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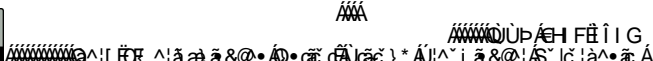
Mêbengokre Ritual Wailing and Flagellation: A Performative Outlet for Emotional Self-Expression¹

Resumen: Este ensayo trata sobre el llanto ceremonial y la auto-flagelación, prácticas propias de las mujeres de los Mêbengokre (o Kayapó), pueblo de lengua yé [jê] en el Brasil Central. Los llantos ritualizados no son un fenómeno reservado para los funerales, representan, más bien, un estilo de comportamiento ceremonial realizado cuando un familiar próximo parte para una larga jornada o un largo viaje, o a su regreso, o cuando alguien es afectado por una grave enfermedad. Es una contrapartida femenina altamente emotiva y estilizada a la oratoria masculina. Tradicionalmente el llanto es acompañado por auto-flagelación, una práctica que actualmente es censurada por el subgrupo Mêtýktire con quienes la autora ha desarrollado trabajo de campo. El tema principal es hasta qué punto el llanto ceremonial produce una catarsis emocional, o si las mujeres son presionadas por el peso de la tradición para expresarse de esta manera.

Summary: This article focuses on ceremonial weeping and wailing and auto-flagellation, characteristic practices of the women among the Mêbengokre (or Kayapó), Amerindian Jê speakers of Central Brazil. The ritual wailings are not just restricted to funerals, they represent also a ceremonial style of behaviour when a close relative is leaving for extended travel or a period of absence from work, or when this person is coming home, or when someone is affected with a severe illness. It is a highly emotive and stylised female counterpart to male rhetoric. The weeping is traditionally accompanied by auto-flagellation, a practice now frowned upon by the Mêtýktire sub-group with whom the author carried out fieldwork. The principal question is to what degree ceremonial wailing produces emotional catharsis, or if the women feel under pressure from the weight of tradition to express themselves in this way.

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1 I am grateful to the Fundo de Apoio ao Ensino e à Pesquisa (FAEP), UNICAMP, for financing my participation in the Americanist Congress in Santiago, Chile, where an earlier version of this paper was presented, and to participants in the symposium for their comments.



This paper deals with the Mēbengokre (better known as the Kayapó), Brazilian Amerindian Jê speakers of the states of Mato Grosso and Pará. It is based on fieldwork (begun in 1978) carried out mainly with the Mētyktire subgroup, presently inhabiting two villages in northern Mato Grosso. The focus is on an aspect of Mēbengokre female performance virtually unknown to the outside world. It has been commonplace when describing Jê societies to deny the participation of women in oratory because researchers did not credit ceremonial wailing as such. The art of wailing is one of the defining traits of the adult woman. It is not something that is limited to funerals; that is why I designate it as ritual or ceremonial wailing rather than keening, a genre associated originally with Irish funerals.² The Mēbengokre have a sophisticated repertoire of vocal techniques. These include producing echoes through voice projection, and the rapid contraction of the diaphragm while talking, as performed by male orators when speaking in formal style.

Among the Mēbengokre, wailing is performed whenever a relative leaves the village for an extended period, such as a trip to the city, or when he or she returns from a prolonged absence. As Urban noted (1988: 392) in his analysis of wailing among the Xavante (Central Jê), Xocleng (Southern Jê), and Bororo (macro-Jê), the theme uniting all situations that give rise to wailing is the feeling of separation and loss that is canonically associated with death. Mētyktire women talk disparagingly about non-Indian women who, unacquainted with ceremonial wailing, merely shed tears when they lose a child. They say they wound the places that once secured their child (*kra jamy djà*; child hold place), such as their arms. When asking why the women hack the crown of their heads I was told that it is because they are angry, and not as I had initially supposed, due to a feeling of guilt.

An inevitable sequence of a plane landing or taking off in a Mēbengokre village is it being surrounded by a group of wailing women. The shrill, spine-chilling tone of wailing can be heard at a considerable distance; that is why it heralds serious illness or death when it bursts out from within a house.³ No one can help noticing it, though people may carry on with what they are doing when they hear it, especially if it is predictable, as when welcoming relatives from a plane that has just arrived on the runway.

