

PROJECTIONS OF GÊ SOCIAL STRUCTURE IN THE ROCK ART OF NORTHERN MINAS GERAIS, BRAZIL: AN HYPOTHESIS*

Ruth Gruhn**

RESUMO

O Grupo Gê, composto por diferentes tribos que vivem no sul e centro do interior do Brasil, é famoso na Literatura Antropológica por suas ideologias tendo, contudo, uma estrutura econômica e tecnológica simples baseada na caça, coleta e horticultura.

Observa-se: as formas circulares concêntricas, na divisão do espaço territorial, obedecendo uma seqüência de significado social e de atividades cerimoniais e também, a variedade de desenhos geométricos na ornamentação dos corpos, utensílios etc., que são associados à hierarquia social, idade, ritos cerimoniais etc.

Arqueólogos e etnólogos têm a possibilidade de comparar tais desenhos e pinturas atuais com desenhos e pinturas rupestres pré-históricas, facilitando uma análise e interpretação mais acurada desses.

INTRODUCTION

In making an archeological reconnaissance of rockshelters in the limestone areas of northern Minas Gerais in November, 1976, my husband Alan Bryan and I came upon one of the most spectacular displays of pictographic rock art known to us in the New World. Almost every overhang of any size has at least one panel of pictographs. Several large rockshelters feature walls covered with dozens of designs in brilliant polychrome combinations of red, yellow, black and white. The designs include anthropomorphic, zoomorphic and celestial figures, and also a wide

variety of geometric forms. Local people called our attention to circular designs which they had interpreted, *a la* von Daniken, as space vehicles or projections of planetary systems. Having in hand a copy of Roberto Da Matta's (1976) monograph on the Gê-speaking Apinayé, in which are published drawings by Apinayé informants of their concept of the physical layout of their village, it was immediately apparent that the circular designs in the rock art were likely visual representations of the traditional circular arrangement of Gê settlements. Back at the Museu Nacional in Rio de Janeiro, Da Matta kindly showed us other unpublished drawings made by Apinayé informants. Included were body paint designs specific to Apinayé ceremonial groups, and virtually identical to geometric forms in the Minas Gerais rock art. Subsequent search in the ethnographic literature on Gê-speaking peoples has produced more correspondences.

Prehistoric rock art has been notoriously difficult to interpret in cultural terms. While scenes of economic, social or ritual activities like hunting or dancing are fairly straightforward in interpretation, designs with ideological content are not because the symbolic referents in the thought-world of extinct nonliterate peoples are unknown. Gê-speaking peoples of interior Brazil, however, are not yet extinct, and their ideology has become famous in the anthropological literature.

* Anthropological Papers in Memory of Earl H. Swanson, Jr. Edited by L.B. Harten, C.N. Warren and D.R. Tuohy. Special Publication of The Idaho State Museum of Natural History, Pocatello, 1980.

** Da University of Alberta.

AN OUTLINE OF GÊ SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND IDEOLOGY

As a number of recent dissertations are at present unpublished (T.S. Turner, 1966; J.B. Turner, 1967; Lave, 1967; Seeger, 1974). Gê-speaking groups of interior Brazil are best known to the English-speaking anthropological world through the publications of Nimuendaju (1937, 1938, 1939, 1942, 1946) on the Apinayé, the Eastern Timbira, and the Sherente; Henry (1941) on the Kaingang; Levi-Strauss (1961) on the Bororo, and Maybury-Lewis (1965, 1967) on the Sherente and the Shavante. With a relatively simple economy and technology based primarily on hunting, collecting and limited horticulture, these peoples of south and central interior Brazil have nevertheless evolved complex social structures closely integrated with balanced cosmological systems.

