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Transcultural encounters as an amplification of forms: indigenous ontologies, the state, alternative modernity, and the environment on the Lower Amazon in Brazil

INTRO

The paper is based on prolonged fieldwork among the Sateré-Mawé, a Tupí-speaking indigenous group of some 12.000 people on the border of Brazilian states Amazonas and Pará on the Lower Amazon. Typical horticulturalists, hunters and fishers of the Amazonian rain forest, the Sateré-Mawé nevertheless have a long history of intercultural contact and have been part of the predatory and exploitative cycles of regional extractivism. Due to an enormous demographic explosion, ecological and economic pressure on the forest environment has increased considerably and shortage of decent alimentation has become a chronic problem. Although a fair trade project tries to reverse this process, the critical situation in the *Área Indígena* lingers on. Thus, the political situation is characterized by internal conflicts due to antagonistic strategies for material well-being and cultural resilience. Trans-environmental dynamics among this rainforest society have become the emergent product of a complex and often antagonistic entanglement of different environmental conceptions and practices that juxtaposes the sylvan environment with local indigenous ontologies, national state politics and globalized forms of AlterModernity.

As you know, the more recent ethnology of Brazil has in a startling way de-colonized our view on Amazonian cosmologies and, what is more, has introduced its anthropological and philosophical insights into international debates on possible alternatives in the face of the crisis of Western modernity (Latour). One of the most discussed of these works is Eduardo Kohn’s recent book “*How forests think*” (2013). Inspired by the semiotics of Charles S. Peirce Kohn unrolls his field as a complex relational web of “living logics”, whose “formal language” (*Formensprache*) all human and non-human entities have to adopt, in order to be able to be in existence. To understand this this “sylvan thinking” (Kohn) is tantamount for an alternative ways of interacting with the environment. Crucial to Kohn’s approach is his notion of “FORM”. Kohn understands “forms” as regular patterns of configurations, which manifest

themselves within the forest environment. Human persons – and actually non-human entities of the forest as well – attain agency by “*getting inside*” these emergent “forms” of the forest environment in order to be able to harness them.

Furthermore historical events tend to “*amplify*” forms in the way that they exacerbate already existing indigenous symbolic forms. Thus, colonial and post-colonial economies may not only amplify the forms of the rain forest, but introduce power configurations which, while retaining certain forms, nevertheless loosen the environmental embedding of the latter.

(1) Interactive Constitution of the Environment encounters with non-human beings of the forest



From an indigenous perspective human – animal relationships are less based on “mutual respect” born out of a moral commitment to acknowledging a shared “personhood”, but rather have to be negotiated on an interactive field of power. The distribution of “perspectives” is nothing less than a matter of life and death: to reverse and consolidate one’s superior position within a hierarchy framed by a prey – predator relationship means to force one’s own “perspective” on the other.

To be able to enforce one’s own perspective is predicated on the possibility of communication in order to establish the necessary effective and affective links (Zent) between human and non-human beings. The attribution of personhood to animals in Amerindian ontologies allows linguistic and extra-linguistic communication (Descola). Communication occurs in a variety of modes and strategies, whose common denominator can be said is the attempt to ritually overcome the post-mythical solipsism of beings (Descola) and to drag both

partners involved onto a common ground where communication is possible again. Backdrop to these ritual measures is a “clear ecological consciousness” (Zent) of Amerindian peoples. The primeval link of botanical, zoological, and human spheres as expressed in mythological narratives (op.cit.), is ritually restored in order to re-establish communication and to tap the generative power of primordial times to enhance agency today (Sullivan).

Now, the emergent regularities according to which these connectivities organize themselves in order to become “efficient”, have been called “forms” by Eduardo Kohn (2013), specific configurations, which constrain the possibilities of action. Thus, according to Kohn, there is the “practical problem of *getting inside form* and doing something with it”, because the “wealth of the forest – games and extractive commodities – accumulates *in a patterned way*” ... “[T]o access it requires finding ways *to enter the logic* of these patterns” (Kohn 2013:21, 166, emphasis mine).

The way these “practical problems” may be resolved, can be shown by means of a couple of hunting charms of Sateré-Mawé hunters. I would like to emphasize not only the creative play with “formal” aspects of “living logics”, but also the complexity of cascading symbolic associations involved.

