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Contents

- ALF HORNBERG. *Machine fetishism, value, and the image of unlimited good: towards a thermodynamics of imperialism*
- NÜRIT BIRD-DAVID. *Beyond 'the hunting and gathering mode of subsistence': observations on the Nayaka and other modern hunter-gatherers*
- SUSAN KENT. *The current forager controversy: real versus ideal views of hunter-gatherers*
- SUSAN DRUCKER BROWN. *Horse, dog, and donkey: the making of a Mamprusi king*
- ÅSA BOHOLM. *The coronation of female death: the Dogaressa of Venice*
- SUSAN J. RASMUSSEN. *Ritual specialists, ambiguity and power in Tuareg society*
- VANESSA LEA. *Mëbengokre (Kayapó) onomastics: a facet of Houses as total social facts in central Brazil*
- ROBERT DELIÈGE. *Replication and consensus: untouchability, caste and ideology in India*

Comment

- Method in our critique of anthropology.* FREDRIK BARTH; BRIAN V. STREET
- Would the real Malinowski please stand up?* JAMES URRY; RICHARD FARDON
- Species and speciation in human evolution.* PAUL GRAVES

MĚBENGOKRE (KAYAPÓ) ONOMASTICS: A FACET OF HOUSES AS TOTAL SOCIAL FACTS IN CENTRAL BRAZIL

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This article re-examines Mēbengokre (Kayapó) onomastics and its relation to social organization. It is argued that personal names are linked to Houses (as distinct from dwellings) which entail an ideology of uterine descent. Names, along with heritable prerogatives, constitute the patrimony of immaterial wealth which defines the distinctive identity of each House. This reappraisal of Mēbengokre society revives the question of descent in Lowland South America. An ethnographic account is given of the social and semantic significance of personal names and of the great naming ceremonies with which they are associated. Names and prerogatives are the basic components of the Mēbengokre personae which link the living to their mythological ancestors. The physical organism is ephemeral but names and other forms of wealth are recovered by society at an individual's death in order to reproduce itself in its own image.

Introduction

In this article, I propose to give an ethnographic account of Mēbengokre onomastics in order to sketch out the contours of the matri-houses (henceforth referred to as Houses) which, in my view, form the basis of the social organization of these Native Amazonians. Personal names form a complementary category with *nekrets* (heritable wealth items) that make up the patrimony of Mēbengokre Houses, membership of which is transmitted through uterine descent. *Nekrets* includes prerogatives related to ceremonial roles and ornaments, the right to store certain goods (feathers, masks, etc.) in one's House, the right to specific cuts of meat for men and the right to raise certain animals as pets on the part of women. Such wealth items give a 'totemic'¹ aspect to Mēbengokre society, substantiating the individuality of each House as an exogamic unit.

The Houses vie with one another over the relative prestige of their patrimony of wealth. This may diminish through robbery and feuds. New additions can also be made through the appropriation of borrowed items and the salvation of names and *nekrets* which lack uterine heirs in a particular village.² Names and *nekrets* are (with the exception of spouses) the only scarce resources in this society. They are emblems and diacritics which substantiate each House's identity. The Mēbengokre say that women used to engage in physical fights over names. To alienate them from such property is to deprive their House of part of its heritage and of the metaphysical essence of its ancestors. Both names and

nekrets concertina time, through a recycling process which regenerates society with a perennial inventory of personae.

The Jê peoples, to whose Northern branch the Mëbengokre belong,³ were originally classified as marginal to the culture area of the tropical forest. They live in the savanna and areas of transition from savanna to forest. They were initially defined by Lowie (1946) in terms of what they lacked – hammocks, ceramics, canoes etc. The first monographs on the Jê were written by Nimuendaju (1939; 1940; 1942; 1946), a Brazilian immigrant who became the founding father of Jê ethnography. It was he who drew attention to the importance of ceremonial activity among the Jê. His writings show that if they are technologically simpler than the inhabitants of the tropical forest, their ceremonial life is far more elaborate.

Nimuendaju is most widely known for his creation of an anthropological red herring, ‘parallel descent’, attributed to the Apinayé (Western Timbira) but which Da Matta has shown to be an ethnographic error (1976*a*). Nimuendaju (1946) described the Eastern Timbira as having matrilineal extended families, though subsequent researchers, such as Carneiro da Cunha (1978: 86-7), have tended to regard them as having a cognatic kinship system. The main exception is W. Crocker; he, however, considers that Canela unilinearity was incipient at the time of contact with national society and that it is currently on the wane (1977; 1979; 1990). The Central Jê have been considered patrilineal, and the Bororo as having matrilineal descent. The Southern Kayapó or Panara were first described by Heelas (1979), according to whom they have ‘spatial’ descent groups. Schwartzman refers to these same units as clans although he does not take this as entailing a principle of descent (1987: 94).

The Jê and Bororo were the focus of the Harvard Central Brazil Project, co-ordinated by Maybury-Lewis. The all-pervasive dualism of these societies was of particular interest because it was not necessarily related to the question of exogamy. Maybury-Lewis expresses the consensus of researchers involved in the Project when he says that descent has proved to be an unhelpful notion for understanding the Jê and Bororo (1979: 305-6). In my view, although the reality of Mëbengokre Houses may be very different from what is meant by descent groups in relation to societies in Africa and elsewhere, this is not grounds for denying the pertinence of the notion of descent as an ideological construct.

The importance of naming among the Jê has long been recognized. Among the Timbira and the Suya, the transmission of names and prerogatives go hand in hand as specific names are linked to specific roles (Melatti 1976; Da Matta 1976*a*; Seeger 1981). Lave (1979: 16-17) believed that name transmission was more important to the Krikatí than to any other Jê of Central Brazil, and that it was acquiring increasing significance in direct proportion to the demise of the age set system. Doubt is cast on this by my interpretation of the importance of Mëbengokre onomastics. The members of the Harvard Central Brazil Project took naming to be a Central Brazilian equivalent to descent as a means of setting up social categories (Maybury-Lewis 1979: 311). In Da Matta’s view (1976*b*: 154), the fact that genitors and name-givers are mutually exclusive categories precludes the development of descent groups.

Lévi-Strauss coined the phrase 'house-based societies' (1981; 1983; 1984) as a tool for analysing societies with cognatic kinship. The phrase denotes a type of social formation where descent and alliance are interchangeable as organizing principles. Lévi-Strauss formulated this notion of the House as a moral person 'which possesses a domain that is perpetuated by the transmission of its name, its fortune and titles, along a real or fictive line, held as legitimate on the sole condition that this continuity can be expressed in the language of kinship or of alliance, and more frequently of the two together' (1984: 190, my translation). I do not regard Mēbengokre society as cognatic, for its matrilineal colouring is dominant. Nevertheless, the notion of House is indispensable for understanding the Mēbengokre, since the foci of the uterine ideology are Houses rather than human beings.

Each House occupies a determined portion of the village circle in relation to East and West, where its dwellings have been located since time immemorial, except in cases where internal disputes have occasioned the fission of a House. Consequently (as other authors have noted but have been unable to explain), when the Mēbengokre move from one village site to another they build new dwellings in the same portion of the circle as in the former village. This has also been reported for the Timbira, the Bororo and the Western Suya. The same norm applies to the erection of temporary huts in camps built during collective treks in the forest. The origins of each House are held to be rooted in mythological time and its heterogeneous collection of wealth items is explicable in terms of the exploits of its ancestors.

The Mēbengokre state unanimously that the fundamental principle of their onomastic system is that names must always return to the House whence they originated.⁴ Uxorilocality is a feature shared by all Jê societies as well as the Bororo. The female members of a Mēbengokre House (along with their husbands, fathers and unmarried male uterine relatives) may nowadays split up into various household units, both on an intra- and inter-village level. In a single village, members of households who belong to the same House should (and usually do) build their dwellings consecutively around the village circle, in recognition of the fact that they belong to the same House.