A common feature of the ideologies of Gê-speaking groups is a spatial concept to the cosmos as a series of concentric circles featuring dual diametric opposites. The concept is thoroughly described for the Northern Kayapó by J.B. Turner (1967), for the Suyá by Seeger (1977) and for the Apinayé by Da Matta (1976). Turner (page 124) and Seeger (Fig. 3) provide diagrams of the universe of concentric spheres. The fact that this basic concept is not simply a formal construction by the anthropologist is shown by a similar diagram which was drawn by one of Da Matta's Apinayé informants (Da Matta, 1967: Fig. 7).

The focus of the universe of concentric spheres is the village, itself composed of concentric units with highly significant cosmological and social connotations. As Turner presents the Northern Kayapó model and Seeger the Suyá model, the center of the village plaza is sacred ground. It is the area of ceremonial and social affairs, the male domain, where the men congregate, often in one or two special men's houses. The periphery of the village, where the matrilineal dwellings are situated, is in contrast profane, the domain of the women and domestic affairs. The area of wasteland behind the houses is a sacred zone, where the Northern Kayapó bury their dead and perform certain rituals. Beyond is the profane sphere of the gardens, then the forest. Spheres far distant may be believed to include spirits, monsters and alien peoples. Da Matta

(1976) likewise found a marked symbolic and social contrast between the center and the peripheries of the Apinayé village. These concepts are illustrated in Figs. 1 and 2.

In the Gê universe, contrasting entities are characteristically complementary in nature. A fundamental concept of complementary dualism is expressed in the social structure as well as in myth and cosmology. Gê-speaking communities are commonly divided into moiety units. Indeed, in some Gê-speaking societies such as the Canella or Ramkokamekra (Nimuendaju, 1937, 1938, 1946) the principle of moiety division in terms of complementary distribution is extended to serve as the basis of at least four interlocking sets of moieties. Moiety membership is characteristically assigned by the bestowal of special names by a distant kinsman or non-relative. Moiety units may be linked with diverse and contrasting elements of the natural and supernatural world in the cosmology of Gê-speaking peoples; thus with the Canella, one Rainy Season moiety (Kamakra) is linked with the sun, the color red, the day, and so on, while the opposite Rainy Season moiety (Atumakra) is linked with the moon, the color black, and the night.

In addition to moieties, many Gê societies feature age sets for males. The age sets usually involve extended and complex rituals of initiation for the youths entering the first age grade. As an example, such ritual is described in detail for the Eastern Timbira by Nimuendaju (1946:170-201).

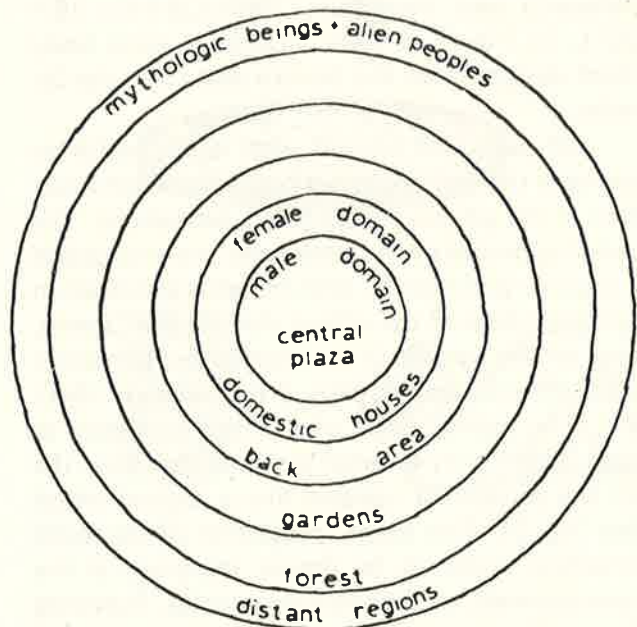


Figure 1 - Generalized plan of the Gê cosmos.

