The Xavante and How Their Mythology is Framed By Themselves and Others

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Abstract

There is a disjuncture in the ways in which researchers have described the Xavante (or Shavante) people’s relationship to their mythology. The Xavante have traditionally lived in the Brazilian highlands, and have been well-documented for their on-going battles to secure land rights. Their relationship to their mythology is a strong component of their identity, communal and individual. Their mythology helps them to identify their sense of place in the world.

John Bierhorst (The Mythology of South America, 2002), a noted collector and scholar of the mythology of indigenous people of the Americas, writes that the Xavante’s relationship to their mythology is superficial. Basing his comments on the early, foundational, work of anthropologist David Maybury-Lewis, Bierhorst claims that:

For the Shavante, myth itself has little or no religious value. In the words of David Maybury-Lewis, one of the foremost observers of the Ge, Shavante myths are simply “just so” stories. (Bierhorst, p. 94)

By contrast, Laura Graham, in her book Performing Dreams: Discourses of Immortality Among the Xavante of Central Brazil (1995), challenges earlier anthropological assessment of Gê societies as “this world oriented” (Graham 1995, p. 99). She writes:

The problem for ethnographers has been that this other world is not a world that is seen; the world of the immortal creators is a world that is heard. One cannot see the immortals, yet their presence can be heard and felt among the living. (Graham 1995, pp. 99-100)

In addition, there is a disjuncture between the ways in which the Xavante talk about themselves in Graham’s book and the realities and difficulties of their lives as described in Coimbra, Jr., et al (The Xavante in Transition: Health, Ecology, and Bioanthropology in Central Brazil, 2002). To sort out these disjunctures, I compared the different things that researchers have written about the Xavante and held it up to scrutiny with what the Xavante have said about themselves. I also conducted a content analysis of the tribal website, focusing on the photographs on the website, to detect the ways in which the Xavante themselves are re-presenting themselves to the world, and to what they give importance. By discerning the prominence of photographs and text about group and ritual activities, I propose to show how the Xavante live, tell, and think about their mythology today, and how, and whether, they use that mythology in strengthening their position in a difficult world. back to top