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Abstract

The Guarani Indians in South Brazil have a sophisticated system of thought about the cosmos. Presented here are some elements of their cosmology and cosmogony and the influences of the heavenly bodies in this people's everyday life, which have been collected in ethnographic research in the first decade of the 21st century. The main themes of cosmology and the origin of the Sun, Moon, and Earth are described, approximating this anthropological research to ethnoastronomy and cultural anthropology discussions. This research seeks to analyze comparatively this cosmological concept with other indigenous cosmological systems and to compare them with the Western cosmological system, thus including it in studies of cultural astronomy.

Introduction

This chapter deals with the cosmological or astronomical system of the Guarani Indians in South Brazil. The main objective is to briefly present the elements of Guarani thought about the cosmos and to discuss recent research on cosmological

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systems of non-occidental people, adding to the field of research called cultural astronomy or ethnoastronomy. We approximate cultural astronomy to cosmology based on the anthropologic theory that, for the Guarani, the Sun, the heavenly bodies, the cosmos, the world, and all the existent things inside it are seen as a whole; therefore, astronomy is contained within cosmology.

The data presented here are based on fieldwork conducted between 1998 and 2008 among ethnic *Mbyá* and *Chiripá Guarani*, in 15 villages in Brazil in the states of Santa Catarina, Rio Grande do Sul, and Paraná, as part of the author's master's dissertation and doctoral thesis. (The villages surveyed are located in southern Brazil. They are: *Cacique Doble*, *Mato Preto*, *Estrela Velha*, *Mbiguaçu*, *Massiambú Morro dos Cavalos*, *Yakaporã*, *Pirai*, *Tarumã*, *Pindoty*, *Ywapuru*, *Conquista*, *Morro Alto*, *Reta*, and *Piraquara*.) In these studies, the overlap between ethnoastronomy, cosmology, shamanism, and sociological aspects of the Guarani people's routines in their villages became evident, which will be explained in the following discussion.

The Guarani Indians

The Guarani are a transnational indigenous people living in the south-central region of South America. Their traditional territory includes Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, and Bolivia. The territorial dispersion of their villages remains similar to the pattern that has been repeated for at least 2,000 years. The area, identified by ceramic Guarani forms, is a massive block of approximately 1.2 million km², situated between the Atlantic Coast and the Uruguay River, extending from the Tropic of Capricorn to the River Plate (La Salvia and Brochado 1989, p. 45). In Brazil, the Guarani population is approximately 80,000, making them the largest group of indigenous people in the country.

Their ancestors occupied the southern coast of Brazil. When the first European vessels arrived in the early sixteenth century, the invasion of Guarani territory began. In the conflicts that resulted, the Guarani developed numerous strategies of resistance and managed to maintain important cultural traits, such as language, laws, rules, sociological customs, a cosmological system, beliefs, ideologies, and ethnohistory. In spite of cultural changes resulting from conflicts with the Portuguese and Spanish armies, contact with Jesuit missionaries, contagious diseases, genocidal practices, the expansion of domestic society, and lack of recognition of their territories, the Guarani have remained resistant to integrating with national societies, maintaining their languages, customs, and own social organization.

Currently, the Guarani in Brazil live in precarious conditions because of the lack of legal recognition of their lands, and they are forced to occupy restricted areas and are unable to ensure their families' livelihood. Their villages are arranged in the last redoubts of forests, roadsides, and areas of conflict with land grabbers, loggers, and invaders, with only a small portion of the population living in areas recognized as indigenous lands. This territorial instability makes families live in constant migration, in situations of social risk and insecurity, with high infant mortality

and adult deaths from malnutrition, disease, and violence (murders, being struck by vehicles, and suicides).

In this critical social context, the majority of today's Guarani villages present a restricted material culture, impoverished compared with the technological and artistic wealth found in the archeological records of the pre-colonial Guarani people. However, their wealth is in the emphasis they devote to their immaterial culture, ideological and cosmological.

The Guarani cultural system seems to have a long history. Archaeological evidence indicates that the height of Guarani civilization occurred 2,500 years BP, around 400–200 BC. They were warlike but skillful and diplomatic in cohabiting with their neighbors. War, cannibalism, and perspectivism with animals and gods are characteristic in their myths and are manifested in artistic expressions.

Guarani is 1 of 20 languages belonging to the Tupi-Guarani linguistic family spoken in Brazil. The Guarani language has many dialects, which coincide with distinct ethnic groups or subgroups that compose the Guarani peoples. The Guarani ethnic groups inhabiting the Brazilian territory are *Chiripá* (or *Xiripá*), *Mbyá*, *Kaiowá*, *Nhandeva*, *Paim*, and *Tambeopé*.

