

I. ASTRONOMICAL AND COSMOLOGICAL KNOWLEDGE IN THE FOLK CULTURE

THE MILKY WAY AND ITS STRUCTURING FUNCTIONS IN THE WORLDVIEW OF THE MOCOVÍ OF GRAN CHACO

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Abstract

This paper analyses the structuring role that the Milky Way performs in the worldview of the Mocoví of the Southern Chaco (Argentina, South America). Since 1998, we have been working on a research project that involves anthropological fieldwork in order to understand Mocoví ethnoastronomy, its changes and variations, and its relationships with other regional indigenous systems of astronomy. Through an analysis of historical chronicles, early ethnographic literature and data from our own fieldwork, the present paper shows how the different interpretations the Mocoví give to the Milky Way relate to one another.

Key words: South America, Mocoví, Milky Way, structuring role.

The Mocoví

Originally hunters and gatherers, the Mocoví belong to the Guaycurú linguistic group. They inhabit the southern area of the Chaco region. In the 17th century the horse was introduced and they began to trade cattle. The Jesuits founded several missions among the Mocoví such as San Javier (1743), which were subsequently maintained by the Franciscans and Mercedarians (Nesis 2005). The abrupt changes brought about by the expansion of the Argentine state at the end of the 19th century gave rise to several millennial movements which ended in fierce repression. In the 1970s, Evangelical cults began to gain influence in the Mocoví communities. Today the Mocoví have a population of twelve thousand and survive by working as rural labourers in Santa Fe and Chaco provinces. Our research has been focused on the Chaco communities.

Mocoví Worldview

The analysis of the evidence collected by the first missionaries and chroniclers (Guevara 1969[1764]; Paucke 1942-44[1749-1767]) together with that gathered during the 20th century (Lehmann-Nitsche 1924, p. 78, 1927, p.145) (Terán 1998; Wilbert and Simmoneau 1988) and that provided by our own fieldwork reveals some of the key pillars of Mocoví worldview:

- (a) their world consists of three levels;
- (b) the central level of the world, '*laua*, is inhabited by the Mocoví themselves;
- (c) the upper level, '*piguem*, is related to power and plenty, and is inhabited by basically female beings;
- (d) the great relevance of the powerful beings that are the "masters" or "owners" of the different animals, plants, places, or resources; and
- (e) the central importance of relations between beings of very different power (asymmetrical power relations) and the concept of "alliance" as the characteristic mechanism of these relations.

In our opinion, certain notions should be taken into account when considering such a wealth of different sources. First of all, it should be acknowledged that the groups under study do not form a homogeneous block, neither do they share a monolithic cosmological corpus. Furthermore, the dynamics of interaction among various sub-traditions is a key factor in the way leaderships are established, strengthened, and challenged. Finally, Indian cosmologies have a history of their own and change over time, and this has not only been happening since the arrival of the Europeans. In this context, the interaction with European cosmolo-

I

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gies does not necessarily imply the dismemberment of earlier cosmologies.

The Milky Way

For the Mocoví, the Milky Way holds many articulated meanings, which are highlighted according to the circumstances or the narrator. A common element throughout these meanings, however, is the structuring role that is played by the Milky Way in Mocoví topology, not only within celestial space but within the world as a whole.

Not long ago, the different positions of the Milky Way in the sky were important for finding the way in woodland at night. Nowadays, owing to deforestation and the difficulty of accessing hunting areas, this use of the Milky Way is of less importance. However, its use as a temporal marker is still significant today. The Mocoví are able to indicate its direction both at several times throughout the year and at different times of night. Also, Mocoví world expectations (based upon both traditional ideas of world cyclical destruction and Christian millenarianism) appear to be connected to the anticipation of astronomical signs, among which a “new position” of the Milky Way is the most frequently mentioned.

The “Riches of the Sky”

Star brightness is related to the notion of the brightness of powerful beings, its magnitude being regarded as a particular entity’s manifestation of power. The Mocoví understand power as a generic capacity for action, based on a sort of superabundance of being – this refers especially to remote actions and to fertilising and productive capacity as a whole. The “powerful” beings that shape the Mocoví cosmos are full of the sort of power that is manifested in the brightness of their physical manifestations – “golden horns”, “bright” dwellings, lightning or rainbows. In this sense, the sky and the myriad of stars make up a space seen as extremely powerful. The Milky Way is an area in the sky displaying a remarkable concentration of such brightness, so that its white clouds are known as the “riches of the sky”.