Besides Bororo and Panara matrilineages and Xavante patrilineages and patrilineages, reference has been made to residential clusters or segments among the Timbira by Lave (1979), Melatti (1979) and Da Matta (1976*a*), and among the Suya by Seeger (1981). In relation to the Mēbengokre, the term 'segment' has been used by Verswijver as a synonym for matriline (1983). Although little comparative work has been done on the Jê, my intuition is that the concept of House may prove useful to interpret variations on a single theme, namely Houses, matrilineages, matrilineages, residential segments and domestic clusters.

This could help to elucidate transformations which are in evidence in the Jê-Bororo culture area, such as in the respective weight accorded to agnatic and uterine ties. The Central Jê figure at one extreme, as societies where the uterine principle is reduced to the status of a residence rule – uxorilocality. Among the remaining Jê of Central Brazil and the Bororo, uxorilocality is amalgamated to a greater or lesser extent with an ideology of uterine descent. This could explain why Da Matta (1976*a*) conceived of Apinayé segments as political factions; why

Krikatí clusters are considered to own names (Lave 1967); Xicrin houses to own ornaments (Vidal 1977); and Canela matrilineal within longhouses to own heritable rites (W. Crocker 1979: 235, 238-9).

This article concentrates on onomastics, which constitute one facet of Mēbengokre Houses. The principles of transmission are identical in the cases of both names and *nekrets*. However, the systems of names and of *nekrets* are each elaborated with such intricacy that they are better treated separately. My concern here is with the former.

The people and the study

The self-designated Mēbengokre are a Native Amazonian people who are generally known as the Northern Kayapó. Their estimated population is 3,615,⁵ divided up amongst thirteen villages in the States of Mato Grosso and Pará, Central Brazil.

The term Kayapó is used to include various sub-groups, including the Xicrin (occupying two villages), whom the Mēbengokre regard as a separate though closely related people. The Kararaó sub-group is practically extinct; the remaining sub-groups (Gorotire and Mēkrānoti) correspond respectively to the Mēbengokre villages situated to the East and West of the Xingu river. Differences in culture and dialect between these sub-groups are minimal. Minor differences are most evident in the case of the Xicrin who, according to Verswijver (1985), separated from the other Mēbengokre during the last century. The remaining sub-groups resulted from fissions which took place in this century (Verswijver 1985).

Nearly a year and a half of fieldwork was carried out between 1977 and 1987, mainly among the Southern Mēkrānoti in Mato Grosso. One brief period of research was spent in Gorotire, a village to the East of the Xingu (Lea 1984). The Southernmost Mēkrānoti designate themselves as the Mētùktire (though they are better known as the Txukarramãe). During most of the period of study they were divided among two villages in northern Mato Grosso. Data on onomastics (concerning eighty-five females and seventy-four males) and on ceremonial participation (concerning ninety-three males and ninety-three females) were collected in the village of Kretire between 1981 and 1982. At that time the village population numbered a little under 200, with twenty-four dwellings representing fourteen Houses. Subsequently, the members of this village joined up with the remaining Mētùktire, forming the village called Kapòto on the western bank of the Xingu. In 1987, this village had thirty-two dwellings representing fifteen Houses. The members of this village are presently moving inland, back to their traditional savanna territory in Northern Mato Grosso. In this article I refer to the Mētùktire to specify the source of my data. When making statements of general applicability I refer to the Mēbengokre.

Facts on names

Categories of names and of people. There are three Mēbengokre onomastic categories – beautiful, common and joking names. Beautiful names are recognizable by the fact that they contain one of eight ceremonial classifiers – *Bemp* and *Tàkàk*, exclusively masculine, and *Bekwòy*, *Nhàk*, *Koko*, *Ngre*, *Pëyn* and *Ire*,

predominantly feminine. Each of these classifiers is linked to a specific ceremony (homonymous with or derived from each classifier), with the exception that *Nhàk* names are confirmed together with *Tàkàk* names (in the *Tàkàk-Nhàk* ceremony). It should be noted that the beautiful name classifiers are not linked to specific Houses.

Beautiful names (*idzi mets* or *idzi kati*) are authentic (*me kumre*) only after having been confirmed during a naming ceremony. Beautiful names which are bestowed on babies but not subsequently ceremonially confirmed are considered inauthentic (*me kaygo*). Beautiful people (*mẽ mets*) are those who have been honoured in a naming ceremony during their childhood. This appears to be equivalent to the *Krĩkati* category of 'ripe people' (Lave 1979).

Common names (*idzi kakrit*) are defined as such because their bestowal implies no ceremony. Both beautiful and common names are conferred informally on all babies a few days after their birth. A baby who dies before being named is socially non-existent in that no dance will be performed in its honour and the mourning period lasts only a few days instead of months as for those with names (cf. J.C. Crocker 1985: 53, on the Bororo). When a *Mẽbengokre* wants to kill an enemy with sorcery, an essential part of the process is the uttering of a person's name. This suggests that a name stands in a metonymical relation to its bearer.⁶

If a child subsequently has a naming ceremony, the names given at birth will then be confirmed; others can be added on and confirmed simultaneously. Naming ceremonies serve to authenticate beautiful names acquired at birth and to increase one's personal stock of them (i.e. the number of names one bears) which are henceforth available for retransmission.

Joking names (*idzi bitsyaere*) are invented collectively by groups of men (in forest camps) and of women (in their gardens) during the course of naming ceremonies for the bestowal or confirmation of beautiful names for children. If joking names are transmitted by their owner to someone else they thereupon become common names.

Joking names, the majority of which seem to be short-lived, are invented by the *Mẽbengokre* using things external to them to think about themselves. For example, one bad-tempered woman is called *Teko-Teko*, after a Brazilian make of aeroplane. Often the men and women choose the name of an animal or plant (or a part of either) which provides the theme for a different name for each person. Nowadays non-indigenous foods and manufactured goods are used in the same way, with people called 'tomato', 'onion', 'motor oil', etc. When Christian names are given to the *Mẽbengokre*, these are then passed down like any other common names. Despite the fact that most common names resemble beautiful ones (minus the possession of a ceremonial classifier), they supposedly originate from joking names invented by the *Mẽbengokre*.

Of 1,824 names registered for nearly 200 *Mẽbengokre* and their immediate ancestors, only twenty-two names were considered to have originated from non-*Mẽbengokre* Native Amazonians or from non-Indians. The vast majority of beautiful and common names were classified generically as pertaining to the ancient people (*mẽtum*), i.e. the ancestors.⁷ Data obtained for living people included only forty-four joking names (equally distributed amongst men and women) and twelve names remembered as having been dreamt or acquired by

shamans (three given to men and nine to women). The remaining names (over 1,400) were either beautiful or common, with the former slightly outnumbering the latter.

The majority of the Mētũktire had between six and fifteen names, though nearly 10 per cent. had sixteen to twenty-three names, and one boy had a total of thirty-two names.⁸ Everyone has a mixture of authentically or inauthentically beautiful names and common names, but people are publicly known by one or a few names, generally by the first name,⁹ whether beautiful or common, given at birth, or by one of their beautiful names confirmed during infancy.

People with ceremonially confirmed names do not necessarily end up with more names than others. When a baby is first named, it does not receive more than about six names (including common and beautiful ones). If various relatives have beautiful names to give the child, each will transmit only one or two at the time of birth, reserving the remainder for the child's naming ceremony, when it is at least old enough to walk. Naming ceremonies are never held for adolescents or adults.

The following quotation from Bamberger illustrates the mystical potency of beautiful names: 'it is said that if a child were to receive his "great names" before he had become strong (*tũych*) enough to carry them, he would sicken and die from a burden too heavy for his years' (1974: 365). A similar explanation probably accounts for the fact that women never bear male names whereas men sometimes bear female names, especially if there is a lack of available male names or if a female relative lacks an heiress. Since males are considered stronger than females, I take it that females are supposed to be unable to take the weight of male names.

