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Lea, Vanessa

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COMMENT ON GERMAN DZIEBEL

Vanessa Lea
UNICAMP
São Paulo
Brazil

Email: vanessa.r.lea@gmail.com

Abstract: *Lea focuses on Dziebel's analysis of the section on South America, composed of two chapters that deal with the Northern Jê (Gê) societies, some displaying Omaha features, others Crow, or a mixture of the two. In his review article, Dziebel argues enthusiastically about the merits of large kinship data bases. However, there is not even consensus among social anthropologists concerning the characterization of the Northern Jê peoples. Dziebel is very critical of the book edited by Trautman and Whiteley, but he naively takes T. Turner's model of societal reproduction at face value, despite it not even dealing directly with the kinship terminology. The other contributor, Marcela Coelho de Souza, sums up her position affirming that kinship is made, not given. Both of these authors dismiss Lea's alternative analysis of the Mẽbêngôkre as a house-based matrilineal society, but Dziebel sidesteps this issue.*

It is challenging to comment on an article that reviews a book that I could have been tempted to review. As a researcher of a Northern Jê people since the late 1970s, grappling with the mysteries of the Crow-Omaha typology for decades, the book provided both a wealth of approaches and of data spanning a wide panorama of societies around the world and through time. Given the book's didactic intentions, it was surprising to find English terms like cousin or uncle translated into other languages (chapter one), instead of despatching them to the rubbish basket of ethnocentrism, making transition to the standard abbreviations: MB, FZD, etc., more difficult to the student of social anthropology, speaking from personal experience. In line with my competence, considerations are restricted to the section on South America, composed of two chapters that deal with the Jê (Gê).

Dziebel takes us on a dizzying journey across continents and across millennia, accompanying the contributors to the book. I prefer to focus on the synchronic level that produces a dazzling complexity which is challenging enough to try and apprehend, the triadic terms being a case in point (see Lea 2004). Formal friendship has been much written about in the N. Jê literature, but its marital implications had been ignored (Lea 1995).

I agree with Dziebel (MS:21) concerning the lamentable lack of collaboration between historical linguists and social anthropologists at the level of etymology and semantics. A good start concerning the Jê is a recent doctoral thesis in Portuguese by a Russian linguist on Proto-Macro-Jê (see Andrey Nikulin 2020). There is also the question of the lack of archaeological research

in the Jê area (something not mentioned by Dzielbel). Some of the Northern Jê were reputed to have large villages in the nineteenth century (of around a thousand people) prior to the consolidation of the “neo-Brazilian” colonist presence in the region, a question that resonates with various of the contributors to the book.

It is noteworthy Dzielbel’s statement, echoing some of the contributors to the book, that the notion of a definable Crow-Omaha type remains debateable, as my teacher Peter Rivière at Oxford University told me decades ago. The debate over the very existence of a Crow-Omaha type is significant to my research precisely because it deals with what has been described as an Omaha terminology (a feature usually associated with patrilineality) in a matrilineal society, with the patrilineal vicarious transmission of formal friends, where emically conceived Houses or matri-houses share much in common with the Lévi-Straussian *sociétés à maisons*, except for the fact that they are not cognatic and are exogamous (for more details see Lea 1995, 2020). There is still a tendency in the literature to forget that matrilineality does not preclude the recognition of a cognatic kindred.

Dzielbel is scathing about the efforts of some of the writers, but he does not question Terence Turner’s argument. This is surprising because Turner reduces the terminology to a grid for regenerating the female infrastructure to support the communal male superstructure, in his customary Marxian-Parsonian language mixed with cybernetics. Turner was a fine orator who produced intelligent and convincing logical arguments that fit snugly together like a jigsaw puzzle. The only problem is that they do not fit the data on the ground. Turner’s chapter evokes Charlie Chaplin’s film *Modern Times* (1936), with the individual circulating around the cogs of a machine. His analysis of the myth of the origin of fire (published posthumously, 2017) left me with the same impression (Lea 2019).

My surname is a mere three letter word, but I could only be heard through the voice of Coelho de Souza who is a radical exponent of the idea that kinship is made not given. Despite the Kisêjêdê (Suyá) having named houses, Coelho de Souza, whilst praising my recourse to onomastics to make sense of the kinship terminology, parting from female name transmission, states that: “We do not have to agree with Lea that the Kayapó have corporate descent units to consider this a possible explanation” (2012:212). What Coelho de Souza is referring to are the Houses/matri-houses discussed in the literature as exogamous segments, with no one delving deeper into what is to be understood by that.

In the Kayapó context (Mêbêngôkre/Mêtyktire) to talk of *the* name-giver (as Dzielbel seems to envisage) is a paleolithic simplification of a practice that involves a series of name-givers, eponyms, name-giver-cum-eponyms, name-receivers, etc., with a logic somewhat different to the Timbira with their name-sets and reclassification of individuals, allowing ego’s realignment with his/her name-giver’s perspective (see Lea 1992, 1997, 2006, 2012).

Turner dispatched my findings, along with those of Lowie & Nimuendajú, in a mere five words (emphasized in the following quotation):

Postmarital residence is uniformly matri-uxorilocal. Although some ethnographers have taken this to imply that the Kayapó possess some form of matrilineal descent that serves as the basis of the matri-uxorilocal household structure, *such is not the case* (see Lea 1995b; Lowie with Nimuendajú 1943). 2012: 224-226 (emphasis added).

Having been airbrushed out of the story, Dzielbel, like Trautman & Whiteley, lost the opportunity to debate divergent interpretations of the Mêbêngôkre. Turner continued to rule the roost despite not having interested himself in the question of terminology. There were no genealogical data in his thesis (1966), and the kinship terms supplied in its appendix were much the same as those given by Simone Dreyfus, whose research Turner ignored after criticizing her book in a review (1965:149-150).

Dziebel proposes equating kinship with consubstantiality. But what is substance? Substance has been a red-herring in Amazonia and, among peoples like the Northern Jê (Gê), interpreted as the *sine qua non* of kinship, its essence, based on the sharing of food prohibitions among the members of the elementary family (more details in Lea 2021). This could be interpreted not as spiritual kinship, as Rivière suggested (1974) when analysing the practice of couvade (part of the same phenomenon), but as a way of constructing paternity, by means of performing “family.”

Contrary to the contributors to the book, Dziebel suggests that Crow-Omaha features in terminologies may have developed out of alternate generation identification with self-reciprocal terms. There are such systems in Amazonia, such as the Pano speakers — Marubo, Kaxinawá, etc., but in the Kayapó case male ego ideally replicates his name in generation -1, his adjacent generation.

Dziebel laments the language barrier that decreases the circulation of Russian research. The same could be said of publications in Portuguese. He also notes that there are few new voices taking part in this debate, so it is worth pointing out that since the publication of Trautman & Whiteley’s book there have been two dissertations written on Jê matrimonial alliances (Paulino 2016; Ramires 2015), besides an article that came out in 2011 (see Giralдин 2011). Both the 2012 book and Dziebel’s article will hopefully rekindle interest in Crow-Omaha terminologies, having demonstrated that much research remains to be done to better understand both how they developed over time and how diversely they operate among living peoples who continue to employ their characteristic skewed crossness.

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