Cosmology and Cosmogony: The Guarani's Perspective on the Universe

The Guarani see the universe as a composition of several cosmic planes or celestial strata that are arranged in a concentric shape, one atop the other. The sky that we see is a small part of this universe, composed of numberless skies ruled by different suns that we cannot see. The suns are creator deities that form and protect the worlds and the beings that inhabit them. Figure 78.1, from a drawing by a Guarani professor, represents the celestial planes that envelop the Earth, called *Yvyvaí*.

The sky that covers *Yvyvaí* is composed of four planes. The first is *yvyanhã*, the land of the cannibal spirits that represents the destructive forms of the universe; humans are not able to see the sky of *yvyanhã*. The sky above *yvyanhã* is *yvydjú*. This is the blue sky we see; it is the sky in which run the rivers that we see as clouds. It is in this plane that the Sun, *Kuaray*, and the Moon, *Djatchi*, the twin creator gods of the Earth, walk while forming the day and the night. The next plane is *yvyporã*, the land of Sun and Moon, where they live together with the many stars.

The skies and the suns that exist beyond the land of Sun and Moon cannot be seen by humans but are in the central part of the universe, where the biggest sun lives. According to the Guarani, the origin of the cosmos occurred from the unfolding of the principal sun, *Nhanderu Tenonde*, that aggregates the whole cosmos with its thinking. Tired of being alone, *Nhanderu Tenonde* decided to have fellows. From its thoughts arose a circle, like a large uterus, that opened as a flower and originated four new suns, which went to live in the four corners of the universe. They are *Karai* (where the sun rises), *Tupãwerá* (where the sun sets), *Djakairá* (where the mists stay), and *Nhe'egueretã* (the region of fire and thunderbolts).

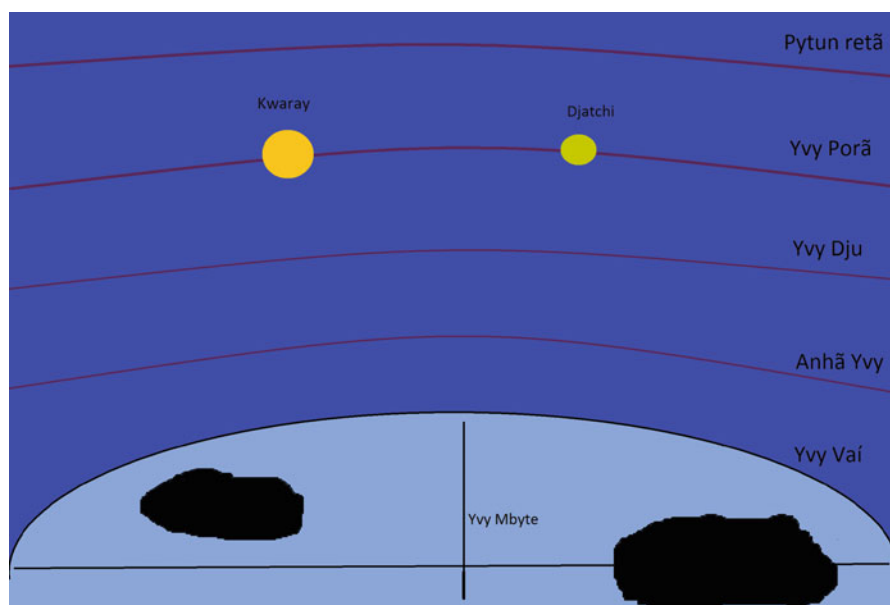


Fig. 78.1 The celestial planes that envelop the Earth. Diagrammatic representation of a drawing by Joel Kuaray Pereira. For the original drawing see Mello (2006)

Each one of these suns lives in pairs or couples and had many children that settled in the universe. Our Sun, called *Kuaray*, is a small sun, one of the many grandchildren of the *Karai* couple. The myth of the *Kuaray* is one of the most vast and poetic myths of Guarani cosmology and relates the encounter between a god and a mortal woman. The cosmological importance of the Sun and the Moon is ever present in many indigenous traditions throughout South America. Described as two brothers (or as twins in many myths), they are the main gods of this cosmological-religious system, and the Guarani recognize and praise them as responsible for the creation and maintenance of life in this world (Fig. 78.2). The cycles created by their rotations are vital for the cycles of social life and, in this context, are sacred and celebrated in rituals throughout the year. Within this genealogy, Sun (*Kuaray*) and Moon (*Djatchi*) are the parents of the Earth (*Yvyvaí*) and protect it from the destructive forces of the universe. The Earth and everything that exists on it are creations of these siblings, and the human being was created in the last phases of the reconstruction, as an imperfect image of the gods.