Someone who becomes a beautiful person is distinguished as such on all future ceremonial occasions by the use of certain ornaments, especially earrings, of which there is one basic type for *Bemp* name-bearers (the most prestigious of male names) and another basic type for bearers of all other authentically beautiful names. The details of both types of earrings vary slightly from House to House. Although it was mentioned that only people with ceremonially confirmed names should be known publicly by one of such names, this was not found to be the case in practice.

There are also specific dietary restrictions associated with each class of beautiful names. For instance, *Bemp* name-bearers cannot eat 'Bemp' fish (*bicudo*, in Portuguese), associated with the origin of this classifier; likewise the capuchin monkey, associated with the origin of the *Koko* classifier, is forbidden to *Koko* name-bearers. These prohibitions (cf. Turner 1966; Bamberger 1967; Vidal 1977; Lea 1986; Giannini 1991) are applicable not only to the name-bearers themselves but also to their siblings and parents. To infringe these prohibitions is said to result invariably in skin disease (*kũ noy noy*).

Turner has described the Mēbengokre conception of human skin as the boundary of the individual as a social and physical being (1966: 476). The Mēbengokre word *kũ*, which may be glossed as skin, canoe, tree bark, clothes, etc., also has the more general meaning of covering or wrapping. This indicates that names are conceived of by the Mēbengokre as a wrapping for the physical organism, as a tree is enveloped by its bark. It is as if names constitute a cloak

which clothes an individual during his lifetime (as Melatti has said of the Krahó, 1979: 67) but is recovered when the body perishes at death so that society can reproduce itself in its own image – that of the ancestors.

Origin of beautiful names. In mythological times, beautiful names originated when a shaman went off to live with the fish. According to some people, he brought back from them only *Bemp* (or *Bep*) and *Bekwòy* names. According to others he brought back names with all the different ceremonial classifiers.¹⁰ The mythological names of the fish tend to coincide with the names for each species or one of its characteristics (which may amount to the same thing), such as ‘*Bep* very black’ (*Bep tũkti*) for a male piranha fish. Though the name may reflect on its original eponym, its meaning is in no way related to the characteristics of its future living Mēbengokre bearers.

The mythological appropriation of fish names established a prototypical strategy to be followed by future shamans. In their nocturnal journeys, they make a point of asking the names of the owner-controller (*kapremp*) plant and animal beings with whom they come into contact in order to transmit these names to their relatives. The dead appear to separate automatically from their names, for they tell the shamans their necro-names (that is, names different from the ones they bore when alive) which are also passed on to the living. Only if a shaman subsequently discovers that one of the names he learnt on his journeys is already in existence among the living is he forced to abandon its transmission, the prior owner being considered the true one. In sum, although shamans contribute to the existing pool of names, they are thought not to invent names but to appropriate them from animals, plants and the dead. New acquisitions enable the Mēbengokre to redress any imbalance that may arise between demographic growth and the available onomastic stock.¹¹

Recent acquisitions of names include those having been dreamt by someone visited in their sleep by the owner of such names, or having been acquired by a shaman during a nocturnal journey (when the soul separates from the body). They are considered inauthentically beautiful because they lack ceremonial implications. I suspect that within a couple of generations such names become indistinguishable from ones entitled to ceremonial confirmation, for both types include a ceremonial classifier followed by one or more words from the Mēbengokre lexicon.

The meanings of names. To comprehend all the nuances of Mēbengokre onomastics, we should not overlook the complex semantics of the names themselves. In terms of what names designate, the only difference between beautiful and common names is that the former must have a ceremonial classifier at the beginning. For instance, there exists the beautiful name *Bep kaběnti* (*Bep* ‘chatterbox’) and the common name *Kaběnti*, though such correspondences do not always occur. For each class of beautiful names, too, there are some which are similar, like *Bep dzo* and *Bekwòy dzo* (*Bep/Bekwòy* ‘fruit’), but there are also names in one class that have no counterpart in another.

In general, names appear to reflect daily village life. They designate flora, fauna and garden produce, besides physical attributes and behaviour, such as – whiner,

big (in the sense of habitual) eater/drinker/talker/sleeper, etc. Polysemy has the effect of engendering ambiguity due to the elliptical nature of names; they lack a context which would stipulate their referent and make their meaning clear. This is the case with homophones like *pari*, which means both 'foot' and the verb 'to kill'. Thus the name *Kubē pari* suggests 'Foreigner's foot' and 'Killer of foreigners'. Similarly, 'o,¹² in names like *Nhàk 'o*, evokes leaf and body hair; *karō*, in names like *Nhàk karō*, evokes spirit, soul, shadow, echo, mask, photograph and the verbs 'to plan' and 'to foresee'. *Kako*, in names like *Ire kako*, could be glossed as 'one thing that fits inside another' – a corn husk, the stem of a plant, shaft of a feather, lip disk, ear plug, or a V-neck body paint design.

Whether names sound applicable to anyone or sound like nicknames describing a distinctive characteristic, whether they express approval (so-and-so is beautiful, strong, tall, etc.) or disapproval (so-and-so has brittle hair, or is skinny), such connotations do not affect the name-bearer, for names are in no way prognostic. It is common for people to have names that are contradictory or antithetical in meaning. In many beautiful names, the eponym is acted upon by a non-specified agent, e.g. *Nhàk dzàrē* (*Nhàk* 'baked').¹³ It is impossible to deduce the original eponym from the names themselves. For instance, the original eponym of *Bep kà meti* (*Bep* 'beautiful skin') was a fish; that of *Tàkàk aykwa to* (*Tàkàk* 'sticky mouth') was a dead person. Many names could refer indifferently to animals or to humans. For example, *Bekwòy toro* (*Bekwòy* 'dances/flies') identifies a particular living person and makes an analogy between human beings who dance and birds that fly. This example shows how names can simultaneously particularize and universalize (cf. Lévi-Strauss 1962).

Some names which are untranslatable today are taken to be in archaic language. More important than their etymology is the fact that (in theory if not in practice) they recall the ancestors of the House in which they are transmitted.

The use of names versus kin terms. Bamberger considered that names are prohibited as terms of address among those Mēbengokre who recognize each other as relatives, claiming that they address one another with kinship terms (1974: 364). According to my experience, the matter is more complicated. Most relatives and affines are addressed and referred to by a kin term and should not be spoken of or to solely by their name. In any situation in which ambiguity can arise, however, one uses the appropriate kin term followed by the publicly known name of the person referred to. The only exception is in ritual wailing where personal names are never uttered. When a mother calls out for a child to come home, she may use all the child's names one by one. Spouses address each other reciprocally as *taware* and by each other's common names. They do not use each other's beautiful names, even if they are known publicly by such names.

With siblings, children, nephews, nieces and grandchildren, the same term of address is used, distinguished only by sex and sibling birth order,¹⁴ alternated by the use of the public name of the relative in question. If such relatives have authentically beautiful names, some of these should be used from time to time. The normal form of address is the beautiful person's epithet (homonymous with or derived from their beautiful name classifier), for example, *Bempe* for *Bemp*

Ko1

name-bearers and *Pëynte* for *Pëyn* name-bearers. Neither epithets nor teknonyms need be used in conjunction with kin terms.

Onomastics as the basis of ceremonial activity

Only three of the ceremonies for specific classifiers have been held by the Mētùktire in the last few decades. At least two of the other ceremonies still appear to be held by the Mēbengokre to the east of the Xingu river. One of the reasons given by the Mētùktire to explain their failure to perform several such ceremonies in recent years is that nobody possesses the right to transmit their names in them. Only people whose names have been ceremonially confirmed during their childhood may, in adult life, summon the staging of a ceremony in order to confirm the beautiful names of their name-receivers. Furthermore, names are attached to specific ceremonies. If, for example, a woman's names were confirmed in the *Koko* ceremony, then her name-receiver may only have them confirmed in that same ceremony. Possessors of inauthentically beautiful names will consequently never be able to transform their name-receivers into beautiful people.

