend to attach prerogatives to names

3. Coincidentally, Harrison and I both began fieldwork in July 1977, so that we started from the standpoint of a similar intellectual climate. For example, Bourdieu was influential at the time, and his work seems to have been important to Harrison, as it was to myself. It was Mauss's essay on the gift (1985 [1923–4]), especially his account of mana (the magical, spiritual and religious power of people) and the hau (the spiritual power of things) among the Polynesian Maori, that first helped me make sense of Mēbengokre personal names.

4. I think it was Cecilia McCallum who suggested this word to me when I first presented my work in English.

5. This echoes the disavowal by other researchers of lowland South America concerning the separation of the natural and the supernatural (see, for example, Viveiros de Castro 1986 and Descola 1986) and the discovery of the frequent interchangeability of people and things, subjects and objects, in Melanesia (see Strathern 1987, 1988).

6. These Houses are moral persons in a Lévi-Straussian sense. For this author's characterization of 'house-based societies' see Lévi-Strauss 1983 and 1984. For a more specific discussion of the compatibility of Lévi-Strauss's definition of house-based societies with the Mēbengokre, see Lea 1995a.

which involve ceremonial roles, not magical powers. In Xavante society (Central Jê), patrilineages own not names but magical powers, such as the right to use a certain species of wood as a pillow to foresee the future through dreams. As with the Manambu, there is intense rivalry over the ownership of this type of property. From Maybury-Lewis's point of view (1974 [1967]), it was the fact that the same prerogative could be found in different clans, from one village to another, that made the notion of descent problematic in the Xavante case. Müller (1976) notes that the ownership of magical powers and adornments is an aspect of the political prestige of lineages and an object of rivalry and disputes within Xavante society.

For the Mëbengokre, personal names form a complementary category with *nekrets*, the heritage of their matri-houses. The category *nekrets*, sometimes explained to me as that which is hoarded, comprises a wide variety of prerogatives. It includes a large number of adornments used by men, women and children on ceremonial occasions, for instance, many different feather headdresses, each of which bears some distinguishing characteristic according to the House it belongs to. Men inherit the right to eat specific portions of meat, while women inherit the right to raise certain animals as pets. Countless songs and ceremonial prerogatives are *nekrets*. Furthermore, certain Houses have the right to store specific ceremonial items within their interiors, such as the gourd rattles which mark the rhythm in all ceremonial dances (this being the only musical instrument used by the Mëbengokre). The role of ceremonial leader (*ngre nhòn dzwoy*), which is vaguely reminiscent of the Manambu *simbuk*, is the most prestigious of the heritable roles belonging to a House. There are also non-ritual prerogatives, such as the owner of 'odds'. When somebody brings fledglings from the forest, the owner of odds takes the odd number of birds: for instance, when there are three he obtains one.

Harrison's focus on names and magical powers, as linked to the identity of persons and groups, fits in well with my analysis of Mëbengokre names as the metaphysical essence of the ancestors, a gene-like quality which individuals acquire through their names. From what I gleaned of Melanesia from Harrison, this conceptualization of names would be perfectly palatable in that part of the world. Analysing Melanesian gift economies but also reflecting native idioms, Strathern portrays persons as being multiply constituted and internally partible (1988: 197). Objects share this quality and circulate, in the form of 'gifts', as parts of persons (*ibid.*: 192). In the Melanesian gift economies, man's identity is represented as having attachable and detachable parts (*ibid.*: 200–1). Thus the Western opposition of active subjects and inert objects hinders the understanding of Melanesian representations focusing on persons and their enchainments of relations (*ibid.*: 165, 369). Kopytoff, arguing along similar lines, shows that the Western separation of people and things can produce moral dilemmas even in our own culture (1986: 84). Harrison cites both these authors to support his own perspective (1990: 198). Their insights can be profitably applied to the interpretation of the circulation of names and prerogatives in Mëbengokre society. As Harrison also shows (*ibid.*: 198), it has often been noted how Melanesian wealth

may represent body substances and substitute for them symbolically: shell wealth is equated with semen, meat with human flesh or milk, etc.