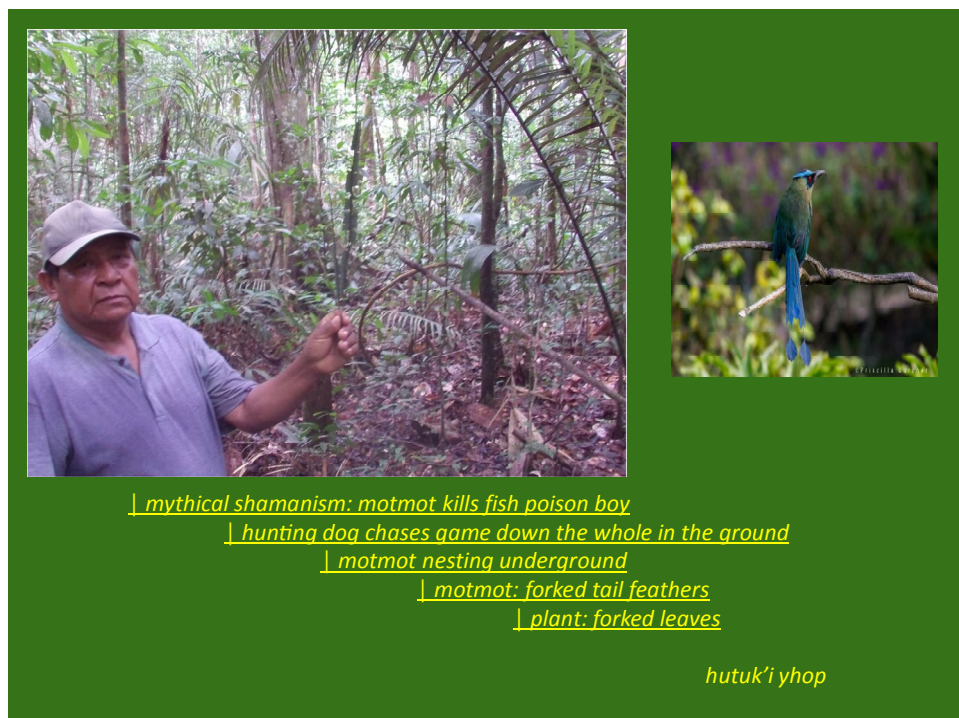


fig.1

Fig. 1 shows the leaf *hutuk'i yhop*, which can be used in hunting magic. Its furcated form alludes to the form of the *hutuk'i* bird's tail feathers, a bird which nests underground (motmot, *Momotus* sp.). By rubbing the hunter's dog with the leaf, the dog will be willing to enter holes

in the ground to chase animals hiding there. In the mythical dimension the *hutuk'i* bird possesses shamanic powers. He was one of a group of bird shamans who killed a young boy. Out of the boy's body grew the first *timbó* plant, which contains a poison used to kill fish in great quantities.

ase'i kuru eputu yp, „Curupira's Sword“



- | requires active engagement on part of the hunt
- | requires heightened attentiveness towards environment
- | produces culinary and social aesthetics

↑

- | hunter has to obey complex set of rules and restrictions
- | hunter: pact with Curupira assures his luck
- | hunting dog: acquires predatory quality
- | plant: crown of the leaves catches debris that falls from above / resembles shamanic "weapon"

Another hunting charm functions according to a simple analogy: the plant is called *ase'i kuru eputu yp*, “Curupira's Sword”. The vegetal material caught in the foliage is used to rub the nose of the hunter's dog, which bestows him with a “capturing” capacity. However, the application of this magic is considered to be “*fino*”, delicate, because *Curupira*, a kind of pan-Amazonian “Master of Animals” demands the observance of a whole series of behavioral rules. If the hunter violates *Curupira's* rules, he runs the risk not only to lose his luck in hunting, but also his physical and mental integrity. He suffers in consequence of failed relations to the entities of the forest. The efficiency of “formal” analogies is further underscored by the allusion to the *eputu yp* (“Sword”), a feather stick, which is used as a shaman's weapon.

As can be seen, efforts to harness the “living logics” of the forest require a deep understanding of complex interrelationships and multiple levels of significance. This knowledge is not only contemplative, but is *actively* applied by human *and* non-human

entities. The “hyper-awareness” (Zent) of the Amazonian hunter moving through the forest is tantamount to a veritable “culture of mindfulness”.

