

# Age Grades and Environmental Practice among the Xavante of Pimentel Barbosa

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*Multiplying futures in historical ecology:  
Understanding change and continuity in sociocultural landscapes*

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## Abstract

Through its emphasis on diachronic change in human-landscape interactions, the historical ecology model implies connections between the past and the future. However, making these connections requires new ways of understanding the present. In this paper, I argue that among the Xavante people of Pimentel Barbosa village, Brazil, contemporary age-based variation in environmental practice (behaviors and perspectives involving the environment) manifests an ongoing process of continuity and change with implications for the past and the future. I discuss this pattern in terms of three formal age grades – adolescent youth (*wapté*), young adults (*ritei'wa*), and mature adults (*iprédu*) – and their mutual involvement in an ongoing tension between “traditional” and “modern” environmental roles.

## Introduction

Human-landscape interactions among the Xavante of Mato Grosso, Brazil, have been influenced by a long and well documented history of involvement with external social and economic spheres. Since the 1940s, when they most recently entered sustained contact with Brazilian society, their subsistence regime transformed from what was described as seminomadic hunting and gathering (Maybury-Lewis 1967:35) to sedentism and reliance on agricultural production of rice as a staple crop (Coimbra, et al. 2002:152-171; Flowers 1983:226-227). Although largely historical in nature, this shift is also part of an ongoing process of change. In my research with the Xavante community of Pimentel Barbosa, I sought to address how contemporary practices and perspectives regarding the local environment might contribute to a more nuanced understanding of historical changes in human-landscape interactions. In this paper, I discuss the specific case of age-based variation in both behavior and ideology as it relates to *du*, a particular ritualized form of hunting. Based on this example, I propose that by taking such a range social factors into account, historical ecology might better address not only the complexities accompanying historical change in globalization settings, but also their implications for the future.

## Hunting with fire

The Xavante live in the *cerrado* of Central Brazil, a closed savannah landscape with relatively dense scrublands interspersed with open grasslands, tall bamboo forests, and closed gallery forests. Large game in the region include many species common to greater Amazonia, such as tapirs, peccaries, deer, and anteaters. These game animals contribute importantly to the contemporary Xavante diet, although they are increasingly supplemented by other sources of animal protein, such as fish, chicken, and beef. As is common among Gê groups, game meat is also important for ceremonial prestations and distributions during social rites.

Hunting with fire, called *du* in the Xavante language, is a ritualized collaborative hunting technique that is most often employed to acquire large quantities of meat in a short period of time for social rites. It is less frequently employed to acquire meat for household consumption outside of any ceremonial context. The *cerrado* vegetation is effectively burned during the dry season, from May to August, with grassland areas being burned earlier in the season, and denser scrublands and bamboo forests being burned as they dry more thoroughly, towards the end of the season.

As I observed *du* on 18 occasions during the 2005 season, hunting groups ranged from about 30 to 80 individuals, the latter being an instance of collaboration between two closely related villages. A group of males left the village around midmorning by truck, motorcycle, bicycle, foot, depending on the distance to be traveled from the village or base camp. Hunters carried a variety of arms, with rifles, shotguns, and bows being most common among full adults. Clubs, machetes, and handguns were more common among youth. The hunters gathered at a pre-designated starting point before informally splitting into three groups. Two of the groups were led by chosen runners, one from each of the two exogamous moieties. These two runners were responsible for lighting fire to the landscape as they raced in semicircular arcs to a pre-selected finishing point. Members of the moiety whose runner arrived first won the right to rub the other moiety's noses in the shame of their loss. The third group, of mixed moiety affiliations, entered the center of the circle, lighting fires here and there as they hunted. The strategy was to create a mosaic of burning vegetation, which progressively drove game from unburned areas into open burned areas, where they were more easily killed. *Du* usually lasted into the early afternoon, until the burn had died down throughout the entire area.