When Harrison affirms (*ibid.*) that ultimately Avatip subclans *are* the names and ritual powers they possess, nothing could express more appropriately the nature of the matrilineal clans of another central Brazilian group, the Bororo, studied by Crocker. Their clans are characterized by their *aroe*, which, according to Crocker, might be termed 'totems' (1977: 247). *Aroe* denotes the soul or sometimes a name (Crocker 1985: 33) and 'designates some immaterial essence which is the metaphysical dimension of a human being' (*ibid.*: 15).⁷ Harrison describes Manambu names and ritual powers as the essence or substance of subclans. I have used these same terms while referring to M̄bengokre names and prerogatives (Lea 1986), despite an uncomfortable feeling that somehow essence and substance were supposed to be polar opposites. Melanesian ethnographies may perhaps resolve the problem of how to make these two concepts compatible. It seems to me that the whole issue of substance, much discussed in Jê ethnographies, has been a red herring.

It has been argued that when, in Jê nuclear families, a mother, father or sibling must abstain from eating certain foods when one of the family members is ill, for fear of worsening the condition of the sick person, this implies a notion of shared physical substance or consanguinity, in complementary opposition to ceremonial ties which link individuals to the public and jural sphere.⁸ The emphasis on this 'community of substance'⁹ has been used to argue for the unsuitability of the notion of unilineal descent in such societies. Seeger (1980) coined the term 'corporeal descent group' to characterize the constituent units of such societies, affirming that descent is based on native concepts of physical relations. One of the constant features of Timbira society is the distinction between name-givers and genitors, which are held to be irreducible categories. While the parents (or, principally, the father's semen) fabricate a child's body, under no circumstances must they give their own names to the child. This role is filled ideally by the parents' cross-sex siblings, or alternatively by the child's grandparents (these genealogical positions being designated by the same terms). In other words, the parents produce their child as the raw material which the name-givers transform into a person. This indicates the problematic character of the notion of corporeal

7. The Bororo (a non-Jê-speaking people) were classed together with the Jê by the Harvard Central-Brazil project, in terms of forming a common cultural complex; cf. *Dialectical Societies: The Gê and Bororo of Central Brazil*, edited by Maybury-Lewis (1979). Viveiros de Castro, in a recent seminar at the University of São Paulo, has questioned whether the Jê are not in fact as close to other peoples of Central Brazil, such as the Karajá and the Mundurucu, as to the Bororo. While this is a point is a good one, Bororo social organization is nevertheless very reminiscent of that of the M̄bengokre, which in its turn is reminiscent of the organization of Manambu clan groups. See Crocker 1969.

8. See Da Matta 1976, 1979; Melatti 1979.

9. See Da Matta 1979.

descent group. From the perspective of the Northern Jê the physical body is perishable, while it is names and prerogatives, the metaphysical essence of the ancestors, that transcend time. There are also the secondary burials, which formerly seem to have been customary practice in many Jê societies. This is compatible with the contrast emphasized in Jê ethnographies between flesh which perishes and bone which does not. It seems probable that the flesh represented the individualistic aspect of the person, lost for ever at death, while the bones represented the person's imperishable substance, contained in names and prerogatives. Among the Manambu, bone is associated with the patrilineal aspect of society and with names, while blood is associated with matrilineal and with uterine relationships which cut across descent groups.

The relationship between the living and the dead appears to be sharply contrasted when one compares the Mēbengokre with the Manambu. The Manambu invoke dead ancestors through spells and sacrifices. A dead couple inhabit simultaneously the village of origin of the husband's subclan and the house they inhabited in life. Although Harrison does not enter into details concerning the dead, they appear to have a benevolent relationship with the living. By contrast, indigenous peoples of lowland South America are generally eager to rid themselves of the dead, and the Mēbengokre are no exception. The dead are dangerous because they miss the living and seize any opportunity of to carry them off to the village of the dead. The dead return *en masse* to attend the climax of the great naming ceremonies held to confirm 'beautiful' names, those which entitle their bearers to be honoured in a naming ceremony and consequently to be transformed into beautiful persons. On the final night of the ceremony, the living abandon their houses to the dead and congregate in a circle in front of their respective houses, outside two inner circles of dancers. The children who are to have their names confirmed at dawn occupy the innermost circle, furthest from the dead. The close relatives of children and adolescents occupying inherited roles follow close behind, smoking pipes to ward off the dead. If a predecessor were to draw near to his living successor, the latter would automatically die. This implies that the conjunction of these two persons produces a short circuit which proves fatal to the living.¹⁰

