

Kathleen Bolling Lowrey

## Wrong about the Land Without Evil but right about shamanism. The lasting legacy of H el ene Clastres

2020

<https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19052>

Ver offentlichungsversion / published version  
Zeitschriftenartikel / journal article

### Empfohlene Zitierung / Suggested Citation:

Bolling Lowrey, Kathleen: Wrong about the Land Without Evil but right about shamanism. The lasting legacy of H el ene Clastres. In: *Zeitschrift f ur Kulturwissenschaften*. Heil versprechen, Jg. 7 (2020), Nr. 1, S. 126–129. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25969/mediarep/19052>.

### Erstmalig hier erschienen / Initial publication here:

<https://doi.org/https://www.degruyter.com/document/doi/10.14361/zfk-2020-140112/html>

### Nutzungsbedingungen:

Dieser Text wird unter einer Creative Commons - Namensnennung - Nicht kommerziell - Keine Bearbeitungen 4.0/ Lizenz zur Verf ugung gestellt. N here Ausk nfte zu dieser Lizenz finden Sie hier:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

### Terms of use:

This document is made available under a creative commons - Attribution - Non Commercial - No Derivatives 4.0/ License. For more information see:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

## Wrong about the Land Without Evil but right about shamanism. The lasting legacy of H el ene Clastres

**Kathleen Bolling Lowrey**

Rereading H el ene Clastres *The Land Without Evil: Tup -Guaran  Prophetism* (1995 [1975]) after the lapse of many years, I was struck first by the archaism of its prose style. Something Brazilian anthropologist Manuela Carneiro da Cunha said in a Robert Hertz memorial lecture is apropos: »Those were great times when we anthropologists could postulate the existence of such an *a priori* totalization« (1997: 1). Of course, H el ene Clastres's is a false archaism: Robert Hertz was born in the nineteenth century and killed in the Great War, but Clastres was writing in the 1970s and her husband Pierre's related work, *Society Against the State* (1977), remains a byword among intellectually fashionable twenty-first century anarchists. H el ene's scholarship was revolutionary in its own right, postcolonial though not postmodern, arguing as it did for the Tup -Guaran  as a ›people with history‹ (to paraphrase Wolf 1982).

Her essay is among other things a manifesto for the proposition (which had been put forth before, though less emphatically, by Curt Nimuendaj  1914 and Alfred M traux 1927) that the wide dispersal of groups speaking Tup -Guaran  languages across lowland South America was the product of endogenous pre-Columbian political dynamism. This process owed little to the so-called »civilized tribes« (to use the terminology of the famous Handbook of South American Indians [Steward 1941]) of the Andes and nothing at all to European invaders. Social transformation and sophisticated political philosophy were not innovations brought by Europeans or borrowed from the Inca Empire but instead proper to the societies of the tropical lowlands.

Probably because of the political unimpeachability of this thesis, the way it said something anthropologists and ethnohistorians were finding to be true all around the decolonizing world between the 1960s and 1980s, it took a long time for scholars to critically re-assess the evidence for Clastres's arguments. However, a flurry of articles published since the turn of the millennium have been devastating on many points. These convincingly show that there was not – as H el ene Clastres asserted – a unitary notion of a Land without Evil that animated groups speaking Tupian and Guaran  languages from the Atlantic Coast to the Eastern slopes of the Andes, Brazil to Paraguay to Bolivia, and across hundreds of years, from testimonies recorded in the sixteenth century to oral narratives collected by

Nimuendajú in 1912 or Leon Cadogan in the 1950s (Pompa 2004, Villar/Combès 2013). Two essays in particular demonstrate that the Kandire postulated by Clastres to be a mystical yet terrestrial paradise, a place that sojourners could find on this earth where they would be guaranteed immortality, becomes ever more prosaic the more accurately it is tracked down. The coastal Tupian and interior Guaraní informants to the first European chroniclers were talking about a plainly real place and one well worth travelling to, as a source of metal trade goods: the Inca Empire (Combès 2006, Julien 2007). Combès also cites the earlier work of Branislava Susnik (1961) who suggested in an aside that in fact Kandire should probably be identified with the Inca Condori. Prior to these critiques, the accomplished Jesuit scholar Bartomeu Meliá<sup>1</sup> glossed »ivi mara-ey« as »land without shame«, meaning untouched virgin territory, and thereby suggested another pragmatic rather than mystic motivation for the great migrations of Tupí-Guaraní speaking peoples: the search for new agricultural land (Meliá 1988).

