

The Tomárâho Conception of the Sky

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Abstract.

The small community of the Tomárâho, an ethnic group culturally derived from the Zamucos, became known in the South American and world anthropological scenario in recent times. This group, far from the banks of the Paraguay river, remained concealed from organized modern societies for many years. Like any other groups of people in close contact with nature, the Tomárâho developed a profound and rich world view which parallels other more widely researched aboriginal cultures as well as showing distinctive features of their own. This is also apparent in their imagery of the sky and of the characters that are closely connected with the celestial sphere.

This paper is based on the lengthy anthropological studies of G. Sequera. We have recently undertaken a project to carry out a detailed analysis of the different astronomical elements present in the imagined sky of the Tomárâho and other Chamacoco ethnic groups. We will briefly review some aspects of this aboriginal culture: places where they live, regions of influence in the past, their linguistic family, their living habits and how the advancement of civilization affected their culture and survival. We will later mention the fieldwork carried out for decades and some of the existing studies and publications. We will also make a brief description of the methodology of this work and special anthropological practices. Last but not least, we will focus on the Tomárâho conception of the sky as well as describe the research work we have been doing together in recent times.

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1. The Tomárâho Culture

The act of living in a certain culture is displayed in many different ways. One possible way is their creativity, at stake when observing the changing phenomena of the surrounding nature; giving names to things, naming people, animals and plants, in short, building up knowledge and symbols to enable them to acquire an identity and survive as a society. The present groups aspire to this, and in complete parallelism, this was a strong motivation of cultures in the past, of those more technologically developed as well as the ones that did not follow the frantic development of “civilization” and remained in closer contact with nature. The Tomárâho small community is an example of the latter.

A first contact with members of this ethnic group took place in 1986 when one of the authors (Sequera) could see for himself the situation of near slavery and strong dependence the members of this people had to put up with in their relationship with the enterprise Carlos Casado. In complicity with the Paraguayan government since the end of the 19th century (a few years after the end of the Triple Alliance War which weakened the nation considerably), this enterprise, made up of Anglo-Argentine capitals, had illegally taken the lands of the Tomárâho and exploited the quebracho woods extensively in order to obtain wood for railway sleepers and to stock their tanning industries. Without any kind of recognized rights, the natives were made to work as axmen under hard labour conditions and be, in their turn, witnesses to the plunder of the Chaco woods thus becoming the helpless victims of the subjugation of their vital space (Sequera, 2006).

Given the importance of carrying out an anthropological study of this ethnic minority, comparative studies of ethnographic sources in different libraries and research centres were done, which helped to clarify the panorama of the possible origin and mention of the Tomárâho in Jesuits' letters (*cartas annuas*) and old chronicles. Sequera, moreover, lived among the natives during several periods between 1987 and 1992, which enabled him to undertake a methodical work of recognition and transcription of the Tomárâho language, a detailed inventory of the social representation of their flora and fauna as well as the gathering and register of an immense mythical corpus that shows the rich world view of this small group. The ethnological work employed the most pertinent qualitative techniques in anthropology, with scientific rigour in observations as well as giving great importance to fieldwork based on the method of partaker observation, cf. the works of Polish anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski (Malinowski, 1922).

The Tomárâho (or Tomaráxo) is a small ethnic group, which together with the Ybytóso (or Ebidóso), makes up a larger group, the Ishir, known in Paraguay as the Chamacoco. The Chamacoco, traditionally hunter-gatherers, in the linguistic classification are related to the Zamuco family. Another indigenous group, the Ayoreo, also belongs to the linguistic family of Zamuco. We do not intend to discuss the etymology of these words and names where abound disparate proposals mainly based in the writings of European chroniclers, beginning perhaps with *Viaje al Río de la Plata, 1534-1554* by harquebusier Ulrico Schmidl (1510-1580). In different catalogues of languages and dialects, in compilations of chronicles and other European texts, certain terms like *Timinabas*, later *Timinaha* and other similar ones come up, always in the Zamuco category. It is mentioned that the peoples who spoke these languages lived in the Chaco woods, inland, far from the Paraguay river. It is also said that these natives had not yet been "subdued by the Jesuit Mission". We gather then that they are referring to the Tomárâho, those natives whose descendants Sequera visited in the neighbouring area of San Carlos in 1986 and who, due to their ancient customs and their own idiosyncrasy, for many years remained alienated from Paraguayan society.