Other lowland South American indigenous peoples, and the Jê in particular, have often been contrasted with African societies with ancestor cults and descent groups, which are also corporate groups controlling economic resources.¹¹ The genealogies of lowland indigenous peoples tend to be shallow in depth, and it is often inferred that there is therefore a complete lack of concern with ancestors. Christine Hugh-Jones (1979) noted that among the Barasana genealogical amnesia

10. This idea was suggested by analogy with Hérítier's (1989 [1979]) analysis of certain forms of incest as producing a short circuit.

11. See Carneiro da Cunha 1978 and 1993; Da Matta 1976; Overing 1977; Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro 1979; Albert 1985.

is induced by the repetition of personal names in short cycles. This point is equally valid for the Mēbengokre. The Barasana re-establish contact with the ancestors through male ritual. In the Mēbengokre case, the essence of the ancestors is transmitted to the living along with their names and prerogatives. The dead who attend Mēbengokre ceremonies are individuals attached to the living through memory. It is held that the dead eventually re-die, being transformed into whirlwinds. In other words, the dead maintain their individuality as long as anyone remembers them, eventually subsiding into empty names and prerogatives which are taken over by their successors. People are not indifferent to the ancestors: they fully recycle them until there is nothing left over. In this connection, it is notable that traditional stone ovens (*ki*) are identical in appearance to grave mounds. Although the Mēbengokre never pointed out this analogy to me, an association between the two seems inescapable. The dead are 'cooked' in their grave to separate out what is perishable from that which can be retrieved by society.

For the Manambu, there is a dichotomy between close ascendants, from whom direct descent is public knowledge, and the totemic ancestors, known today only in their metamorphosed form, as mountains, rivers etc., the creators of the world as it exists today. The Mēbengokre do not appear to distinguish pre-social origins as a distinct category of time. In fact, they do not appear to distinguish myth and history; rather, there is a direct continuity between them, even if today's humanity is a pale shadow of what it was in the past in terms of the feats men performed.

Harrison describes how specific totemic ancestors created or became transformed into aspects of the physical environment, and even into wards, ceremonial houses and artefacts (1990: 45). The Mēbengokre say that women in general transformed themselves into fish in mythical times, and the feathers of a giant bird, slain by the Mēbengokre, were transformed into the birds that exist today. The giant bird was killed by the ancestors of a present-day House, which claims the ownership of a type of feather wig, acquired as a trophy at the bird's death. The Karaja not only have the same artefact but even call it by the same name.¹² Some of their ancestors created hills and rivers, although a more common theme is the acquisition of already existing goods from others, as when Venus brought horticultural crops down from the sky. A Manambu ancestor created daylight, whereas the Mēbengokre acquired night in a calabash from a mythical father-in-law. For the Mēbengokre, objects of material culture were either created or obtained by the ancestors rather than being considered the transfigured forms of ancestors.

The Manambu consider that names encapsulate their bearer's spirit. Consistent with this idea is the fact that the pronouncing of a victim's name is essential to

12. This wig-like artefact is called *ròri-ròri*. Its existence among the Karaja was recently brought to my notice by André de Toral, who carried out research with the Karaja for his MA thesis. Detailed comparative research on material culture has yet to be done: it could help to break down the immemorial homogeneity of the Mēbengokre material and ceremonial heritage. Further details of ceremonial acquisitions from other indigenous peoples are given in Lea 1986.

guarantee the efficacy of sorcery. This is equally valid for the M̄bengokre and the Bororo, demonstrating the metonymical character of names.

