

June 2008

Cubeo Hehenawa Religious Thought. Metaphysics of a Northwestern Amazonian People

Robin M. Wright

University of Florida, rowrightrobin@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti>



Part of the [Anthropology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Wright, Robin M. (2008). "Cubeo Hehenawa Religious Thought. Metaphysics of a Northwestern Amazonian People," *Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*: Vol. 6: Iss. 1, Article 9.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.trinity.edu/tipiti/vol6/iss1/9>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Trinity. It has been accepted for inclusion in Tipiti: Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Trinity. For more information, please contact jcostanz@trinity.edu.

BOOK REVIEWS

Cubeo Hebenawa Religious Thought. Metaphysics of a Northwestern Amazonian People. Irving Goldman. Edited by Peter J. Wilson. Afterword by Stephen Hugh-Jones. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004. xlv + 438 pp., glossary, references, index. \$82 (cloth). ISBN 0-231-13021-X. [<http://cup.columbia.edu>]

ROBIN M. WRIGHT
University of Florida

Generations of anthropology students have been introduced to the discipline through Irving Goldman's classic *The Cubeo: Indians of the Northwest Amazon*. Considered a model of Boasian ethnography, the monograph was also very much ahead of its time and has inspired professional anthropologists for its interpretation of the ethos, "style," or what Joanna Overing called the "aesthetics" of indigenous social life. In the present work, Goldman has taken his insightful understanding of Cubeo religion and society to a far deeper level. For ethnologists of the Northwest Amazon, this is an extraordinarily rich and important study for a variety of reasons. One is that Goldman conducted his research among a high-ranking Cubeo sib called the *Hebenawa*, whereas his first monograph was based on his work among the low-ranking sib, the *Babukiwa*. In this region, Tukanoan and Arawak-speaking peoples are organized into societies based on patrilineal descent, patri-sibs and phratries. Each phratry consists of a number of sibs ranked according to the birth order of a mythical set of agnatic ancestors. Each sib was traditionally associated with a ceremonial function (chief, shaman, dancer, servant) important especially for the complex rites of passage in which sacred flutes and trumpets, considered to be the body of ancestral beings, were played. For the Arawak-speaking peoples, these rites and the instruments formed a complex which has been called the "Kuwai religion." The "noble" status of the *Hebenawa* means they are the keepers of the religious traditions, that is, the thinkers who understand the dynamics of cosmology and the principles of cosmogony far more deeply than the lower-ranking sibs. With the *Babukiwa*, Goldman presented a shallow view of Cubeo religious thought but a deep appreciation of the aesthetics of daily life; here, the reader is challenged to understand the metaphysical foundations of Cubeo society and how these shape practice.

A second, extraordinary aspect of his presentation of the Cubeo deities is the hybridity which has taken place between Tukanoan and Arawak religions.

What do I mean by this? Cubeo territory lies in the frontier region between the largely Tukano-speaking peoples of the upper Vaupés River and the predominantly Arawak-speaking peoples of the nearby Aiary River and upper Guainia. The upper Aiary River region is the area where I did fieldwork in the 1970s among Baniwa phratries called *Hobodene*, *Maulieni* and *Walipere-dakenai*. From the ethnohistory of the upper Rio Negro region (Wright 1981, 1992, 2005), we know that in the mid-18th century, the upper Uaupés around the Cuduiary and Querary rivers was inhabited by both the Baniwa and the Barasana (or “Panenoa”). The Cubeo are mentioned for the first time in the written documents of 1852 which refer to the Catholic mission “Santa Cruz de los Cubbeos” at Mitu Falls, further up the Uaupés, which the Cubeo consider to be the place of their creation. Historical records indicate that until the end of the 19th Century, Baniwa phratries (the *Kapitibi-minanai* and *Dzuremene*) lived all along the Querary River, a short distance away from the Cuduiary where the Cubeo had their settlements. Throughout the latter half of the 19th Century, there were intense movements of Cubeo and Baniwa phratries of these rivers to escape the rubber boom. The forest between the upper Cuduiary and Aiary served as a refuge area for both peoples; thus it is not surprising that *Hebenea* and Baniwa religions came to be extremely similar in important respects. The *Hebenea* in fact were originally an Arawak sib that adopted the Tukano language probably during this time of intense movement, and forged a hybrid religion.