Shamanism among the Chamacoco has as much relevance as in other indigenous cultures. Vocal music is closely related to shamans' rituals, whether men or women. These prominent members of the tribe, known as *konsaha* or *anahak*, create their own repertoires basing themselves on dreams, called *chykêra*, which stimulate the creation of their poems, melodies and rhythms. The Chamacoco shamans try to dominate their dreams by turning them into a chant called *teichu*. The production of these songs is highly personal and it can be transmitted to other members of the community, but it is generally performed in groups where several songs mix and a very atypical musical atmosphere is created with rattles (*sonajas*) and whistles as instrumental accompaniment. Rattles called *osecha* or *paîkâra* by the Chamacoco are made from gourds (*calabazas* of the species *Lagenaria siceraria*) or with tortoise shells called *enermítak* (*Geochelone carbonaria*). Dry seeds or pebbles are put inside so as to produce sound. These rattles represent the sky and the shamans identify their upper part with the centre of the sky, *porr hosýpyte*. The body of the instrument is painted in "visual narratives" in the shape of rhomboids, and inside these geometrical figures are represented the stars *porrebija* (Sequera, 2006). Studies suggest a close relationship between the Chamacoco vocal and instrumental techniques – specially among the Tomárâho where shamanism has lasted longer and more intensively – and their vision of the world, a bond between musical expression and the natives' view of the universe still to be researched in detail (see also Cordeu, 1994).

The Chamacoco shamanic practices are very similar to those of other South American indigenous cultures, and even to those of other continents: visionary dreams, personality split, trance achieved through chants, etc. are situations to be repeated in time and

space. It is through these dreams that the *konsaha* discover for the rest of the members of the tribe the true “topography” of the indigenous universe and its interrelation with the mythical tales inherited from their ancestors.†

2. Astronomic elements of the Ybytóso and Tomárâho sky

The Chamacoco imagine the world as a disk-shaped flat surface which they call *hñymich*. On this immense earth disk are located their familiar landscapes, their villages, rivers and woods and also neighbouring villages they had contact with. The *hñymich* stands on the waters of an aquatic world called *niogorot urr*. As it occurs with other ancient peoples, the presence of a subterranean water world fits the Chamacoco world view because of the importance they assign to water in springs and rivers (moreover, the mythical beings *ahnapsûro* are aquatic beings, as we will see). The *niogorot urr* is subdivided in various strata at different depths. Over the earth disk are situated several transparent skies, generically called *porrioho*. They are immense half spheres that surround men and which they imagine resting on the sides of the *hñymich* disk.

Apart from these descriptions of the earth, the underworld and the characteristic skies, the Chamacoco conception of the sky includes many representations related to the stars, individually as well as in groups. We find the Milky Way, called *iomynny* and its meaning, perhaps, as the way of the souls (Giménez Benítez et al., 2002), and other “nebula” clearly seen from the great Paraguayan Chaco, such as the Great (*kajywysta*) and Small (*kajywyhyrtâ*) Magellanic Clouds. Also the Sun, called *Deich*, and the Moon, *Xekulku*, both male characters, are protagonists of several stories very dear to their culture (Cordeu, 1990-1991). There are also certain stories that mention Venus, which they call *Iohdle*, or also mother of the stars, *porrebe bahlohta*, which are related to the other celestial bodies and to the gentiles. Many elements of the Chamacoco cosmos have protectors assigned, such as insects (protected by *Ñiogogo*, the frog *Bufo granulatus*) or other members of local birds (protected by *Wohôra* for the Tomárâho and by *Pêeta yrâhata* for the Ybytóso). In the same way, stars are protected by *Abich*, the star son of Venus, while the *ñandú* or local ostrich (*Rhea Americana*) called *Pemme-Kamytêrehe* by the Chamacoco is in charge of *Deich*, the Sun. In their stories and drawings the *kululte* or *châro* has also been represented. It is the “cosmic tree” or world support, which, like in many other cultures, works as a link between the *porrioho* and the *niogorot urr*. As we will see later the *châro* plays a privileged role in the stories about shamanic travels.