When a mother loses a child, she not only hacks her crown until the blood runs down her body, she also performs what Nimuendajú described (1983: 115; 1971: 133) as ‘mortal jumps’, throwing herself backwards to the ground, an action that can result

2 For a recent and sensitive account of keening in an Amazonian society, see Conklin’s book (2001) on the Wari’.

3 T. Turner (1966) noted that sometimes people are declared dead before we would consider them to be so.

in death from a broken neck. She does this repeatedly until other women intervene to grab the machete and physically deter her from further self injury. Genealogical data revealed various cases of women killing themselves in this way. Before the advent of steel machetes they used rocks to gash their heads.

It was such an overwhelming experience to witness scenes of wailing and self-flagellating women that in 1982 I conducted an interview (in Mëbengokre) with one of my most articulate monolingual interlocutors in order to learn more about it. The woman concerned, Bëribëri, was then middle-aged, and her intelligence made her one of the leading female figures in the village. I had been unable to fathom out what words were used by the women as they wailed. Thus the first question was to learn whether there was a set script or whether each woman improvised as she went along, as in Brazilian *repentista* songs. The recorded interview lasted around fourteen minutes; it was so informative that I later designated it as a lesson in wailing. It transpired that the vocabulary used in female wailing is different to that used in everyday life. It is like a distinct dialect, and may even be as different as, for example, Spanish and Latin, as used during Roman Catholic mass. I assume this means that the male spectators and children pick up on the emotive and performative aspects, rather than the precise meaning of the words employed, since they are used exclusively by women. The fact that the vocabulary of wailing is different to everyday speech sets it apart from and above the ordinary world, as an art form that is one of the defining elements of Mëbengokre female identity.

Traditionally a Mëbengokre's prestige increases as he or she ages, since knowledge is correlated with experience. It was apparent from my lesson in wailing that this activity serves as a barometer of maturity, as the older one is the more one wails. Young childless women do not engage in wailing at all; in this sense it signals social maturity. There is a high rate of infant mortality, and Mëbengokre women include stillborn children when reckoning the number of their offspring. Consequently, the older one is the more children one has lost. It is common for a mother to be having her last child when her eldest daughter is having her first one. Mothers may help to breast feed their co-resident grandchildren (daughters' children), and often bring up the first child of their daughters. Small girls straddle their younger siblings on their left hip as soon as they are strong enough to do so, and have their first children in early adolescence. A woman's destiny is to care for children throughout her life, be they siblings, children, grandchildren, or great grandchildren. She establishes close emotional bonds with these people, but also with other relatives, including the offspring of her sisters (her classificatory children), and of her brothers (classed in the same category as grandchildren, in conformity with the Omaha type reckoning of kinship).

There is a set of at least fourteen specific wailing terms for relatives (mainly very different from the ordinary terms of reference and address) – for brothers and sisters (including parallel cousins), for one's children and classificatory children, for the

grandmother-cum-father's sister category, for the grandfather-cum-mother's brother category, for the category comprising the offspring of cross-sex siblings-cum-grandchildren, for formal friends (inherited from one's father), for the husband, the parents-in-law, the brother's wife-cum daughter-in-law category, the sister's husband-cum-daughter's husband category, and for the husband's sister. In sum, one wails for affines as well as consanguineal relatives, besides one's formal friends, the latter being the ideal sons-in-law for a woman. There is a corresponding set of terms used by men as they sob whilst uttering sentences in rhetorical style, but they never wail in the falsetto tone used by the women.

Personal names are not used in wailing. When referring to children, the wailer merely distinguishes gender. The script is rigorously pre-determined. One does not mention the life exploits of the person referred to. In this sense the text is impersonal; it is shared collectively. Wailing involves specific bodily postures. Both men and women raise the back of one hand, resting their forehead upon it. Wailing may be done both standing and sitting, though sobbing men also squat beside a corpse.