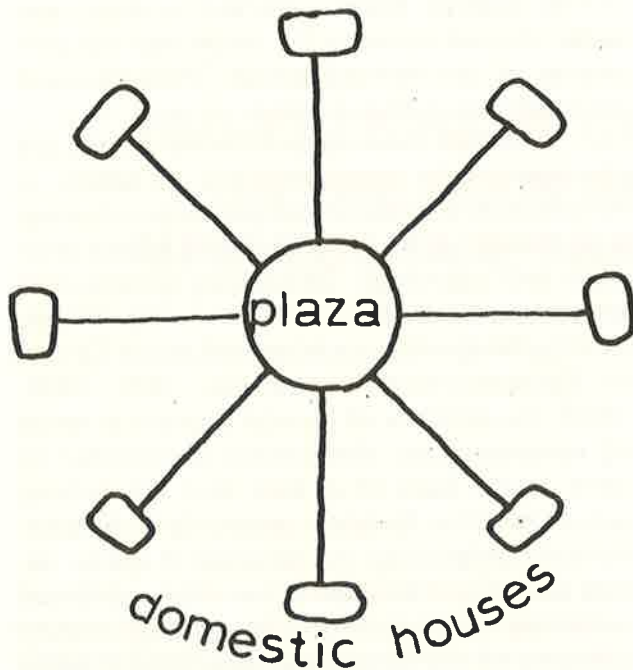


Figure 2 — Schematic plan of traditional Gê settlement.

Among the Gê-speaking peoples, the various moiety units, ceremonial associations and age sets constitute social subgroups within the community which are often distinguished by particular insignia: special ornaments and special body paint designs. Special painted insignia of Bororo "clans" (actually name groups, not unilineal descent groups, according to Crocker, 1977) are well illustrated in the Enciclopedia Bororo (Albisetti and Venturelli, 1968:139-148; 197-201). In Fig. 3, I have illustrated some body paint designs from the Bororo and from the Canella.

Of particular interest with regard to Gê societies is the spatial projection of the social structure in the physical layout of a settlement. The dwelling houses of the settlement are arranged in a circle or a semicircle, with moieties localized on opposing sides of the village. Among the Canella, each of the age sets is positioned in a particular place in the central plaza (Nimuendaju, 1946: 91). The central plaza of a village connects to each dwelling by a radial path, so that from the air the settlement appears like a spoked wheel (see Fig. 2). This spatial projection of the social structure seems to be deeply ingrained in the consciousness of Gê-speaking peoples. Surviving Apinayé have long resided neoBrazilian style in a