3. The Axis Mundi

The centre as a symbol is present in many cultures and was thoroughly studied by historians of religion. According to Eliade, the existence of a cosmic centre is a natural consequence of the divide of reality into the sacred (where all the value is concentrated) and the profane, whose space gives no orientation to man (Eliade, 1957). Thus the world acquires a meaning only through *hierophanies*.‡ These intrusions of the sacred into the profane establish a unique place, a centre, which breaks away with a homogeneous space unrelated to any mythical inheritance. It can also be interpreted as an element which links several existential levels; among them, one is, of course, ordinary life, whereas the other levels are unapproachable to men, or at least to all men.

The spatial arrangement of these different levels is oriented orthogonally to the earth flat space, though it is true that the borders of the habitable earth have also special

† A very detailed anthropological exploration for the case of the *Qom*, or *Tobas* from the Argentine Chaco, can be consulted in (Wright, 2005).

‡ from Greek, *hieros*, meaning sacred, and *phainein*, revelation, that is, hierophany could be translated as “where the sacred is revealed”.

connotations. Moving between these levels is done vertically, either towards the upper part or, quite on the contrary, penetrating the bowels of the earth. The typical image that arises in the imaginary of people from the different cultures is that of a prominent mountain, which stands out in the landscape, or that of a “cosmic tree” distinguished by its height or old age, or another “pillar” that functions as a link between the sky with the earth as well as with the lower regions.

Generically speaking, this object is called an *axis mundi*, and History is generous in examples. We will see that there exists a strong parallel between these beliefs and the cosmos as imagined by the Ybytóso and the Tomárâho from Northern Paraguayan Chaco.

The mountain or cosmic pillar was not only located in the centre of the organized space of ancient communities but very often its peak represented the highest point in the world, an area that had not been reached even by the greatest floods ever. These places were imagined, in their turn, like a kind of navel of the earth, an embryo. The Creation of the world took place there and then expanded towards the periphery in all directions. And of course, man had been born (had had its origin) in that centre of the world; a centre of Creation that a future ethnographic work should be able to clarify also for the whole Chamacoco community, and for the Tomárâho in particular.

4. The Ybytóso and Tomárâho axis mundi

The view of the universe accepted by the Chamacoco imagines a tree-support of the world which, as we said, they call *kululte* or *châro*. This tree belongs to the species *Chorisia insignis*, endemic from Paraguay and bordering countries; among other names this tree is known in Spanish as *palo borracho*. Like in many other cultures, this cosmic tree represents the link between the sky and the earth. It is said that in the roots of this mythological tree converge all graves.

The Chamacoco’s higher universe is imagined like a juxtaposition of transparent skies which we earlier in this article called *porrioho*, opposite to the dwelling of the dead on earth where the *châro* sinks its roots. The myth of origin says that in ancient times the earth and the sky were united by the cosmic tree. Both kingdoms, lets say, were fused together and the gentiles could move around without any barriers or impediments. The first inhabitants of the earth, called *yxyro poruwuhle*, fed themselves without effort, hunting animals and gathering fruits easily. This situation reminds us of similar mythological eras in other cultures and it may very well be called a sort of Chamacoco’s paradise or garden of abundance. However, as the informants that collaborated with this ethnographic investigation coincide in stating, history changed its course the day a widow and her children asked to be helped with food, assistance which was denied to them. On seeing this lack of altruism for her family and the idleness her neighbours showed, *Dagylta*, the widow, turned into a beetle and slowly began to gnaw the wood of the mighty *châro*. At that moment appears in the story a bird, *dichikîor* of the species *Polyborus plancus* or *Caracara plancus*, known in Spanish as *carancho*, who attempted to stop the widow from carrying out her plan. But he failed and the cosmic tree finally fell down.†