Wailing is contagious as it reminds those who hear it of their own lost relatives. The act of wailing by one woman, detonated by the arrival or departure of a relative, sparks off a number of other women. Those who are not drawn into the display of flagellation and wailing step in when the occasion arises, to prevent the performers doing serious bodily harm or killing themselves. Thus, as noted in different contexts by Hegland (1998) and other writers, there is no clear separation between performers and audience.

Each one wails not only for the person who triggered off their performance, but also for any other close relative whom she remembers at the time. For instance, whenever my Mētyktire 'mother' engages in wailing she laments not only the loss of her recently dead granddaughter, but also her three dead children. When Bepgogoti (an elderly leader of the neighbouring Mēkrāgnoti subgroup of the Mēbengokre) visited a Mētyktire village in 1982, after an absence of several decades, he went from house to house performing the subdued male sobbing with the senior woman of each dwelling. Some women, besides wailing, hacked the crown of their heads with machetes as they remembered dead children, siblings, or husbands who had been alive when this leader had last been seen.

The closest parallel to Mēbengokre flagellation is that performed by Shi'a Muslims. Although Mēbengokre women have occasionally died during their performance, most of them recover with no apparent sequel. On at least one occasion, I was reminded of drama school classes when overhearing a group of women discussing how to throw oneself to the ground backwards without getting a broken back or neck.

Urban (1988: 385) describes wailing as a ceremonialised expression of emotion, noting (1988: 387) the dynamic tension between standardization and individuation. He analyses it as being composed of lines, corresponding to the divisions between

breaths, noting that such lines are musical, “marked by a characteristic intonational contour and rhythmical structure” (1988: 386). Intensity of performance mirrors the intensity of the feelings of the performer. Schechner (1994: 613) contrasts theatre and ritual, with the former emphasizing entertainment and the latter efficacy. In the phenomenon analysed here there is a strong theatrical aspect, but it is not entertainment, and if efficacy is at all relevant, it is as a channel for emotional self-expression. As a conventional mode of behaviour it is equally coercive as it is what is traditionally expected of every Mêbengokre adult woman.

Mêbengokre wailing resembles that of the Bororo, characterised by its high-pitched falsetto character (as described by Urban 1988: 389), and also due to the fact that, according to Albisetti/Venturelli (1962: 971), the words used in Bororo wailing are not part of common language. The explanation given by the Mêbengokre for the lexical distinctiveness of wailing is that it expresses a bygone language, adding to its arcane aura.

Urban comments that the chaining of cry breaks to form a sobbing action is related to laughter in articulatory terms, involving the pulsing of the air flow (1988: 390). For the Mêbengokre, both ritual wailing and laughter have mythological origins. ‘Beautiful’ (stylised) wailing, as opposed to spontaneous ‘natural’ crying, originated between two brothers who killed a giant bird the size of an aeroplane that had carried off and killed one of their relatives. Laughter originated when a man was tickled by bat-men in a cave; as it was considered uncondusive to masculinity, this action was given as a motive for slaughtering the bat-men.

The interview

I now proceed to an edited version of my wailing lesson in order to convey some idea about what is being said when women wail, although this paper is concerned with the performative aspects of wailing rather than the semantics of the text.⁴ Bêribêri explains that a girl does not participate in ceremonial wailing until she has children, in other words, until she is an adult. She then wails, for example, “Oh my brother, you went away with horrible foreigners, but now you have come back to me. I, your sister, am crying because I have missed you ...”. Urban (1988: 386) considers wailing to be a monologue which is overheard rather than being addressed to a specific person. In the example given here, a woman addresses her brother, but all who are within earshot will overhear her, and this generally amounts to the entire village. Urban (1988: 385) draws a sharp distinction between wailing and ceremonial dialogue, considering them to appear in complementary distribution in lowland South America. In the Mêben-

4 An abridged transcription of the text was presented at a symposium on Jê languages in December 2003, and is presently in preparation for publication (see Lea/Txukarramãe, in press).

gokre case, a wailing woman may establish a sort of ceremonial dialogue with a sobbing man as a counterpart. It evokes the performance of soliloquies, differentiated according to gender, each sparked off by the presence of the other person.⁵ Urban (1988: 395) notes that among the coastal Tupi, at the time of colonization, wailing appears to have been a predominantly female genre, whereas among the Xocleng and Xavante it is performed by both sexes.

