

RELIGION AT THE EDGE OF ETHNIC IDENTITY

**By Clarice Novaes da Mota, Ph.D. (Universidade Federal de Sergipe, Brazil)
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ABSTRACT:

The Kariri-Shoko community is composed of descendants from indigenous tribes that inhabited the region of Northeast Brazil. It is located in the area by the town Colégio, in the state of Alagoas. After five centuries of a colonization process that scattered and annihilated the majority of tribal communities in the area, the Kariri-Shoko have managed to survive, through the changes imposed by European colonizers, conforming to the rural life style of the larger society. They are still identified as a tribal group that has kept part of its traditional system of beliefs and rituals. In this paper I argue - and support my argument with ethnographic data - that they have been keeping the faith in their ancestral deities as a means of empowerment against the outside pressures and claims over their territory. They have kept a part of the ancestral land as a ceremonial village, where the "tribal secret" - surrounding the intake of an entheogenic beverage known as Jurema - takes place. Only members of the indigenous community can participate in the religious ritual surrounded by secrecy. It is thus that they keep symbolic and real frontiers against non-tribal members, solidifying their traditions and their ethnic identity.

INTRODUCTION:

The descendants of the *Kariri-Shocó* people live at the margin of São Francisco River, in villages neighboring the town of *Porto Real do Colégio*, Alagoas state, Brazil. The estimated population is of 2,000, occupying an area of approximately 699.3 hectares, which was legally delimited by the federal government, within the semi-arid northeastern region of Brazil. The villages and the land were claimed in the 1970's, through political mobilization, when their territorial dimension was redefined. Presently, the indigenous land comprises only 2.75% of the agricultural lands available in the municipal area of Porto Real do Colégio, and is now in the process of being delimited once again, by legal means, as part of their claim over lands inhabited by the native tribes they descend from.

This indigenous group consists of the union of several ethnic groups, resulting from the junction of several northeastern tribes from a larger area, formed mainly by the Shocó - who arrived around the end of the 19th century, as they ran away from their persecutors at home in Sergipe state- and by the Kariri. The latter have lived in that area at least since the arrival of the colonizers in the 16th century.

In the colonization process, all tribal groups that lived around the lower São Francisco basin - *Tupinambá*, *Karapató*, *Acorane*, *Natu* - were under the control of Jesuit missionaries. Later on, they were put under the control of the General Directory of Indian Affairs, which ended in 1872. At that point, end of the 19th century, beginning of the 20th, indigenous villages under its guardianship were declared "extinct" and, therefore, their lands were put for sale as "public land" to non-indigenous buyers who could afford their

prices. Subsequently, all remaining indigenous peoples in the area went to live, almost as beggars, as a mass of landless rural workers in a street of the small town of Colégio, with no rights left to their ancestral lands.

At that historical time something extremely important happened: the Kariri, together with all the other tribes in the area, kept a hold over a patch of forest which they considered sacred, where their religious rituals, a type of shamanism composed of a set of ceremonies associated to health-illness-cure -known as *Matekraí* - were celebrated regularly. The colonizers were maintained at bay, away from the almost 200 acres of forested land where the Kariri deities continued to be invoked and worshipped by the people who would not relinquish their ancestral belief system. Even as they were Christianized, they held on to their sacred ceremonies and, more importantly, to the territory they considered as being the home place of their divinities.

From then on, the *Kariri-Shoko* continued to maintain close interrelationships with other indigenous ethnic groups in this region: *Shucuru-Kariri*, *Tingui-Botó* and *Karapotó*, in Alagoas state; *Fulni-ô*, in *Pernambuco* state and *Shocó*, in *Sergipe* state. All these groups practice and participate in the ritual *Matekraí*, now known as *Ouricuri*, in their own territories. (1)

IDEOLOGICAL FRONTIERS

The Kariri-Shocó exemplify the capacity to survive the onslaught of colonization by keeping an specific ethnic identity: through the tenacity with which they maintained and re-elaborated a belief system, through a constant feedback of their tribal symbols, the main one being the divine Jurema, represented by an entheogenic beverage. Without the sacred territory and the cluster of meaningful ceremonies, the Kariri-Shocó, and all the other tribes involved in the Ouricuri complex, would have become just impoverished communities made up of rural laborers, descendants from indigenous peoples known as *caboclos*, culturally orphaned beings living at the margin of regional capitalist developments.