Our Earth, *Yvyvaí*, was created and destroyed several times. The version that exists today is an imperfect copy of an earlier Earth that was better settled but was devoured by *Anhã*, who also devoured *Djatchi*. Both were recreated by the Sun, but cyclic time is a reminder that the originating stability is ruptured and doomed to destruction. This is the reason for the phases of the moon, which recall the devouring and reconstruction of the Moon and Earth. This is also connected with

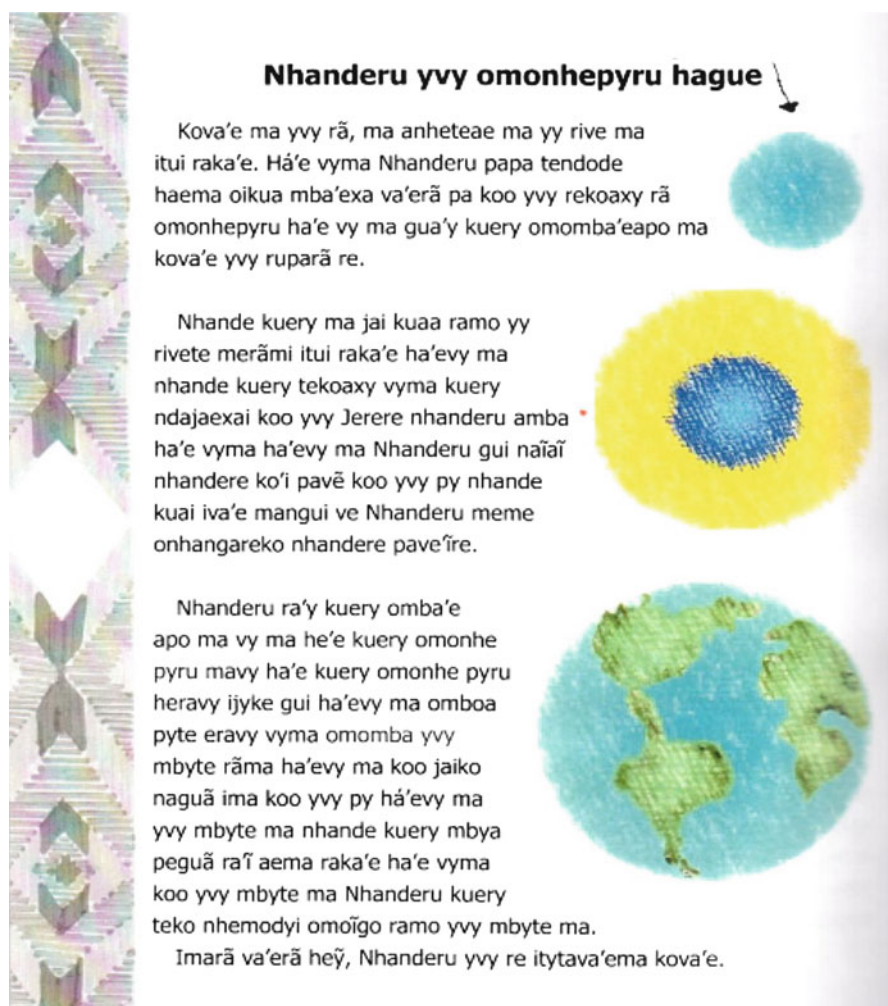


Fig. 78.2 The importance of the Sun and Moon for the creation and maintenance of life in this world. From Professores Indígenas Guarani (2005)

various other regular cycles, such as the change of seasons, human and animal reproductive cycles, agricultural and hunting cycles, productive activities, migration, and so on.

Conclusions

In Guarani cosmology, the importance of the heavenly bodies in daily life is apparent. From the agricultural cycle to female fertility, the importance of what is in the sky is strongly evidenced. From social and environmental perspectives, the

genealogy of the gods indicates a kinship among humans, other inhabitants of the Earth, and celestial creatures in a taxonomic classification very distinct from that defined by Western biology (Ruggles and Saunders 1993, pp. 6–8).

This understanding establishes kinship as well as living norms and rules among Sun, Moon, stars, humans, and animals. It is also seen in ordination and classification systems that exist and form the moral norms that regulate society, meaning, and the ethical-religious system. Similarly, the Sun and Moon indicate relationship rules and mark human cycles: passing through stages of life such as birth and death (and post-mortem life), puberty (marked by first menstruation in women and voice change in men), maturity, interaction with environment, and agricultural calendars. The relationship among humans, Sun, and Moon informs different aspects of human daily life as well as the relationship among the celestial creatures and maintains this world's existence.

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