The two images we show below present the conception of the cosmic tree in two graphic registers of Ogwa Flores Balbuena, a member of the Ybytóso community (Sequera, 2005). The first one (left, year 1991) shows a representation of the myth of origin for the Ybytóso and the central place occupied by the *châro*. We can see in the drawing a whole variety of local birds and animals, as well as a few gentiles travelling between the earth and the sky. The second graphic register (right, year 1988) shows the tree *Ebyta* (another name

† Among the *mocoví* of the Argentine Chaco there exists a very similar story, where the widow is turned into a capybara or *carpincho*. See the chronicle by the Jesuit father Guevara (1764).

for *châro*) as the pillar and support of the world, again during times previous to its fall caused by *Dagylta's* intervention. This drawing shows also the two kingdoms united by the mighty tree and some characters around it.

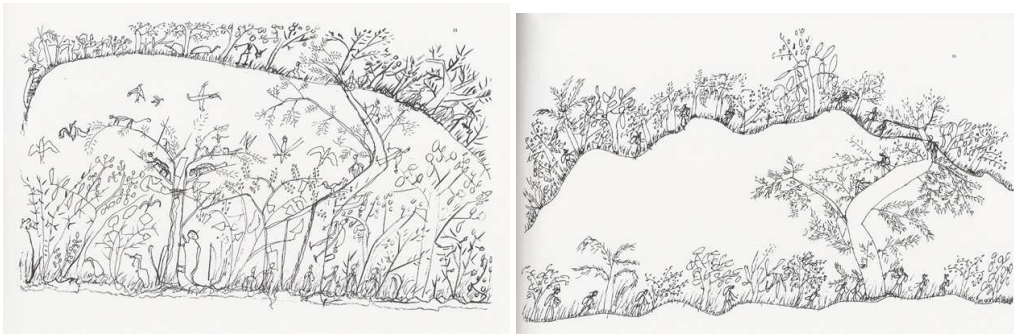


Figure 1. Drawings by Ogwa Flores Balbuena, a member of the Ybytóso community.

While *Dagylta*, in the shape of a beetle, gnawed and weakened the trunk of the cosmic tree, many gentiles that until then moved freely between sky and earth, foreseeing what might happen, decided to climb down. Others, instead, more idle, were left behind and once the tree had fallen, remained forever in the upper kingdom, clinging to the sky. And they turned into the *porrebija*, the stars that inhabit the Chamacoco sky.†

The Chamacoco say that when the bridge that joined the two kingdoms was cut off, the universe expanded and sky and earth never came together again. In the representations of Ogwa Flores shown in previous figures, the sky is inhabited by beings that move about, interact and cohabit with animals and plants of the higher region. And this region is located just a few metres above the top of the highest trees in the earth woods. Moreover, from the stories we gather that the same sky reflects its colour on the leaves of the top foliage of these woods. When *châro* collapsed, the joint of this kind of cosmic pillar closed, transforming the sky, which was seen as a thick layer, hard and gray, into a stratified region divided in multiple levels. The Chamacoco imagery, through this foundational event of collapse, disarticulates the Ecumene into two opposing worlds: the upper kingdom, which looks like a half sphered sky; the lower region, set on the original waters, imagined like a wrecked world (Sequera, 2006).

This separation heaven-earth-hell was largely recorded both in studies on Anthropology and in the history of religions as well. Eliade, in his book *Images and Symbols* mentions the case of the Semang pygmies in the Malaca or Malayan peninsula. In the centre of the Semang world there is an enormous rock (or perhaps a limestone hill; see Evans, 1937), called Batu Ribn or Batu 'Rem, which covers the lower regions and, in ancient times, was the base on which stood a tree trunk that reached the sky. Hell, the centre of the earth and the entrance to heaven were joined by the same axis. This axis, in turn, was the way to take to move from one region to the other. The story goes that, for this people, in the past, communication with God and heaven was simple and natural, but after a ritual flaw this relationship was interrupted. What had been natural for all the members of the Semang world was then left as a privilege only for the shamans.

