

## Canela Initiation Festivals: “Helping Hands through Life”

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Canela means “cinnamon” in Portuguese and Spanish, so let’s call these Gê-speaking, South American Indians the “Cinnamon” people. They live in two villages in the high (1,000 feet, 300 meters), “closed” savannas (*cerrados*)\* of Central Brazil in the state of Maranhão and municipality of Barra do Corda [2002: Pop. 1,300 in the *município* of Fernando Falcão] and they practice agriculture, although some of their food is still obtained by hunting and gathering (fig. 56). The Ramkókamekra-Canela (pop. 600) and the Apanyêkra-Canela (pop. 250) used to fight each other until they were “pacified” by pioneer fronts of settlers in the first quarter of the last century, but they share the same language and culture with some variations.\*\*



**Figure 56.** Canela, Brazil, 1970: View of the village from the air.

The Cinnamon people celebrate life ceremonially and secularly during the whole yearly cycle, but most intensively in their summer festival season (*wè?tè*). During this approximately three-month span, they usually carry out a minimal daily ritual act, but they often sing and dance in a secular manner as well. These celebrations—of the Canela nature itself—usually take place three times a day, in their round plaza at the center of their circular village, in the late afternoon,

mid evening, and from about three in the morning until the sun almost appears. This secular celebration of being Cinnamon people—joy-in-self (*amyi-?kin*), generosity (*hà?kayren*), activity (*hà?khrithkhrít*), and following orders (*harkhwa?khôt*)—is accompanied by ritual pageants, the various acts of which are dramatized either daily or periodically, depending on the nature of the rite. The Cinnamon people cannot read or write, and therefore they communicate and pass on their culture through these festivals. Cosmological beliefs, relationships between men, women and ghosts, the drama between men and wild game animals, the play among men and women, how parents should treat children, relations between kin and affines—all are portrayed and sanctioned in these traditional festival-pageants which are carried out in essentially the same way every time they are performed.

The Cinnamon people “own” a number of annual rituals as well as five great festivals, one of which is put on each “summer” (April-August). The “initiation festivals” are two of these five summer pageants, and they must each be enacted twice over a period of about ten years in order to process and graduate an age class of boys into adulthood. A third one of these five summer festivals may be carried out once or twice during this ten-year period so that the older men can dramatize their adult roles and

orientations in life, in contrast to the two earlier stages of the initiation process.

These three festivals parallel each other in many ways: the first (Khêêtúwayê) emphasizes prepubertal security relationships; the second (Pepyê) focuses on postpubertal life challenges; and the third (Pepkahàk) clarifies and sanctifies various adult roles. All three festivals involve the internment and segregation of a male group (each with two ceremonial girls) in order to separate them from the villagers (*põõ-katêyê*: savanna people) so that these novices can grow and evolve more rapidly in their new and very special environment. While each of the three festivals begins with the acts of “catching” and secluding a group of internees, the middle sections of these pageants vary considerably, and each is specifically oriented toward the ceremonial’s particular objectives. The terminal days of each of these three dramatic sequences are—like the initial parts—almost exactly the same. These three festivals not only bring meaning to each other but are also part of a continuing maturation process and therefore must be treated as one unit. [2002: Nimuendajú 1946: 170–201, 212–225]



The Khêêtúwayê festival begins dramatically with the

**Figure 57**

*Khêêtúwayê novices dancing in two facing ranks. They are painted red with urucu and have white falcon-down glued on, and wear macaw tail feather headdresses. They are held by “sisters;” their “uncles” are in the background as are sing-dancing leaders with gourd rattles.*

interruption of a late afternoon secular dance in the center of the plaza by an elder of the tribe who raises before the rank of singing women a curved staff (about 22 feet long by 12 inches in diameter) covered with falcon down and red urucu paint. The symbol has “spoken.” Silence falls upon all immediately; the women stop singing, and the dancing youths freeze in place before the female rank. Immediately, two “catchers” (*më-hapèn-katê*) spring into action. Having been appointed by the elders, they proceed with unchallengeable authority and begin to catch and group all the boys within a ten-year age span into two parallel ranks facing each other in the center of the plaza (fig. 57). These “novices” are promptly marched off, filing in opposite directions, to two family homes of internment, one in the east and the other in the west, where large rooms are being hastily prepared to house these boys for from two to four months (fig. 58).