One of the fascinating aspects of this hybridity is what happened to the “*Kuwai* religion.” The sacred flutes and trumpets are believed to be the “body” of the child of the Creator and were related to all of the central religious traditions—forms of shamanism (healing, witchcraft, priestly chants), rites of initiation, ritual hierarchy—as well as being the foundation of regional social organization. A comparison of the stories of the *Kuwai*, the creator deities of the *Hebenea*, and the *Hobodene Kuwai* reveals that for the *Hebenea*, the *Hobodene* Creator *Nhiaperikuli* is the *Hebenea Kuwai* and the collective *Kuwaiwa*, the ancestral people who are known to the Barasana and other Tukanoan peoples of the Uaupés as the *he masa* (Hugh-Jones 2004:410). However, this change turns out to be more Arawak, for, exactly like *Nhiaperikuli*, the *Kuwaiwa* are actually three-brothers. There is one major tradition or “myth” about *Kuwai* that the *Hobodene* tell; in contrast, there are several dozen stories they tell of *Nhiaperikuli* and his two brothers, the “Universe People” (see the collection of *Hobodene* and *Walipere-dakenai* stories, ACIRA/FOIRN 1999). In various places in Goldman’s text, there are stories in which it appears that there was a simple trade of *Nhiaperikuli* for *Kuwai*.

Kuwai for the *Hobodene* is the “owner of sicknesses,” that is, it was he who left all fatal illness in the world at his death in primordial times. He also left his knowledge of healing, and it is to him that shamans travel in their cures of humans suffering from lethal sickness today. The *Hobodene* shamans also say that *Nhiaperikuli* has a “tribe of bee-spirit people” called the *Kuwai-inyai*. These

Kuwai-inyai are shamanic bee-spirits who produce powerful honey capable of resuscitating the souls of those who suffer from serious sickness, bringing them back to life.

Another important tradition in this play of similarities and differences is the story of *Mavichikore* who, for the *Hehenewa*, like the *Hobodene* (who call him *Mawerikuli*), is the “first person to die,” that is, he introduced death into the world; but the stories of how each ‘died’ are very different. And more importantly, I think, for the *Hehenewa*, *Mavichikore* introduces the rituals of the masked dances, about which Goldman (and Theodor Koch-Grünberg before him) wrote extensively in his first monograph. The *Hobodene* state clearly that *Mawerikuli* is indeed a Cubeo tradition; and that the *Maulieni*, their younger brother sib, celebrated the masked dances up until the 1940s or so, when evangelicalism was introduced to the Baniwa and Cubeo.

In *Hobodene* traditions, one of the two brothers of *Nhiaperikuli*, is named *Kurwaikaniri*. To many narrators, he is the same as *Mawerikuli*. Among both the *Hobodene* of the Aiary and their kin, the *Wakuenai* of the upper Guainia River (Hill 1993), there are a series of chants and songs related to curing in which *Kurwaikaniri* appears to be the archetype of reversible death, for he is cured from deadly sickness (witchcraft poison) by the tribe of shamanic bee-spirits, the *Kuwai-inyai* (Wright 1998). It seems as though the *Hobodene* adopted the figure of *Mawerikuli* as the “unfortunate” brother who irreversibly died from witchcraft poison, while the original *Kurwaikaniri* figure is the other side of the same figure, that is, reversible death, who is brought back to life by the powerful antidote of the *Kuwai-inyai* bee-spirit people.

Another very intriguing contrast and similarity among the deities occurs on p. 195 where Goldman cites one of his *Hehenewa* interlocutors, who wrote:

In the general tradition of the tribes of Amazonia, it is told that there existed at one time an ancient era of the most powerful spirits and knowledgeable beings than those that are of the present era. That era was known as the “Era of the *Kuwaiwa*” in the Cubeo language. There existed then two classes of *Kuwaiwa*: the seniors, authors of all good things, the juniors of all bad things.

Goldman finds it difficult to reconcile this statement with any of the other attributes of the *Kuwai*. Indeed, he suggests that native scholars have not yet resolved the apparent discrepancies in these traditions. Something similar occurs amongst the *Hobodene* Baniwa, some of whom speak of a primordial era when there existed but one being who was extraordinarily powerful. Nothing much is known of this being, nor of this era except that it was an epoch of “happiness” that came to an end with the felling of a great world tree (Wright 2004; 2009). The *Hobodene* shamans were in agreement amongst themselves that the present world is “a bad place,” a “place of rot” a moribund and sickly place, because of witchcraft and poison. It seems then that the present world is the “world of *Kuwai*” and the “unfortunate” *Mawerikuli*. The contrast of the

world of happiness and the world of sickness corresponds to the Cubeo notion of the primal senior “Era of Kuwaiwa” (for the *Hobodene*, *Nhiaperikuli*) and the present era of juniors. It may be relevant to this question, I think, that both the Cubeo and the Baniwa were evangelized by Sophie Müller around the same time, and she preached to them about a primordial Paradise and a present state of evil, the era of the devil.