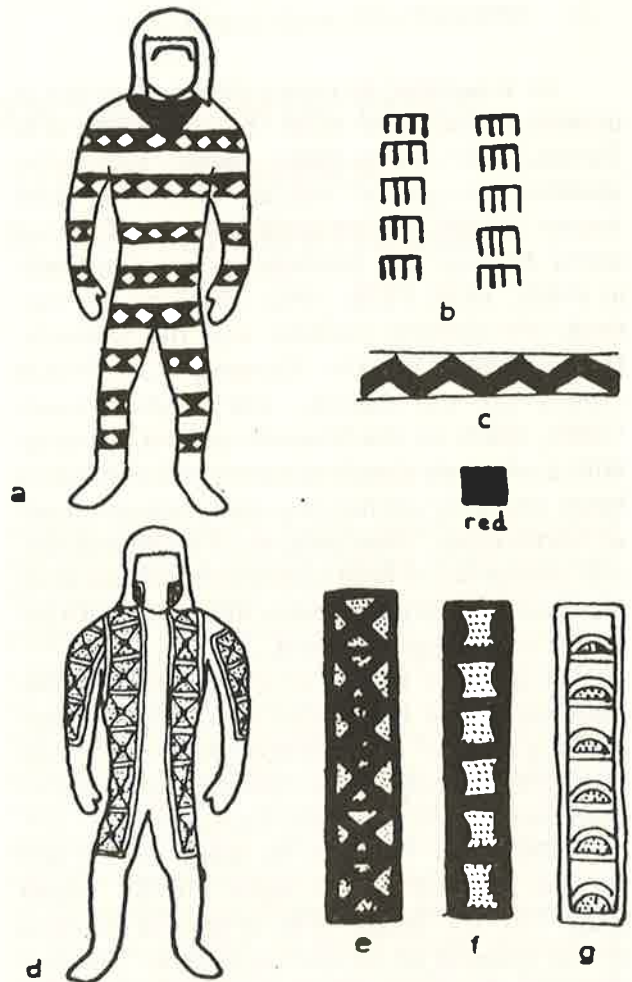


Figure 3 — Body paint designs of Gê tribes, specific to particular social groups within the community. a-c, Bororo, redrawn from Albisetti and Venturelli 1962: pp. 145, 141; d-g, Canella, drawn from plate 33 in Nimuendaju, 1946.

settlement with a rectangular layout of structures, but when asked by Da Matta to draw their concept of the community layout, informants produced plans of a traditional circular Gê village (Da Matta, 1976: Figs. 4-6).

Given the occurrence of distinctive features of social structure and ideology among various Gê-speaking peoples now widely dispersed in southern and central Brazil, it is likely that the characteristic patterns of Gê society are ancient. It is hypothesized that rock art in caves and rock-shelters in northern Minas Gerais may present material evidence for the existence of characteristic features of Gê social structure and ideology in prehistoric times.

ROCK ART OF NORTHERN MINAS GERAIS

The major rockshelters surveyed in 1976 were situated in an area of limestone outcrops in a locality known as Janelão, on the west side of the São Francisco river valley about 35km north of the town of Januaria. Other shelters with rock art are known from the area of Varzealandia, around 80km south-southwest of Januaria. The pictograph panels are situated on the rear walls of shallow shelters and on side walls near the mouth of deep shelters (those which open into solution caverns). In some instances the pictographs are far above human reach. In one large Janelão rockshelter stalagmite remnants adjacent to the wall were scaled to place the pictographs over 10 meters above the floor of the shelter. The pictograph panels cover very extensive areas on the walls of the shelters: in some cases dozens of separate elements can be distinguished. The larger pictograph panels present evidence of superposition and the repeated application of designs over a long period of time.

The pictograph designs are characteristically polychrome. Combinations of red and yellow are most frequent, but black and white may also occur in the designs. Life forms — humanoid, mammal, reptile or bird — are common, but most of the elements are geometric in form.

Pictograph designs of spoked circles, circles with a series of small circles or projections on the peripheries, and circles with linear extensions are illustrated in Fig. 4. Such designs may be compared with drawings of the traditional Gê village layout. It is suggested, then, that such circular designs in the prehistoric rock art are visual projections of Gê settlement layouts.

A variety of linear geometric designs from rockshelter pictographic panels are illustrated in Fig. 5. These design elements may be compared with body paint designs and ornamental designs of various Gê groups. In Gê societies specific ornamental designs are associated with specific social groups: moieties, name groups, age sets and ceremonial associations. It may be suggested, then, that geometric elements in the prehistoric rock art may represent insignia associated with specific social groups, and that the prehistoric

