

## Individual Drawings and Collective Representations

Perceptions of Death Among Kaiowá Youth

by

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*This article explores some of the sentiments that may explain the phenomenon of suicide among young indians in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil. By asking a group of young people to envision "death" by means of drawings, a number of thought models are identified, and it is discussed in what ways perceptions of death is linked with the social situation of the people in question. A special emphasis is put on religious interpretations, be it pre-Christian remnants of the old religion or present day Christianity. It is concluded that the suicides are closely linked with the need for identity-formation, even if no unambiguous pattern is seen.*

### Introduction

Brazil has the largest population of Guarani Indians. Half of it, approximately 25.000 individuals, mostly represented by the Kaiowá and Guarani, live in the state of Mato Grosso do Sul in 26 designated areas. The Guarani speaking indigenous population in general is composed by three different ethnic groups - Kaiowá, Nandeva and Mbya - in different locations in Brazil, Paraguay, Argentina and Uruguay. Until a few decades ago, the Kaiowá and the Guarani lived in a wide territory in the southern parts of the state of Mato Grosso do Sul covering the entire extension of the Grande Dourados region. However, the Brazilian government, with the purpose of favouring the occupation of the area by non-indigenous groups, demarcated, in the first half of the century, eight small expanses of land, turning them into indigenous reservations, known in Portuguese as *aldeias*, "villages". Since then, traditional Kaiowá and Guarani territory has systematically been occupied by non-Indians. This ongoing process of expulsion of the Indians from their traditional lands began in

the 1940's. Many family groups were transferred to the reservations, or they came to wander among the farms that were gradually being established in the region. Therefore, in a recent and relatively short period of time, the Kaiowá and Guarani territory in Mato Grosso do Sul, has experienced deep alterations, triggering deep changes in the traditional forms of organisation and the general fabric of social (and hence religious) life. In the aldeia near the city of Dourados some 10.000 people live clustered on only 3,568 hectares (figures refer to conditions in 2003-2004). Fresh water is extremely scarce, there is no sanitation, houses are miserable and the possibility to work and earn money is very limited indeed. Traditional cultural ways, consequently, have deteriorated and due to racist sentiments in the larger society, the Indians have not been given the opportunity to join in other cultural or social contexts.

One thing in particular regarding the Kaiowá-population of Brazil has caught the attention of the surrounding society: The many suicides that have occurred among young people since 1986, a development that still goes on. The number of suicides may have reached 500 at this point (no precise figures are available). Nobody doubts that the social situation of those who choose to end their lives is determining their decision, but it remains unclear exactly what is going on.

As a backdrop for the following discussion I shall briefly refer anthropologist Georg Grümberg's explanation of what he terms "the Kaiowá sequence suicide". Grümberg identifies the following causes as important:

- 1) Lack of living space and loss of self determination
- 2) Lack of prospects, the experience of a void rather than a future
- 3) The idea that the person who commits suicide is actually a hero, someone who captures a new reality and creates a new situation
- 4) The social instability created by Christian missionaries, who have prevented people from negotiating their conflicts in traditional ways.

Indeed, as Grümberg notes, suicides occur in three out of four communities where the Christians are in power, and he maintains that the impact of the missionaries is the main reason for the suicides (Grümberg 1991). Not surprisingly the missionaries themselves think differently. The Indigenous Missionary Council in Brazil (CIMI) identifies poverty and lack of land as the main reasons, ignoring the destruction of religion and social structures as possible explanations.<sup>1</sup>

No matter what theory, one thing stands out at the young Kaiowás' primary concern: The challenge of defining who they are and to where they belong, and the phenomenon of suicide must be understood in that context. The suicides have emerged as one among several reactions to the prevailing social situation, and, as it appears, death and dying has become a very important dimen-

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<sup>1</sup> As mentioned in *Servico Brasileiro de Justica e Paz* No. 299, 15. Jan. 1998, where a report by CIMI is recapitulated.

sion in the ongoing process of identity formation among the young. The aim of this article, then, is to discuss how death is perceived in order to understand some of the social and psychological mechanisms behind the suicides better. No comprehensive explanation will be given, but some new approaches to the problem will be offered.

### **A few words on methodology**

Concepts of death and dying are culturally unfolded in many ways, not least through narratives and rituals. In this case, though, the medium is crayon drawings made by young (10-18 years old) Kaiowás upon request in the Dourados *aldeia* in March and April 2004. Approximately 85 individuals were asked to make drawings of how they would imagine death and dying, and virtually everybody responded positively. “What happens when you die?” was the concrete question posed. While narratives to some extent have been collected and rituals observed, no iconographic approach has previously been attempted.

It should be noted that there is no such thing as a well defined tradition for pictorial art in Kaiowá culture. The drawings produced by modern Kaiowás, consequently, are not rooted in old artistic fashions and do not represent anything “original Kaiowá”. The earliest samples of Kaiowá drawings were collected in the midst 1940s by ethnographer Egon Schaden at a time when the artists had no previous or very little experience with this medium.<sup>2</sup> The modern Kaiowás discussed here, on the contrary, are members of a complex society and therefore significantly influenced by the multitude of cultural ways in present day’s Brazil, even if they remain marginalised in most ways. In terms of art production it is evident that style and techniques are quite similar to what is found among other ethnic and social groups. In short, Kaiowá children and adolescents paint and draw in the same way as young people in general. This is a simple but significant point to make: The motifs in the drawings reflect the Kaiowás’ special social situation (culturally and psychologically), but the fact that the children and adolescents are capable of making this kind of art work shows that they have exactly the same cognitive and artistic point of departure as everybody else in the larger Brazilian society.