Bêribêri explains that the more children a woman has the more she wails. I infer that the older a woman is the more children she has generally lost, and along with them an increasing number of other relatives too, and in whatever context she wails, she always mentions her lost children. One of the formulas exemplified during the interview was the following: “Oh my brother, I’ve already had children who are your nephews and nieces. I am getting old and that is why I am crying like this when I see you. If I were childless I would cry softly when I see you”. Addressing me she says:

If you had lots of children you would cry a lot. When you have lots and lots of children you go to the very end of the lament. After having lost our mother, our brother, our father, when we think about their soul (*karô*), we increase the crying depending on the number of our own children. “A wicked foreigner killed my mother with sorcery, slaughtered my father and my brother like game animals. My brother, I miss our father. I am the one who now heads the family. I’ve already had children, your nephews and nieces. Your niece is already a young girl. I have cared for your nephews and nieces, and then you suddenly came back and I am crying because I have missed you”. That is how you cry when you have had lots of children.

I asked her if older women cry differently to younger women, to which she replied:

When you are old you cry: “My nephews, nieces and grandchildren come to me. I, your aunt (father’s sister) [or grandmother], am crying because I miss you. I have had sons and daughters, and they have grown up by my side. They have had sons and daughters who have grown up and are now scattered about. I am your aunt [or grandmother] and I see you nephews, nieces [or grandchildren] and I cry because I miss you”. That is how the old women cry. The crying of the old women is intricate.

I asked Bêribêri whether one cries in the same way for some one arriving and when some one dies. She replied that it is the same. She explained the terms used for different relatives, including the distinction between elder and younger brothers and sisters. She then gave an example of losing a child:

We cry “Oh my child, the cursed illness killed you”. When we lose a daughter or a sister’s daughter we cry “Oh daughter, a wicked foreigner killed you with cursed sorcery”. If you happen to be somewhere when a child has just died you will see people flagellating them-

5 In this sense it is very different from the Yanomami ceremonial dialogue (*ñaumû*), resembling a duet, as recorded and transcribed by Marlui Miranda (1995).

selves. We elders, when we lose a child, or when an enemy slaughters our brother, we flagellate ourselves, hitting ourselves with a machete. Then other women snatch the machete off us to wound themselves too. We grab another woman's machete to hurt ourselves with.

I asked Bêribêri what the Mêbengokre used before acquiring machetes from non-Indians. She replied that people used to go after White⁶ men to kill them and take their machetes which were brought back for the women to flagellate themselves, and then other women would grab them to hit themselves too. When I questioned why they do this she retorted scornfully: "We don't just cry 'oh! oh! my child!' We gash our heads". At this point she uses an onomatopoeic word "txu txu txu txu" to express the sound of the knife blade striking the head. I asked her why they shed blood, to which she replied: "We hit ourselves until we bleed, until the blood flows down our face [...]. We throw ourselves repeatedly to the ground. Then we grab a piece of wood to hit ourselves with. We repeatedly strike our body parts where we once held our child, then our whole body".⁷ In reply to which relatives the women do this for, she said that it is done for brothers, children, one's mother, father, husband et cetera. I asked her if there is a specific lament for a still-born child. She replied: "When a baby is born and then dies, we cry: 'My child, you have ceased living; you were born and now I have lost you. I am your mother and I cry because I miss you'". I enquired whether there are different laments for death caused by flu (*kubê djudjê* 'white man's sorcery'), Indian illnesses et cetera. She said that there are. "When a child dies of flu one cries 'Oh, my child, some one wicked slaughtered you with sorcery as if you were a mere game animal. I am your mother and I cry because I miss you. My child I am here thinking about you'. That is what we Mêbengokre do whereas you Whites just go around crying 'iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii'. " In other words, she contrasts the mono-syllabic crying of non-Indians, interspersed with 'spontaneous' crying, as done by children, with the stylised formulas, delivered in falsetto voice, by Mêbengokre women.