† Note that the Bushmen (*Bosquimanos*) from the Kalahari desert, in South Africa, say that the stars are the very first peoples and that they are like them, nomads and hunter-gatherers (Krupp, 1996). According to the Qom of the Argentine Chaco, after a cataclysm that altered the structure of earth and sky, some characters also became stars (Wright, 2005).

5. The Chamacoco space-world

After the collapse of mythological *châro*, a breakdown event that took place early in the history of the Ybytóso and the Tomárâho, the universe acquires a particular architecture where the higher world is separated from the underground world. The former is located above ground and it includes six strata, starting with the usual habitat of plants and animals. This layer, solid and dry is also the dwelling of men and climbs to an altitude equivalent to the highest palm tree. This region is called *porr iut*, which in Chamacoco language means lower sky. Then there is a layer located above the ground, which is characterized by its humidity. It is called *porr pehet*, which in indigenous language stands for half way up to heaven (*pehet* means space). This layer belongs to the region where clouds are located and where rain develops. Also storms, originated by beings called *osâsero* (spirits of the storms), find in this area a place to set up. This is the dwelling of the wren-like rushbirds (*Phleocryptes melanops*, or in Spanish *pajaritos junqueros* or *petûis chyperme* in indigenous language), who fly low in swamps, and it is also where some of the shamans dwell. In turn, the members of the Tomárâho community affirm that this region is peopled by strange spirits, called *osôoro kynaha*, evil beings which transmit deceases, microbial or contagious, endemic in many regions of Northern Chaco. *Nehmurt*, a mythical malevolent being is also found in *porr pehet*.

The following stratum of the higher world is called *porr pixt* (true sky) and the Chamacoco represent it as a layer of thick fog, the domain of a character called *Lapyxe*, the rain maker. Many characters act as guardians of certain things, phenomena and animate and inanimate objects. *Lapyxe*, in turn, is the guardian of waters. In this region both the Moon and the Sun can be found but, according to some qualified informants, with the latter located beneath the former. In fact the contour of the Moon marks the higher edge of the *porr pixt*. This edge makes up the gate to heaven, difficult to go through as its guardians are the strange spirits *osôoro kynaha*. These are the main obstacles the shamans *anahak* have to overcome in order to travel through the skies of the higher world during their shamanic flights.

The fourth sky, *porr yhyr* (high sky), is a wide area where the stars *porrebija* are found, as well as groups of stars that make up asterisms and constellations. Let us recall that in the Chamacoco world view, stars had been born from the beings left behind in the higher region at the moment of the collapse of the *châro*, the cosmic tree that joined the sky and the earth in time immemorial. The most luminous “star” in the night sky after the Moon, which is planet Venus, or *Iohdle* for the natives, is also found in this clear sky, together with other kinds of celestial objects. The Milky Way, *iomyyny*, as we have seen, is shown in the crystal clear skies of the Chaco Paraguayo as an outstanding whitish stripe across the sky and is also located in the *porr yhyr*. With the exception of some visionary shamans, nobody has the power to enter this distant and profound sky.

Finally, the two last strata of the higher world are called *porr uhur* (“horizon” sky), the former, and *porr nahnyk* (cold sky), the higher. The former is the threshold to the end of the firmament and the region of the unknown. The latter is seen as an indefinite space which goes beyond the inner skies, the region where the universe is expanded and the unknown predominates. It is a profound, airless sky.†

Let us travel now in the opposite vertical direction, that is, towards the kingdom of the profound. The underground world, which appeared in the Chamacoco imagery after the fall of the cosmic tree, is divided into three main strata. It is a hidden and profound world that extends towards the bowels of the earth and it has a viscose constitution. It

† Cordeu (1994) has provided a different stratification of the higher world, more related to the chromatic and atmospheric properties of the sky.

is supposed to be a region where destruction reigns. The first region, *nôgoro urr*, is a wetland zone with superficial water courses. In this fluid medium inhabits the mythical eel *dyhylygyta* and also the *uriche*, the present otter (of the species *Lontra longicaudis*). These animals coexist with spirits that take the shape of fishes. It would be these fishes who would grant the shamans powers to fight against the strange spirits *osïoro kynaha*.