Goldman’s ethnography of the Death and Mourning rites, as well as of “Shamans, Jaguars and Thunderers” merit separate essays, as do his final chapters on “power” and “gender”—two key concepts in the native religions of the Northwest Amazon. His analysis of shamanism was helpful and insightful adding immeasurably to the understanding of Arawak shamanism as it became overlaid by Tukanoan belief and practice. The “Great Tree of Nourishment” (p. 331) is none other than what the *Hobodene* call *Kaali ka thadapa*, the Great Tree of the deity *Kaali*, the source of *parika*, the jaguar-tooth collar, and all food (Wright 2009). The first of the *Hebenewa* shamans or *pajes*, is *Djuri* “the singing one” (p. 310) which, for the *Hobodene*, is the elder brother of *Nhiaperikuli*, one of the three main creators named *Dzuliferi*, which, according to Goldman, is “for the Arawakan Baniwa, a name for their *Kuwai* who was a leading *paje*.” Indeed, the story is more complex: while the attribute of the “singing one” is common to both Cubeo and Baniwa shamans, in *Hobodene* cosmology, *Dzuli* and *Kuwai* are opposites sides of the same figure: *Dzuli* is the primordial healer, the “owner of shaman’s snuff”; *Kuwai* is primordial sickness, the “owner of sickness.” As elsewhere in lowland South America, the shaman is the ambiguous healer and giver of sickness, although the shamans insist on saying that they only heal and do not give sickness. During a shaman’s apprenticeship, he or she is trained to recognize the difference between a manifestation of *Dzuli* that is the “deceiver,” who deludes the *paje* into thinking he is a healer, and the true *Dzuli*, who cannot deceive the *paje* and teaches him the correct way of curing. There are many aspects of the deity *Dzuliferi* that identify him as the primordial shaman. Furthermore, during the shaman’s apprenticeship, the novice performs a cure on *Dzuli* at his place in the “Other World,” but it is not really *Dzuli*, it is *Kuwai* who has transformed into his father’s brother “in order to teach the novice,” as the shamans say. These kinds of transformations and mirror appearances in the Other World help us understand why, for the Baniwa *Hobodene*, their principal deity *Nhiaperikuli* has no fixed form but is, as a very powerful shaman told me, “like brilliant light bouncing back and forth in a room full of mirrors.” No better image for the ideal and form-less deity capable of taking on all forms depending on the occasion.

To conclude, it is a great tribute to Goldman’s ethnography that we now can understand and appreciate the complexity and beauty of Cubeo religious beliefs. Further, the hybridity so well documented in this study is certainly found elsewhere amongst both Tukanoan and Arawak-speaking peoples, making the

whole area, as one ethnographer said, “one giant jigsaw puzzle’ (D. Buchillet, personal communication). Perhaps one day, the ethnography and ethnohistory of the Northwest Amazon region will have advanced sufficiently as to be able to produce a comparative and historical study of the religious traditions of the Northwest Amazon. It would be a great tribute to our intellectual ancestors—Irving Goldman, Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff, Berta Ribeiro, and others—who laid the groundwork for this to be done. But Goldman fully recognized, as all Northwest Amazon scholars now do, that native scholars are now writing down the most important reflections about their own traditions. It is ultimately from them that we hope to learn a great deal more about “the ancient times.”

REFERENCES CITED

- ACIRA (Associação das Comunidades Indígenas do Rio Aiari)/(FOIRN)
 Federação das Organizações Indígenas do Rio Negro
 1999 *Waferinaipe Ianbeke: A Sabedoria dos Nossos Antepassados: Histórias dos Hobodene e dos Walipere-dakenai do Rio Aiary*. Coleção Narradores Indígenas do Rio Negro, v. 3. FOIRN: São Gabriel da Cachoeira, AM.
- Hill, Jonathan
 1993 *Keepers of the Sacred Chants: The Poetics of Ritual Power in an Amazonian Society*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press.
- Hugh-Jones, Stephen
 2004 “Afterword.” In *Cubeo Hehenawa Religious Thought*. Irving Goldman, editor, pp. 405-12. New York: Columbia.
- Wright, Robin M
 1981 *The History and Religion of the Baniwa Peoples of the Upper Rio Negro Valley*. Ph.D. Thesis. University Microfilms: Ann Arbor.
 1992 “História Indígena do Noroeste da Amazônia: Questões, Hipóteses, e Perspectivas.” In *História Dos Índios No Brasil*. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha, editor. 1st ed. São Paulo: Companhia Das Letras.
 1998 *Cosmos, Self, and History in Baniwa Religion: For Those Unborn*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press.
 2004 “As Tradições Proféticas e Cosmologias ‘Cristas’ entre os Baniwa.” In *Transformando os Deuses*, vol. 2, pp. 341-376. Campinas: Editora da UNICAMP.
 2005 *Historia Indigena e do Indigenismo no Alto Rio Negro*. Campinas: Mercado de Letras.
 2009 “The Fruit of Knowledge and the Bodies of the Gods: Religious Meanings of Plants Among the Baniwa.” *Journal for the Study of Religion, Nature, and Culture* 3(1):126-159.