I asked Bêribêri how one wails for dead pets; it is significant that the formula mentioned is 'my child who is like a Mêbengokre'. Women nurture pets in their homes and plants in their gardens. On my last visit to the Mêtÿktire I noticed a woman chewing food and then pressing it through her lips into a fledgling's beak. Certain species of animals are traditionally associated with specific matri-houses which thereby monopolise the right to raise them, and in a myth that refers to the origin of laughter, one

6 The term 'Whites' (*brancos*) is the term used in Brazil to designate non-Indians; it does not denote skin colour.

7 In reply to the reviewer who requested more details concerning this statement, I can only suggest that a woman initially vents her anger on her arms as if they were rendered useless by the loss of the child they once held. It is noteworthy that the expression for adopting someone is 'to grab by the arm'. One could compare a line from the song "All of me" by Simons and Marks, eternalised by Billie Holiday and addressed to a departed lover: "Take my arms, I'll never use them".

or two bat-boys (depending on the version) were brought up in a specific matri-house. Thus the analogy between children and pets makes sense in the Mëbengokre context. Albisetti/Venturelli (1962: 971) likewise mention Bororo women wailing for dogs, macaws and other pets.

It is noteworthy that the notion of missing someone is a prevalent theme in the poetic structure of Mëbengokre wailing. Various writers have claimed that the Portuguese noun *saudade* expresses the specificity of the Luso-Brazilian soul, initially inspired by Portugal's shoreline beside the vast ocean, where men customarily departed, sometimes never to be seen again.⁸ I would argue that it is not a notion expressed exclusively in Portuguese; in English, *saudade* is expressed as a verb (to miss), as is the equivalent in Mëbengokre (*oama*). To my mind, the fact of being formulated as a noun or a verb does not differentiate the feeling being expressed. I surmise that missing some one is as universal as grieving.

It is interesting to note Bëribëri's scorn of non-Indian women who merely shed tears and moan over the loss of relatives, lacking any stylised expression of grief. One could be forgiven for expecting Amerindians to be able to deal with grief more easily than their non-Indian middle-class urban counterparts due to the prevalence of death resulting from the high mortality rate. However, Bëribëri expresses the opposite view, that the Mëbengokre are more sensitive to loss than non-Indians.⁹

Urban (1988: 393) compares contemporary wailing practices to the Tupi 'welcome of tears' that puzzled early travellers due to the seeming absence of true emotion, as people would suddenly stop crying, uncover their face and smile. He says this confuses the surface emotional significance with the underlying one, a desire for sociability. I was told by the Mëbengokre that wailing by non-relatives must be reciprocated with gifts of food, a comment that arose from my presence in the house of a non-relative of mine who had died. My relatives gibed me by asking what I was being paid to go there.

Urban (1988: 393-394) notes that the Xocleng use the same term for the wailing that occurs on the occasion of a death and for the crying done by children, whereas the sort he analyses has another name. The Mëbengokre use the same term for children's crying and for ceremonial wailing, but the latter is qualified as 'beautiful' wailing. There is also a song genre, exclusive to elderly women, known as *màry kati*, big or major wailing.¹⁰ The Mëbengokre abhor prolonged crying on the part of children; it is probably considered dangerous. This can be inferred from the fact that a sudden fright

8 A discussion of this question can be found in Roberto DaMatta's article "Antropologia da Saudade" (DaMatta 1993).

9 It is interesting to compare the analysis of Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1992) of infantile death being responded to tearlessly in poverty stricken North-Eastern Brazil.

10 Giraldin (2000) deals extensively with the Apinayé genre and repertoire of laments. They are a closely related Jê people.

is considered to endanger soul loss on the part of a baby. A howling baby could be considered to be outside itself with grief, thus under threat of inability to regain self-control. Erikson (1996: 289) notes the same abhorrence of infantile crying among the Panoan Matis. On a few occasions that a young child wailed in a tantrum in the house where I lived, the men who were in the men's house, in the centre of the village, halted their conversation as one of them called over, demanding to know why the child was in such a state.