Harrison describes the pedigree of a name, transmitted regularly within the same subclan, as important evidence of ownership. Serial ownership among the M̄bengokre has equivalent significance (Lea 1992).¹³ Both the Manambu and the M̄bengokre rationalize the lack of cross-generational continuity in the use of names within a group claiming ownership, affirming that it reacquired them or that they were not publicly known because they were used as secondary names and hence unheard. Harrison (1990: 56) mentions that each Manambu subclan tries to maintain a collective homonymy between its mythological figures and its own living members. It is the fact that the members of a subclan are the namesakes of their totemic ancestors that links the phenomenal with the spirit world. For the M̄bengokre, personal names close the gap between the eponymous ancestors and the living, but they also seem to be permeated by the essence of each subsequent bearer. This is suggested by the practice of people substituting dead relatives with living ones through names, as when a mother transmits the name of a dead child to a subsequent child (Lea 1992).

The idea of an organic totality is a recurrent theme among the M̄bengokre and is also central to Harrison's analysis of the Manambu. Harrison suggests that this totality, achieved in rare moments of male cult ritual, is an ideological compensation for the relative lack of polity on a daily basis when people are absorbed with everyday concerns of subsistence (1990: 193–4). This argument applies equally well to the M̄bengokre. A totality is produced by naming ceremonies, whose enactment requires the presence of the whole of the living and dead population of a village and whose efficacy is dependent upon a mosaic of roles, offices, songs and artefacts provided by a wide network of Houses. These major ceremonies, lasting several months from beginning to end, can be suspended at any point when disharmony erupts in the village.¹⁴ In the past, when warfare was a normal activity of daily life, it may have been more difficult than nowadays to stage two naming ceremonies annually. An atmosphere of supreme harmony is experienced at the climax of rituals, with the entire village sharing food, camped in a compact circle with no walls dividing them.

Among the Manambu, personal names and magical powers transcend society. They are pre-social, in the sense that they were created by the totemic ancestors with whom the Manambu do not directly trace genealogical descent. Each subclan's patrimony of names and magical powers represent its portion of this finite and perennial order of the universe. As nothing is conceived as having been created since the beginning of time, one group's loss is another's gain. Like the

13. We appear to be referring to the same phenomenon by different names.

14. Historical narratives mention the treacherous ambush and slaughter of hunting parties while camping in the forest to amass sufficient game for the collective feast on the final night of the ceremony.

Manambu, the Mēbengokre and other Jê seem oblivious to the idea of creation. A classic example from mythology is the theft of fire from the jaguar. Nothing represents better the idea of portions of a totality than the inherited right to eat specific portions of tapir meat, the largest game animal in the area. Each House owns one or more specific portions; adding them together, one obtains a whole animal or the whole of society.

The Manambu are part of a complex network of trading relationships which is reminiscent of the Upper Xingu in central Brazil rather than the Mēbengokre. One of the Manambu's neighbours and trading partners are the Iatmul, from whom many ritual items have been obtained, through trade rather than war. Harrison recalls (1990: 1) that Bateson described personal names, debated and disputed, as providing a theoretical image of the whole of Iatmul culture. This had escaped my memory when describing Mēbengokre names as total social facts (Lea 1992). Warfare for the Mēbengokre appears to have been equivalent to trade for the Manambu. Prisoners of war were a source for the learning of names, songs etc., from other indigenous groups, and war booty was transformed into *nekrets*, augmenting the heritage of the House of the person who first acquired any particular item. Harrison describes how the Manambu attempt to fit Western goods and offices into their hereditary totemic system (1990: 78, 177): the Mēbengokre transformed numerous Western goods into hereditary *nekrets*. One example of a widely disputed prerogative is the right to wear a red hat. It is held that when the first white man died at the hands of a Mēbengokre, a red hat was taken as a trophy from the victim's head, henceforth becoming his *nekrets*. Red cloth also used to be a prerogative, but nowadays it is worn 'inauthentically' (*kaygo*) by all women.

A Mēbengokre village consists of a circle of Houses laid out in accordance with the axis of the sun's path, from east to west. In the Manambu village studied by Harrison, the oldest ceremonial houses are referred to as the prow and stern of a canoe. Among the Mēbengokre, the east is associated with the idea of base, legs, and source or beginning. The west is associated with the idea of top and represents the head. North and south are known as the sides of the belly, from which one can deduce that the navel corresponds to the zenith of the sun at midday. Each portion of the village circle corresponds to the 'standing-place' (*dzam dzà*) of a specific House, though not every House is represented in every Mēbengokre village, and some populous Houses, comprised of numerous abodes, end up invading the 'standing-place' of a neighbouring House.