## Xavante age grades and youth

As one might infer from my previous comment regarding the methods of transportation and arms employed during *du*, this is not just an ostensibly "traditional" activity (a point I will take up below), but also a locus of cultural transformation. This change process is apparent in how youth participation differs from that of older adults. I will structure my discussion here according to three Xavante age grades, which structure the usual lifecycle: *wapté*, *ritei'wa*, and *iprédu*. *Wapté* is commonly glossed as "adolescents." At the time of my research, *wapté* ranged in age from 8 to 14 years of age. The second age grade, *ritei'wa*, is often glossed as "young adults," or "youth," sensu stricto. *Ritei'wa* males ranged from 13 to 19 years of age. The third age grade, *iprédu* includes all full adults.

It is important to note that I was assigned to the *ritei'wa* age grade. Through my adoption by a particular family, I also gained a *ritei'wa* brother, who made a special effort to include me in youth activities. Although this assignment left me with relatively less access to females and males of other age groups, it gave me the wonderful opportunity to get to know what is usually a somewhat closed group to outsiders. Accordingly, in the next section of this paper, I will emphasize *ritei'wa*, youth in a strict sense.

### **Youth participation in *du***

*Iprédu* thoroughly enjoy criticizing *ritei'wa* youth for not knowing how to hunt, for being “weak,” “lazy,” “knowing nothing,” and for wanting to “turn white.” Such shaming of youth by adults are common expressions of age-based rivalry and thus cannot be taken at face value. The striking fact is that, as regards their stance towards hunting, youth tend to not disagree with the sentiments behind these judgments. In my conversations with *ritei'wa*, only one ever expressed that he truly enjoys hunting. Among the others, a most common comment was that they do not like getting scratched by twigs or walking in the hot sun. With the exception of the one individual who claimed to like hunting, the others uniformly said they prefer fishing to hunting. When I asked one *ritei'wa* whether he was joining the men on a group hunt that particular day, he laughed and asked “me?” One individual who is particularly close to me even told me that he is not sure if he ever intends to learn to hunt. These comments indicate that youth tend not to value hunting or to aspire to become good hunters.

Another related question is whether or not youth participate in hunts, and whether their participation varies according to the type of hunt. Xavante categorize contemporary hunts according to two types: individual and group. Individual hunts are not done collectively, but may involve large numbers of people. Group hunts involve some collective ceremonial purpose, such as acquiring meat for marriages or initiation rites, or a collaborative strategy. Group hunts may employ fire (if so, they are called *du*), but not necessarily. Group hunts also may or may not take place during multiple day camping trips. These all-male camping trips are distinguished from treks, which also included women and children, and were discontinued over the last several decades.

My observations of *ritei'wa* participation in hunts confirm a pattern of avoidance, regardless of the type of hunt. Other than the time I asked my brother to hunt with his father and me, I never observed a single case of *ritei'wa* undertaking individual hunts alone or in small groups. Even when the men used the truck to go in large numbers on individual hunts, no more than two or three *ritei'wa* accompanied them. This pattern contrasts with the eagerness with which *ritei'wa* will undertake fishing trips if given access to the village truck. Youth also exhibit avoidance while participating in *du*. For example, if youth find a body of water in the course of hunting with fire, they often abandon the hunt in favor of fishing, and usually remain there until the hunt has concluded.

I attribute this pattern of avoidance to an implicit recognition that hunting is no longer the most practical means of providing animal protein for one's family, since fishing is more reliable and commercial sources are available to most families. I also believe it stems from a shift in male identity values, whereby the historical ideal of male

as hunter (Maybury-Lewis 1967:36) has been largely replaced among youth by other ideals, such as male as provider of commercial goods.

Despite a general pattern of hunting avoidance, youth participate more in *du* than in individual hunts. Furthermore, they tend to participate in *du* more or less according to the purposes for which they are undertaken. *Du* are undertaken to acquire meat for usual household consumption, with no ceremonial purpose, and to acquire meat for ceremonial purposes, including marriages and initiation rites. During my year of fieldwork, only one *du* had no ceremonial purpose. On that occasion, no *ritei'wa* participated. Most frequently, *du* were undertaken to acquire meat for marriage prestations, in some cases by *ritei'wa* grooms. Participation in these hunts by *ritei'wa* varied from few (two or three) to many (about twenty). I also accompanied one group camping trip undertaken as part of a *wapté* social initiation rite, which involved daily *du* to accumulate meat for a ceremonial presentation upon the hunters' return to the village. In this case, almost all *ritei'wa* participated in the camping trip, with just a few staying in the village due to health issues or other obligations. During the trip, *ritei'wa* either participated in the daily hunts or were assigned camp duties (making camp, butchering game, tending roasting fires), which Xavante adults consider integral to the hunt itself.

