

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia

Stephen Hugh-Jones

Excerpt

[More information](#)

PART I

The rites in context

1

Introduction

Despite both the importance and elaborate development of ritual amongst the Indian societies of lowland South America, this topic has received surprisingly little attention in the ethnographic literature. Today, there exists a substantial body of monographic studies of a number of different Amerindian societies, most of which focus upon kinship and social organisation. In addition, Lévi-Strauss (1968, 1970, 1971, 1973) has published a massive cross-cultural study of North and South American Indian mythology unparalleled in the anthropological literature for any other part of the world. Yet to date, there is hardly a single account or analysis of ritual amongst lowland South American Indians that is comparable in scope or detail with those published on African, Asian and Australasian societies. Most accounts of Amerindian rituals form part of a wider, more general, ethnographic study and as such tend to be both highly superficial and often one-sided. To me, this neglect of ritual represents a distortion of the ethnographic reality of South American Indians, at least from a native point of view. On the one hand, one of the most interesting and significant features of these societies is that, unlike some of the anthropologists who study them, they do not see their kinship, marriage and social organisation in isolation from a wider religious and cosmological order. On the other hand, it appears to be through ritual that the elaborate mythological systems of these people acquire their meaning as an active force and organising principle in daily life. This study is intended to redress the balance and to go some way towards filling an ethnographic vacuum. Its focus is upon a particular ritual complex, known in the ethnographic literature as the Yurupary cult, amongst the Barasana Indians, a Tukanoan-speaking group living in the Vaupés region of Colombia.

The rites in context

The Yurupary cult, like other secret men's cults widespread amongst lowland South American Indian groups, centres on the use of sacred musical instruments that women and children are forbidden to see. These cults serve to express and to reinforce a fundamental division between the sexes that permeates almost every aspect of society. The cult embraces all adult men, new members being incorporated through rites of initiation at which they are shown the Yurupary instruments for the first time. Yurupary rites are thus rites of initiation but, as I shall show, they are much more than this. They are also the highest expression of the religious life of the Barasana and their neighbours and as such have no single or simple interpretation. I shall describe and analyse these rites and their associated mythology and, by setting them selectively in their wider ethnographic context, attempt to gain an insight into Barasana society, religion and cosmology more generally. I hope to show that such an approach represents a valid and useful way of studying religion and one which achieves results that would not perhaps be gained from a broader descriptive study.

In addition to being a contribution to ethnography, this study is also an exercise in the interpretation of ritual and myth. I have attempted to integrate structuralist analysis, in particular Lévi-Straussian analysis of myth, with more conventional approaches to the study of religion and cosmology in such a way as to construct a unified system around the religious thought of a single society. I seek to show how one ritual can be analysed with reference to others and to a body of myth, and to show how ritual mediates between mythic thought and social action.

The Yurupary cult

The first account of the Yurupary cult comes from the writings of Alfred Russel Wallace (1889 : 241–2), who travelled up the Vaupés river in 1850. Following him, nearly every traveller, missionary and ethnologist to visit the Vaupés region has described Yurupary rites and recorded Yurupary myths, and a variety of interpretations, some of them highly fanciful, have been offered for the cult.

Until the recent past, the Catholic and Protestant missionaries who worked in the Vaupés believed that the cult of Yurupary was the cult of the Devil and they went to considerable lengths to suppress it. They burned the longhouses, or malocas, which play an integral

Introduction

role in the cult, destroyed feather ornaments and other items of ritual equipment and exposed the instruments to women and children. Some measure of the importance of the cult to the Vaupés Indians is given by the fact that in 1883, when the missionaries exposed sacred Yurupary masks to women and children at a church service, the Indians rose in revolt and temporarily expelled them from the region. Unfortunately, many elements of this intolerant attitude still persist amongst members of both the Catholic and Protestant missions that work in the area today. I would like to believe that this book would enhance respect and understanding for the Indians' religion, but I fear that, unless the missionaries realise the criminal folly of their present way of thinking, it may instead be used to further the process of ethnocide, a fear expressed by the Barasana themselves.

In the ethnographic literature on the Vaupés, there are numerous accounts of Yurupary rituals amongst the different Arawakan and Tukanoan groups living in the region (see appendix 1). Unfortunately, most of these accounts are highly superficial, but at least in terms of gross features it appears that the rites are broadly similar to those of the Barasana. Usually, forest or cultivated fruit is taken into the maloca or longhouse to the sound of the Yurupary instruments, whilst women and children are required either to flee to the forest or gardens or to remain secluded in a screened-off area at the rear of the house. The men play the instruments in the house all day and there follows a dance at which the women are present. Sometimes the men whip each other (and the women), and sometimes ritualised intersexual aggression is expressed. My own study of the Barasana shows that there are two different kinds of Yurupary rite, one much more extended and much more sacred than the other. This more elaborate rite appears to have occurred amongst at least some other Tukanoan groups but has never been properly described before. I shall argue that it would be impossible to understand fully the shorter, less sacred, rites without knowledge of the longer rite upon which they are modelled and for which they act as a preparatory phase in a process of initiation. One of the objects of this book is simply to present, for the first time, an accurate and detailed account of Yurupary rites as a basis for interpretation. What I show in my analysis is that many aspects of the rites are only comprehensible in the light of a careful examination of details of their spatio-temporal structuring, of the dress and age of the participants, and so on.