Each of the classifier-specific ceremonies is held in a particular season, either the dry or the rainy season, as are the remaining three naming ceremonies in which names containing any classifier may be confirmed. Nevertheless, in these ceremonies, too, the same names must always be transmitted in the same ceremony. Two of these ceremonies are male and female counterparts of each other,¹⁵ and in the remaining one, men and women take part on equal terms. These ceremonies appear to be of more recent origin than the others.

The only major ceremony held regularly by the Mēbengokre which is not linked to naming is the annual corn ceremony (*ngroa ngrono*), though this may temporally coincide with a naming ceremony. Ideally (and generally in practice) a naming ceremony is held each season and may last from several months to nearly half a year from its inception to its dramatic climax.

The regularity of Mēbengokre ceremonial activity is demonstrated by the fact that ceremonies constitute the basic mnemonic device for calculating past time. Distant years (and seasons within them) are recalled with reference to whose children were honoured with a ceremony in which village.¹⁶ The Mēbengokre annual calendar of village dispersal and aggregation is thus largely determined by their ceremonial life.

Ceremonies owe their inherently aesthetic nature to the fact that they articulate the particularistic domain of the Houses to the collective domain of the village. The culmination point of ceremonies is the most cohesive moment in Mēbengokre life. Even the dead come to attend, occupying the dwellings of the residential circle which are vacated by the living who assemble in the patio. They join either the outer circle of spectators or the inner circles of active participants who display their wealth of ornaments and ceremonial roles. The fact that Houses are both separate units and fragments of a whole is enacted in ceremonies through the articulation of prerogatives from an array of Houses (cf. J. Crocker on Bororo organic solidarity, 1985: 35). Likewise, a single village is a fragment of the Mēbengokre community, as is attested by the constant traffic of names and *nekrets* from one village to another.

The staging of each ceremony requires the realization of a prolonged hunt (*ōntomōrō*) lasting on average about a month. It is claimed that in former times only the relatives of the children being ceremonially honoured used to perform this hunt. Nowadays, with smaller villages, the entire population is expected to participate, though sometimes the men leave the women and children in the village whilst they move about the forest from camp to camp in search of land turtles and other animals. Land turtles can be stored alive for weeks in order that a sufficient number be assembled for a great feast for the entire village on the final night of the naming ceremonies. On that occasion, dancing and singing are performed from dusk until dawn, whereupon the naming rite itself is held.

Ceremonial naming rites occur in the House of the name-receiver and are tense and formal affairs. The name-giver sits on the ground with the child and its parents, proclaiming in loud and serious tones the names given or confirmed. Anyone who wishes may go along to witness the event, though disputes sometimes occur concerning true ownership of the names being transmitted (hence the tense atmosphere).

Personal names and prerogatives (*nekrets*) stretch way beyond time calculated in genealogical terms (which spans no more than seven generations, including the living).¹⁷ Old women are clearly proud to affirm that the names of their children have belonged to their House since the latter's inception. In the absence of written documents, it is the recognition of a series of eponyms within a House – when someone can recall that a given name or names belonged to their B, MB, MMB etc. – that legitimizes ownership. In one sense, naming rites serve as genealogical surveys to sort out who is related to whom and from where they acquired their names. In another sense, they help to prune back fuzzy frontier areas between one House and another, thereby highlighting the distinctiveness of each House.

For an individual to be transformed into a beautiful person, she or he requires not only a beautiful eponym but also a sizeable network of kin to sustain the economic burden involved in this process. During the months of rehearsals of the song and dance repertoire that will be performed at the culmination of the ceremony, the participants must be provided with food by the parents of the honoured children (*mēkrareremets*).

The greater the number of people who are mobilized to dance and sing with vigour throughout the rehearsals and at the end of the ceremony, the closer it approximates to the ideal. If participants in the rehearsals are not generously provisioned, few people will bother to turn up, and if the feeding of the dancers falls short on the final night, they will stop dancing until they consider themselves to be adequately fed. The men are particularly demanding on this score. It is in this sense that the economic resources available for staging a ceremony attest to the political standing of the sponsoring parents. Those capable of mobilizing a large network of kin are thereby shown to be mature, influential members of the community.

The Mēbengokre claim that parents become thin and weary from all the work involved in a naming ceremony. Their relatives, especially the co-resident members of the uxorilocal household, assist them in their tasks. For this reason, it is common for sisters and matrilineal parallel-cousins to combine their efforts to

honour one or more of their children in the same ceremony. The maximum recorded number of children sharing a ceremony was six.

Naming ceremonies modify the status not only of the children in whose honour they are held, but also that of their parents who must not participate in the singing and dancing, nor ornament themselves in any way. They must dedicate themselves exclusively to feeding the participants. When the ceremony and the long hunt that was involved are completed, the parents of a beautiful child will have gained prestige and respect through their undertaking. Henceforth they will be considered potential pacifiers in village disputes, and will be addressed on formal occasions by teknonyms¹⁸ formed from the epithets given to their children, such as *Bemp bam*, 'father of *Bemp*' and *Bemp nhire*, 'mother of *Bemp*'.

In the village that I studied, just over a third of the female population and a slightly larger proportion of men could be considered beautiful people. It is possible that these proportions have increased rather than diminished in the period since permanent contact with national society. A small minority of people are honoured in two ceremonies when they possess names that entitle them to such double honours. In some cases a ceremony is begun, but later suspended due to an insufficiency of food supplies to see it through, or on account of conflicts which hinder the harmony of the village. Hence, in some cases, children who were to be honoured end up remaining inauthentically beautiful.

It is rare for a couple to have no children with ceremonially confirmed names. On average a couple sponsors about two ceremonies for their children, and when they become grandparents they will assist their daughters to perform ceremonies for their grandchildren. The last born children (*kutapure*) of either sex are the ones least likely to undergo a ceremony. By the time they are born, the authentically beautiful names belonging to their relatives are likely to have been used up on behalf of their older siblings.

Name transmission

The social categories involved. In the anthropological literature concerning the Northern Jê, one of their best known characteristics is the dual aspect of the individual, made up of an organism created by his or her genitor and a social persona acquired through names. Central to this dichotomy is the fact that the role of genitor can never coincide with the role of name-giver. It is a man who fabricates the foetus through the accumulation of semen, but the child that he produces will belong to its mother's House,¹⁹ which will be the source of its heritage of personally transmissible wealth.

Members of the nuclear family are linked by a bond of shared organic substance which obliges siblings mutually to obey dietary restrictions when one of them is ill. This also holds for parents in relation to sick children but not *vice versa*. This shared physical substance is ephemeral in the sense that it perishes along with the decomposition of the corpse.

Da Matta (1976a) and Turner (1979b: 183 and *passim*) designate as marginal those relatives involved in naming (MB, FZ and both sets of grandparents) in order to distinguish them from relatives within the nuclear family who abide by mutual food restrictions. I believe the use of the word 'marginal' is misleading in this context. One Mëbengokre term for the category of potential male

name-givers is *krã tum*, old head or shoot; the reciprocal term is *krã nu*, new head or shoot. Women lack a corresponding term, yet females in the category of potential name-givers (*kwatëy*) carry their grandchildren, nieces or nephews astride their shoulders, whereby the children's heads protrude above their relatives' heads like new shoots.²⁰ Young children who are being ceremonially honoured are always carried in this way.