Economically speaking, the native community continues to live in poverty, toiling a land that is deprived of water and irrigation of any sort, though at the margins of a large river. By reinventing past and forgotten traditions, they continue to pursue a way out of their economic predicament, revitalizing their "spirit de corps" as a traditional tribal group, moving forward in their history. It is in their "sacred forest" that the inhabitants of the indigenous village go in search of their ancestral origins, which they constantly affirm to be their reason to exist. To retain the land and what they consider as their "traditional" culture, the Kariri-Shoko have developed a unique relationship to a magical and medical ritual complex, utilizing botanical species as mediators. In that way, not only they conserve crucial cultural elements for the continuation of their indigenous life, but also part of the biological diversity of that area, creating an oasis for forest conservation. In that sacred space, several botanical and even animal species could be saved from the assailment of cattle farming and extensive monopolistic agricultural production that today characterizes the rest of the area.

In order to survive as an indigenous community, with rights guaranteed by Brazilian constitution, they have made extensive use of an ideology of ancestry, i.e., an ethnic ideology producing ethnic categories and classifiers within the context of interethnic relations. Through this all-embracing ideology of ancestry they have constructed a theory of human existence and the cosmos, claiming back what they believe to be their ancestral rights. According to the perception supported by this ideology, they are Kariri-Shoko because they have inherited rituals, performances, knowledge of the environment, and medical practices from their native ancestors, the ones who form their "roots" and "trunks." The ancestral knowledge is intimately related to the natural environment: the vegetal, animal and mineral world that gave shape to traditions from the past.

PLANTS AS MEDIATORS BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

Traditionally, the Kariri-Shoko people perceive plants as living symbols of their ancestors, literally the roots and trunks in the "tree of life,"⁽²⁾ their original beings. They interpret the natural habitat as book, where their history can be seen and saved, and the forest as a place where it has been imprinted. As plants have been imbued with symbolic meaning, one has to be "forest-literate" in Kariri symbolic language in order to decipher sounds and meanings, that trace their common origins with the other beings from the forest, who are co-participants in their present path.

Thus, plants are categorized in meaningful ways, standing out as symbols that have different meanings relating to both mythical and contemporary cultural history. Plants - more specifically those used as medicines (*remédios*) - play a fundamental role in their socially constructed imagery, in a quest for ethnic identity and property rights to the land they recognize as ancestral. Plants are seen not only as biological organisms, or for what makes them to stand out in unique and concrete ways, but also as culturally meaningful elements that have biological and cultural properties. They make part of the Kariri-Shoko's knowledge and subsequent resistance to total domination from the colonization frontiers people that invaded and devastated their territory five hundred years ago.

The utilitarian/economic and political sense inherent in this knowledge of the natural environment is related to the equilibrium of power needed to be kept concerning non-natives. One way to do that is through healing practices by regional population's request, which is paid through monetary means. The other is through the management of their secret knowledge of spiritual powers, which members of national Brazilian society have learned to fear. The construction of native knowledge relates to the construction of a belief system, which so far has not clashed with the belief system imposed by the Europeans and even by Africans brought to Brazil as slaves. Thus, Christianity and African religion systems were incorporated into the entirety of the Ouricuri complex of ceremonies, the ritualistic process that is central to the successful operation for maintaining ethnic identity and group integrity.

Nature, natural resources, forms a conceptually organized space, filled with cultural significance. This concept of nature and its power is related to the Kariri-Shoko struggle for the land and its resources, as well as to the spiritual powers they believe to possess as an inheritance from their mythical ancestors.

THE MEANING OF THE *OURICURI*.

The Ouricuri forest refers to a piece of the surrounding woods known by the Kariri-Shocó and other tribal descendants as the "enchanted forest" (*mata do encanto*) and by the local people as the "forest of the caboclos" (*mata dos caboclos*). Ouricuri is not only a patch of forest, a sacred territory, but also a system of beliefs, a religion; a set of rituals, a religious ceremony; and more than that: a state of being, a human condition brought about being by born and raised within the community that practices it.

"The Ouricuri cannot be made, the Ouricuri is born."