What we are looking for, consequently, are signs and clues in the pictures that reveal how the artists see themselves and the world in which they live, “the Kaiowá perspective” or “the Kaiowá experience”, but we should not expect artistic features or symbolic forms that goes beyond a rather ordinary usage.

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<sup>2</sup> There are indications that the style applied in this material may have slight parallels to much older rock engravings found not far from the area where the drawings were collected. Other features, however, most notably the odd perspective used to draw villages and houses, also indicate some influence from 18th century pictures of houses and developed sites made by Portuguese speaking non-Indians.

From a methodological point of view, artistic expressions are, in this case, adopted as a hitherto unexplored source in order to broaden our understanding of the young people that are supposed to carry on the traumatised Kaiowá culture in a very near future. Through the medium of drawings people are inclined to express themselves in symbolic forms that are not equally applicable in spoken or written language. The drawings presented here provide, so to say, a new path into the cognitive and symbolic minds of the people in question. The drawings, however, cannot and should not stand alone. As sources revealing elements of the Kaiowá experience, they are closely interlinked with other kinds of data. In order to enhance this co-ordination of data, the people who made the drawings were also asked to produce brief texts explaining what they had produced. Thus, in most cases, the single drawing corresponds with a very brief, sometimes quite personal, narrative.<sup>3</sup> More fieldwork data may indeed enhance the possibility for understanding the issues dealt with here.<sup>4</sup>

The drawings are elements in the individual's self-narrative, but elements that would probably not emerge had the young people not been asked to produce the pictures. However, the drawings reflect a reality that implicitly is a part of the young Indians' lives and therefore something that is being socially communicated in other ways disregarding the drawings.

### **The data**

A sample of 83 drawings (many with corresponding texts) has been collected. The drawings may be divided into 8 categories based on what they depict, although a line of subcategories easily could be defined as a number of drawings display special features. Furthermore, many pictures include aspects from more than one category. The main categories are briefly described in the following (the most frequent first, the least frequent last), but no actual iconographic analysis based on the pictures is attempted. The analysis follows immediately after:

#### *1. Hell (21 drawings)*

The largest category only depicts Hell, a dark and gloomy place with fire pits and scary, sharp rocks. The dual nature of the Christian afterlife is ignored, as the wonderful Heaven that awaits the saved, is totally absent. Death, in these pictures, simply means pain and suffering in Hell. Monsters, demons, death personified, and Satan are always included in the pictures, often tormenting the miserable deceased. Symbols such as skulls and bones, blood and crosses on fire are abundant. Very

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<sup>3</sup> The same approach has successfully been attempted by others in studies of a similar kind, for instance De Marinis et al. 2002 and Hanish (s.a.)

<sup>4</sup> The fieldwork referred to in this article was conducted in the Dourados *aldeia*, Mato Grosso do Sul, by anthropologist Maria de Lourdes Beldi Alcantara in cooperation with students and local assistants. I was periodically working along with this team in 2003-2005, but this analysis only covers my personal opinion. Data (of which some are included in the present study) was readily placed at my disposal for which I am very grateful.

often the torture of the unholy dead is ritualised; we see torture instruments, and symmetrical set-ups where the agents of Evil stand prepared to receive the condemned. Hell is a very well structured place meticulously designed for its unpleasant purpose.

## 2. *Heaven or hell* (20 drawings)

Almost as numerous, these drawings, contrary to the first category, clearly reflect the Christian notion of an afterlife depending on the individual's behaviour and sentiment while alive. The faithful go to a wonderful place, while the unbelievers or the wicked are facing eternal damnation. The drawings all show the two opposing realms in very distinct ways, often with the individual placed in between. Heaven is identified through lush, green vegetation and a lot of cool water, while Hell is dark and dusty with awful heat and no vegetation. Various superhuman agents may be included (angels, God, Jesus, Satan etc.) but it is Heaven and Hell as *locations* that seem to be of most importance.

## 3. *Heaven* (14 drawings)

In ways similar to the drawings in the first category, but in the reverse perspective, these pictures seem to ignore the negative realm altogether. After death, a Paradise awaits the individual. Here, as expected, Heaven is also primarily defined by means of lushful vegetation and a magnitude of water, but happy human figures, often in the company of angels, are also seen. Indeed, sometimes the dead him- or herself has been transformed into an angel (identified by the wings and, quite often, blond hair).

## 4. *The grave* (14 drawings)

While the abovementioned drawings are based on Christian mythology, this category is inspired by social experience. Contrary to the mythological perspective, which dualistically focuses the attention on the unbodily soul (even if it is depicted as a human being), the question of "what happens when you die?", in this category, is answered with reference to the dead *body*: When you die you are laid in a coffin. Secondly, the sadness among those left behind, is considered. Death, in this case, is understood to be a *social event* that nobody likes. The pictures show the dead person in his or her grave, the mourning relatives standing by. The scene is set in the everyday context of the artists' lives, the *aldeia*. In five examples the dead person is obviously a child. It is significant that there are no, or only very few, references to religious beliefs in these pictures.

## 5. *Ghosts* (5 drawings)

This category takes us back to the mythological realm, while at the same time keeping the scenery in the context of the young Indians' social life. The drawings (with corresponding texts) claim that

the dead become ghosts, and it is clear from the pictures that such entities roam among the living, i.e. they stay in society. The category of ghosts, in this connection, is iconographically defined in a very common fashion with no reference to special Kaiowá features: A ghost looks like a person wearing a sheet over his or her head, but contrary to persons, it can fly.

#### 6. *Concrete case: Death of a loved one* (4 drawings)

In four cases the artist has shown concrete events - the death of someone he or she knew. These drawings have no reference to the afterlife or religion in other ways. The focus is on the tragic loss of life or the paradox of death. The accompanying texts reveal pain and loss in a more direct way than what can be seen in the other examples. These examples, like those in the fourth category, consider death as a sad social event. The focus is, of course, on the deceased, but in fact it is the sense of loss and sadness among those left behind that is the driving force of these pictures.