During the initial internment of an age class (ranging in age from one to ten), it is often the very first time such boys have spent a night away from their mothers. Of course the very young children are allowed to go

**Figure 58** *Khêêtúwayê internees in their room of seclusion.*

home to their families since they are only required to perform according to their age and abilities. About five or six years later, this same age class will again experience the socializing effects of this same Khêêtúwayê pageant.

There are a number of scenes in a Khêêtúwayê pageant-festival drama. (The Canela [Cinnamon] festivals are theatrical dramas or many-act pageants, the various “scenes” of which take place in a traditional sequence over a period of days, weeks, or months, depending on the particular festival.) The two most important ones are the group singing in the plaza, where potential dangers from ghosts are encountered, and the activities in the two houses of seclusion, where the interneers become imbued with a certain disciplinary style of life. The Khêêtúwayê boys may sing in the plaza in two ranks facing each other as many as six times a day, depending on how often they are called out by the leaders of the next oldest age class of the opposite faction—their “enemies.” (The tribe is divided into halves, or moieties, each composed of alternately graduated age classes.) They may sing for ten minutes or for up to an hour, depending on how many songs are required of them according to the particular scheduling of the festival, the time of day, the desires of the opposing age class, or the energies of the great sing-dance leaders conducting the performance of the boys.

For every outing into the plaza, however, the sing-dancing formation can be described in the following manner: the boys (forty to sixty in number) face each other in two ranks, with sisters or more distant female relatives holding them from behind, with their hands firmly securing each boy around the chest. For any of the lengthier performances, the boys have to be colored red with greasy urucu paint and must wear a headband made of three to five macaw tail feathers attached and pointed skyward. Two older male sing-dance leaders with gourd rattles will take their places at the head of each rank, facing each other, and male relatives will group themselves well behind and on either side of the ranks of boys who are held by their female relatives.

At first, the boys just stand in ranks, facing each other while they chant a set of sad, ghost-attracting songs to the slow and precise rhythm of the gourd rattles. Soon, each boy begins to stamp his right foot in toward the other rank, in time with the two sing-dance leaders. Then they turn face out, stepping backward and opening the ranks in a ripple of unified motion. After about twenty minutes of this swaying in and out, the sing-dance leaders set a faster and faster pace, leaping six steps in before stamping and then swinging six steps out, singing heartily with great booming voices. Later the two ranks turn to file after their respective leaders, forming “S” curves and circles in a snake-like manner. Now they sing happily in rich choral harmony, the sisters and uncles chanting with operatic volume. The girls still hold their little brothers, following them as they can, in their leap-hopping motion around the circular village plaza. At the end of the rite, each boy is doused by his sister with several gallons of water poured onto his body from great gourds—“to give him strength and to help him grow,” it is said.

The Khêêtúwayê set of songs were obtained from the ghosts themselves (dead Cinnamon people) in earlier times by a culture hero who had been away on a trip in the savanna. Although their choral music was freely given, the ghosts still long for their enthralling songs, it is believed, and so assemble in great numbers around the singers in the present village when their chants are being sung.

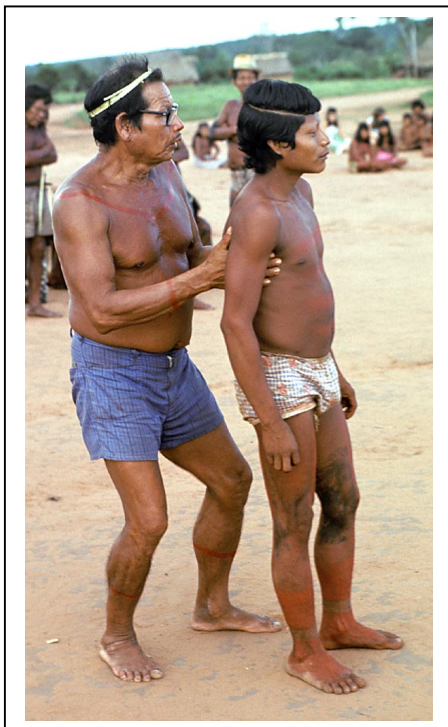
Ghosts love to snatch away the souls of little boys when they can, which usually results in death. Thus, precautions have to be taken to prevent soul loss, especially

against those recently dead such as a mother longing for the company of her little son. This is their reason for the necessity of the presence of *living* female and male relatives. It is perceived as family solidarity against hostile forces, since ghosts are believed to be afraid of large groupings of living people. It is also believed that ghosts do not like the urucu paint and macaw tail feathers worn by the singing boys.