(2) Reactive de-constitution of the environment: encounters with the state

Guide in sateré-language: how to apply for welfare money:



As has been said “getting inside” the “living logics” of the rain forest requires an “ambitious” mode of human-nature (non-human) relations. Mature relations with the environment, as they are construed by the initiation rite, are based on complex ecological insights as well as cosmological notions, which usually are predicated on the willingness to undergo a variety of restrictions and precautions that seriously encroach on an individual’s life. These ecologically and cosmologically grounded cognitive configurations of *scarcity and renunciation* are in contrast to a notion of a (mythical) place of absolute *plenitude and fullness* in the forest. This “always already” timescape, as Kohn shrewdly calls it, may be inspired by natural forms of the forest as multi-species aggregations under fruit trees, waterholes, salt licks etc., historically reshaped by notions of the colonial river traders’ warehouses , where desired merchandise has been kept, and indigenous notions of stone-houses, where effigies of game animals are kept by a supernatural owner.



- | historical “form”: *barracão*: warehouse of river traders
- | cultural “form”: stone-house where prototypes of game animals are held
- | natural “form”: multi-species aggregations under fruit trees

“always already” timescape

The crucial point is that among the Sateré-Mawé it is usually not the pretentious and vindictive *Curupira*, who is in charge of the stone-house, but rather a benevolent “Animal Mother”. This “Animal Mother” is approached by simply demanding game from her. Again these hunting rituals are not performed at random, but happen “inside” of phenological and ethological “forms” (e.g. at the end of the rainy season huge bands of white-lipped peccaries come close to village sites; occasion to perform these rites). However, in contrast to pleading the Animal Mother the dealings with *Curupira* require more attentiveness. For one the hunter of game ceded by *Curupira* is forced to “get inside” a more ambitious framework of relations between human and non-human domains than the pattern of relationship with the Animal Mother, which rather corresponds to a simpler parent-child relation. As we will see, it is no surprise that a Sateré-Mawé individual is always prone to sideline this logic and “regress” to the more unconditional, “un-ambitious” logic behind the relation to the “Animal Mother”. Now it is very important to notice that this “form” of “un-conditional” access to resources is subject to considerable historical changes, which not only gradually erode connectivities with the forest environment, but also dislocate the very sources of agency towards the exterior.

The topography of sylvan wealth and plenitude has also followed this colonial and post-colonial trajectory. While in ancient times the stone-house of the “Animal Mother” has been located in the *centro*, i.e. deep in the forest, it now has been dislocated towards the urban centre with its bureaucratic facilities and consumerist possibilities:

the shifting topology of cornucopia:

- | shaman → animal mother / forest (“*centro*”)
- | chief → river trader / warehouse
- | capitão → SPI / FUNAI post (indigenist agencies of the state)
- | modern indigenous leaders → national / international NGOs
- | indigenous beneficiaries → government / bureaucracies in urban center
- cash machines
- super markets



The most striking indication of this trajectory is the increasing alienation from the sylvan environment. The Sateré-Mawé have been gradually obliged “to get inside the form” of governmental policies from the tutelary regime of the FUNAI to recent systems of cash transfer, while the Game Mother has fallen out of favor, as one of my interlocutors put it:

“Hunting is finished on the Rio Andirá. The Sateré do not trust in the forest anymore”

(3) Active re-constitution of the environment: encounters with Western AlterModernity



Lack of food has been chronic in Sateré-Mawé communities for quite some time. The proverbial scarcity of nutrients of rain forest ecologies, which forces human and non-human forest dwellers to develop complex strategies for survival has been additionally aggravated by bio-political factors as demographic explosion resulting in an over-exploitation of resources, especially game animals. To be fair, the overwhelming fascination with Western consumerism is partly due to the sheer necessity to buy foodstuff in urban super markets. Nevertheless, for about two decades political activists of the Sateré-Mawé are trying to reverse the situation of generalized misery and increasing intellectual loss in many indigenous communities by installing a project of commercializing forest products, in the first place guaraná. The syndicate of Sateré-Mawé producers supplies the European Fair-Trade market with forest products. Since such a market requires a whole series of certificates one cannot simply return to proverbial “millennial” agricultural wisdom, but stakeholders are forced to comply with the normative system of rules of this kind of market. This novel engagement with the forest environment among the Sateré-Mawé is actually a hybrid affair combining indigenous knowledge and practices of cultivation with concepts of Western ecogism.