#### 7. *Murder* (3 drawings)

This category is closely related to the sixth category. In this case the drawings simply show people being brutally murdered in the context of the young peoples' habitat. In two of the pictures police and ambulances are approaching in the distance, but the general impression is that of murder as an unfortunate, but not too surprising event. Actually these drawings do not answer the question: "What happens when you die?". They just give examples of *how* people may very well end up dying, which is something else, even if the subjects are interlinked. Apparently, in these examples, religion has not much to do with the concept of death.

#### 8. *Angels* (2 drawings)

This category corresponds nicely with the third category but there is a significant difference. In these two drawings the angels are out of Heavenly context. They are on their own, flying over houses and trees. What we see is a transformed human being, now in the shape of an angel, flying in the air. It is most likely that Heaven implicitly goes along with the figure, but one cannot be sure. In fact the angels here are structurally quite similar to the ghosts (category 5), although the connotations are quite different.

### **Analysis**

#### *The predominance of Christian mythology*

Not everybody in the Dourados *aldeia* share religious beliefs. All are heavily influenced by various brands of Christianity, but to certain segments of the population (mainly the Kaiowá) certain elements of pre-Christian religious traditions are still relevant. The old bearers of religious authority are gone, and no apprentices are educated, but reinventions of tradition take place more often than

before. Some (those involved with the Christian missions) strongly resent this recent development as they consider the new *nandesy* representatives of what should be forgotten - the ungodly Indian religion. Bearing this differentiation in mind, it is interesting to note that almost no signs of pre-Christian religion are seen in the drawings (the ghosts probably represent the only obvious indication (the fifth category)). Why is that?

Indian traditions may deliberately be excluded from the drawings due to simple social pressure, but it is more likely that the concepts of death, at this point, primarily are shaped through Christian symbols, while the remnants of traditional Kaiowá-Guarani religion deals with other things.<sup>5</sup> The exclusiveness of Christian motifs, therefore, does not mean that the religion of the missionaries is the only one at work. What it means is that death generally is conceived “Christian wise”. Currently a growing number of Kaiowá have gained some kind of religious influence by being in control of preaching and rituals. On the surface it may seem as if Indians are doing the work of the Evangelicals, but this is not entirely true: With an emerging religious Kaiowá leadership, new mythologies and interpretations will develop from the Christian raw materials, but it is too early to predict any concrete outcome. The question is to what extent this development implicitly is present in the drawings. Perhaps the Kaiowá perspective lies in invisible details, perhaps it is not strong enough yet to be exposed?

We have to conclude that only Christian ideas are expressed in the drawings, but we still have to consider to what extent (if at all) pre-Christian structural fragments may have survived.

#### *Disintegration of symbolic structures*

Any religious system is subjected to continuous change, and it is not surprising at all that the Tupi-Guarani's symbolic system at a very early stage merged with that of the invading Jesuits (Tupi-Guarani being rather closely related to the Kiowa). Saguier and Clastres (1969), however, suggest that the dominating feature of the two systems was that they coexisted in a process of “cultural pluralism”, and somehow the Indians' religious system lived on even if it was covered by Christian concepts. Commenting on Saguier's and Clastres' theory, anthropologist Dorthe Nyland Sørensen points to the fact that the “cultural pluralism” that supposedly would allow a Tupi-Guarani symbolic system to survive, was entirely governed by the Jesuits (Nyland Sørensen 1991:138). The concept of “cultural pluralism”, therefore, has to be understood in the proper context. Nyland Sørensen, however, maintains that the Tupi-Guarani and the Jesuits “could meet in the Paradise vision” and that “there were a momentum of voluntary effort” on the part of the Indians in their meeting with the Jesuits. Historical data clearly support this, but it should be added that this interest on the

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<sup>5</sup> Pre-Christian religion in this context typically deals with question of health, the control of spells etc., but no such simplification will do justice to the old religion of the Kaiowá. Here, however, not monographical description is attempted.

part of the Tupi-Guarani was multifaceted and included religious as well as many other interests (which makes the history of the Tupi-Guaranis quite similar to a number of other cases in the history of Christian expansion) (Nyland Sørensen 1991:139)..

Nyland Sørensen discusses an early phase in the history of Christian mission to the Tupi-Guarani, but Saguier and Clastres take the argument further and claim that the process of “cultural pluralism” in terms of religious or symbolic systems, survived - at least - into the 1960’s, a period of around 400 years. Could it be that the Christian myths of death are more interwoven with pre-Christian religion than the concrete symbols of the drawings suggest? Is there perhaps an underlying mythological-symbolic structure? We shall return to this question further below.

#### *Individual or shared notions?*

It is not clear whether the drawings intend to depict what everybody should expect, or whether it is the individual artist’s *personal* expectations that are shown. Indeed some of the young Indians (those more closely involved with Evangelical movements) have come to understand themselves as soteriologically privileged because they already “live with God” in their everyday lives. Hence they have all good reasons for expecting to receive a divine reward when they die. Similarly, others have been taught that they are hopeless sinners, and that nothing but perdition lies ahead of them. It is reasonable to expect that the more one-dimensional pictures show individual prospects, while the broader, more general renderings reflect socially shared, dogmatic positions. The texts accompanying the drawings unfortunately do not clear this up. Another problem is the question of suicide as a special cause of death. Interviews with young Indians have shown that those who commit suicide are believed to be bound for only more trouble and suffering in the afterlife. It is possible that some of the drawings implicitly focus on this situation, simply because it has been central during field work and because it preoccupies the minds of many young people. At any rate, it is clear that distinct ideas of the afterlife permeate the religious fantasy of the young Kaiowá, and that most of those asked share basic points of view. This also suggests that ideas of death and dying are communicated to an extent that allows people to adjust to the same basic notions, but the evidence also show that no strict uniformity prevails.