Beyond what the Canela say, the social ties being formed in these repeated theatrical dramas are quite important. The act of being held securely by a sister, while celebrating the strongest protection against soul snatching, certainly contributes to the development of what is probably the most serious interpersonal loyalty among the Cinnamon people—the brother-sister bond. These dramatic situations provide an excellent setting for teaching both family and age-class solidarity. Sisters help brothers, and uncles help nephews in their time of potential danger, and urucu paint and macaw feathers possess a defensive magic against ghosts. All these arrangements act as protections against the unknown.

Moreover, from other situations it is clear to the Canela that people who go about *alone* in the forests or savannas are likely to be harassed and bruised and even killed by ghosts, so it is quite important for uninitiated and undisciplined youths to travel in groups when they are away from the village. In this way, the Khêêtúwayê boys are learning to live for each other—to work and cooperate together, and for the tribe as a whole, rather than for just themselves—at quite an early age.

In their group internment rooms, the boys must adjust to and play with each other respectfully, speaking little and always obeying the orders of the assigned commandant (much older), his deputy (one of them), and the “corporals” who are young representatives of the next highest, opposing age class. It is important that the ceremonial “catcher” and commandant are not a Khêêtúwayê novice’s relatives; having been appointed by the elders, they represent tribal authority. Thus they learn to take commands, and their behavior is molded by the group and its leaders. Certain elders come by to pass the time of day, telling stories about the ancestors, while the novices listen and learn their society’s values.



Just two or three years after the original Khêêtúwayê “catching” and formation of this age class, its members are caught again, this time to be internees in a different festival, the Pepyê. On this occasion they are secluded in separate cells built in their mothers’ houses. This Pepyê family home internment festival occurs again about ten years after the original “catching” of this age class and amounts to their final “initiation” or “graduation” into manhood and, in old times, into warrior status. (The word “*pep*” meant “warrior,” though the new peaceful Cinnamon people do not know that these days.) Members of a graduating age class may range between approximately ten and twenty years of age in current times, but some 150 years ago or more, the age span of these graduated warriors is believed

**Figure 59** Pepyê novice in the act of being “caught” for internment by the “catcher.”

to have been between fifteen and twenty-three.

While the Khêêtúwayê pageant serves somewhat as a school away from home for inculcating group solidarity, the Pepyê festival, which takes place when the same boys who took part in this Khêêtúwayê festival are a few years older, serves to instill individual self-control, personal fortitude, and certain unique skills into its interneers.



**Figure 60** *Pepyê novices, just out of internment, line up kneeling in the plaza, facing the women with whom they broke the internment restrictions regarding sexual intercourse (Apanyekra).*

Ultimately, however, this more individualistic training must be completed within the context of the age class and even more so by the youth himself by his special conduct in daily life. For a Pepyê festival, then, taking place a few years later, the same set of young people (an age class) are “caught” (fig. 59) by a special representative of the elders but interned this time in their mothers’ houses, where a small round hut, about four to five feet high, is prepared by their families’ sons-in-law for them to live in—to repose and think. Their own uncles then make a fenced-in yard extended behind the house from the hut to enclose the latrine. In theory, these separately interned youths are supposed to converse only very briefly with anyone, except with visiting

uncles who lecture on traditions. These youths must never walk in the yard exposed to the sun or moon, except when they are well covered with mats or cloth. They must avoid stepping upon twigs or dead leaves when filing behind the houses at night to attend morality lectures at their commandant’s house; they must avoid being seen by any village members possessing an “evil eye” (but no one knows just who these persons are); they must never talk with women who have just had sexual relations, even their relatives (*see* fig. 60), and they must eat only foods with little or no “poison” in them. For example most meat and some vegetable juices are polluting. Damage from any of these sources will prevent the youth from becoming a great hunter: he will be unable to bear up under the heat of the noonday sun or to develop the ability to talk with ghosts (i.e., become a shaman). And, in earlier times, eating these “poisonous” foods would have prevented him from acquiring the necessary skills and magical abilities required to be a great warrior.

To attain these cultural goals, it is necessary to enter into quite a different existence, one in which the individual becomes ultra-sensitive to the perils of life and therefore must take unusual precautions to avoid these dangers. At the same time, however, in this other existence, the individual, through his ultrasensitivity, has the means to grow very rapidly in strength, ability, knowledge, and perception, aided by continual bathing, eating only “pure” foods, and listening to his uncles. In this condition of “purity,” he may even be visited by ghosts and become a shaman.