To review, I observed a general pattern of agreement between youth and adults that youth lack interest and skill in hunting. In addition, during the 2005 hunting season youth participation was positively correlated with the degree to which the hunts had ritual or ceremonial significance.

### **Hunting and cultural traditionalism**

Numerous explanations may be offered justifiably for greater youth participation in hunts that involve fire. In this paper I focus on one particular possibility, that youth participation in *du* conforms to a larger pattern, whereby younger community members tend to place more value on traditionalism as it pertains to ritual and ceremonial activities than to those in the domain of economics and subsistence.

Xavante men are extremely proud of their social and spiritual ceremonies, which are central to their cultural identity. Laura Graham takes up this issue in a wonderful article in the November issue of *American Ethnologist*. She mentions that the Xavante have adopted the Portuguese words *tradição* ("tradition") and *cultura* ("culture") to denote "the Xavante way of life, traditions... [, embracing] everything that contemporary Xavante associate with their forebears," including such subsistence activities as hunting (Graham 2005:629). In my research, I found that younger adults and youth most often use *tradição* interchangeably with *rituais* ("rituals") and much less frequently to inclusively denote what they perceive as "traditional" subsistence activities. In contrast to their conservative stance toward ceremonial and spiritual activities, I found younger community members to be strongly inclined to modernize agricultural and fishing techniques, if practical. Thus, in relative terms, traditionalism among younger Xavante favors ritual and ceremonial activities, whereas economic and subsistence activities are approached more pragmatically. By this, I do not mean to imply a cognitive opposition between ceremonial and economic domains, but rather that notions of traditionalism tends to prioritize such activities differently.

*Du* are particularly interesting because, being explicitly recognized by the Xavante people as both ritual acts and a subsistence practice, they are situated figuratively between traditionalism and pragmatism. Whereas youth tend to avoid hunting in general because they no longer recognize its practical value, they continue to value and participate in *du* because its ceremonial aspect makes it more relevant to the notion of *tradição*.

### **Reinterpreting the past**

In the above discussion, I focused on the perspectives and behaviors of *ritei'wa*, or youth in a strict sense. I will now broaden my focus to youth, considered broadly, and their role in historical change. In the discussion that follows, I show how youth values are apparent in historical changes in the Xavante practice of hunting with fire, whereby the tendency among youth to favor traditionalism in ceremonial activities over subsistence activities had tangible consequences for how the Xavante use the landscape.

The use of fire to hunt has undoubtedly been an important factor in landscape transformation since the Xavante migrated to the region in the middle of the nineteenth century. When they were contacted in the 1940s, the Xavante practiced trekking (Maybury-Lewis 1967:35, 53-59). According to village elders, one of the main purposes of dry season trekking was to hunt with fire. Subsequently, starting in the 1970s, the Xavante were subjected to territorial circumscription through government initiated agricultural development and settlement on an official reservation, both of which greatly reduced their access to the landscape (Menezes 1982). Accordingly, for the 100 years prior to being settled in a reserve, the use of fire was distributed throughout a much larger region than it is today. Important, then, is why and how *du* were continued throughout the process of territorial circumscription.

It is not a given that *du* or any other type of hunt should have endured the historical process of territorial confinement. Just as family treks were abandoned but male camping trips (i.e. ceremonial treks) continue today, *du* retained cultural relevance for subsequent generations of youth throughout the shift to reservation life in part because they are ritualized male acts of great import for social ceremonials.