At any rate, life is understood with reference to what awaits after death. Indeed this functioning of the Kaiowás’ death mythologies should not be underestimated. To those looking forward to Paradise, life here and now is a forerunner for “the real thing”, Eternal Life. To others “the real thing” remains this life here and now on Earth, no matter how difficult it is. Several of the young artists that have depicted post-death conditions as something nice, maintain that “life is good - death is bad”. This does not imply that they consider life here and now to be “good”, but it shows that they primarily locate the possibility of having a good life to this world, and not to what they believe to come. This is a considerable difference which exemplifies two opposing mythological

mechanisms. One is fixating the realisation of what it means to be human to the afterlife, while the other remains focused on life here and now.

The symbolic difference is also significant: Those who consider themselves fortunate and in God's favour, will often enjoy better social and personal conditions than others, simply because they have the benefit of Church membership and thus status and support. They can afford to interpret their present situation as less attractive than the Heaven that awaits them. Those deprived of the support of the Church have to anchor the symbolic ideal somewhere else because Hell cannot work as a symbolic reflection of the ideal. The paradoxical result is that the least fortunate sometimes prefer life here-and-now to death, while the more fortunate place their ideal in the mythical post-life future.

### *Ethnicity?*

Ethnicity is sometimes an important feature in the drawings, even if indirectly. God himself is depicted on his Heavenly throne four or five times, always (very!) anthropomorphical. In one case he has black hair, but in the rest he is blond. The same goes for the angels of Heaven - they are all blond - and apparently, when the dead is transformed into an angel (the eighth category), he or she also receives blond hair. The agents of evil are all black or brownish, but they are usually demons or skeletons and never "human" in the same way as God and his semi-divine associates. Only in two drawings can the dead be identified specifically as Indians: They are wearing feather ornaments on their heads. In one case the dead man's soul rises from the grave and proceeds to Heaven, in the other the people present in Heaven are all Indians. The fact that only two drawings depict the dead as Indians could mean that ethnicity is of no or little importance, and that the young Indians consider themselves parallel to everybody else in this respect. On the contrary, the lack of ethnic specification could be a sign of cultural oppression: To enter the Christian Heaven you have to deconstruct your Indian identity and become simply "Christian". The drawings do not reveal enough to allow us to pass judgement. Neither do they show us what kind of differences that may prevail between the different Indian ethnicities in the *aldeia*. We know that they are there, but the indications in the iconographic material are not sufficient to draw conclusions.

### *Collective and individualised eschatologies*

The young Indians, disregarding their ethnic and social differences, are all subjected to the same religious impacts in the shape of Christian theology, primarily (although not exclusively) of an Evangelical kind. In terms of death and dying two different, but correlated perspectives, are seen. The first is of an all encompassing cosmic nature with a broad historical perspective: As the End time approaches and the great eschatological judgement shall take place, cosmos awaits the unavoidable - the destruction of the sinful world. History is perceived as a process of divinely gov-

erned creation, maintenance and destruction where human beings are given the possibility of choosing the right path and thus survive the apocalypse and gain eternal life and happiness.

But within the cosmic process that will eventually wipe out the evil world, the single individual's life elapses with another kind of eschatological perspective - the individual's personal salvation after death. On this level the time frame is much narrower. On the macro level the entire creation awaits the day of doom, but the very same structure applies to the individual on the micro level. "The end of time" is reached upon death. The drawings are very explicit in this respect, showing a clear cut understanding of the dualistic prospect awaiting everyone in a not too far future. Eschatology has become privatised or personalised. The individual is directly confronted with the divine during the process of dying.

This type of personal eschatology forms an important part of the individual's narrative about him- or herself and represents one of the more certain projections regarding the future. Anthropological enquiries into the lives of young Kaiowá have revealed that thoughts about the future rarely are emphasised. The past is recollected through stories full of frustrations and failures, the present by what is happening here and now with no further plans, while the future is largely disregarded.<sup>6</sup> In effect it seems as if the self-narratives only have one distinct link to the future: Death. While the future of their lives appeared to be more or less irrelevant in conversations with the young people, there was no hesitation when they were asked to specify their understanding of death. Images and thoughts were instantly available in their minds.<sup>7</sup> In a way, time is abandoned: The young are reluctant to imagine their lives in the future, but death is already at this point in their young existence a well defined point in time and (mythological) space. This is a crucial for our understanding of what I have previously termed "the Kaiowá experience". The drawings depict an imagined situation that will occur at the end of the individual's life, a mythological understanding of what awaits the person when his or her life is over, but the process that leads to that point, the life span of the individual, is downplayed or simply absent in the way young Kaiowá speak - and apparently think - about themselves.

#### *Visions of the afterlife as cognitive blends*

In terms of cognitive psychology it is relevant to observe that human beings are able to escape the present (including the nearer future of their concrete lives) by introducing other times and places in thoughts and fantasies. An individual may be inescapably trapped in a painful situation, but by means of his or her creative mind, an alternative scenario can be developed as a kind of mental escape from the unpleasant situation. As expressed by Gilles Fauconnier:

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<sup>6</sup> Field data compiled by Maria de Lourdes, tentatively presented in an unpublished working-paper with the title "Who do we belong to?", October 2004.

<sup>7</sup> Indeed, when the drawings were collected, it was interesting to observe how easily people got started. Nobody had trouble knowing how to present the subject (death) they were asked to deal with.