The Cinnamon people firmly believe that it is *only* through carrying out extreme protective measures against these potential “pollutants” and through drinking herbal medicines daily to eliminate the poisons already accumulated in the body, that a youth can ever develop the expected strength of a respected adult. If a person happens to be weak and lazy, they usually say he must not have completed his post-pubertal restrictions

very well. If a hunter returns without game, they say he could not have undertaken sufficient restrictions and drunk sufficient medicines during the preceding days. If a shaman has difficulty curing a patient, they suspect this highly sensitive man must have failed to maintain his relative state of purity. All skills, except singing and dancing, are acquired through maintaining strict food and sex restrictions and through drinking certain purifying medicines.

Maintaining restrictions is, for the maturing of Canela individuals, the *great* “helping hand” (*i?te kaypar tsà*: leg supporting device, or in English, “a helping hand”). These procedures are learned in the setting of the Pepyê festival internment, but their practice must be maintained in daily life when the novice has returned from his special sheltering after the termination of the festival. In this existence, quite apart from daily life, it is possible for the youth to mature much more rapidly. Where the various pollutants can be far more damaging because of his sensitivity, the youth must be thoroughly impressed and possibly even scared by the perceived threats in the situation. Faced with this challenge, he learns he must control (i.e., apply restrictions to) his environment while he is gaining strength through avoiding certain foods, taking purifying medicines, and bathing continually with fresh water. (The association with water—bathing in it, or its consumption—is believed to enhance magical growth.)

One dramatic event occurs separately for all of the interned youths in succession around the village circle of houses at a time when they are nearly ready to come out of their circular cells as partially initiated young men. During the seclusion, sunlight has not touched their skin, and after an initial period of severe food restrictions, they have been allowed to eat well, though only foods relatively devoid of polluting substances. Consequently, these youths have grown light in color and heavy in weight, which the Cinnamon people associate with having grown big and strong, having ripened and matured. At various times during the internment, the uncles have come by the cells all together to see how well their nephews are developing. First, they peek through the thatch wall and on another occasion summon each youth to show his face at a window. At a certain time each lad must display his whole body in the entrance way so that the uncles can judge whether he is ready to emerge—to be born anew as a warrior. Accordingly, all the older men assemble to witness this rite for testing maturation, and each man calls forth his nephew in turn. But when a youth appears white and fat in the doorway, his uncle shouts at him in hostile hazing tones, demanding to know whether he is prepared to join the men and sally forth into the savanna to fight enemy warriors should they come to massacre his people. The youth, however, is not ready to answer affirmatively, and so is thrust back into his womblike cell for further gestation.

The cultural analyst would say that when put in danger, we, as well as the Canela, are more likely to develop the self-control and willpower necessary to cope with and manipulate the environment, and that it is then possible for these learned behaviors to be transferred and applied to daily living. Thus, the individual internship of the Pepyê festival can be seen as a culturally “fabricated” challenging situation, in which a youth is given a chance to develop his willpower to resist the “bad” and select the “good,” while at the same time magically receiving, as a result of maintaining the necessary restrictions, great abilities to become superior in various life roles. This will come to pass for him only if he accepts the challenge seriously while in his cell of seclusion and only if he makes a great effort to maintain similar standards in daily life after the termination of the

seclusion period.

While the Khêêtúwayê socialization experience partly furnishes the circumstances for the basic prepubertal learning of social solidarity, and the Pepyê training partly provides the setting for the individual's learning of the necessary post-pubertal abilities to cope with his environment, there is still a perceived need for re-experiencing both the early acquired longing for living out group solidarity in its epitome—group internment—as well as the later learned ability to manipulate the world scene through self-imposed restrictions. Thus, the purposes of the Pepkahàk festival internment are to reinforce the society's need for group solidarity by giving adult individuals a chance to practice it again as well as providing them with a helpful environment in which to enhance their abilities to maintain strict food and sex restrictions through which most valued life accomplishments are to be attained.

Again in the Pepkahàk festival, as in the two earlier ones, the internees are “caught” by a representative of the elders, but this time they are selected from all the graduated age classes regardless of their tribal activities and are secluded in a hut which they themselves build about 150 yards outside the village. They are supposed to remain together as a unit, performing services for the community on orders from the elders. No



**Figure 61** *The Falcon troop coming to attack the Pepkahàk (1970).*

commandant from a higher age class of the opposing side chastises them or maintains group discipline, nor can their uncles harass them if they do not maintain reasonable high food and sex restrictions. They are adults now, and therefore achievements are their own responsibility. The apparent dangers and the “helping hands” they utilize are, as they should be, consistent with the

nature of adult life. Instead of supernatural threats to be neutralized (ghosts) or personal challenges to be overcome (pollutants), the Pepkahàk are “menaced” by wasps and opposing men's festival societies (both symbolizing enemy tribes), and also by the cold of the night in its literal sense. The “helping hands,” instead of being relatives, urucu paint, macaw feathers, food and sex restrictions, physical enclosure, and herbal medicines are now each person's “Formal Friends” who are special nonrelatives, said to be like Brazilian *compadres*, who are supposed to protect a person from almost any worldly danger.