Furthermore, the manner in which *du* continued to be practiced involved the use of modernizing technologies that not only facilitated their congruence with reservation life, but also enabled them to be continued as ostensibly “traditional” ritual acts. An example is the historical application of vehicular transportation to hunting with fire. Through the efforts of younger *iprédu* leaders, who were educated as *ritei'wa* in the cities, trucks not only came to be used by the community, but became an almost absolute requirement for travel within the reservation. Today, (male) village decision makers give preferential use of trucks to group hunting parties. Trucks enable large groups of hunters to reach relatively distant hunting grounds with minimal effort, making hunting more congruent with modern reservation life. Locations that previously were only reached by leaving the village before dawn and returning after dark, or on multiple day camping trips, can now be reached by leaving the village in the mid afternoon and returning in the mid to late afternoon. Ease of access made these hunts more practical during an era of increased scheduling conflicts caused by agricultural intensification and frequent engagements outside the reservation.

This particular configuration of innovation had concrete effects on the nature of landscape use. For example, reliance on trucks concentrated burning in areas close to the village or with road access, and restricted it from other areas. Interestingly, community members told me that some of those roads were specifically opened to access preferred hunting grounds during a World Wildlife Fund research program initiated by younger community leaders (Leeuwenberg 1995). Thus, burning was not only restricted within the reservation, but spatially patterned through reliance on a new technology.

### **Implications for the future**

The final issue I will take up in this paper is what possible scenarios for the future of *du* might be indicated by my interpretation that notions of traditionalism tend to favor continuity in ritual and ceremonial activities over subsistence and economic activities. An initial question is whether *du* will continue into the future. One adult leader told me that he anticipates the community will cease the practice altogether after the current set of elders die, reasoning that they alone are the stimulus for its continuation today. That is certainly one possibility, and in the case of *du* undertaken without ceremonial objectives, is a likely one. However, my interpretation suggests that the ceremonial function of *du* is a strong motivator for its continuation in such contexts. The discontinuation of *du* would necessarily involve either modifying or abandoning of a host of social rites, but there is scarce evidence that younger members of the community are inclined do so. For example, in the case of marriage prestations, my informants tell me that the quantity of wild game meat expected of a groom has increased significantly during the last 20 years, and that substitution by beef has never occurred. Similarly, because access to facilitating technologies is likely to continue or increase, hunting with fire is likely to remain at least as practical as it is today.

The possibility that *du* will continue into the future also depends on its continued ecological sustainability. Currently, there is no evidence of game depletion due to hunting on the Pimentel Barbosa reservation (Villalobos 2002). Furthermore, community elders claim that game populations have increased in recent decades, being greater today than they were before contact in the 1940s. They attribute this change to a reduction in individual hunting by younger adults. Despite these positive indicators, there is no guarantee of the future sustainability of landscape burning, especially if anticipated population increases (Coimbra, et al. 2002:124-129; Flowers 1994) cause it to occur more frequently. In fact, other Xavante reservations, with larger population to land ratios, have been extensively degraded with marked game depletion (Graham 1995:42).

In addition to the two most obvious scenarios for *du*, of continued burning with increased likelihood of environmental degradation or of discontinued burning with decreased likelihood of environmental degradation, it is also possible to take a middle-ground approach that protects the practice of *du* while limiting environmental impacts through acceptable modification to social rites and additional use of enabling technologies. Historical ecology might contribute to finding such a solution by applying historical research on the real environmental impacts of hunting with fire and ethnographic research on the contemporary ideologies motivating it.

## Conclusion

In this paper, I have discussed how changing youth participation in hunting with fire indicates that Xavante notions of traditionalism favor continuity in ceremonial activities, while subsistence activities are approached more pragmatically. I discussed the example of hunting with fire to demonstrate how both traditionalism and pragmatism can operate on activities at the interface of subsistence and ceremony. During my fieldwork I found a number of other examples of this dynamic, including fishing among youth, root and tuber gathering among women, and corn cultivation. In all of these cases, the Xavante make choices regarding subsistence activities not only based on practical issues, but also based on ideology and identity values. Attention to such dynamics may facilitate historical ecology as it increasingly addresses the complexities of change in globalization settings.

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