We can blend a pattern of meaning that corresponds to the immediate environment with a remembered or an imagined pattern that we have activated. We can activate and blend two patterns of meaning and perception, both of which are supplied by memory or imagination, even if neither of them is closely related to the present.<sup>8</sup>

The vision of a Heavenly future, where all problems are forgotten, is a remarkable example of this functioning of the mind. In the midst of a troubled life, the individual is able to imagine a fundamentally different situation with qualities that contradict what is normally perceived or expected. The drawings reveal that the young Indians are extremely creative in this respect. The vision of Paradise provides a comfort which eases the difficulties of the hard everyday life.

At other times, however, the mythological fantasy does not provide comfort. On the contrary, it adds to the frustration and suffering of the individual. This is obviously the case when young Kaiowá think of Hell and eternal damnation as something awaiting them. While the vision of Paradise implicitly creates an argument against the social condition of the Kaiowá, the idea of Hell, at least in principle, confirms it. If Paradise awaits you, you actually deserve better than what comes to you in this life, but if religious imaginations tell you that you are bound for Hell, the suffering you are experiencing right now is probably what you deserve. In both cases the afterlife vision creates a perspective that influences the individual's understanding of his or her situation, socially and existentially. Heaven and Hell are mythological projections, but to the minds of the young Kaiowá the concepts refer to concrete places and condition somewhere else in the cosmos. Nothing in either texts or drawings suggests otherwise. Heaven and Hell are cognitively thought of as physical places in a real topography.

To the external observer, however, the very tangible notion of Heaven and Hell remains a mythological reflection of present social and psychological conditions. Heaven and Hell are symbolic expressions of living peoples' dreams and hopes, as well as their problematic experiences and fears. Through the language of mythology the young Indians create explanations about themselves and their world. By applying the dualistic cosmology of Evangelical Christianity, their situation becomes understandable. In effect, the young Kaiowá build up their self-perception within a framework defined by Evangelical notions of the divine and the satanic.

This process takes place on two interdependent levels: The individual and the collective. The drawings reflect primarily the collective representations as most pictures share themes as well as style. There are, of course, many differences, but the overall impression is one of similarity. Only a

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<sup>8</sup> Abstract provided for the conference "The Way We Think", University of Southern Denmark, Odense, August 2002. Proceedings from the conference, including Fauconnier's abstract (p.225) was published in Hougaard & Lund 2002.

few drawings fall outside the general matrix. The individuality probably reveals itself in the artist's choice of general theme. It is, for instance, likely that young Kaiowá, with close affiliations to the Evangelical movements, young men and women that "walk with God" (an expression used to denote Christian devotion), will depict themselves on their way to Heaven, while miserable, unhappy young people, without the same relation to religious communities, may choose another theme which seems more reasonable in the light of their own experience, and thus depict Hell. Everybody knows the imagery of both scenarios, but depending of the individual's situation one is preferred to the other.

The religious references in this case seem to be entirely Christian, but again we raise the question: Could pre-Christian mythological structures be detected nevertheless? As a matter of fact: Yes! According to the Jesuit missionary Fernao Cardim, who tells about the old Tupinamba in his 16th century *Tratados da Terra*, they believe in an immortal soul and that they, following death, "go to fields filled with fruit, near a beautiful river where together, they do nothing but dance" (as quoted in Clastres 1995:23). The drawings depicting a paradise-vision examined above seem to match this image perfectly. In short, from this perspective, it remains impossible to determine which mythology (Christian or native) that is related. The mentioning of "dance", obviously, is distinctly Indian but it is perfectly possible that it has become contained in a mythology of death based upon Christian notions as well as native ideas.

We may, however, also try to approach this difficult question through a more intricate theory. The argument is that it in fact is possible to identify a structural resemblance in the present mythologies of death (as expressed in the drawings) to what Viveiros de Castro has called the "triadic matrix" of Guarani (and thus Kaiowá) cosmology: "Nature/Society/Supernature":

Of course the ontological triad Nature/Society/Supernature is not restricted to the Tupi-Guarani; it is found in times and places as venerable in the history of Western thought as classical Greece and the Renaissance. What distinguishes the Tupi-Guarani case is the way in which it is hierarchically ordered: the focus is not on the central domain, *humanitas*, but on the other two, *feritas* and *divinitas*. Society is a space of dispersal and a time of transition, encompassed by that which is exterior to it (Viveiros de Castro 1992:29)

Applying this identification to what we have already seen reveals an interesting pattern which may explain why the Christian notions of the afterlife have gained such a momentum in the thoughts of the young Kaiowá. If it is correct that traditional Guarani philosophy places the realm of the living humans ("Culture") at the bottom of a cosmological hierarchy where "Nature" and "Supernature" are above, it is definitely possible that the present preoccupation with the afterlife (and their highly developed ability to depict it in minute details), and the common disregard of the present among young Kaiowá, is structured by pre-Christian cosmology.

The Guarani cosmological matrix shows to what extent the cognitive blend of social reality and imagined realms can develop. In effect reality is transferred to the realm of mythology, while the social and physical reality, the world people actually live in, is somehow reduced in importance. Trouble arises because the world (“Culture” as well as “Nature”) into which this idea was born, and where it was supposed to work, has been destroyed. The understanding of “Culture” as secondary to “Nature” and “Supernature” has no possible way of becoming meaningful in the context of the larger Brazilian society. “Supernature” has also been severely affected, but contrary to “Culture” and “Nature” it has readapted itself much more successfully. Mythology is very viable, and it seems as if the creative imagination has been able to include Christian ideas quite efficiently while the levels of “Culture” and “Nature” have lost their traditional semantic properties.