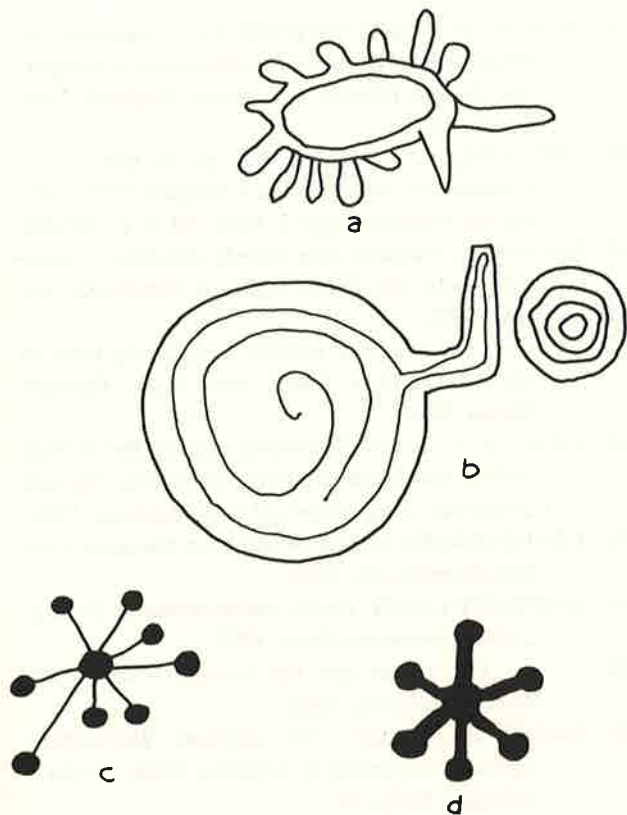


Figure 4 — Sketches of pictographs of circular form from various northern Minas Gerais rockshelters. Not to scale.

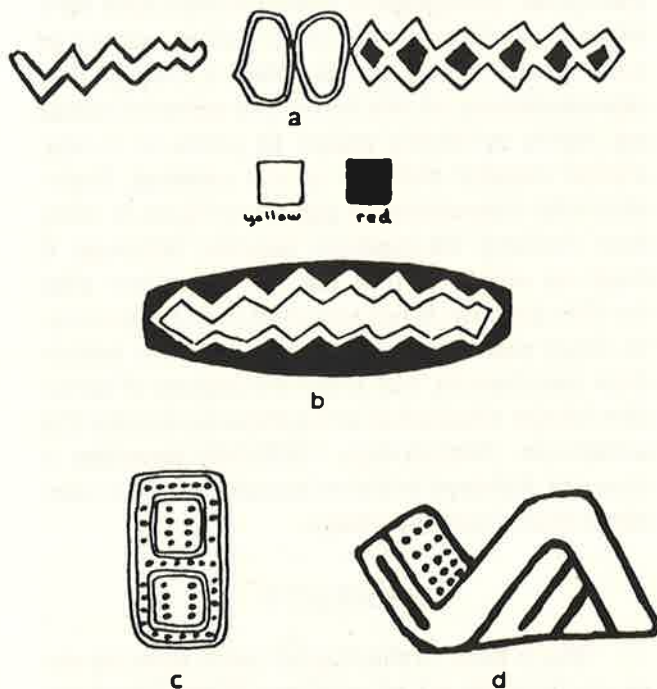


Figure 5 — Sketches of pictographs of geometric form from various northern Minas Gerais rockshelters. Not to scale.

cultures featured sets of contrasting and complementary ideological and social entities.

On the basis of the ethnographic data, I am proposing the hypothesis that design elements symbolic of Gê social structure occur in prehistoric rock art in northern Minas Gerais. For what purpose was this painting on rock walls? I have found no evidence for rock art in the ethnographic literature on Gê-speaking peoples aside from a very brief reference by Levi-Strauss (1961:210) to the former practice of pictograph painting by the Bororo. Much farther afield from Gê territory, Reichel-Dolmatoff (1967, 1971) has been able to interpret rock paintings in the Vaupes area of the upper Amazon basin as the efforts of shamans to win game from supernatural beings that control animal populations. Most of the Vaupes paintings, however, appear to be representations of animals. The preponderance of geometric elements in the rock art of the Janelão region of northern Minas Gerais is not explained by Reichel-Dolmatoff's study.

I suggest the possibility that the representation of traditional symbolic design elements on rockshelter walls in northern Minas Gerais may be related to use of rockshelters as sites of seclusion and instruction of youths during age set initiation rituals. As with the rock art of Australian aborigines, pictographic elements may have served as symbols to reinforce the values associated with specific social groups. Also, it may be that representations of life forms and celestial bodies are highly symbolic, meant to relate to fundamental moiety divisions of the universe. Seclusion with instruction of age set initiates is common among Gê-speaking peoples, although it must be admitted that use of rockshelter sites for this purpose is not reported in the literature. In most cases the initiates are secluded within their own homes, but there are reports of seclusion camps situated at some distance outside the settlement. Nimuendaju (1939:59) describes a camp of Apinayé initiates located near a stream about 6 km from the village.