For the Apinayé, Da Matta (1976a) distinguishes between name-givers, name-receivers, and those who arrange for the names which are to be given. Da Matta refers to the latter as adoptive parents (1976a: 113). In the Mëbengokre case, it seems to me that Turner (1979b) has exaggerated the importance of the 'adoptive father'. He is merely a young boy's tutor of an ascending generation who complements rather than substitutes for the role of the true father. I see no useful analogy between the Apinayé name-arranger and the Mëbengokre boy's tutor in the men's house, but it has led to confusion in the literature, as when Carneiro da Cunha infers that the Apinayé and Kayapó are organized in symbolic or adoptive patrilineages (1978: 87).

In the Mëbengokre case, the personal eponym whose name is transmitted to another is more important than the name-giver who actually proclaims the names being transmitted. A personal eponym is a link in a chain going back to the forgotten original eponym.²¹ If the name-giver is transmitting names which she or he bears, then she or he is a name-giver-cum-eponym. The name-giver need not, however, necessarily be the bearer of the names being given. In that case the giver and the eponym are separate people, as when a woman gives a dead brother's names to her son.

Despite the importance of receiving the names of living or dead relatives, no Mëbengokre is the exact replica of another. This contrasts with the practice of other Northern Jê peoples who are reported to conceive of an absolute identity between name-giver and name-receiver. A Mëbengokre never transmits all of his or her names to one person, and no name-receiver bears the names of only one person. If we add together name-givers-cum-eponyms, name-givers, and eponyms, as many as ten different individuals can contribute to the naming of a single person. Usually, the names of between two and six relatives are incorporated together in the naming of an individual. Thus each person has one or more series of beautiful names (with different classifiers) plus a list of common names.

Even when a name-giver transmits the names of someone else, he or she divides up the names of that person to benefit two or more receivers. The most plausible explanation for this is that the dead are considered by their living relatives to be dangerous because they miss (*o ama*) them and seize upon any opportunity to carry them off to the village of the dead. If a dead person's names were borne by only one person, he or she would be a prime target for abduction. The fractioning of an eponym's names amongst various receivers dilutes his or her identification with any one of them. This helps to explain why the Mëbengokre seem to consider that the more names one has the better it is.

Although the same names ideally recur within each House, in successive or alternate generations, the facts that females often bear names belonging to their father's House, and that females and males can have lifelong usufruct of their

grandparents' names, indicate that the possible combinations of names are infinite. Even over the course of several generations it is unlikely that two members of the same House will ever have exactly the same names.

People who receive the names of a dead relative hold in reserve the name by which the deceased was publicly known. The name-receiver uses one of the names that the deceased had, other than the one he or she is known by, or a name from another eponym. A few homonyms can occur within a village when individuals transmit their names during their own lifetimes. The avoidance of the names of a dead person lasts for as long as one of his or her close relatives wishes to avoid hearing them, on account of the feelings of loss they induce.

Mythological figures inevitably have various names that are divided up amongst their uterine descendents, and these are 'lent out' to other Houses like any other ancestral names (the process by which Houses 'lend out' and 'recover' their names is explained below). Regardless of whether or not names designate illustrious mythological or historical ²² ancestors, they serve to close the void between the living and the dead. The Mëbengokre believe that after a certain time the dead 'redie'. Their individuality is then obliterated, but their social personae are perpetuated through the living who bear their names and nekrets.

The majority of an individual's names do not serve to identify him or her. After they are given, confirmed and recited during the bearer's childhood by its mother, they will be forgotten until an elderly uterine relative decides that the time has come to retransmit them.²³

The brother-sister bond and Houses. The ideal pattern of Mëbengokre name transmission was described by Bamberger in the following terms:

Male names move through a uterine line of male kin (from sister's son to sister's son), and female names through an agnatic line of females (from brother's daughter to brother's daughter) It is possible for *tabdjuò* (male and female) [for male Ego – ZC; for female Ego – BC; and for both – CC] to receive names from *ngët* [MB, MF, FF...] and *kwatuy* [FZ, MM, FM...] other than mother's brother or father's sister, although this form of name exchange is not as desirable (1974: 374, 371.)

The insertions in square brackets are my own, and define the kinship terms that are here transcribed as *tabdzwë*, *nhênget* and *kwatëy*.

In my view, which roughly coincides with Verswijver's (1983), the 'cross-sex sibling reciprocity' to which Bamberger refers is illusory, in the sense that it is a form of pseudo-reciprocity. The onomastic process is completed not with the initial exchange between a brother and sister pair (the male name passing from the brother to his sister's son, the female name from the sister to her brother's daughter) but rather in the following generation, when female names that were lent out are returned to their rightful owners (see fig. 1, examples 1-3).

The Mëbengokre onomastic system embraces three generations. From the viewpoint of generation zero, there is apparent cross-sex sibling reciprocity when a brother and sister exchange names for each other's opposite sex children. Thus at generation -1, men's names ideally return to their natal House and women's names are lent out to their BW's House to be returned to their House of origin in generation -2. This model, my reconstruction of the native model proposed to me by the Mëbengokre, diverges from the prevalent view in the literature that, among the Timbira and Mëbengokre, male names remain in a

Male and female ego use the same terms (M and MB) for their matrilineal cross-cousins. Female ego's patrilineal cross-cousins are her classificatory children; for male ego, these same cousins are classificatory ZC.

Example 1: ——— Male ego transmits names to ZS

Example 2: - - - - - Female ego received the usufruct of names from her FZ which she later returns to her FZDD. Since ego is not the rightful owner of these names, she must return them to their House of origin.

Example 3: ===== Female ego's MM gave usufruct of her names to her BD and later retransmitted them to her DD, thereby enabling female ego to transmit these names to her BD, since they are the property of ego's House.

~~Examples 2 and 3 are alternative strategies.~~

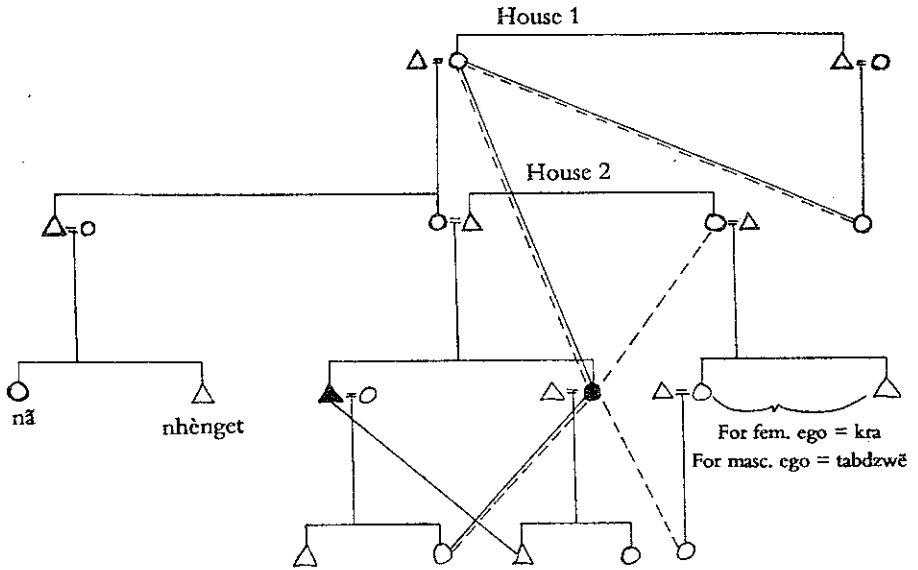


FIGURE 1. Cross-cousin terms and examples of name transmission.

man's natal home to compensate for his uxorilocal residence and female names spread out at random whilst women remain lifelong in their natal home (cf. Melatti 1979: 77-8).

Women relinquish their brothers to procreate children for other Houses, but ideally they recover their brothers' names and prerogatives to transform their sons into social personae. Women's uterine heiresses are their daughters' daughters; since they cannot give their names to their own daughters, they have nothing to lose by entrusting their names to their brothers' daughters. The latter enjoy lifelong usufruct of their FZ's names, even after these names are retransmitted to a member of the FZ's own House.

