



MEDITATION

An ongoing conversation

Terry Turner and the Kayapo-Mebêngôkre

Cesar GORDON, *Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro*

Comment on Turner, Terence. 2017. “Beauty and the beast: The fearful symmetry of the jaguar and other natural beings in Kayapo ritual and myth.” *HAU: Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 7 (2): 51–70.

Commenting on Terry Turner’s paper, “Beauty and the beast,” almost two years after his passing, is both an intellectual and an existential task. It brings back memories. I will always remember the pleasant days in the late 1990s when he came to Rio de Janeiro and we would walk through the Botanical Garden having lively talks about the Kayapo-Mebêngôkre. His vast ethnographic knowledge and experience, as well as his passionate interest and commitment to the Kayapo and the indigenous peoples of Amazonia were a real inspiration to every young anthropologist, as I was at the time. In those years, I had just started my own research among the Xikrin people, who, like the Kayapo, are another subgroup of the large Mebêngôkre-speaking community. Reading Turner’s paper today and reflecting on his ethnographic analysis and reasoning is almost like sustaining that conversation. I would thus like to offer my commentary as a humble homage to Turner. In spite of this more or less personal justification, I hope that my discussion here has a broad and general interest to readers.

The article is a crystallization of Terry Turner’s long and prolific work on the Kayapo, which spans more than fifty years of research, much of which was spent in Kayapo villages in Brazil. The text reflects the work of a mature anthropologist, recuperating many of the main themes of his ethnography, always securely fastened to their corresponding analytical tools. The starting point is an understanding of Kayapo society as a system for the production and reproduction of an



asymmetrical pattern that originates in the exploitation of the young by the elders, which results in a differential appropriation of social value, expressed in the native concept of *mêch*, or “beauty,” as Turner translates it.

Turner’s great merit was constructing a model that sought to integrate all aspects of Kayapo social life, analyzing them through a series of distinct structural levels that are dialectically articulated by successive encompassments: the lower (domestic) level of material production and the social production of persons; the intermediate level of communal institutions (age sets and men’s house); and the upper level of the ceremonial system, which transcends the tensions of the preceding levels and constitutes a mechanism for the patterning and reproduction of a total asymmetrical structure. The model is dynamic and takes into account the dimensions of both time and space, as can be discerned from the descriptions of the life cycle, which is where the author locates the tensions that traverse the structural levels. A prime example is the tension between the uxorilocal residence rule and the emphasis on paternity as a criterion for access to collective adult life.

The result of the Kayapo sociological machinery is the “beautiful” person, an embodiment of a complex chain of social relations. Although it is the ultimate goal of Kayapo productive efforts, beauty is unequally distributed, and society hence remains divided into two categories of persons: beautiful (*me mêch*) and common (*me kakrit*). Turner tended to minimize the importance of this difference in terms of its political and economic effects. However, as I showed in previous work (Gordon 2010), the distinction does indeed have ramifications for political and economic life, being closely associated with agency or social power. This is because the same social relations that compete in the constitution of beauty (such as an extended and extensive kindred) also compete in the maintenance of prominent political positions and economic wealth.

Furthermore, there is an even more important aspect that has completely escaped Turner’s analysis. I am referring to the more complete understanding of the notion of *mêch* and its fundamental articulation with the problem of *differentiation*, which, for the Mebêngôkre, poses as an immense philosophical and existential problem. As I have shown elsewhere (Gordon 2016), at the core of the definition of *mêch* is the idea that social order should rest on a coefficient of difference, which reveals the totemic bias of Mebêngôkre society. Hierarchical or asymmetrical differences can only be adequately understood when they are articulated to totemic-type differences.

Returning to the model, Turner recognizes yet another level—which we might call “cosmic,” “natural,” or “extrasocial”—which has always had a somewhat problematic articulation with the other levels, generating a sort of torsion or chiasma in the model, and perhaps indicating a limitation to his theoretical toolkit. Animals, for instance, appear as the infrasocial limit of humanity but, at the same time, as its suprasocial limit, setting the parameters within which the human condition transits. The problem is that both these poles converge at the same point, in a “fearful symmetry of beauty and bestiality.” The figure of the jaguar synthesizes this ambivalence and can emerge in a violent form precisely at the point that Turner expects to find the vertex of the process of human socialization. How are we to explain this?