The Celestial Rhea

To the Mocoví, the master of an animal species may be manifested as a special animal of that same species, such as a snake-shaped being or a humanoid being (frequently a *criollo*). *Mañic* is the master of the South American rheas (*mañic*). It used to shelter in a number of burrows, under the roots of an *ombú*. One “powerful” man, decided to face it. To this end, accompanied

by other Mocoví, he chased the *Mañic* throughout the world. The cornered *Mañic* climbed up the *ombú* trunk (the tree of the world) to the sky. Today, the *Mañic*, or rather its shadow-soul (*la'al*), can be seen as the Milky Way’s dark clouds, with its head in the coal sack. Alpha and Beta Centauri are the dogs chasing it and biting its neck.

The Path

The representation of the Milky Way as a “path” structures the Mocoví’s oral narrative about stars, and is one of the most popular Mocoví interpretations of the Milky Way. The Mocoví word *nayic* means “path”, and it is related to the idea of going deep into non-human space. One such space is the forest, along which a sequence of markers unfolds, each one commemorating a pact with the ruling powers of the world. The Milky Way is seen as the path followed by *Mañic* as it flees to the sky or as the road of the powerful beings. The asterisms arranged along the Milky Way therefore represent encounters with powerful beings and the pacts between them and the ancient Mocoví. Stories about these events make up a kind of serial narrative linked to the history of the “hunting of *Mañic*” and “strung” on the Milky Way’s connecting thread.

The River and the World Tree

As is mentioned by the first chroniclers and also found in the present-day fieldwork, the three planes of the Mocoví world are interconnected through a giant tree, *Nalliagdigua*. In some versions, there is a large river inside the tree, while in others a big river is reached by climbing the tree. It was in this river that humans originally obtained their food, painlessly. This happened during primordial times, when the humans also were in animal form. But this blissful situation came to an end because the humans refused to share the fish with an old woman. The old woman, in the form of a big rodent, felled the tree, thus freeing the waters and forcing the humans to rely upon hunting and gathering in the forest for survival.

Sponge World

Our research on the Milky Way has, in particular, revealed the relationship between the Milky Way and shamanic initiation. One of the typical modes in which initiation occurs is by sleeping under an *ombú* tree, which is identified with the tree appearing in the *Mañic* narrative; this is because during sleep the initiate sees how it turns into the tree of the world. There is a descent to the roots, where “gold caves” are found. The recruit must then climb up the tree, from the underworld to

the sky, while encountering the powerful beings inside the tree and establishing alliances with them. Thus, the tree is also a path marked with a series of alliances. The *pi'xonaq*, the specialists of the sacred, have a capacity to “see” the structure of the universe – the tree connecting the worlds, which used to be available to everyone, is now only visible to them. Their healing capacity is based on their capacity to travel around the world and build alliances with the entities governing it. Therefore, the Milky Way is strongly related to the means whereby the *pi'xonaq* exerted a certain degree of control over the other Mocoví. Today, just as in ancient times, the tree permits the coexistence of cosmic levels. Nowadays, this only occurs in an oneiric level or in encounters with powerful deities, which in a concentrated time and space dimension make it possible to experience the way of being of the origins, that is to say, they reveal the ontological importance of cosmic structure.

In this context, the dust devils formed by the wind on the Chaco savannah are seen as the visible manifestation of a series of “tunnels” or “paths” connecting various areas of the Mocoví world. Seemingly, it was through these tunnels indicated by the whirlwinds that the ancients were able to move rapidly from one place to the other. These “passages” or underground tunnels supposedly connecting the lagoons are regarded as “eyes” or windows used by the powerful beings to watch the earth. The tree of the world is mentioned by the informants as being like a big “whirlwind”, the paradigmatic case of a system of “tunnels for communication” that run from one end to the other of the Mocoví cosmos. This communication is essential for the flow of resources from the sky to the Earth. The Mocoví universe thus resembles a “sponge”: it is an interrelated world.

Texts, Illustrations And Mocoví Reinterpretation

Generally speaking, a constant element in the Guaycurú reinterpretation of modern texts is some kind of exegesis based on the illustrations. In this context, it is very interesting to note the way Mocoví teachers have interpreted published illustrations of the solar system. Such drawings show the orbits of the planets, which accounts for their iconographic identification with the “whirlwinds” mentioned above. When interpreting the illustrations, the Mocoví teachers with whom we interacted emphasized the structural relationship between the Earth, “other inhabited worlds”, and a “whirlwind-path” joining them. During their studies, the teachers spontaneously turned to their grandparents to identify such bridges. We observed that these processes of cosmological “transaction” involved strong feelings of

uncertainty and precariousness, which were only overcome by a new synthesis.

In this Mocoví view of the solar system, the world's whirlwind keeps its tree identity and is explicitly called *Nalliagdiguá*. In fact, the narration is constructed on the basis of its felling, the point being that since the tree was cut it has been growing “towards us, towards the Earth.” As soon as the tree touches the Earth again, the communication between these “other inhabited worlds” and the Earth will be restored once more, so that the sky beings will come down to the Earth. Who are they? The extraterrestrials. The tree is seen as a connection between these planes, and the overall communication between planes as a prelude to a new era for the world. In this context, stories about “extraterrestrials” heard on the media are incorporated.