The rites in context

In addition to these accounts of Yurupary rites, there also exists a large body of myths, recorded from different Indian groups in the Vaupés–Içana region, which tell of a culture hero called Yurupary or of other characters identifiable with him (see appendix 2). A theme common to most of these stories is that of the hero being burned alive on a fire, often as a punishment for an act of cannibalism. From the ashes of this fire springs a paxiuba palm (*Iriartea exorrhiza*) which is subsequently cut up into sections to make the Yurupary instruments. Another theme, equally common, tells how the women stole the Yurupary instruments from the men so that the social order was reversed, the men becoming like women and the women achieving political dominance over the men. Only when the men were able to get back the instruments was the ‘normal’ order restored. In this book, I present a corpus of myths recorded amongst the Barasana and their neighbours in the Pirá-paraná area. Although none of them concerns a character called Yurupary, and although some of them appear superficially to be very different from the classic Yurupary myths, I shall argue that they can be treated as variants and transformations of them. I use these myths as an integral part of my analysis of Barasana Yurupary rites, showing that unless myth is systematically related to rite, many features of the rites remain inexplicable. This reflects the Barasana viewpoint, for most explanations that they give of whole rites or elements within them are couched in terms of myth or make reference to mythic knowledge. Such explanations are not simply ‘charters’ for ritual action; myths are understood at a deeper level, by shamans and ritual specialists, and are used to give meaning and potency to the rites.

Throughout this study, I have tried to make as full use as possible of these published accounts of Yurupary rites and myths. I have done so in part to supplement and extend my own data, particularly in the area of myth where, following Lévi-Strauss, I take the view that one myth can only be properly understood in the light of other variants. In this respect, my study is only the preliminary groundwork for a more thorough and extensive analysis of Yurupary myths which I hope to undertake at a later date. But also, by relating my own data and analysis to that of other writers, I hope that this study will be seen not only as a contribution to the ethnography of the Barasana and their neighbours but also as a contribution to the ethnography of Northwest Amazonia more generally.

The word Yurupary (Iurupari, Jurupari, etc.) comes from the

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-35890-3 - The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia
Stephen Hugh-Jones