It is necessary to return to the ethnographic ground and to attempt a description that remains closer to the native idiom, mobilizing the Mebêngôkre notions of

aybanh (alienation, madness), *karon* (anima, image, or double), *kamrô* (blood), *~in* and *'i* (flesh and bones, or corporality). In “Beauty and the beast,” the focus of the analysis shifts to Kayapo conceptions of the relations between “humans and non-humans,” which is traditionally the weakest point in Turner’s model. This focus enables him to refine his interpretation of these relations as seen by the Kayapo and, at the same time, to resume his criticism of the analytical models of animism and perspectivism, as formulated by Philippe Descola and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, respectively. Turner had begun to develop this criticism in an earlier article (Turner 2009), developing his lifelong intellectual discomfort with Claude Lévi-Strauss’ structuralism. Unlike Marshall Sahlins, another great American anthropologist of his generation who was trained in the Marxist tradition of Leslie White but ultimately found his theoretical home in structuralism, Turner never abandoned his Marxist roots. The concept of “production” therefore remained a mainstay of his analyses of the Kayapo, taking precedence over the concepts of “exchange” or of “ontological predation,” associated with their structuralist roots.

In this vein, Turner offers a number of interesting considerations, ultimately recognizing that a Kayapo “animism” exists but arguing that it involves complex notions of “anima” and “corporality,” which are less evocative of perspectivism, particularly in its schematic variant (Viveiros de Castro 2004), and more reminiscent of Aristotelian notions of “form” (*eidos*) and “matter” (*hylé*). The articulation of the formal–agentive dimension of the *karon* and its material substrate (flesh, blood, and bones) does indeed indicate that the perspectivist model needs to be calibrated to the specificities of Mebêngôkre-speaking people and those of other members of the Gê family. However, some of these issues had already been addressed in a clearer, more general fashion by authors such as Carlos Fausto (2007).

On the other hand, the relations between “beauty” and “violence” that Turner points to could have been analyzed further had the author investigated certain cosmological considerations of the Kayapo. I am thinking specifically of the origin myths of feather ornaments and ceremonial beauty, in which the figure of the “great bird” (Àkti), the celestial equivalent of the jaguar and an epitome of “ferocity” (àkrê), is destroyed by the pair of “civilizing” brothers, thereby instating a new cosmic order. This myth is important for illustrating a nonperspectivist inflection to Mebêngôkre thought, which would strengthen Turner’s argument insofar as it does not refer to a presubjective and preobjective state, as Viveiros de Castro (2004) would predict but, on the contrary, to a complete *inversion* of the subject–object relation that is processed by humans through the controlled possession of violence and aggressive capacities (àkrê). This narrative complements the archetypal myth of the theft of the fire of the jaguar (Turner 2017) and establishes the need to deal with the *sacrificial* logic of the Kayapo universe, which remains eclipsed by the model of production. This helps us to understand a further lacuna in Turner’s analysis: the Kayapo recognize that beauty *originates* in violence and hence may eventually return to it.

However, these are only some considerations raised by this dense article. I would like to conclude by saying that “Beauty and the beast” is proof that Terry Turner’s work remains alive and vibrant, drawing on current debates in the field of native Amazonian anthropology and providing a wealth of anthropological insights.

(Translated by Luiz Antonio Lino da Costa)

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Cesar GORDON is Associate Professor at the Institute of Philosophy and Social Sciences, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRJ), Department of Cultural Anthropology. He has been working with the Xikrin-Mebêngôkre since 1998 and he has been publishing articles and chapters covering socioeconomic changes, ritual practices, monetization, history, mimetic aspects of interethnic relations. He is the author of the book *Economia Selvagem: Ritual e Mercadoria entre os Xikrin-Mebengokre* (2006), and co-editor of *Xikrin: uma coleção etnográfica* (2011). He was a visiting professor in France, at the Laboratoire d'Anthropologie Social, Collège de France, Paris.

Cesar Gordon
Department of Cultural Anthropology
Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Sociais
Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro (IFCS-UFRJ)
Rio de Janeiro, RJ, Brazil
cesargordon@ufrj.br