Since it appears to be important to have an 'occupant' for every name in each generation, females act as the guardians of their FZ's names. If a woman dies before retransmitting her names to her DD, her daughter can retrieve these names from her MBD, to give to her own daughter or any other member of her own House. Nothing prevents women and men from acting as name-givers to

their children, indeed it is quite common; but they cannot be their own children's eponyms.

The bond between a brother and sister is lifelong. Consequently, I disagree with Turner (1979*b*) when he considers that Mēbengokre men are forced to sever their links with natal homes in order to be incorporated into their families of procreation. When a man marries and turns over his catch of fish or game to his wife, she generally sends a portion of this raw product to her husband's mother and sisters. The beautiful cuts of meat (*mnù mets*) that a man inherits the right to consume continue to be claimed for him by his sisters after he is married. Such cuts are taken to his mother's House where he goes to consume them, along with his sister(s)' son(s), his rightful uterine heir(s). Whenever a man visits his mother and sisters he should be offered food, including garden produce cultivated and owned by the women. When a woman (and her children) visit her husband's mother and sisters they too are offered food when it is available, and are given garden produce to take back to the husband.

When brothers and sisters transmit their names to each other's offspring (B→ZS; Z→BD) they implicitly recognize their sustained relations of reciprocity. However, unlike the Eastern Timbira (cf. Lave 1979; Melatti 1979; Ladeira 1982), a Mēbengokre does not necessarily give his or her names to the child of the opposite-sex sibling who named his or her own child.

Various men informed me that if their sisters are stingy and never offer them food, they have the right to retaliate by transmitting their names (on the condition that they originated in their natal House) to their grandsons (DS or SS), obliging their sisters to await the birth of a great-grandson (DDS) to retrieve these names. As long as people are the true owners of the names they bear (if these belong to their House) they can transmit them to any *tabdzwè* of their choice, real or classificatory, of the same or of a different House. If one has lifelong usufruct of names, on account of their belonging to a different House, then they must either be retransmitted to a *tabdzwè* in the House whence they originated or be simply relinquished (*kanga*), leaving retransmission to the rightful owners (the eponym or heirs/heiresses).

It may be necessary to clarify how women ensure that the names they have received from their FZ return to their House of origin whilst they simultaneously transmit lifelong usufruct of names to their BD (fig. 1). Data concerning name transmission revealed that females receive as many names from their own Houses as males do, although females receive nearly as many names from their father's House as from their own House.²⁴

I stress Houses rather than individuals since females can receive the names of the FM or FMM or any other female member of the father's House, independently of whether the FZ is the name-giver. Similarly, males may receive the names of their MMB, MMMB or any other male member of their own House, independently of whether these *nhèngèt* are the name-givers or merely eponyms.²⁵

The genealogical depth of eponyms outstrips that of name-givers-cum-eponyms. When people die, their closest uterine descendants are considered to be the true owners of their names. These descendants utilize this stock of names, which they do not personally bear, to transmit to their name-receivers. For

instance, if a woman bears only names borrowed from other Houses which she cannot retransmit, she can appropriate the names of her dead mother or other uterine ascendant to transmit to her BD, D or DD. Not every member of a House bears its names; what matters is the perpetuation of its onomastic stock.

Cross-cousins. Although the Mēbengokre possess what has always been described as an Omaha kinship terminology, the terms for cross-cousins are intelligible from the perspective of onomastics (fig. 1). For both male and female ego, their female matrilineal cross-cousin is a classificatory mother (*nã*) and the potential guardian of their mother's names. Correspondingly, their male matrilineal cross-cousin is a classificatory MB (*nhèngét*). For female ego, her patrilineal cross-cousins are her classificatory children (*kra*). For male ego, these same cousins are classificatory ZC (*tabdzwě*). This is compatible with the fact that female ego is the potential name-receiver of her FZ and the guardian of these names for her FZDD, who is ego's classificatory CC (and her eponym's true DC). In other words, the name-receiver is the *tabdzwě* of both these women.

Knowledge. Knowledge of traditional matters, including onomastics, is a prerogative of the elders. The Mēbengokre have an empirical conception of knowledge – one knows best that which one has witnessed personally. Thus the older one gets the more one knows. This conception is being increasingly shaken by the importance of knowledge of the Western world which tends to be monopolized by the young, for the older one gets the more inaccessible it is. For those knowledgeable in onomastic matters, names identify an individual as a member of a specific House or as a lifelong usufructuary of an item of that House's heritage, hence someone closely related to one of its members.

Individuals rarely know all the names they bear for they were very young and therefore 'weak eyed' (*nò rerek*) when they received their names. When questioned about their own names, people usually told me to ask their name-giver or eldest living female uterine relative (who may or may not be the same person).

The ignorance of young mothers who sent me to their uterine elders, claiming not to know their children's names, because they themselves grew up recently (*abatây nù*; grow up new), is partly a question of etiquette. Whilst they sit nursing their young children they sometimes recite their names in a string, in an effort to memorize them. However, it is the elders (*abatây tum*; grow up old) who keep track of who receives which names. Data revealed that (independently of the sex of these name-receivers) 118 of their name-givers were female and only 61 were male.

Orphans have to rely on information from members of other Houses to learn their own names and those of their ascendants. As such information is likely to be incomplete, people commonly attribute the theft of names to orphans. They supposedly steal other people's names due to their knowing so few of the ones that they could legitimately transmit. Adults who could remember less than six of their own names were quick to tell me that they had had many more but lost them when they were orphaned during their infancy.

Spouses do not know all of each other's names, and men generally only know of the names that their children have received from their House (eg. from the

FZ). They know of course of the names their children are publicly known by, whether or not these are from the children's father's House. Bodenhorn could almost have been citing a Mēbengokre, when she quotes an Iñupiaq as saying: 'I cannot be four or five different people at the same time, but whatever family wishes to identify me as that one person, then I will be that one – for them' (1988: 11). A Mēbengokre may be designated differently by members of the various Houses who have conferred names upon him or her.

Manipulation of the rules. The onomastic process resembles a relay race in that the important thing seems to be that as soon as one name-bearer dies, his or her names should be taken up by someone else. The Mēbengokre are not worried about the possibility, conceived in abstract terms, that names might disappear into oblivion; they are concerned with the perpetuation of those particular names to which they are personally attached in that they recall dead relatives and ancestors.

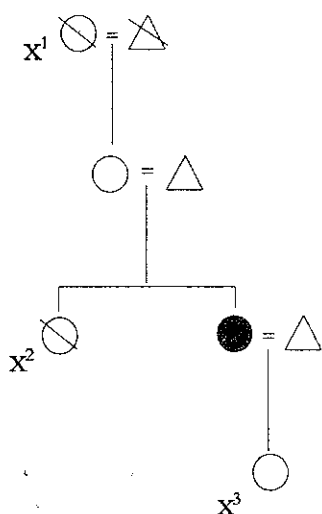
The Mēbengokre manipulate the onomastic rules for their own 'psychological comfort' (for want of a better expression). I refer to this as their genealogical amnesia. This same phenomenon highlights a dialectical link between one's ancestors and descendants. Cases were found of a woman transmitting the names of a dead sister to her daughter and of a dead daughter to another daughter's daughter (fig. 2). In terms of the rules this is impossible because the name-receiver's eponym would be a classificatory mother (*nā*).

The Mēbengokre do not admit exceptions to the rule that a name-receiver's eponym must stand in the relation of *kwatëy* (FZ, MM, FM ...) or *nhênget* (MB, MF, FF ...), yet they get around this by pointing out that the name-receiver of a classificatory mother's name has a more distant ascending uterine relative, hence a homonymous *kwatëy*. This is comforting in that it allows a woman to envisage a daughter or daughter's daughter as a metaphorical reincarnation of a dead sister or daughter. In other words, the dead, be they ascendants or descendants, are ever present through the living who bear their names.