Excerpt

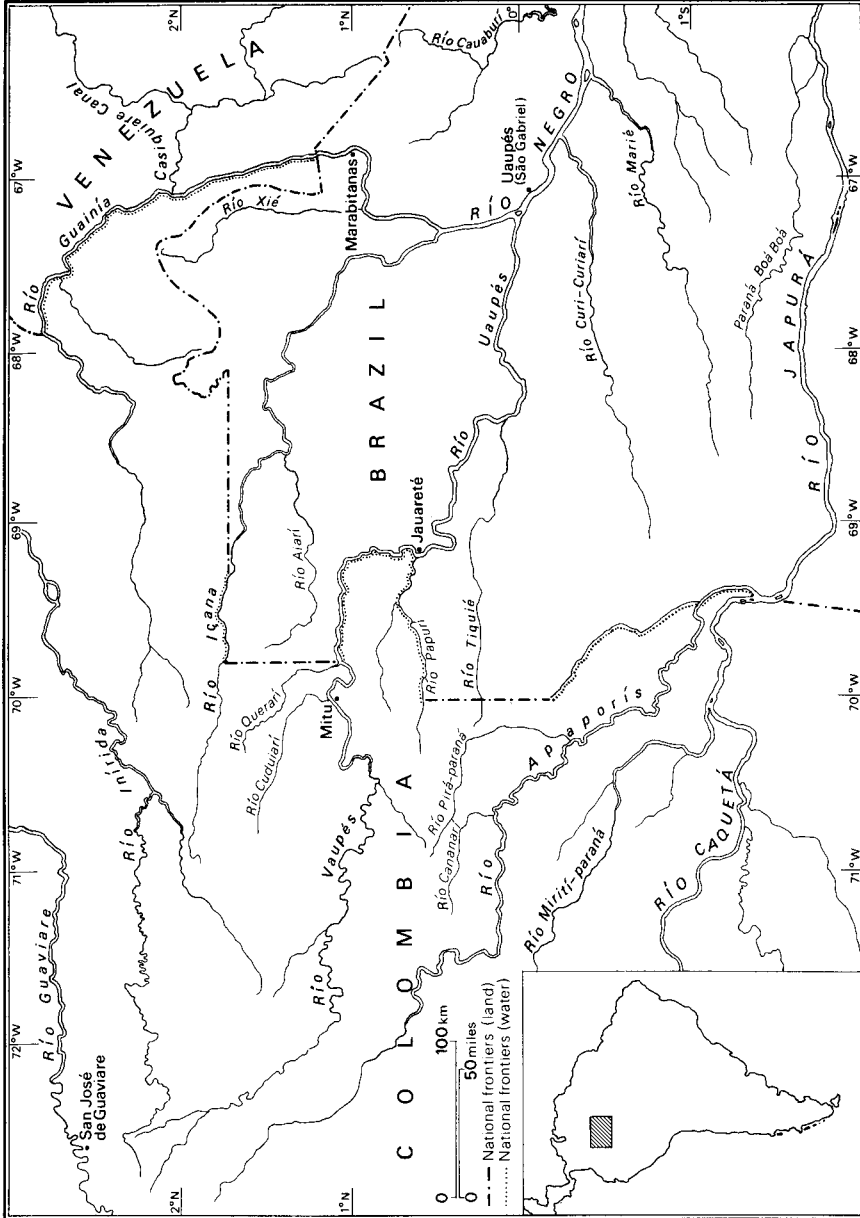
[More information](#)*Introduction*

Tupian *Lingua Geral* or *Nheêngatu*, a *lingua franca* once widely spoken along the *Río Negro* and its affluents. Various writers, principally Schaden (1959 : 149–53) and Goldman (1963 : 192, 255), have objected to the use of this term in anthropological literature, pointing out that it is a term used by Indians only in conversation with outsiders, and often as an apparent explanation for anything taboo, secret or mysterious designed to avoid further questions, and that its meaning is tainted by having been identified with the Christian Devil.

The term is generally used in three related ways: first, to refer to the sacred musical instruments that are taboo to women and children; second, as a blanket name for a variety of mythical characters, many of whom do indeed have much in common with one another, but each of whom has a proper name in the language of the group that tells the myth; and third, when used in phrases such as ‘the Yurupary cult’, to refer both to the instruments and also to the beliefs and practices that go with them. Used in the first sense, I can see no great objection to the term as a label for a cross-cultural phenomenon – it is simply a useful shorthand for the more cumbersome ‘sacred flutes and trumpets’. From the evidence available and as I hope to show, there does seem to be something fundamentally the same about these instruments, the context in which they are used and the beliefs associated with them, over a very wide area of Northwest Amazonia (map 1 shows the rough extent of the area in which the Yurupary cult occurs). In this book, I shall use the term Yurupary in this shorthand sense to mean ‘sacred flutes and trumpets taboo to women’ that are used (a) within a roughly defined geographical area and (b) in the context of initiation into a secret men’s cult of which they form the focus.¹ But I shall use the Barasana term *He* (pronounced like ‘hen’ without the ‘n’) to refer to the Barasana instruments in particular.

Used as a name for a mythical hero, the term is more problematic. To identify the heroes of Yurupary myths with the Christian Devil is an error that cannot be too strongly condemned in the light of the crimes to which it has led. This error was recognised by the Bishop of Amazonas back in 1909 (Costa cit. Schaden 1959 : 151) but his words appear to have gone unheeded. Leaving aside the

¹ In other words I would not, for example, include Tikuna sacred trumpets used in the context of rites of first menstruation, nor the sacred flutes used in the Xingu area of Central Brazil.



Map 1 Northwest Amazonia: the area of the Yurupay cult

Introduction

confusions of missionaries, there still exists a considerable body of myths about someone to whom those who recorded them rightly or wrongly assigned the name Yurupary. These myths are close variants of one another in spite of coming from societies widely separated in space. They are also close variants of other myths concerning characters whose names are given in the original language of the people who told them. All these myths come from a single geographic area and one in which the Indian cultures are, or were, strikingly similar to one another. In view of this, and leaving aside the Devil, I see no great objection to calling these myths Yurupary myths, nor to calling their heroes Yurupary, provided that it is understood that these heroes are not identical and that each has his own proper name. But when I refer to the characters of Barasana myth, I shall use their proper names.