Whilst visiting a Mëtyktire village in 2002, the granddaughter of my adoptive father, the chief Ropni, died after a prolonged illness, and unwittingly I found myself caught up in the highly charged atmosphere of a funeral. To my amazement no one hacked their head with a machete on that occasion. One of my brothers, Tedje, visited briefly that day from a nearby town where he is working for a Mëtyktire Association dealing with health issues. People attributed to his advice the fact that no woman practiced flagellation on that occasion. Some weeks later, in São Paulo, at the funeral of Orlando Villas-Boas (one of the founders of the Xingú Park), a chief from Kubëkàkre, a village of the Mëkrāgnoti subgroup of Mëbengokre, told me that the Whites (*kubë*) had told them to abandon these practices in order not to ruin (*ajken*) the women. On one occasion when flagellation broke out during my fieldwork in the early 1980s, there was a Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) missionary present. She wished to intervene to halt the proceedings, although she did not manage to do so, and I did not feel authorised to interfere. It was probably due to the influence of these Protestant missionaries and to medical personnel that the Mëbengokre have abandoned the practice of secondary burials.

Hegland's article (1998) on flagellation and women's rituals of mourning in Peshawar, Pakistan, provided a much needed interlocutor to reflect on this question. This author notes (1998: 245) that both men and women practice chest-beating (*sineh-zani*), but only the men may draw blood, beating their backs with chains (*zangir-zani*). Hegland analyses the women's chest and head-beating as a form of self expression whereby they acquire prestige, honour and fame for their performative pre-eminence. She shows that the female ritual gatherings obey a clearly defined etiquette and are closely monitored by middle-aged women, whilst at the same time they offer an opportunity for individual creativity. Performances are energetic and competitive for both men and women, and the men proudly display their scars for the rest of their lives. A parallel can be drawn with the Mëbengokre in that most mature women display scars on their heads that are visible whenever they renew the traditional hairstyle, characterised by a triangular tonsure.

The intensity of the performance is a key element in any display of Mëbengokre singing, dancing, and rhetoric. I was once criticised by one of my brothers for making him ashamed for not singing loudly enough in a name-confirmation ceremony. Dance leaders exhort the dancers to perform vigorously, something that is related to the effi-

cacy of the ceremonies. When I asked Bêribêri to demonstrate wailing in falsetto tone, during the lesson she gave me in speech tone, she misunderstood and retorted that of course she does not wail in a low voice. Although people may go on with what they are doing when they hear wailing, it is extremely disquieting.

Among Mëbengokre women, as with Shi'a men (Hegland 1998: 248), new dribbles of blood sprout with each stroke, and the blood pours down the face and body. Significantly, when one is ill or in a liminal state one cannot use the conventional body paint, including blood red *urucu* applied to the face and feet. But even if someone practices flagellation when fully painted, with a reddened face and feet, and the body blackened with geometrical body-paint designs produced with genipap, the streams of blood stand out in sharp contrast.

Hegland (1998: 248) describes the men's scars as badges notarizing years of flagellation, and as ineradicable, "embodied testimony" to their identity and devotion. In the case of the Mëbengokre, the counterpart to the women's head scars are the scars inscribed on men's chests to mark the killing of an enemy. This parallel deserves further attention but there is not space to do that here. Hegland (1998: 253) says that some women seem quietly proud of their self-inflicted bruises. She talks of self-aggrandisement with outstanding performance, relating performance to female agency, subjectivity and empowerment. She describes the women as strategists and "shrewd negotiators of etiquette requirement" (Hegland 1998: 253); these comments are equally applicable to the Mëbengokre.