With these words the current Kariri Shocó shaman tried to convey the meaning of the Ouricuri to the non-natives who want to learn about it. The preservation of the Ouricuri territory as a sacred grove is an extremely important historical, cultural and even biological event. The patches of forest in the Ouricuri territory enable the Kariri-Shoko to speak of a "forest of spirits" where they go to their ancestral roots, but where they can also open a small space for the celebration of their Christian tradition, another inheritance yet from the colonizers. In the confines of this preserved forest, another village has been built where the natives live during the duration of the rituals. The village contains a row of little rooms where entire families stay during the ceremonies, and it is steadily growing beyond the first circle that was built around 50 years ago. In the sacred *Ouricuri* village there are also off-shoots from the internal central circle, a space where women cannot set foot and where the men conduct their private and secret - a secret within the secret - ceremonies, usually at night and totally apart from the women: hence constructing another form of power that relates to gender hierarchy within the tribal inheritance.

It is in the Ouricuri village where, following tradition that is supposed to come from the mythical "beginning of times", the Kariri-Shocó get together to re-enact a complex of magical-religious ceremonies, for two weeks in the beginning of every year, as well as through a number of weekends throughout the year. The ceremonies are likewise called '*Ouricuri*'. They involve ancestor worship, initiation rites for the youth, rites of passage for adults who are developing from one state of knowledge to the next, spiritual possession and healing sessions. It is an obligation to participate, and people tend to feel 'unprotected' if they have not been coming regularly. It is everyone's duty to offer food and presents to their spiritual guides. The deepest meanings of the Ouricuri are set in the indigenous vision of "another world", where they are free and happy. The Ouricuri experience enables a person to see this other reality, this world beyond the physical known world of everyday experiences. This is done through the ingestion of the entheogenic beverage of Jurema. After having drunken Jurema with the other natives within the Ouricuri the follower has been empowered forever and can never abandon the Ouricuri from then on. The Kariri-Shoko shaman explained,

- "The Ouricuri was and will always be ours, because the enchanted peoples of the forest, our ancestors, still live there. They live in the trees, the shrubs, the leaves and the herbs. We cannot gather any of these sacred beings without asking their permission to do so. They own the Ouricuri, we do not. We are only the keepers of

the land. No one has been able to take that land away from us because we are protected by the *encantados* and the *encantados* (3) are protected by us as well."

In the past this ritual complex was known as the feast of *Varakidra* or *Warakidza*, an ancestral Kariri deity. It took place during the time when the fruits of a palm tree named Ouricuri (*Cocos coronata* M.) were ripening. Considering the belief system of today, it is possible to think that the Ouricuri tree was the embodiment of the deity otherwise known as *Warakidza*. At that time, which is still the present time in tribal imaginary, consultations or divinations took place in a new hut made of fresh leaves. *Warakidza* - meaning "companion" - was renamed Ouricuri as a consequence of the Jesuit priests' pressure against indigenous religious manifestations. The Ouricuri tree had, after all, economic significance besides the ceremonial one. As a consequence of environmental shifts, the direction and magnitude of which we have not been able to ascertain yet, the tree lost its commercial impact and, along with that, its supremacy in the Kariri animistic concept of the world. However, the ceremony continued to be known as Ouricuri, although to the contemporary Kariri it is also known as *Matekrai*.(4)

A man who lives in Colégio made a statement regarding the Ouricuri that could be repeated by practically everyone in that locality:

- "This secret is kept by all Indians, from the little ones to the adults. Whoever starts to talk about it becomes deranged. They do something there and the person goes crazy. That was what has already happened to a young Indian woman who told the secret to a non-Indian: she became totally crazy shortly afterwards. The man to whom she revealed the secret left town and has never dared to talk about it. I think they get people killed or sacrificed at the end of the festival or sacrificed to be eaten. I don't know. But some people never come back from the Ouricuri so they must die there!"

Three magic powers - *Warakidza*, *Bizamu*, *Bizamyé* - are supposed to be unleashed during the rituals. *Bizamu* is a spiritual being - *encanto* - that is called forth by the shaman through knowledgeable invocation, and the shaman then becomes *Bizamu* himself. In *Iate* - a native language still spoken by the Fulni-ô - *Bizamu* means witch or sorcerer: one who orients the faithful in their work, bringing them the necessary knowledge so that they can go on in their task of surviving in this world. *Bizamu*, the original shaman, taught followers to locate the best places for fishing and hunting, also how to win wars. It is easy to see the importance that such rituals had for the group's very existence at the daily level. *Bizamu* and *Bizamyé* were the powers, but there were other beings: *Badzé* and *Poditão* who were supposed to hold the power in order to pass it on. *Badzé*, or *Padzo*, which means "father," is still recognized today as the deity of tobacco. *Poditan*, *Politão* or *Inhura* meant "son" but is never mentioned by the Kariri of today. (5) These godly companions were bequeathed with a power known as *Bizamu* or "enchantment": the power to see the future, to divine the problems existing in human affairs, thus helping the group to face adverse forces. Nowadays, *Badzé* still appears as an important figure, forever embodied in the tobacco plant, who is brought to life at the beginning of the rituals through the communal smoking of the pipes - the prized *shandukas* - and who is in charge of protecting the group by turning it invisible. Therefore, the same power helps the Kariri when the shaman invokes it