Manambu villages have no central square but consist of a succession of wards, one for every subclan. The domestic houses¹⁵ are at the rear, the club-houses of non-initiated men in the centre, and the ceremonial houses, which are simultaneously club-houses for initiated men, at the front. Domestic houses are a miniature of village space, with the women and children occupying the outer walls and

15. In Lévi-Straussian terms (1981 [1947]), both the Manambu and the Mēbengokre have harmonious regimes, the first being patrilineal and patrilocal, the second matrilineal and uxori-local. There is not space to discuss this point here.

the men the central area. They sound reminiscent of the Barasana houses described by the Hugh-Joneses (1979). Conversely, there is no pre-eminently male space in M̄bengokre houses. The correct place for men is in the men's house, at the centre of the village. The M̄bengokre have no secret men's cult from which the women are excluded. In a sense, Melanesian ethnographies seem to have contaminated Jê ethnographies (at least those concerning the M̄bengokre), inducing them to exaggerate the exclusion of women from ritual activities.¹⁶

Dualism has been taken as one of the marked characteristics of Jê societies. Harrison also mentions it for the Manambu. One of the three Manambu clan groups is demographically so insignificant that there is virtually a moiety system with respect to exogamy (1990: 43); there are also ritual moieties which cross-cut the division into descent groups. However, dualism seems so prevalent the world over that I have never been entirely convinced of it having special significance for the Jê.

The similarities between the Manambu and the M̄bengokre inevitably invite one to try and reconcile the equally striking contrasts between them. The most obvious one is the question of descent. In lowland South American social anthropology, New Guinea is held up as a paradigm for questioning the validity of descent theory. It is therefore somewhat surprising to find Harrison employing a model of descent so unhesitatingly. He argues that patrilineal descent is rigidly adhered to and is thus unproblematic. Flexibility occurs instead at the level of the patrimony of the totemic ancestors. While this is conceived of as perennial, its distribution is in a state of flux. This patrimony is the object of rivalry, conflict and competition. Although its constituent categories are fixed, the social groups which own any particular item of wealth are subject to historical change. A subclan's patrimony is a measure of its relative prestige value in the community. Personal names, ritual and magical powers are scarce because they are conceived of as a finite pool (1990: 55, 200).

In describing the case of the M̄bengokre, I considered using the terms 'lineage' and 'clan'. The Jê literature presents a dizzying array of terms, domestic clusters, segments, clans, matrilineages, matriline. Maybury-Lewis dismissed all these terms, as far as the Northern Jê are concerned, as adding up to nothing more than the 'cumulative effects of uxorilocality' (1979: 304). The M̄bengokre distinguish clearly between houses as abodes (*kikre*) and as matri-houses (*kikre dzam dzà*), each with its own distinctive heritage of personal names and prerogatives. The emphasis is thus on a House as a property-owning group existing from time immemorial. The same Houses occur from one village to another, but people are not singled out as the founders of lineages. Houses are designated with reference to one of their major items of wealth (such as the owner of the yellow feather headdress) or their mythological exploits (e.g. 'the House that killed the [giant] bird'). This emphasis on property led me to engage with Lévi-Strauss's

16. Harrison does not examine the question of gender in any detail, and this issue will not be dealt with in this paper.

concept of house-based societies, despite the fact that he attributes this type of social formation to cognatic societies (Lea 1995a).

Among the Manambu, thoroughgoing differentiation is achieved through personal names: coevals should not be namesakes. According to Harrison, there may be no perceptible differences in an item of material culture from one subclan to another besides its name. Myths may also be identical from one subclan to another in all but the names of the protagonists (1990: 56).¹⁷ The linguistic exogamy of Tukanooan peoples offers an interesting parallel to the Manambu. Hugh-Jones notes (1995) that they also have material objects or plant species which may be distinguishable in nothing more than name.