The term *He* is polysemic and the whole of this book could be said to be an extended exploration of its various meanings. In its most restricted sense, the term refers in particular to the sacred flutes and trumpets; more widely, it is perhaps best translated as 'ancestral' and refers to the past, to the spirit world and to the world of myth. At its widest range, it implies a whole conception of the cosmos and of the place of human society within it. The Barasana have an unusually rich and varied corpus of myths which are treated with considerable respect and which form the basis of shamanic knowledge and power. The myths describe the establishment of an ordered cosmos and the creation of human society within it; the human social order is seen as part of this wider order, as timeless and changeless and beyond the immediate control of human agency – it is, or should be, as it was created in the past. The *He* state implies a state of being prior to, and now parallel with, human existence. Originally everything was *He* and the pre-human, man–animal characters of myth are the *He* People from whom human beings developed by a process of transformation. The *He* People and the *He* state, wherein lies the power of creation and order, are thus set in the distant past. But it is also an ever-changeless present that encapsulates human society and which exists as another aspect of reality, another world. When *He* is viewed as the past, human society is in danger of becoming increasingly distant and separated from this wider reality and source of life – the effects of this time must be overcome. As the present, this other world is seen as separated in space; human society is in danger of becoming out of phase with this other reality and spatial

The rites in context

separation must be mediated. The *He* state is known through myth; it is experienced and manipulated through ritual and controlled through spatial and temporal metaphor.

At birth, people leave the *He* state and become human, ontogeny repeating phylogeny; at death, people once again enter the *He* state and become ancestors to be reborn at future births. In life, people enter into involuntary contact with the *He* state through dreaming and illness, through menstruation and childbirth and through the deaths of others. All such contact is uncontrolled and dangerous. It is also possible to enter into voluntary and controlled contact with the *He* state and to experience it directly. The power and position of the shaman lies precisely in his ability to experience and manipulate the *He* state at will; such people are seen as living on two planes of existence simultaneously. Other men can enter into contact with the *He* state through rituals at which the shamans act as mediators. Though all rituals involve such voluntary contact, it is during the rites at which *He* instruments are used that this contact is achieved to its fullest extent. The *He* instruments represent the living dead, the first ancestors of humanity. This regular and controlled contact with the other world, which gives power to control life and which ensures the continuance of society in a healthy and ordered state, is reserved for adult men. Its complement lies in female fertility and powers of reproduction. Women ensure the reproduction of people; men ensure the reproduction of society.

It is impossible for me to summarise adequately the main propositions of Barasana religious thought – I attempt to give some idea of this in the pages that follow. Nor is it really possible to summarise the main themes of my analysis of Barasana *He* rituals. Two points will emerge from my analysis which explain in part why this is so. First, these rites, which are not simply rites of initiation but total religious phenomena, have no simple explanation. Rather they must be explained at a number of different levels and along a number of different axes. Secondly and related to this point, these explanations should ideally be given simultaneously, for they are all there simultaneously in the multidimensional nature of the rites themselves. But because writing involves a linear presentation, they must be taken in sequence. What I have done is to present my analysis in a sequence which is to some extent arbitrary, but to raise at the start a number of interrelated themes which are then explored from a number of different points of view using different aspects of the same set of data.

Introduction

In order to give some idea of my method of analysis and of the different themes that I explore within it, I shall briefly summarise the contents of the different chapters of this book and the way in which they are interrelated.

The book is divided into five parts together with a preface and appendixes. Part I is intended to set Barasana *He* rites in their wider ethnographic and theoretical context. Parts II and V contain the basic data upon which the argument is based. I found that to attempt to describe and analyse the rites at the same time was cumbersome and the result unreadable. I have therefore tried to keep description and analysis separate. In part II, the rites are described in detail but commentary and explanation are kept to a minimum. In part V, a number of myths are presented, again without commentary or explanation. In part III, the rites described in part II are analysed and explained. The analysis draws heavily upon the myths and also upon explanatory data that is introduced at this point. In order to fully understand the argument, frequent cross-reference must be made to both part II and to part V. The fact that the myths are given as an extended appendix at the end does not in any way mean that they are considered less important. Part IV, the conclusion, is divided into two sections: the first relates my description and analysis of Barasana Yurupary rites to those of other writers on the Vaupés area and attempts to draw together some of the major propositions of Barasana religious thought; the second is devoted to a discussion of anthropological approaches to myth and ritual in terms of some of the general points that emerge from my analysis.

Chapter 2 provides a brief ethnographic sketch of Indian society in the Pirá-paraná region and places *He* rites in the context of other rituals and of Barasana society at large. It is not intended as a balanced or exhaustive account of Barasana society. Chapter 3 describes one kind of *He* rite, called Fruit House, and sets it in the context of an initiatory process that culminates in another kind of rite, called *He* House, described in chapter 4. Fruit House, it is argued, reproduces the structure of *He* House in a reduced and attenuated form. Chapter 5 focusses upon the different categories of actors that take part in the rites. The significance of the maloca as ritual space is discussed in relation to the different age-grades of the participants and it is argued that the microstructure of the maloca with its people reproduces the macrostructure of society and the cosmos. The role of the shaman as mediator is examined and the theme of open and closed bodily