If, then, the Land Without Evil is an »invented tradition« (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983), what should we make of those shamanic figures supposedly prophesying about it? These are well attested as having been present at multiple points along a long time span and wide geographic area, from the sixteenth century to the twentieth, from the Atlantic coast to the Eastern slopes of the Andes. They are always ambiguous: far from ordinary, outside the normal social and kinship bonds, powerful, but not the same as chiefly leaders. If the *Land Without Evil* never existed, not just in the sense of being a mystical dream but in the sense of being something no actual Indians ever dreamt about in the way described by white anthropologists and ethnohistorians, what could those *paye* and *karai* have been talking about? What was, to use the title to chapter three of Héléne Clastres's text, the »speech of the prophets« actually about and what were its »effects« really?

Here, I think, we find the reason Clastres' extended essay is still absolutely worth reading (and, for reasons to be made clear, especially worth translating): not just as an artifact of the scholarly pretensions of a particular era but as a book still bristling with real insights. These men existed, they did speak, and in so doing made a great impression on Indians and whites alike. Clastres' attention to their role anticipated by more than a decade an anthropological mode of analysis of Amerindian shamanism that now dominates lowland South American scholarship. To wit, she argued early on that shamans are translators of power relations and as such are magicians of history: Viveiros de Castro 1992 [1986], Taussig 1986, Gow 1994 among others opened the way for the present deluge of analysis along these lines.

Héléne Clastres declared that Tupí-Guaraní societies »far from being oppressed, were, on the contrary, in full expansion when they were discovered – were in a word, societies of conquerors« (1995 [1975]: 45–46). Everything we are learning about lowland South American societies generally from recent archaeological findings suggest just such an expansive, population-dense dynamism: not only among Tupí-Guaraní peoples but also Arawakan ones, and others as well (Erickson 2014, Heckenberger et al. 2008). Unlike in the case of the Land Without Evil, here later findings tend to sustain, not undermine, the assertions of Clastres's work.

---

1 Bartomeu Meliá (1932–2019) passed away the very day I was composing these words, December 6th, 2019.

Of course, the much later peoples upon whose data she also draws, willy nilly, were not »conquerors«: clearly the Apopocuva-Guaraní encountered by Nimuendajú in Brazil in 1912 were not doing well at all; the Mbyá Guarani informants of Leon Cadogan in the 1950s in Paraguay said sadly: »We who are the last generations [...] we no longer know how to behave« (Clastres 1995: 98). And yet these downwardly mobile indigenous communities too had shamans, as do most (all?) contemporary indigenous lowland South American societies – Tupí-Guaraní or not – that are experiencing demographic, political, and cultural resurgence. Why should this be so? Why is shamanism associated with social transformation, whether from »colder« to »hotter«, egalitarian to hierarchical, demographically robust to demographically threatened, and back again: that is to say, in whatever direction those dynamics are operative as long as they are in motion?

It has been said that the term »shamanism« is far too promiscuously applied to a wide variety of practices and belief systems that actually have little or nothing in common (Kehoe 2000). I don't think this is correct, an instinct for which I recently found support from an unexpected quarter. I must confess that my own forthcoming book on shamanism in the Americas draws quite heavily on ideas I first encountered in H el ene Clastres (Lowrey 2020), so reading the many apt critiques of her work that have emerged over the past two decades got me searching. In a wonderful book on »shamanism and the Western imagination«, Andrei Znamenski tells us that to Soviet anthropologists and folklorists, Siberian »shamanism represented an ideology of a society caught in transition from an egalitarian to a class-based society [...] shamans represented transitional figures« (Znamenski 2007: 323). What is interesting here is that a corps of ethnographers trained in a more orthodox Marxist tradition than the French structuralist one that produced H el ene Clastres, and encountering shamanism in the Siberian rather than the American context, made much the same analysis of it: that it was a practice of politics and history. What is missing from this analysis, and which I insist upon in my own book, is that practices of power are also practices of vulnerability, which is why one sees shamanism appearing in so much the same form across time and across space and whether the political fortunes in question are rising or falling. Clastres ends her book with a chapter entitled »Prophetism«. Perhaps she foresaw that her insights into shaman-prophets would last longer than those about the Land Without Evil that she opened with in the book's title, and for that reason chose to close instead with prophetism. The essay by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha from which I quoted at the start here was precisely about »shamanism and translation«. Clastres's robust contributions to that theme are an ongoing inspiration for considering how we twenty-first century anthropologists might still hope, like her, to »postulate the existence« of »*a priori* totalizations«, and to do so in many different languages.