For the Mēbengokre, names alone are not a sufficient factor of differentiation. If two Houses have the right to use a red macaw tail-feather, they will each use a different species or will add petal-like down from different species of birds to form tassels on the tail-feather. One Manambu clan-group has red totems, another black ones, these two colours being the minimum differentiating feature of many heritable Mēbengokre adornments. When the Manambu dispute a name, as a temporary solution one side may agree to use the male form and the other the female form (the difference being in the suffix). The Mēbengokre divide ownership of disputed pets in the same fashion. One House raises males of the species, the other females. Among both Manambu and Mēbengokre, certain wealth items are exclusive to a subclan or House, while others can be found in a number of them. Sense can be made of this apparent untidiness by having recourse to the notion of polythetic categories, advocated in another context by Needham (1975). The same element may be found in different groups and is not therefore a sufficient defining feature. It is the sum of elements which differentiates one group from another.

Despite considering patrilineal descent unproblematic in the Manambu case, Harrison lays great emphasis on the importance of matrimonial alliance and links created through uterine kinship. A subclan's most important allies are its sisters' sons. Harrison goes so far as to say that a subclan is held together in relation to its unmarried sisters' sons and not through patrilineal descent (1990: 36) and that agnatic descent lines are generated by uterine alliance relations (*ibid.*: 37). If subclan members were to marry their sisters' sons, they would be donor and recipient in respect of their bridewealth and mortuary payments (neither of which have any equivalent among the Mēbengokre). Patrification is an important aspect of Mēbengokre social organization because formal friends are inherited through one's father. An ideal marriage is one in which a woman marries her mother's formal friend and a male ego marries a formal friend's daughter.¹⁸ Harrison talks of 'onomastic exogamy' when referring to the uttering of spells. To be effective,

17. Harrison mentions versions of myths disparaged as lies. A similar situation was encountered with the Mēbengokre, but I have not yet been able to sort this matter out.

18. There is not space for more details here. The question is treated at length in Lea 1995b.

one must know the names of two people of the subclan that owns them and the names of two of its allies (1990: 57). Melatti (1979) coined the term 'onomastic incest' to describe Eastern Timbira practices. This expression is equally valid for the Mēbengokre. A woman loses her brother, who goes off to live uxorilocally, fabricating children in another House, but this same brother returns his names and prerogatives to transform his sister's son into a person. Women lend out their names and prerogatives to their brothers' daughters but later retrieve them to transmit to their daughters' daughters. Harrison describes how Manambu children receive not more than five names from their subclan. Once a person is bereaved, he or she acquires the usufruct of a name from the maternal subclan. A person acquires a different name from this same source at each bereavement. This would seem to imply that for the greater part of their lives, most Manambu are known effectively by names acquired from their maternal subclan rather than from their own subclan. Among the Mēbengokre, it is the fact that grandparents may give the usufruct of their names to their grandchildren, just as women lend names to their brothers' daughters, that often leads to confusion concerning the true owners of names. This distinction between true and inauthentic name-bearers is shared by the Manambu.

Harrison uses the expression 'complementary filiation' to emphasize that individuals are linked as closely to their mother's subclan as to their own (1990: 37). Despite the scorn that has been poured on this expression, it seems a good depiction of Mēbengokre society. One's closest relatives, after those of one's own House, are those of one's father's House, and there is a close relationship between grandparents and grandchildren. When grandparents give the usufruct of names and prerogatives to grandchildren other than those in the direct uterine line, it seems simpler to attribute this to the link with one's grandchildren than to the products of alliances.

Harrison argues that ritual is not merely a distortion of reality, nor does it serve to maintain the status quo. In so far as a ritual manifests a temporary crystallization of power relations, it serves to forge differences in status (1990: 4). This could throw light on the significance of ritual for the Mēbengokre. Major naming ceremonies are not only becoming more common with the demise of warfare, they also provide new channels of social differentiation. To become a beautiful person, a child requires not only the right sort of names but also a sizeable network of kin to meet the expenses of the ceremony. Moreover, contact with national society is facilitating the creation of self-made leaders. As such, they can summon up the economic resources for expensive ceremonies better than anyone else. The late Coronel Pombo, who initiated relations with gold prospectors, is a perfect example of a Big Man. The case best known to me, however, is that of Raoni. As a leader whose power stemmed from his role as a go-between, as an intermediary between the whites and the Mēbengokre, he was able to honour each of his children with naming ceremonies. Among the ceremonies he patronized was *bemp*, the most elaborate of all, which allowed several boys (besides his own sons) to benefit from his generosity. At the village of Gorotire, in 1983, this