PROSPECTS

Much basic archeological work must be done on the rock art of northern Minas Gerais before the hypothesis of relationship of design elements to Gê social structure can be pursued further. The rock art of the region has yet to be fully

recorded. The distribution of the elements and styles must be plotted and the relative chronology of elements determined by studies of superposition. Excavation of the rockshelters may produce evidence relating to the dating and cultural context of the art.

At the same time, much ethnographic work with Gê-speaking peoples needs to be done in order to pursue the hypothesis. The archeologist attempting to interpret the designs in rock art requires full information on the symbolic content of iconographic elements in ethnographic cultures. It appears that contemporary ethnologists rarely record such information in complete detail, or if they do, it is left in unpublished field notes.

Archeologists and ethnologists have much to gain from cooperation in analysis and interpretation of iconographic elements in prehistoric rock art. It is hoped that the hypothesis of projection of social structure in rock art may stimulate such cooperative research.

REFERÊNCIAS BIBLIOGRÁFICAS

01. ALBISETTI, Cesar & VENTURELLI, Angelo Jayme. *Enciclopédia Bororó I, vocabulários e etnografia*. Campo Grande, MT, Museu Regional Dom Bosco, 1962.
02. CROCKER, J. Christopher. Why are the Bororó matrilineal? In: *Actes du XLII Congres International des Americanistes*, 2. Paris, 1977. p. 245-58.
03. DA MATA, Roberto. *Um mundo dividido: a estrutura social dos índios Apinayé*. Petrópolis, Vozes, 1976.
04. HENRY, Jules. *Jungle people: a Kaingang tribe of the highlands of Brazil*. New York, Random House, 1941.
05. LAVE, J. C. *Social Taxonomy among the Krikati (Gê) of central Brazil*. PhD dissertation. Harvard University, Department of Anthropology, 1967.
06. LEVI-STRAUSS, Claude. *A world on the wane*. London, Hutchinson, 1961.
07. MAYBURY-LEWIS, David. *Akwe-shavante society*. Oxford University Press, 1967.
08. ———. *The savage and the innocent*. New York, World Publishing, 1965.
09. NIMUENDAJU, Curt. *The Apinayé*. Washington, Catholic University of America, 1939. (Anthropological Series, 8).
10. ———. The dual organization of the Ramkokamekra (Canella) of northern Brazil. *American Anthropologist*, 39:565-82, 1937.

11. ——— The eastern Timbira. *American Archeology and Ethnology*, Berkeley, University of California, 41, 1946.
12. ——— *The serent*: publication of the Frederick Webb. Los Angeles, Southwest Museum, 1942. (Hodge Anniversary Series, 4).
13. ——— The social structure of the Ramkokamekra (Canella). *American Anthropologist*, 40:51-74, 1938.
14. REICHEL-DOLMATOFF, Gerardo. *Amazonian cosmos*. University of Chicago Press, 1971.
15. ——— Rock paintings of the Vaupés: an essay of interpretation. *Folklore Americas*, Los Angeles, 27(2):107-13, 1967.
16. SEEGER, Anthony. Fixed points on arcs in circles: the temporal, processual aspect of Suyá space and society. In: *Actes du XLII Congress International des Americanistes*, 2. Paris, 1977. p. 341-59.
17. ——— *Nature and culture and their transformations in the cosmology and social organization of the Suyá, a Gê-speaking tribe of central Brazil*. PhD dissertation. University of Chicago, Dept. of Anthropology, 1974.
18. TURNER, Joan Bamberger. *Environment and cultural classification: a study of the Northern Kayapó*. PhD dissertation. Harvard University, Dept. of Anthropology, 1967.
19. TURNER, Terence S. *Social structure and political organization among the Northern Kayapó*. PhD dissertation Harvard University, Dept. of Anthropology, 1966.