as he smokes the sacred pipes and drinks the sacred Jurema, the sacred beverage made of the roots of the Jurema tree (*Mimosa tenuiflora*, L.).

Through Jurema - who is also *Sonsé*, the Supreme Being, and the master/caretaker - *Bizamu* orients the people in their relations with the non-Kariri-Shoko, helping them to take the political steps that are crucial for their survival in a continuing hostile world. Therefore, the feast initiates a time for healing the community, protecting its members from the dangers inherent in the universe. At present, the more readily felt dangers are those coming from the enveloping national society. Ouricuri members stand out as "special people" to be feared because they receive protection from entities such as *Badzé* and *Sonsé*; consequently they maintain the ritual also as an insurance against any type of disaster or misfortune that may accompany their participation in the larger national society. They are a disturbing kind of people, a "nuisance" that is feared and will not go away, and as such they have to continue seeking for protection.

Since Ouricuri membership is of a secret society, ritual performances are maintained in strict secrecy as well, so that outsiders cannot observe them. At the first day of the more formal ceremonies, the shaman invites a few non-Indian friends to share the moment with them, but we are allowed to stay only for two to three hours and then are asked to leave, when it is no longer safe to remain inside the sacred place with them. It is unsafe both ways: outsiders can contaminate the Kariri-Shoko with their ignorance and spiritual pollution, but can also be endangered by their very lack of preparation to be in that magical place. Therefore, it is safe to affirm that the Ouricuri ritual is a magical-religious process of enculturation in which only truly recognized members of the Kariri-Shoko group can take part. Therefore, the Ouricuri ritual sets boundaries between members and non-members of the Kariri-Shoko tribal family.

RELIGION AND HEALING:

The significance of cure among the *Kariri-Shoko* has a dual meaning which is based on the physical and spiritual aspects of one's life: first, the meaning of healing is that physical wellness is re-established and evil is warded off, therefore to be cured equals to be blessed which equals to have spiritual strength; secondly to be cured can mean that the person has been "bewitched", i.e., the sick person's soul has been taken away or trapped by somebody else's will and magical work, therefore it also equals to being under the most unfortunate predicament. The unlucky turn of events - not only a negative physical manifestation - in everyday affairs, can mean that a "cure" has been perpetrated against that person., and he/she has to take special herbal medicines to be cured in a positive way, thus restoring equilibrium and subsequently spiritual and physical health.

The *Kariri-Shoko*'s "animistic theory of the world" is the base to understand their conceptualization of health and illness. Accordingly, they differentiate "dead spirits" as souls of the dead persons, which continue to live in forests, villages and places where they used to live when they were alive, from "live spirits", or beings who are alive in human, animal, vegetal form. Illnesses are mostly caused by live spiritual beings that enter a person's body, either spontaneously or by responding to someone's will. Everyone who participates in *Ouricuri*'s ritual learns how to utilize nature's power, as everyone becomes

empowered by a special plant. The *Kariri-Shoko* people conceptualize relationships between the "type of healing" and the "type of illness", and a "spiritually-provoked illness", which cannot be cured by a medical doctor. Their manipulation and classification of plants are based on binary of oppositions (such as negative-positive, weak-strong, feminine-masculine, hot-cold, etc.), where horizontal and/or vertical movements from one pole to another can be done according to the manipulation and use of the plant, although they conceive that all plants have a positive character. In this system of transformable opposites, the stronger disease, such as tuberculosis, measles, convulsion, nervous disorders, etc., are believed to be caused by stronger illness spirits, which can only be cured by similarly strong vegetal spirits -"masculine spirits" (which are more difficult to find, being more sacred and secret); and "feminine plant spirits" (which are supposed be gentler and weaker, thus residing in plant forms which are easier to find and more commonly used). Only *Jurema* plants of different kinds embodied in *Vitex agnus-castus* Linn., *Mimosa verrucosa* Benth., *Mimosa tenuiflora* Benth. have a central role in sacred life, presenting both traits of gentleness and strength, thus being classified as both female and male. They are also the highest embodiments of the sacred on earth and therefore of the power to heal. It is that power that has to be continually unleashed through the ritualistic drinking of *Jurema* in the Ouricuri grounds.