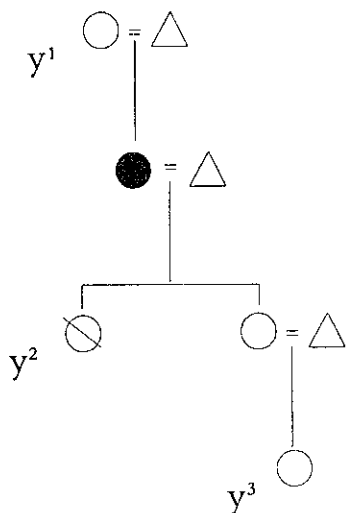
Despite the fact that there should be only one bearer of a name in each generation, it was found that when a child died soon after birth, its names could be given to a uterine sibling, MZC, or matrilineal parallel-cousin's child. When someone has homonymous children they are usually, but not always, known publicly by different names. I was struck by the lack of superstition attached to names, in that such practices were not deemed unlucky. Possibly this is due to no two people being absolute homonyms.

A woman, like her daughter, stands in the relation of *kwatëy* to her SC. Therefore, when a woman transmits names of a dead daughter to her SD, she is simultaneously representing the deceased (who died before transmitting her names to her BD) and substituting her dead daughter through her granddaughter. When a woman transmits the names of a dead son to her DS, she is taking her son's place as the name-giver of his ZS and attenuating her loss of her own son by creating a homonymous grandson.

It also happens that when a baby with the usufruct of names dies, these names can be recovered at once by the House that made the loan and retransmitted to one of its new-born members. In such cases, the latter's eponym is considered to be an ascending relative in his or her House and not the usufructuary of the same



Ego's D (the third of three women called X) cannot receive the names of her MZ who is a classificatory M (*nā*). This is remedied when it is argued that ego's ^{MM} eponym is her MM (X^1) and therefore a *kwatëy*. The incorrect relation (X^2) is conveniently forgotten or ignored when ego says that her D bears the names of their (the D's and the M's) *kwatëy*.



Ego gave her mother's name (Y) to her daughter (Y^2) who died. Ego later retransmitted her mother's name to her DD. When asked who is the eponym of her granddaughter, ego says it is her own mother. Y^2 is forgotten or ignored because she is Y^3 's classificatory M and cannot therefore be her eponym.

FIGURE 2. Examples of amnesia - variations of the same positions.

generation. Similarly, a girl who recovers the names which her MM had transmitted to her (the MM's) BD, is regarded as receiving the names of her MM and not of her MMBD.

For the Mëbengokre, it is as if each name were a slot which must be eternally filled, within one generation if a name-receiver dies early or within the next generation if his or her siblings have already begotten children when he or she dies.

When all the members of a House die out, their names do not circulate arbitrarily, nor are they abandoned. They are incorporated into the House where

one of their members married and begot children. For example, if a woman's father or MF lacks uterine descendants, she may save (*utà*) his names from extinction by transmitting them (and those of any of his female relatives that she happens to know) to one of her uterine descendants. Such names will then be incorporated into the stock of the House that has appropriated them.

People admit that they tend to return borrowed names only when their legitimate owner (the person who lent them or a uterine heir/ess) demands their return. The recipients of borrowed names tend to hold onto them if the House that owns them is absent (*kikre kapri*; house empty) in the village where they reside, independently of whether or not it is truly extinct in all Mēbengokre villages. When people discover, however, that names which belong to their House have been robbed (*o aki*) in one generation and transmitted to a member of another House, they cherish the hope of demanding their return in the generation below that of the present bearer.

Conclusion

Maybury-Lewis, summing up research carried out on the Jê in the 1960s by members of the Harvard Central Brazil Project, concludes that: 'The supposed matriliney of the Northern Gê is thus a misinterpretation based on the cumulative effects of uxorilocality' (1979: 304). From my experience of Mēbengokre society, this view is unfounded, as is the contemporary aversion to the word 'descent'.

The problem of descent is out of favour and out of fashion in anthropological studies of Lowland South America (see Overing 1977; Seeger *et al.* 1979; Albert 1985).²⁶ At least in the case of the Mēbengokre, the time may have come to swing back the pendulum, and to consider premature the burial of the notion of descent along with Nimuendaju.

It is not my aim to try to enforce the Jê into the straitjacket of African models.²⁷ What I contend is that there is no reason why Africans or descent theorists should be deemed to have exhausted all possible connotations of the notion of descent. Mēbengokre Houses do not serve to regulate the distribution of either land or livestock, and they are not primarily political institutions. For Lévi-Strauss (1984: 193) the English term 'corporate group' is the equivalent of the French term *personne morale*, which may put paid to the endless discussion of what constitutes a corporate group. Mēbengokre Houses are moral persons, defined in relation to uterine descent, a spatial position and a patrimony of names and prerogatives, believed to be perpetual.

In one sense, a particular House corresponds to a clan, the segments of which are dispersed amongst various villages. Neither Houses nor segments of them, however, have eponymous ancestors, and uterine sisters, residing in different villages, are not considered to be the founders of separate lineages but rather regard themselves as inhabiting different dwellings of the same House. For the Mēbengokre, then, the House is both emic and etic.

Fortes's concept of complementary filiation (1953) serves to highlight an important aspect of Mēbengokre reality. Besides one's own House, one's next closest option to turn to in time of need is one's father's natal household.

Observed from another angle, the loaning of names cements alliances between Houses just as the return of borrowed names clears the way for fresh alliances.

In Lévi-Strauss's discussion of house-based societies, he does not distinguish clearly between societies with undifferentiated descent and what he calls 'pseudo-morphs' (1983: 1222) which appear to be unilineal when in fact they are cognatic. To my mind, the Mëbengokre are closer to having a system of double descent than one that is undifferentiated. People inherit their formal friends from their fathers but this results in *de facto* patrilineal rather than patrilineages.²⁸ What is emphasized is that an individual has the same formal friends as his or her father. This seems to be linked to the question of inherited affinity since an ideal marriage is one in which a woman marries her mother's formal friend. This topic will be dealt with in a forthcoming paper.

As long ago as 1929, Mauss sought an explanation at the level of social organization for the equivalence between name and soul in many societies. The association of naming and reincarnation is a prevalent theme in accounts of the Eskimo (Inuit), in the context of cognatic descent (e.g. Wachtmeister 1956²⁹). In writings on the Jê and Bororo, substitution or replacement rather than descent has been taken as the underlying theme of onomastics. This focus neglects the diachronic aspect which provides continuity between the living and their ancestors. An interesting contrast is provided by the Barasana patrilineal descent groups of the northwest Amazon. Hugh-Jones associates the transmission of ancestral soul-stuff along with names in their case (1977: 188). My analysis also approximates the Mëbengokre to the Bororo.

Rivière has raised the question of whether the Northern Jê have unilineal descent disguised as name transmission (1980: 538). He concludes that name transmission is 'a scheme of continuity just as effective as unilineal descent, whereby social personae succeed one another in orderly linear progression' (1980: 539). My argument is that, in the Mëbengokre case, name transmission is a facet of Houses conceived as unilineal descent groups. The non-perishable elements of the dead (their names and prerogatives) are separated, reshuffled and redistributed amongst the living. Neither blood nor genes, but rather the components that go to make up personae, are the source of continuity for the Mëbengokre.

The focus on conception and substance has been unprofitable in the Mëbengokre case. The notion that the self is separable from the body is confirmed by the fact that shamans leave their bodies behind during their nocturnal journeys. For the Mëbengokre, one's essence resides not in one's organic substance but in one's names and prerogatives – this is what is left behind when the rest is gone.