same ceremony was staged with the respective chiefs flying in plane-loads of biscuits and soft drinks (Lea 1984). Rank was already in evidence in the village at that time. The chiefs and their close relatives lived in a central street, with brick houses and electric light. The poorest villagers, denigrated as immigrants,¹⁹ resided in a traditional circle of houses off the main street.

Manambu ritual status gives a person prestige but little authority in the context of secular life. This applies equally to the Mēbengokre. The image that springs to mind to depict them is the contrast between a decadent aristocracy and the industrial bourgeoisie. In the village where research was carried out, the most prestigious House in mythological terms—where, among other things, the pupils of the eyes originated—was occupied by a tiny ramshackle abode. Whites were generally oblivious to the existence of the traditional monolingual chief. An up-and-coming elite was being formed of those who had learned Portuguese, were semi-literate and above all could earn a wage from the national Indian Agency (FUNAI). As with the Manambu, there is some attempt to maintain the two spheres as distinct, but increasingly the knowledge of the young competes with the age-graded hierarchy of adult men. Emphasis is laid on demographic strength in Harrison's portrayal of the contemporary Manambu. His argument sounds somewhat Darwinian but may correctly characterize what is happening. The stronger a subclan's demographic power, the greater its chances of laying claim to the names of other groups and defraying the expenses of debates over name ownership. There is a decidedly ceremonial aspect to debates, approximating them to Mēbengokre naming ceremonies. Procedures are highly stereotyped and formalized, sometimes lasting more than twenty-four hours, during which time the participants must be fed by the debaters and their allies. Debaters may enact extracts from myths, claiming to be the legitimate So-and-So, and women dance in the latter parts of the proceedings (1990: 156, 161–62).

Harrison argues that at least one subclan is gradually trying to achieve ritual dominance over the rest of the community, thus transforming the system into one of hereditary rank (1990: 6–7). The starting-point of my research on the Mēbengokre was to understand the etymology of the word *nekrets*, which is nowadays used to designate Western industrial goods. There is also a move towards the institutionalization of rank in Mēbengokre society and the emergence of Big Men. If names are as important as ever, traditional *nekrets* is tending to be submerged by the new *nekrets* or manufactured goods. It has long been recognized by anthropologists that matrilineal societies tend to undergo greater disruption than patrilineal ones with the onslaught of Western civilization. This may at least partially explain the difference in the impact of Western society between the Mēbengokre and the Manambu, but this question is too complex to be discussed within the limits of this article.

19. The precise meaning of this designation was not entirely clear; it seemed to bear some relation to past fissions and fusions.

Harrison focuses on questions of history, politics and cosmology. He notes that within the anthropological literature on Melanesia, there has been a discussion of the extent to which religion has been developed in some societies whereas others are predominantly secular (1990: 199). Harrison disavows the separation of religion from culture (*ibid.*: 85). This again raises the problem of the categories one uses in analysing a body of data. My work has focused on social organization, cosmology and gender, without ever having recourse to the notion of religion. This is related to Harrison's observation that a false dichotomy is created when economics is considered to be relevant to the gift-exchange and prestige economies of Melanesia but not to the Manambu, with their lack of food surpluses and their immaterial property (1990: 171). The Jê were once considered marginal to the tropical forest cultural area of lowland South America, due partly to their low level of technology, their lack of ceramics, weaving and canoes; in other words, they were deemed to have no significant property. If Harrison labours the point that names are thing-like, this allows him to highlight the limitations of our language, showing that anthropology tends to oppose material goods to symbolic ones, when in reality material goods also have a symbolic aspect. Harrison emphasizes that he is not propounding an idealist interpretation; rather, he is trying to show that the Manambu have a semiotic prestige economy involving culturally constituted values and meaning. Names and ritual powers are instrumental to individuals and groups in pitting their relative value against one another. This discussion could perhaps be furthered by considering the issue of honour.²⁰