CONCLUSIONS

The use of *Jurema* continues to hold on strongly, confirming its central role in the community's life and self-preservation as a cultural group. In another work (Mota and Barros, 1991) we referred to the different types of *Jurema* plants as well as the forms that fall under the designation of *Jurema* as the "*Jurema complex*", defining it as:

"...a group of representations that do not only include plants named Jurema but also the conceptions existing around them." (1991:171)

All the members of the village, starting with three-year old children, ingest the *Jurema* beverage orally during the Ouricuri rituals. It is supposed to propitiate changes in visual and auditory perception, but only if it is prepared by combining the roots of the *Jurema* tree (*Mimosa tenuiflora*, Benth.) with another vegetal that contains the active principle to make a synergy with the alkaloid from *Jurema* -N,N dimethyltryptamine (DMT). (6) Otherwise, the substance cannot produce alterations in perceptions, which are perceived as the result of being in contact with the divinity. The belief is that, when one drinks *Jurema*, one ingests the divine being contained in the tree and therefore in the beverage made from that tree: the entheogenic substance. According to tribal lore, *Jurema* brings about knowledge of the world, enabling the people to "see the unseen world" and thus become filled with spiritual power and wisdom. The heart of the mystery - the *Kariri-Shoko* tribal secret - is also locked into what is the other vegetal, i.e., the other substance, that is mixed with the roots of *Jurema* in order to produce the desired ecstatic experience in their rituals. It has been speculated that the species being used and which necessarily contains the inhibitor of the monoamine oxidase (MAO) is probably *Peganum harmala*, the same species that another Northeastern native descendents - the *Turká*, of Pernambuco state - use for their *Jurema* rituals.

Jurema is nevertheless widely known throughout the northeastern villages, whether made up of native descendants or simply rural people of the interior - the *sertanejos*. The complex of rituals around Jurema is diverse in organization and content, varying also which botanical species is utilized in the beverage composition. However, the Jurema that is partaken at the Ouricuri ritual is still the matrix of a strong will to live and survive under the mark of a native cosmology. Continuing to hold on to the tribal secret, its followers are also holding on to the signs that indicate who can be known as "Jurema's children", the inheritors of an ancestral order and their associates. Affirming that they are the descendants from the mythical users of Jurema, they continue to set themselves apart from those who cannot participate in the Ouricuri, cannot drink Jurema within the sacred forest, and, therefore, cannot become seers of another more powerful, wider and everlasting reality.

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FOOTNOTES:

- (1) It is important to note that the only group allowed to participate in the *Fulni-ô's Ouricuri* (the only group in this region that maintained their native language – Yatê) is the *Kariri-Shoko*.
- (2) "Tree of life" is an allegory originated in ancient cultures worldwide, representing both a real tree that is a metaphor for all life on earth, and also the genealogy of a people.
- (3) Encantado (enchanted one) is an European conceptualization of spiritual beings that appear either as ghosts or live within other live beings. The natives appropriated this European element and mixed it with their own concept of spirits or souls that inhabit the forest and animate the inanimate world.
- (4) My informants in that area gave me the information. Other contemporary researchers who have studied nearby groups that also perform the Ouricuri did not register this appellation.
- (5) It belongs to speculation to know whether the trinity composed of "companion" (perhaps the Holy Spirit?), "father" and "son" were influences from the Jesuits' catechism or existed even before colonial times as the originating ancestors.
- (6) "Being tryptamine derivates, these indolic hallucinogens are structurally akin to the neuro-humoral factor serotonin (5-hydroxytryptamine), common to warmblooded animals. This substance accumulates in the brain, where it is involved in the biochemistry of central nervous regulations. It appears that certain tryptamines that occur frequently as hallucinogens, as well as in the neurohormone serotonin, are in fact centrally important in the metabolism of psychic functions."(Lewis & Lewis, 1977 *apud* Camargo, 1988:13).

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