But another interpretation takes us in quite another direction: The sociopsychological condition of the young Kaiowá, in other cases, actually dissolves the dualistic structure of the Christian Heaven and Hell and thereby what may be left of the pre-Christian Guarani-understanding of the relationship between “Nature”, “Culture” and “Supernature”. According to many young people that have been interviewed, the feeling of not belonging anywhere, and the lack of possibilities to build a meaningful identity, makes life unbearable, and a kind of cultural apathy emerges. A remarkable consequence is that the quality of the afterlife also becomes irrelevant. They simply do not care. The indifference of living automatically also comes to include death. There are also signs that the duality based anthropology may be abandoned in the same connection. Most explicitly one young girl, who had tried to end her own life, said that she had done it to “stop feeling pain”. The prospect of going to Hell was of no big concern to her. “I won’t feel pain”, she said. “Only my soul will”. Apparently the *body* is identified as the actual person, while the destiny of the soul in the afterlife is of minor importance.

Sad as it is, this perception of life and death may be interpreted as the last resort in the struggle for identity. People who are able to disregard the power of the Christian missions and place themselves outside the framework of Evangelical cosmology, have, in certain ways, conquered a cognitive and social space of their own in which they can define themselves. In that sense they are doing the same as those that uphold a well functioning “Supernature”. In both cases people create references that make it possible for them to classify and identify themselves, at least to a certain degree.

Religion, as always, provides tools for understanding death and structures that makes it possible to communicate about death and dying. The material suggests, however, that some of the young Indians are perfectly able to relate to death without this framework (the sixth and seventh categories). Rather than referring to standard positions and theological dogma, they stick to the hard realities of social life, and contemplate on what they have witnessed themselves. Contrary to the other categories, the examples in categories 6 and 7 are painfully realistic. Other categories are

optimistic or pessimistic, but indeed optimistic or pessimistic within a mythological fantasy. We may say that death and dying, in those cases, are dealt with on a symbolic level while the examples in category 6 and 7 addresses the problems right on. In these cases there is no obvious connection to mythological structures of either Guarani religion or Christianity.

*Suicide - and more symbolically important structures*

The Kaiowás' responses to suicide are very different from what the Catholic (and increasingly Evangelical) dominated larger community would allow. The phenomenon of suicide is itself of secondary importance in this connection while the *discourse* about it and the *symbolic system* attached to it reveals important differences between Kaiowá culture and Brazilian society at large regarding the concept of death. Indeed, the question of suicide possibly indicates some kind of Tupi-Guarani legacy on the part of the Kaiowá, while at the same time testifying to the differences between Kaiowá culture and the Christian, "white" community. The drawings do not inform us directly about suicides, but we know for sure that the issue occupies the minds of young Kaiowá very much. We shall therefore allow a digression from the drawings to some considerations regarding death with relation to suicide as parallels to the symbolic structures we have seen already also appear here. I shall end this section with briefly returning to the drawings.

Anthropologist Eduardo Viviero de Castro has convincingly shown how the Araweté, another Tupi-Guarani people (of the Eastern Amazon), create their ultimate identity through the death of their enemies. The case of the Araweté is extremely complicated. In this connection, however, it is enough to mention the fact that the social cosmology and ritual order symbolically builds the individual by breaking down the barrier between the "interior" and "exterior" person by intimately relating him or her to "the enemy" by means of cannibalism. In effect this means that death and dying serve as key symbols in the very construction of life and living. In short, identity is constructed through ideas of "alterity" with the arena of death and dying as the central context.<sup>9</sup> Considering the fact that the predecessors of the modern Kaiowá also practised cannibalism in ways with certain similarities to the Araweté described by de Viviero de Castro, it may be hypothesised that the Kaiowá identity, at an earlier stage, also was built upon concepts of alterity pertaining to death and dying, and that the same structure still, one way or another, lies at the foundation of Kaiowá identity formation. The question, then, is whether the present phenomenon of suicides can be understood in the light of the identity formation based on a "death-contextualised" alterity?

The suicides are in many ways in direct opposition to the process of becoming whom you are in a death related alterity process with your enemy. The person who commits (or attempts) suicide does not engage in a social exchange with another human being in his or her death process.

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<sup>9</sup> By "alterity" in this connection I mean (in anthropological terms) the relationship between one self and "the other", but (more philosophically) also the exchange of existentially meaningful perspectives between oneself and another person.

The act certainly has social consequences, but it does not directly involve somebody else on a deeper symbolic level. Rather than becoming *somebody* in the cannibalistic process where death is inflicted upon the enemy, the person who commits suicide becomes virtually *nobody* because the process is deprived of relations: No alterity is seen and therefore no identity is produced. A person killing him- or herself is deconstructing identity with no obvious means for regaining it. The suicide becomes an act, perhaps even a ritual, of declassification and deconstruction of the individual. It is a non-social act with socially destabilising or even antisocial effects, even if meaningful and consciously intended by the individual. The suicide is understandable if seen in relation to the sad situation of the Kaiowá, but on a symbolic level it holds no apparent value that makes it a dynamic *social* force. It only contains the mechanisms of further social decline. Thus the suicides cannot be seen as a “natural” social phenomenon if the maintenance of social life is considered a key feature to social organisations. The suicides occur as a consequence of intolerable social and psychological conditions. This is, of course, what could be expected from a traumatised society: When the basic conditions for social exchange and cultural reproduction are diminished (as is the case among the Kaiowá) even the core symbols may gradually fall into oblivion. In the context of Tupi-Guarani ideology, consequently, suicide may be interpreted as something uniquely non-social because it deprives the individual from the kind of relations to other humans that makes him or her truly human. Said in a more direct way, the victims of suicide are in fact dehumanising themselves in the suicidal process by radically detaching themselves from the alterity that makes humans human, thereby annihilating themselves from the realm of humanity and the memory of those left behind: It remains a fact that the families of the people who kill themselves show very modest reactions, and that ordinary everyday life is resumed surprisingly fast after the burial of the person who committed suicide. During funeral rituals the family will mourn the dead, but soon after everything passes and - on the surface - seems to be forgotten. Could this be because the person who killed him- or herself has placed him- or herself outside the realm of humanity by dying this way? Are the burials “rites of extermination” rather than “rites of transition?” Or are they both? In this connection it is vital to remember that the *actual* emotions of those left behind may be suppressed by what is *supposed* to be expressed. It should also be noted that members of the deceased person’s families will try to rationalize the suicide in ways that seem to ignore the deeper causes. People may themselves be unaware of this, but making a fight with one’s girlfriend, a conflict with parents, dissatisfaction with school, or the longing for a new pair of jeans the direct cause of suicide, is a very superficial – albeit – popular explanation. In some cases it is believed that the deceased was the victim of evil spells, but none of these explanations go deeper into the lives and emotions of the unhappy youth who end their own lives. A better understanding of these explanations, however, may reveal suppressed or disguised aspects of how suicides are perceived. At this point we can only suspect that rather superficial explanations are employed because the deeper causes are difficult to com-