The question of outstanding female performers recalls an episode that I witnessed in the early 1980s. A Mëtyktire woman injured herself so badly over her sister's adult son (her classificatory son), who had gone missing on a trip to Brasilia, that she took weeks to recover enough to be able to walk again. Hegland mentions that the women push and shove for a good vantage position "to see flaying arms, clanging metal, and naked backs streaming with blood, the scene ending after a few short moments of pandemonium" (1998: 248). This description can be transferred to the context of the Mëbengokre, merely substituting the gender of the performers. It recalls analyses of rituals of revolt that serve to restore order. In the Mëbengokre case, wailing and flagellation can be thought of as emotional catharsis, although witnessing the display of emotion of other women can exacerbate one's own feelings of loss. As in the case of the Shi'a in Peshawar, the Mëbengokre who witness the eruption of a performance run along to get a better view. The sound of a machete blade thumping the crown of the head in quick successive blows is quite uncanny. It is now clear to me why I mistook this as a manifestation of chastisement, for this is a common association in the West, indeed flagellation is generally associated with the religious domain which is not how I perceive the Mëbengokre phenomenon.

The sadness evoked by a song that recalls a bygone ceremony, when a cherished person participated, can be just as acute as the news that a person's life has just ex-

pired. The poetic script and rules of performance provide a channel for navigating one through the torment provoked by loss in order to emerge, not unscathed, but able to return to the side of the living.¹¹ The Mětyktire say that the dead miss their living relatives and seize upon the opportunity to carry them off, something facilitated if they become weakened by excessive melancholy and nostalgia. Veiga (2000) has shown that in the case of the Kaingang (Southern Jê like the Xoclong), if one accepts food offered by a dead person then one is unable to return to the land of the living; one literally goes over to the other side.

If chaos theory allows one to discern order in something apparently chaotic, then wailing and flagellation allow one to impose order on potentially chaotic emotions. Hegland describes the female rituals in Peshawar as “an emotional outlet, helping them to release tension” (1998: 251). The shortcoming of this analysis is that one could equally claim that the women are instigated to perform wailing and self-flagellation by the existing cultural code. It should also be remembered that the most outstanding Měbengokre performances actually lead to death, albeit very rarely.

Hegland (1998: 248) mentions mothers being heartened by the courage of their sons. This was undoubtedly the case for Měbengokre men, witnessing the emotional display of their female relatives, before becoming convinced of the need to censure this activity. This brings us to the question of what difference it will make for the Měbengokre to summarily abandon the practice of self-flagellation. I do not wish to lament its eradication because I imagine that it could eventually lead to brain damage. But if it has been an integral component of Měbengokre female identity since the mythical past, the abandoning of this practice will supposedly make a difference of some kind. It will probably be construed as approximating them to the ‘civilizados’;¹² nevertheless, it should be remembered that Bêribêri despised the unstylished manifestation of grief by ‘Whites’.

Witnessing the abandonment of self-flagellation in 2002, for the first time since I began fieldwork with the Mětyktire, it struck me as toning down the funeral. It seemed to be a muted, anaesthetised affair, as if the participants were under the influence of tranquilisers. It is as if the women have to be subdued to conform to the dictates of Euro-American values. Maybe they will simply begin to acquire pre-eminence in new fields. Among the Apinayé (a closely related Jê people), the women have been intensely involved in the fight to demarcate their lands.¹³ In sum, the main question is whether Měbengokre women express emotional torment so dramatically due to their sensibility, as they seem to think, judging from Bêribêri’s narrative, or whether, as

11 This also evokes the shamanic treatment for a difficult birth, analysed by Lévi-Strauss (1958).

11 The Mětyktire regularly contrast ‘civilised Indians’, those with regular contact with national society, and ‘wild Indians’ (*indios bravos*), those who have not yet been contacted.

13 This process is described by Raquel Pereira da Rocha (2001).

seems more convincing, they are compelled to perform self-flagellation and ‘mortal jumps’ by the weight of tradition. The sudden suppression of these activities, especially flagellation (whether permanently or not), lends weight to the latter interpretation.

The question of globalization is relevant to my paper in a very specific and somewhat novel way. It was Hegland’s paper (1998) concerning the practice of flagellation by Shi’a Muslim women in Pakistan that helped me reflect upon flagellation (the counterpart to wailing) among Mëbengokre women. It had long been enigmatic to me. To a certain extent, it continues to be so, due to its ambivalent nature. It allows women to vent their feelings, the intensity of which can be gauged by the dramaticism of their performance, but on the other hand, they are at the same time constrained by their cultural code to make a public display of their most intimate feelings of grief.

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