In sum, a Mëbengokre House is a multi-faceted phenomenon. One acquires membership automatically through birth, though not one's names and prerogatives. These must be transmitted individually from the correct category of relative. Within a sibling group, even among members of the same sex, certain privileges may be held in common, though each sibling may also have other prerogatives which are exclusive to him or her. Siblings, indeed the sum total of the members of any particular House, thus constitute a polythetic group (cf. Needham 1975).

The Mēbengokre are forever detotalizing and retotalizing. They do not need to worship the ancestors because they take them to pieces (through the transmission of names and *nekrets*) and reutilize all their non-perishable parts. As diacritics, there is obviously something redundant about Mēbengokre names and *nekrets*. They recall Bourdieu's (1977) notion of symbolic capital in that they are an endless source of individual strategies. They not only enhance the prestige of the House that owns them, but also serve to seal alliances with other Houses through the process of loans. This leads to a blurring of the outlines between Houses over the course of time. Different Houses have certain names and prerogatives which overlap, yet others maintain their singularity.

In existing anthropological accounts of Mēbengokre society, the women have been assigned to the village periphery or domestic area, whilst men are held to occupy the public, ceremonial and jural domain. As has been shown here, everything involved in the performance of major ceremonies is governed by the Houses – the names given to children, the ornaments used and innumerable songs and dances. This is more relevant than the fact that the women are barred from the men's house (*ngã*), situated in the centre of the patio. The manifold significance of the Mēbengokre House has been overlooked by previous studies. As I have tried to demonstrate, the House is both a moral person and a total social fact revolving around women.

NOTES

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¹ Cf. J.C. Crocker (1977: 247), who glosses as totems, names or souls, the *aroe* which provide Bororo clans with their distinctive identity.

² This is compatible with Lévi-Strauss's view that house-based societies have a historical dimension.

³ See the introduction and conclusion in Maybury-Lewis (1979) for a wider review of hypotheses raised in relation to the Northern Jê. Maybury-Lewis included the Bororo in the same culture area as the Jê-speaking societies of Central Brazil. The Northern Jê (see below) and the Central Jê (Xavante and Xerente) of Central Brazil are opposed to the Southern Jê (Kaingang and Xoklêng) of Southern Brazil. I concentrate on the Northern and Central Jê, for the study of social organization has focused on them. The Northern Jê includes the Eastern and Western Timbira. The Apinayé are today the only surviving Western Timbira. The Eastern Timbira includes the Apaniekra and the Ramkokamekra (who are together known as the Canela), the Krikatí Krahó, Gavião, Pukobyé, etc. The Northern Kayapó (including the Mēbengokre and Xicrin), the Southern Kayapó (the Panara) and the Suya are the remaining Northern Jê peoples. The Southern Kayapó were considered extinct but later identified with the Panara, better known as the Kreen-Akore. In terms of language and various aspects of culture, they appear to be more distant from the Northern Kayapó than the Timbira.

⁴ 'Originatè' is a gloss for *katoro dzà*: *katoro* = surge forth; *dzà* = place. 'House' is a gloss for *kikre dzam dzà*: *kikre* = house; *dzam* = standing; *dzà* = place.

⁵ The figure given here is a rough estimate, based on data from the Centro Ecumêncio de Documentação e Informação (CEDI), São Paulo, from varying sources and dates ranging from 1986 to 1990.

⁶ Analogously, one form of sorcery also involves the victim's urine. Cf. Viertler (1976: 50) on the use of the name of the victim in Bororo sorcery.

⁷ Verswijver's experience was different from mine. He considers (personal communication) that the elders know the original eponyms of the onomastic stock of their own House.

⁸ Cases of less than six names were found only where data were incomplete, for example, in the case of small children who had not yet received all their names, and in the case of orphans whose names have been lost along with their parents. The children of unmarried mothers also tend to be poor in names.

⁹ 'First name' is a gloss for *idzi kray*: *idzi* = name; *kray* = beginning, base, root, east.

¹⁰ Ambiguity is inherent in the statements of the Mēbengokre concerning the origin of beautiful names, on the question of whether all names came from the fish or whether *Koko* and other classifiers are of different origin. Cf. Vidal (1977: 109-10).

¹¹ For an equivalent but very different strategy used by a Carib society – the *Txikãp* of the Upper Xingu – see Menget (1977).

¹² O preceded by a glottal stop.

¹³ This name was sometimes translated as 'Someone baked *Nhãk*!'. Names of a similar structure were translated from Kayapó to Portuguese in the same manner.

¹⁴ *Angme/angmere* for males; *ômui/ômuire* for females.

¹⁵ The male ceremony is called *mēmü biok* or *mēmü dzàkèri*, and the corresponding female ceremony is called *mēni biok* or *mēni dzàkèri*. For a description of the female ceremony, see Verswijver (1982); for the *Koko* ceremony, see Banner (1978).

¹⁶ Cf. Verswijver (1985), who used this same device for recording Mēbengokre oral history.

¹⁷ Cf. Hugh-Jones (1979: 39), who considers that the Barasana onomastic system (which appears to me to be similar to that of the Mēbengokre) 'inhibits the accumulation of genealogical knowledge'. See also Overing (1977) on the suppression of time depth in Lowland South America.

¹⁸ Teknonyms are used, for example, in the discourse which follows ceremonial wailing when receiving visitors from other Mēbengokre villages.

¹⁹ Cf. Caiuby Novaes (1983: 310) on Bororo children named by men for their wives' clan.

²⁰ The Mēbengokre conceive of our genealogies as upside down. In their view, the young sprout upwards from the dead, like plants. In this sense, it would be more exact to refer to their ascendants as descendants and vice versa, but the Western use of these terms has been used here to avoid confusion.

²¹ I use the term, 'original eponym' to designate the person, animal or plant from whom/which a personal name originates, as opposed to the 'personal eponym' who is the direct source of one's names. Since it is the personal eponym with whom I am mainly concerned, I refer to him or her in abbreviated form as the eponym. Obviously one's personal eponym is also one's namesake or homonym. These latter terms, however, carry the reciprocal connotation of a person with the same name as another, besides their alternative meaning of one person named after another. In the Mēbengokre case, what is at issue is the transmission of a name from its bearer to an individual of a succeeding generation. The term 'personal eponym' expresses this idea of the person from whom one's name has been passed less ambiguously than do the terms homonym and namesake, which lack a unidirectional connotation.

²² The Mēbengokre do not distinguish between mythical and historical time. When asked about the names of ancestors about whom stories are told, they include chiefs from the nineteenth century along with the man who transformed himself into lightning and the brothers Sun and Moon who used to live on earth.

²³ Cf. Ladeira (1982: 43). She considers that the 'value' of Timbira names is attributable to the obligation to exchange them – to receive and to give them.

²⁴ Eighty-five females received 227 names from their father's House and 261 from their own House (Lea 1986: 206). It should also be noted that women have as many names as men do.

²⁵ It is less common for males to receive names from their father's House than for females, and more common for males to receive names from members of other Houses, e.g., from their MF, FF, besides from their own House.

²⁶ The abhorrence of the notion of descent is more widespread, if Kuper (1982, 1988) can be taken as a reliable guide. Albert (1985) gives an excellent account of the issue of descent in the

case of the Yanomami; see, for example, Chagnon (1968), Shapiro (1974, 1975), Taylor & Ramos (1975) and Lizot (1975).

²⁷ Amongst others, Murphy (1979) has warned of the dangers of this.

²⁸ An analogy could be made with the Ashanti. Fortes (1950) regards them as matrilineal despite the fact that names and the mystical quality *ntoro* are passed down through the father. In the Mëbengokre case it is one's formal friends and one's organism that are acquired through the father. It should also be noted that among the Panara individuals are said to belong to their mother's clans but receive their names from their fathers (cf. Schwartzman 1987).

²⁹ Saladin d'Anglure (1970) argues that it is not really reincarnation that is at issue. There are some striking analogies between his account of Eskimo onomastics and that of the Mëbengokre.

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