prehend, or because society at large needs to rationalize what is taking place in a concrete and rational manner to cope with the situation.

Usually, in non-traumatized cultures, the ritual disposal of the dead initiates the departed individual into a new place; the realm of the dead which, symbolically, almost always is understood to be “somewhere” where the living can not go. The dead are no longer part of society in the way they used to be, but they are indeed members of a larger community that contains the world of the dead as a counterpart to that of the living. This mechanism, however, depends of various kinds of memory. The dead are ritually instituted into another realm, but their presence in society requires a vital memory and imagination on the part of the living. Mortuary rituals very often make this explicit by institutionalising remembrance as a part of the ritual scheme. It is usually the obligation of the living to remember the dead. But what happens to the dead Kaiowá that killed him- or herself? As far as I know there is no emphasis on remembrance in the aftermath of the death.

If this theory is correct, the Kaiowá death rituals could tentatively be characterized as “rites of extermination” that removes the dead from the general cosmology rather than incorporating him or her into a new realm. If this is correct, it is a very special feature which should be seen in close connection to the logic of the suicides themselves. As mentioned above, the suicide seems to be an act that contradicts the general cultural pattern because it avoids alterity in the most radical way. The individual abolishes the very structure that potentially would make him or her a real person, i.e. the alterity with another person. Dying in deliberate isolation means annihilating the “social component” that potentially would make the individual a full person in conjunction with another person. In this way we have two separate ritualized levels that operate for the same purpose: Exterminating the memory about the dead, and thus his or her individuality entirely.

Memory seems to be important, and memory is closely linked with the concept of time. Let us try to put the phenomenon of suicide in focus again and see what happens when time is introduced. As I see it the suicides, on a symbolic level, imply the absence of history (time). The past has led to nothing, the future is invisible and nothing is left but the moment. If there is no cosmology to structure time (which is biologically recognised) into a cultural design, time dissolves and along goes the future. The individual becomes confined to the moment, and no movement back or forth is possible on the mental and emotional level. The only movement that really persists is a kind of being “in” or “out”: Do you want to stay in a world with no meaning, or do you want to escape it? As it is cognitively impossible to live in a meaningless world people try to make a sense out of it, very often in vain, unfortunately. Leaving the meaningless, therefore, may to some seem much more logical: If there is no means for producing structure and meaning, a logical alternative could be to give up and accept that a cognitive and social void has taken over, in this case symbolized by what we may call “the non-alterity”. In their own way the suicides become meaningful because they offer some kind of balance: If there basically are no meaning, no meaningful experience of

time, no experience of history, and no experience of alterity, then there is no life. As a kind of escape route from this condition, the suicide becomes a process of extermination that leads to the only possible harmony, i.e. death.

Some people have explained that they would never kill themselves because they “walk with God” (see above). In this case “God” is not simply a mythological entity that believers have aligned with, and abstaining from taking one’s own life, even if it is miserable, is not only a moral decision. I would rather suggest that “God”, in this connection, refers to “a sense of history” or “a sense of time”. The concept of “God” is imbedded in a distinct mythological historiography that specifically defines the moment as a point in history: The deity is actively doing things in the world, which means that the world is always “becoming”, “evolving”, and “changing”. This structure automatically creates prospects for the future, and thus an entirely different perspective for life compared to what is found among people with no such historiography, i.e. people that do not take such a god into consideration. I propose that it is this *structure* of Christian mythology that may inspire people not to take their own lives, not simply Christian beliefs or social engagement.

In fact, the question of historiography connects directly with one of the most profound religious ideas in the past of the Guarani, the notion of “The Land Without Evil”. The earliest sources relate a religious notion of a wonderful land that could be reached by living humans, a land where they could escape the imminent destruction of the world. Imagining that this place could be found, larger groups of people migrated to new places in an ongoing quest, in effect a huge pilgrimage lead by prophets that encouraged people to dance and fast in order to “lighten their bodies” and become more successful. According to Egon Schaden these imaginations, however, took a turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, when different Guarani speaking groups, including the Kaiowá, retold and reshaped their myths in a way “so that the desire for eternal life without evil became a death-wish” (Sullivan 2002:189). In the words of historian of religions Lawrence E. Sullivan:

Watching their social units unravel, spiritual leaders grew increasingly ignorant of their own tradition and helpless in the face of the new conditions. The Guarani groups used Christian imagery to explain the postponement of the eschaton. Many Guarani groups concluded that no path was open to them. The earth was bloated and old; the cosmos depleted and sterile. The tribe no longer multiplied. They believed that on their path to paradise the weight of imperfection (tekó-achy) had overpowered them, smothering them (Sullivan 2002:189-190).