For instance, in the Pepkahàk festival, when a wasp nest planted near the Pepkahàk hut is broken by “enemies” of the Pepkahàk troop, it is the ceremonial friends who swat down and kill *all* the escaping wasps so that none can reach the Pepkahàk membership to sting them. When the Falcon society “attacks” the Pepkahàk troop, it is again the Formal Friends of the Pepkahàk who ward them off with long staffs (fig. 61). When the Pepkahàk sing through the night during the terminal period of the festival, it is again their Formal Friends, bearing large mats on their backs, who surround the Pepkahàk on all sides in order to keep out the cold of the early morning (fig. 62). While

the other defenses are against artificially created dangers, this last protection offered by the Formal Friends of the Pepkahàk alleviates a very real discomfort (cold) and is quite effective.

It happens in this way: in the center of the circular village plaza, an old singer of the Pepkahàk songs takes his place, sitting and leaning on a carved staff. Opposite him sit two young girls, the Pepkahàk troop girl associates who share the singing with the female associates of former Pepkahàk festivals that took place some five to ten years earlier. The Pepkahàk troop members, supporting themselves on their carved poles, sit around the old man and the women on all sides in several concentric circles.

The singing starts so softly that no one outside the plaza can hear it, but little by little it gains momentum and volume, with all participants rocking on their staffs in a circular motion to the accentuated rhythm of the choral chanting. Eventually, it is time to stand up, and then the singing becomes even louder, well punctuated and precise, the men very low and the girls high and harmonizing in several parts. The earlier anthropologist who lived with the Canela, Curt Nimuendajú (1946:216), wrote that this Pepkahàk chanting sounds like a “machine in motion,” and I would say like a slowly accelerating train engine. This is true, and the shrill nasal voices of the girls sound as if the locomotive were gathering speed with its whistle modulating and blowing continuously. This ensemble can be heard a number of miles outside the village and is among the best series of songs the Canela possess. (These days the Pepkahàk songs are always sung on Good Friday evening to prevent God from dying before midnight, so they have become part of a folk Catholic rite that will surely outlast the aboriginal festivals.)



**Figure 62** *The Formal Friends of the Pepkahàk troop members bear mats on their backs and surround the singing Pepkahàk to keep them warm as they sing all night (1970).*

The cast of the Pepkahàk performers is completed around ten o'clock when the troop members' Formal Friends, bearing human-size mats, form a circle around the Pepkahàk to sing with them and protect them from the cold with their own body heat, conserved and held in by the mats. The Pepkahàk sing and sway in this communal manner until dawn, with few breaks, hanging on their white staffs and rocking in unison.

It would seem, from the analysis of the Pepkahàk festival, that an adult defends himself largely through his formal friends, although he still continues to do so with the help of his relatives, magical devices, food and sex restrictions, self-discipline, and purifying medicines. It should also be noted that the goals of the three festivals change from the general and long-term to the actual and immediate, that is, from group solidarity and personal development to tribal defense and personal comfort.

At least for the Cinnamon people (the Canela) it appears to be psychologically

beneficial to artificially remove young persons from ordinary daily living and place them in seemingly stressful situations in order to enhance their learning acuity and even their maturation. In other cultural situations and among other peoples, such rites may also be beneficial. Can we see football, final exams, and even graduation ceremonies in this perspective?

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\*Cerrado or “closed” savannas are characteristic of the central Brazilian plateau and consist of grassy woodlands where the low trees are generally far enough apart so that a person can walk between them but not see more than twenty-five to fifty yards away unless from a hill.

\*\*In describing the Cinnamon people I will be writing always about the Ràm-khò-khâm-mě-?khra (almecega-tree grove in [plural] Indian-people: tribe of the almecega [protium sp.] grove) unless I specifically refer to the Apàn-yê-?khra (piranha [plural] Indian-people: the piranha [flesh-eating fish] tribe) for purposes of contrast.

### Reference

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