Although the so called “*projeto guaraná*” still holds a minority position in comparison to beneficiaries of the welfare system, it is of considerable advantage that guaraná is at the heart of Sateré-Mawé cosmology and ritual. Although guaraná cultivation has long been part of Sateré-Mawé forest life, today, within the context of the Fair-Trade enterprise it is largely

cultivated within so-called *roças consorciadas* or **Forest Gardens**. Forest Gardens make part of the more encompassing ecological concept of permaculture and basically recurs to the ideal, that a spot of forest cleared for a garden should reproduce the biodiversity of the former forest. A typical forest garden of the Sateré-Mawé combines no less than about two dozen useful plants harvested for commercialization or personal use. Beyond that, management of a *roça consorciada* in many ways stretches out into the actual forest (transfer of wild seedlings, trees that remain standing, game animals that are attracted etc.). Thus, besides the economic aspect, these gardens without doubt re-activate / re-constitute engagement with the forest and re-actualize contentions with its “living logics”.



schematic distribution of plants

PU: personal use
Ex: export

				PU	Ex
1	açai	<i>Euterpe oleracea</i>	açai palm	x	
2	limão	<i>Citrus</i> spp.	lemon	x	
3	andiroba	<i>Carapa guianensis</i>			x
4	cajú	<i>Anacardium occidentale</i>	cashew	x	
5	guaraná	<i>Paullinia cupana</i>		x	x
6	abiu	<i>Pouteria caimito</i>		x	
7	pajurá	<i>Couepia</i> sp.		x	
8	pau-rosa	<i>Aniba roseodora</i>	rosewood		x
9	limão grande	<i>Citrus</i> spp.	lemon	x	
10	crajiurá	<i>Arribidea chica</i>			x
11	laranja	<i>Citrus</i> spp.	orange	x	
12	pupunha	<i>Bactris gasipaes</i>	peach palm	x	
13	cupuaçu	<i>Theobroma grandiflorum</i>	Großblütiger Kakao	x	
14	ingá	<i>Inga edulis</i>	inga	x	
15	biribá	<i>Rollinia mucosa</i>		x	
16	abacate	<i>Persea americana</i>	avocado	x	
17	urucum	<i>Bixa orrellana</i>	annatto		x
18	banana	<i>Musa</i> spp.	banana	x	
19	manguinho	<i>Mangifera</i> spp.	mango	x	
20	mandioca	<i>Manihot esculenta</i>	manioc	x	

Conclusion

As has been shown, the “contractual” relationship with *Curupira*, as a specific strategy to “get inside” the “living logics” of the forest, implies observance of a complex set of rules in order to be able to participate in his abundance and at the same time not lose one’s bodily and mental integrity as a hunter and social being. One does not invest “trust” in *Curupira*, but “respects” (*motipot*) him like someone respects a leader. Respect for *Curupira* seems to be based on the insight of a mature adult person that the reproduction of life is predicated on the connectivity or “addressability” of non-human entities and on the concern to maintain one’s integrity during these transgressive movements, which this kind of communication requires.

“Respect” (*motipot*) does not seem to revolve around notions of reciprocity or moral regard for non-human persons as a consequence of their “similar” ontological status, but works *because it creates an environment of semiotic valence*.

The Sateré-Mawé hunter may “live in fear” - as an Inuit shaman once famously explained to Rasmussen - that his personhood may disintegrate in the transgressive processes of dealing with non-human entities. However, it is this very process that creates a very peculiar aesthetics that amounts to what can be called “mindful communication” in human-nature relations. To successfully manage this “inter-being” - intimate connectedness of human and non-human realms - as precondition for one’s personal integrity and well-being, is what constitutes the art of forest life.

Unfortunately, as my Sateré-Mawé friend stated above, nowadays game is all but depleted. Along with the decline of hunting the semiotic valence of forest environment continues to evanesce in favor of an increasing material and affective integration into Western consumerism. The vast store of traditional environmental knowledge connected with hunting is nowadays almost unavailable anymore to the younger generation of Sateré-Mawé.

However, it can be hypothesized that this intellectual loss or rather: *ontological degradation*, which amounts to a loss of the capacity to communicate with the “*animal kingdom*”, might at least be partly compensated by a revitalization of the semiotic valence of the “*plant kingdom*” and its “efficacious forms” as constituted in the Forest Gardens.

Kohn, Eduardo: How *Forests Think. Toward an Anthropology beyond the Human*, Univ. Cal. Press, Berkeley
2013
Zent, Eglée L.: Jotí Ecogony, Venezuelan Amazon, Environ. Res. Letter 8, 2013