Comparing the collective distress of the old Guarani to the pain and suffering of the individual of the present, we are able to recognize a basic common pattern: As the time-structure declines, *meaning* is difficult to maintain. As a culture, from a historical point of view, the indians lost perspective and direction and got socially “smothered”, as individuals of today they loose perspective and

direction and become emotionally exhausted. Faced with such a state of anomie (in the Durkheimian sense of the word), leaving the dysfunctional system becomes an option.

Alterity is always processual. Aligning with someone or something is not confined to the moment, but has to take place in time. If there is no sense of history, alterity is very different to create because there is no such thing as “one-shot alterity”. It is always processual, i.e. bound in history. It may be that alterity is created in a second, but unless it expands in time, it will not work as a social or psychological relation. When the Araweté eat their enemies, for instance, it happens at a certain time, but the event lasts into the future because the one who lives on, only lives because of the alterity he built by devouring his enemy.

So, is the religious structure of the Evangelicals the answer? Of course not, but I guess that it is correct to say that the myths of the Christians provide a time-space continuum that takes the individual in less problematic directions in terms of suicide. But is it Christian theology that does the trick? No. It is much more likely that Christian myths are supporting traditional, if suppressed and therefore suspended, Kaiowá concepts of alterity: The phrase “living with God” is a good indication. By “living with God” the individual has developed a kind of alterity with a *mythological being* that structurally substitutes another *person*. Perhaps this interpretation can be taken even further: The god of the Christian religion also appears in the shape of a man which, in Evangelical traditions, is considered a friend, a helper, one that loves you, and so on. The anthropomorphism is massive. Christian mythology maintains that the cosmic creator wishes to meet people as a human being himself (even if divine). So, alterity is in a way built into Christian mythology, and with some adaptations Kaiowá concepts of alterity may find important parallels. Recent research into the cognitive functioning of the brain shows that praying Christians will activate the same centres of their brain as those activated when they address humans they like. In effect the mythological being (God) is cognitively perceived as a human being with whom you have a good relationship.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, bearing the case of the Araweté in mind, the divine human of Christianity (Jesus) is being ritually eaten on a regular basis in order to establish an unbreakable bond. From the Kaiowá perspective this could be interpreted as a sacralization of the traditional alterity-relation that used to be built with a non-divine human (who was eaten). This also seems to be perfectly acceptable within a Tupi-Guarani-Kaiowá framework. It is certainly difficult to prove that a Christian mythological structure can nourish a pre-Christian notion, especially because people will be unaware of it themselves, but the theory seems to be workable.

Returning to the drawings we may suggest that the deconstruction of the individual through suicide has a parallel in the deconstruction of the individual in Hell. If this is correct we may suggest that the pessimistic drawings (the most frequent category) reveal how individuals feel out of place, and outside the structure of belonging, because they are deprived of experiencing alterity.

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<sup>10</sup> Ongoing experimental research carried out by historian of religions Uffe Schiødt, Aarhus University.

Quite contrary the other large group of drawings, those indicating a salvation in Heaven, are expressing a sense of belonging and indeed the experience of alterity-exchange with other saved individuals and a host of divine being, most prominently God and Jesus.

#### *A final indication of pre-Christian religion*

Christian mythology and theology is creeping and crawling with angels, demons and saints, but the kind of ghost we find in the drawings (the fifth category) can hardly match either Evangelical nor Catholic dogmatic imaginations. It seems as if the ghosts are of a different kind, that they have another origin. Interviews with young Kaiowá have revealed a common belief that the soul of the departed (not least victims of suicide), may stay wandering among the living, but this is clearly no ideal situation. The transformation from human to ghost takes place when something goes wrong or is out of order, and measures must be taken to protect people from the potential harm of the ghost. If possible, the ghost should be helped to proceed on its death path so that it may leave its present liminal position. Such notions are quite similar to ghost-beliefs in a larger European context, and the ghost may of course have entered the Kaiowá imagination from Western popular culture. However the ghost might also represent remnants of an indigenous religious tradition, as similar beings are numerous and well known in Guarani mythology. The idea that the soul of the dead enters a black hole, another notion registered through interviews with members of the Kaiowá community, is not seen in the drawings.<sup>11</sup> As already mentioned the ghost in certain ways reminds of the dead in the shape of an angel. The angel, however, is a well classified entity that is *supposed* to be an angel. The ghost is a ghost by mistake.

#### **A few words for conclusion**

It is perfectly clear that the young Indians share a number of basic ideas about death and dying, but it is equally clear that they also differ in opinion. Individuality, age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and education are some of the reasons why we find these differences. Perhaps it is not possible to talk of one single notion of death in the Dourados *aldeia*. Concepts of death are negotiated as well as everything else in the social fabric of these people, and we have addressed a number of ways in which it takes place. Above all we have tried to determine to what extent pre-Christian mythology may have survived as a fragmented structure in the prevailing religious systems. No matter what in fact is determining the concepts of death, the drawings can be seen as arguments in an ongoing social process by which the individual builds his or her fragile identity. The mythologies of death have, as always, everything to do with peoples' lives.

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<sup>11</sup> The notion of the departed soul entering a hole or tunnel is found in many cultures and probably owe as much to the cognitive and neurological functioning of the human brain as to cultural imagination, not least in so called shamanistic traditions (Lewis-Williams 2004:128-129). It is therefore possible, perhaps, to link this idea to some pre-Christian tradition that is no longer entirely visible.

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