Harrison's work has provided me a clearer understanding of the Mëbengokre. The consubstantiality between the Manambu and their totems (1990: 48) could equally well characterize the relation between the Mëbengokre and their personal names and heritable prerogatives. In both societies, people fight over names, verbally and even physically. In both, what are at stake are unique, imperishable values. This helps to make sense of conflicts over non-material property which are intrinsic to both societies. Both the Manambu and the Mëbengokre recognize that some groups (subclans or Houses) become extinct while others flourish and may fission. Both distinguish rightful from actual possession and are aware that names and rights may be gradually appropriated or usurped from their true owners. And in both societies, allies may temporarily deputize for the owners of rights, or assume the safekeeping of rights during periods when the proper owners lack the appropriate people to exercise them. In sum, names seem to have an identical flavour for the Manambu and the Mëbengokre. Strathern (e.g. 1987, 1988) describes the composite character and partibility of persons as a widespread image conjured up by Melanesian idioms. This offers an additional perspective on the

20. A Korean student of mine wrote in an essay that in her country widows used to be encouraged to commit suicide, because if they were to commit adultery this would bring dishonour on their family, whose members would thus be prevented from participating in public examinations. Nothing could illustrate better the materiality of honour.

meaning of names and *nekrets*, providing one possible bridge between Amazonia and Melanesia.

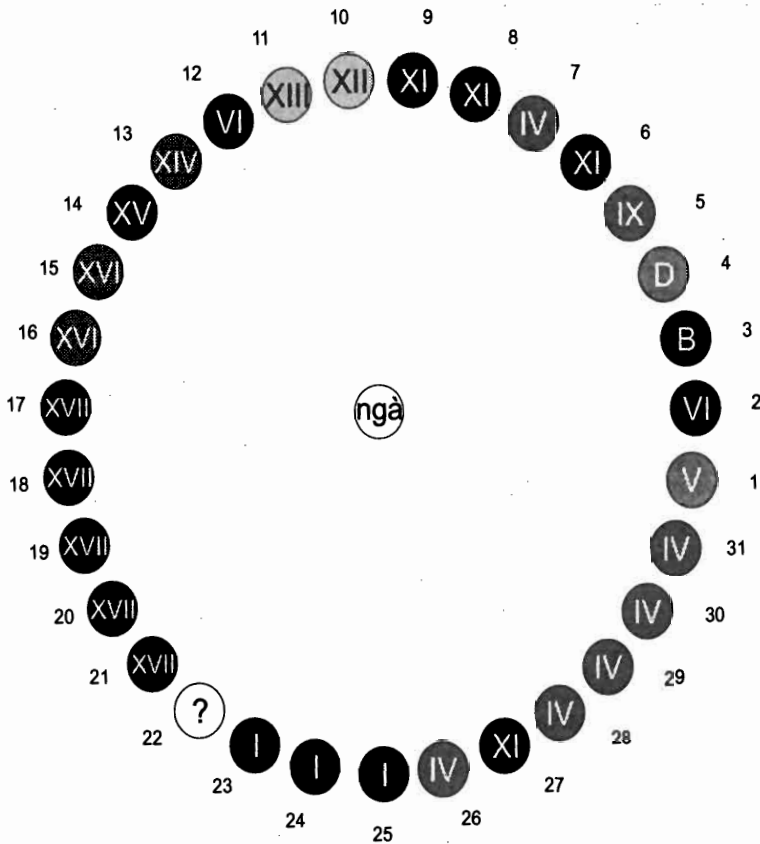


FIG. 1: Kapòto/Mètùkire 1987

Roman numerals and letters of the alphabet indicate matri-houses. Arabic numerals mark the number of abodes. Letters differentiate Houses that were not among the original group (comprised of 18 Houses) that crossed the Xingu river from east to west at the start of the twentieth century. In the context of this article, letters are the equivalent Roman numerals, the distinction being irrelevant. Ngà is the Mēbengokre word for the men's house, standing in the centre of the village.

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