The second subterranean layer is imagined like an area of profound waters mixed with thick viscous mud. It is known as *hñymich yhyrt*, literally earth of high hill, and it is the dwelling of monsters similar to the eels. The most fabulous among them both for its dimension and its red giant head, is the one the natives call *pêeta*. This monster eel grants to certain shamans the power to move quickly through this subterranean layer, to emerge from the water underworld at great speed in any point of the earth. Finally, the third subterranean layer is called *hñymich urruo*, which means under ground. This is the region of the dark and rotten world of corpses and that of the being called *amyrry lata*, which looks like a giant armadillo (*Priodontes maximus*), which is connected with initiated shamans.

Although these different strata of the wrecked world invoke destruction, death and finally putrefaction of everything alive, they can, however, liberate certain forces of ascension like those that impel the shamans in the second layer (Sequera, 2006) and also the ones that characterize the *ahnapsûro* (or *axnábsero*), the mythical beings of the Chamacoco world. Having being described for the first time by Boggiani in 1900 (Baldus, 1932; Susnik, 1969), the *ahnapsûro* are recalled by all Chamacoco natives, although only the Tomárâho keep the ritual practices of mythical representations even today (the myths of origin called *emuhno*). These powerful aquatic beings, whose bodies are covered with scales and feathers, are believed to be the founders of the Chamacoco culture and, in time immemorial, lived together with the gentiles *yxyro* in full harmony, and even taught the first peoples to search for food and organize themselves. Their appearance now-a-days in the Tomárâho camp is the source of shock and terror. Regularly, ritual representations are organized to repel the danger of their possible presence.

6. Final Discussion and Future Projects

In this article we described just a sketch of the immense richness of the Chamacoco in their relationship with nature and the sky. A long and patient ethnographic work has brought to light the most remarkable features of this aboriginal group as a whole, alongside with the characteristics of the Tomárâho and Ybytóso in particular. Becoming familiar with their culture, the transcription of their language, their slow social improvement and education, are some of the elements many people have been working on, with great respect for traditions and cultural identity.

In this important ethnographic work, however, the astronomical aspects have not been treated as thoroughly as the other aspects. That is the reason why there remains to be done a detailed analysis of recognition and identification of the outstanding aspects of the Chamacoco sky, as well as an in-depth study of the true meaning of the *châro*, the cosmic tree that united the sky and the earth and which, even nowadays, is central to the rituals concerning the origin of the world. Prominent stars visible at different moments of the year (such as Sirius) or even well known asterisms like the Orion's belt, their names and the stories that were certainly told about them, are some aspects, we believe, that need to be payed greater attention. Also their imagery about the presence and characteristics of the Milky Way; their interpretation of some outstanding and sudden phenomena, like total solar eclipses; also prolonged appearances in the sky, like for comets, or sporadic ones like in the case of shooting stars, are other interesting aspects of their culture that require more work.

The story of *Iodhle* (Venus), who long time ago married a young Tomárâho gentile, is just one of the many stories with astronomical elements that old people used to tell. Many of these stories are still remembered by the older members of this group. Thus, a necessary project is to be able to incorporate this culture into the immaterial patrimony of humanity before it gets lost in the unfathomable clouds of time. Another project in store is to try to understand the relationship between the vocal and instrumental techniques of the Chamacoco and their view of the universe surrounding them, specially the use they make of rattles (*paikâra*) which, as we have seen, represent the starry sky.

Likewise our project intends to carry out, together with the members of the present Tomárâho community, a work of gathering data and recognition of the stars and constellations distribution, dark zones in the sky, nebula etc. These would be interpreted maps with an important symbolic weight of the Tomárâho sky for the Upper Chaco region, for different moments of the year, which may tell us a great deal about the aboriginal imagery and also about many things of their every-day life that they project in the dark depths of the sky. In short, we consider that the Tomárâho conception of the sky has not been sufficiently explored as a study in itself, and that more fieldwork would be welcome in the area of ethnoastronomy as an interdisciplinary activity that includes anthropologists as well as astronomers.

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