## Literature

CLASTRES, H el ene (1995): *The Land Without Evil. Tup i-Guarani Prophetism*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

CLASTRES, Pierre (1977): *Society Against the State. Essays in Political Anthropology*, New York: Urizen Books.

COMB ES, Isabelle (2006): »De los candires a Kandire. La invenci on de un mito chiriguano«. In: *Journal de la Soci et  des Am ericainistes* 92: 1–2, 137–163.

- DA CUNHA, Manuela Carneiro (1997): *Points of View on the Amazon Forest. Shamanism and Translation*. Annual Robert Hertz lecture, Association pour la Recherche en Anthropologie Sociale, Paris, 9.7.1997.
- ERICKSON, Clark (2014): »Amazonia. The Historical Ecology of a Domesticated Landscape«. In: *The Social Lives of Forests*, hg. v. Susanna B. Hecht, Kathleen Morrison und Christine Padoch, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 199–214.
- GOW, Peter (1994): »River People. Shamanism and History in Western Amazonia«. In: *Shamanism, History, and the State*, hg. v. Nicholas Thomas und Caroline Humphrey, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- HECKENBERGER, Michael et al. (2008): »Pre-columbian Urbanism, Anthropogenic Landscapes, and the Future of the Amazon«. In: *Science* 321: 5893,1214–1217.
- HOBBSAWM, Eric/RANGER, Terence (Hg.) (1983): *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- JULIEN, Catherine (2007): »Kandire in Real Time and Space. Sixteenth-century Expeditions from the Pantanal to the Andes«. In: *Ethnohistory* 54: 2, 245–272.
- KEHOE, Alice (2000): *Shamans and Religion. An Anthropological Exploration in Critical Thinking*, Mountain View: Waveland Press.
- LOWREY, Kathleen (2020): *Shamanism and Vulnerability on the North and South American Great Plains*, Louisville: University Press of Colorado.
- MELIÁ, Bartomeu (1988): *El guaraní conquistado e reducido*, Asunción: Biblioteca Paraguaya de Antropología.
- MÉTRAUX, Alfred (1927): »Les migrations historiques des Tupi-Guaraní«. In: *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 19, 1–45.
- NIMENDAJÚ, Curt Unkel (1987 [1914]): *As lendas da criação e destruição do mundo como fundamentos da Religião dos Apapocúva-Guaraní*, São Paulo: HUCITEC-Universidade de São Paulo.
- POMPA, Cristina (2004): »O profetismo tupi-guarani: a construção de um objeto antropológico«. In: *Revista de Índias* 64: 230, 141–174.
- STEWART, Julian (Hg.) (1941): *Handbook of South American Indians*, Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution.
- SUSNIK, Branislava (1961): *Apuntes de etnografía paraguaya*, Asunción: Museo Etnográfico Andrés Barbero.
- TAUSSIG, Michael (1986): *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man. A Study in Terror and Healing*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- VILLAR, Diego/COMBÈS, Isabelle (2013): »La Tierra sin Mal. Leyenda de la creación y destrucción de un mito«. In: *Tellus* 13: 24, 201–225.
- VIVEIROS DE CASTRO, Eduardo (1992): *From the Enemy's Point of View. Humanity and Divinity in an Amazonian Society*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- WOLF, Eric (1982): *Europe and the People Without History*, Berkeley: University of California Press.
- ZNAMENSKI, Andrei (2007): *The Beauty of the Primitive. Shamanism and the Western Imagination*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.