Conclusions

In this paper, we have attempted to draw attention, above all, to the dynamic and heterogeneous character of cosmological conceptions among the Mocoví communities of the Chaco. We believe this is a general characteristic of cosmologies in several cultures that has been neglected in the interests of presenting the different cosmologies as a homogeneous whole. The Mocoví case demonstrates that the existence of an important common and characteristic axis does not imply a monolithic block of ideas and practices. Indeed, among the Mocoví cosmology is a matter of dispute and negotiation associated with leadership, given that Mocoví leaders are characterised by their ability to see the true structure of the world, to speak well, and to reach a consensus. Notwithstanding this flexibility, we can see that the cosmological ideas of these Mocoví communities share a series of general principles that coordinate the multiplicity of voices present. Our investigation has focused on one of these fundamental ideas: the central role of the Milky Way as a structuring element of the sky, as an articulation between the different levels of the world, and as a link between the central plane (*laua*), inhabited by the Mocoví, and the power and plenty of the celestial plane. We have shown that a series of different and mutually influential meanings come together through this asterism. We have also seen that this asterism has links with shamanic activity because it constitutes a power-concentrating pole. This power-pole characteristic associates the Milky Way with the whirlwinds and tunnels that give a sponge-like appearance to the Mocoví cosmos.

Furthermore, we have emphasized the need to pay special attention to the ways in which the cosmological ideas of these communities interact with ideas intro-

duced by Western society from different sources – biblical stories, formal schooling, and the mass media. In this context, it is important to recognize the huge relevance of illustrations. In the case we studied, there is both an active concern for preserving certain pre-existing core lines – by which we mean dynamics and relations rather than “objects” – and the flexibility to include novel elements provided they can be structured around these core lines.

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europiečių įtaką iki pat XX a., kuomet argentiniečiai pradėjo sistemingą skverbimąsi į jų tradicinę teritoriją. Šiuo metu Mokovi gentį sudaro 1200 žmonių, kurie dirba žemės ūkyje. Nuo 1998 metų buvo vykdomas antropologinio pobūdžio mokslinių tyrimų projektas, kurio pagrindinis tikslas buvo ištirti Mokovi genties etnoastronomiją ir ją palyginti su kitų regionų etnoastronomija. Išanalizavę istorinius šaltinius, ankstyvąją etnografinę literatūrą ir mūsų mokslinių lauko tyrimų duomenis, šiame straipsnyje pateikiame keletą Mokovi gentyje žinomų Paukščių tako vaizdinių.

Paukščių takas yra svarbus Mokovi genties kosmologinės sistemos elementas. Jis vaizduojamas kaip kosminis medis, kelias arba upė. Paukščių tako kaip „kelio“ įvaizdis išreiškia esminę Mokovi astronominės sistemos ir žodinės tradicijos idėją. Paukščių takas čia iškyla kaip prasiveržimo į užžmogišką erdvę kelias, išilgai kurio skleidžiasi santarvę su pasaulį valdančiomis galiomis simbolizuojančių ženklų seka.

Mes taip pat tyrinėjome vertikalios ašies sampratą Mokovi kosmologijoje ir simbolikoje ir konkrečiai Paukščių tako kaip Kosminio medžio idėją. Nustatėme, kad naudojimasis Paukščių taku orientavimuisi erdvėje bei laike turėjo įtakos pačios erdvės ir laiko sampratai Mokovi kosmologijoje.

Mūsų atskleisti ryšiai tarp Paukščių tako ir šamanų galios „matyti“ kosmoso struktūrą leido suprasti esant svarbius saitus tarp kosmologinių koncepcijų ir galių valdymo bei visuomeninės kontrolės ir jos organizacijos. Galiausiai mes aptarėme Mokovi kosmologinių idėjų sistemos transformaciją įvykusią dėl religinių misijų, švietimo sistemos ir žiniasklaidos poveikio.

Vertė Algirdas Girininkas

PAUKŠČIŲ TAKAS IR JO STRUKTŪRINĖS FUNKCIJOS GRAND ČAKŲ MOKOVI GENTIES PASAULĖŽIŪROJE

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Santrauka

Šiame straipsnyje nagrinėjamas Paukščių tako įvaizdis ir jo reikšmė Mokovi genties, gyvenančios pietinėje Čakų (Chaco) provincijoje (Argentina, Pietų Amerika), žmonių pasaulėžiūrai. Buvę medžiotojai ir maiso rinkėjai Mokovi genties nariai kolonijiniais laikais patyrė daug permainų. Tačiau jie sugebėjo atlaikyti