The Wauja snake-basket: myth and the conceptual imagination of material culture in Amazonia

Aristoteles Barcelos Neto

Abstract

The literature on Amazonian ethnology is plenty of mythical serpents whose deeds are related to the origin of humanity, the invention and teaching of shamanic knowledge, artefacts, graphic motifs and songs. If the mythological themes on Amazonian serpents have already been widely described and analysed, the same cannot be said about the visual forms related to these themes. Many studies on Amazonian mythology left aside the very plastic aspects of material culture. These studies did not take into account that several features of the mythological themes are precisely merged with the qualities of the visual styles. This article discusses some aspects of the conceptual imagination of Wauja (an Arawak speaking people of the Upper Xingu) material culture through the analysis of a mythical character that explicitly exposes the intrinsic and simultaneous musical and iconographic nature of weaving art.

Keywords: Upper Xingu; cosmology; art; myth; music.

O cesto-serpente Wauja: mito e a imaginação conceitual da cultura material em Amazônia

Resumo

A literatura etnológica amazônica é povoada de serpentes mitológicas que estão na origem da humanidade, da criação e transmissão de conhecimentos xamânicos, de artefatos da cultura material, de desenhos e de canções. Se os temas mitológicos das serpentes amazônicas já estão amplamente caracterizados e analisados, o mesmo não pode ser dito sobre as formas visuais relacionadas aos mesmos. Muitos estudos da mitologia amazônica deixaram de lado os aspectos propriamente plásticos da cultura material, sem talvez dar-se conta que determinadas particularidades dos temas mito-cosmológicos estão precisamente fundidas nas qualidades dos estilos visuais. Este artigo discute alguns aspectos da imaginação conceitual da cultura material wauja (arawak do Alto Xingu) a partir da análise de um personagem mítico que expõe de modo explícito a natureza intrínseca e simultaneamente musical e iconográfica da arte do trançado.

Palavras-chave: Alto Xingu; cosmologia; arte; mito; música.

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Introduction

For ultimately the real question
is not what art means but how.
Guss (1989: 91)

Even though there are few studies on Amazonian basketry, there has long been a consensus about the important role of weaving technology and the objects it produces in Amazonian thought and cosmology. The extensive occurrence of weaving in lowland South America, coupled with its impressive morphological, functional, technical and iconographic variability, led Berta Ribeiro (1980) to call the region *The Civilization of Straw*. In the Upper Xingu, for example, large carrying baskets are prestigious objects which can be used for ritual payments and are therefore the object of ostentation and admiration. Baskets are highly admired objects among many Amerindian peoples, from Alaska to the Paraguayan Chaco. As Lévi-Strauss (1997) has observed, however, outside of the Amerindian world baskets are rarely appreciated as objects of aesthetic value. He further argued that baskets represent a stable equilibrium between nature and culture, an idea that is reflected in technological and plastic differences between woven basketry ("raw" recipients) and ceramic pots ("cooked" recipients that transform the raw into the cooked), a metaphorical translation of material relations in terms of Amerindian dualist thought.

As elementary geometric forms, often covered in geometrical motifs, Amazonian baskets inhabit a universe of non-realist figuration the elements of which are often schematic, in some cases similar to visual codes (Munn 1973). Among the Wauja of the upper Xingu, mimetic figuration is commonly restricted to ceramics, while weaving explores other forms of expression. Realistic representation must be controlled, and in many cases avoided, because it opens up potential dangers and is therefore ill-suited for aestheticizing the relationship between humans and non-humans. Not everything which is human, animal or monster in this encounter must necessarily receive a clearly anthropomorphic or zoomorphic head, trunk or members. A concern with the exterior form of objects reflects the problem of the conceptual imagination of their internal (mental and intentional) capacities (Gell 1998).

In Amazonian visual systems, every form is minimally or essentially a body or a significant part of it, which is why baskets and weapons can abandon or attack their owners (Lévi-Strauss 1997; Quilter 1990). The Wauja explain that charms, the excessive presence of animal spirits in the village or an eclipse can cause the figurative designs of animals on any object to come unstuck and run towards the forest, or, worse, to seek refuge in houses and spread disease.

It is as if these figurative designs were asleep. Geometrical designs can also react in a similar manner when they represent parts of animal bodies. Thus two rows of aligned triangles representing pointy teeth can pose a risk of cannibalism to those who gaze upon them during vulnerable moments.

Geometrical designs are preferentially applied and appreciated in baskets and ceramics[1]. However, their conceptual imagination raises questions beyond the domains of visual experience. Geometric designs occupy a privileged position in the imagination of intersensorial and intersemiotic relations, which are encompassed by a wider ethnographic theory anchored in myth, music and ritual performance (Menezes Bastos 1990, 2007). What follows is an attempt to interpret these relations in the light of this and other theories. In order to ground this discussion, it will be helpful first to examine the indigenous account of the origins of these designs.

Arakuni: from body painting to snake-basket

A Wauja myth explains that originally there was only a single graphic motif, the *kulupiene*, first used in male body painting. This motif is said to be the matrix for all other graphic motifs used for decorating Wauja material culture, including basketry and pottery. Arakuni, a Wauja teenager who had just emerged from pubescent seclusion, invented the *kulupiene* motif (figure 1) for himself in order to beautify his wrestler's body. Arakuni had a younger sister, Kamayulalu, who was still in pubescent seclusion. The siblings fell in love and had sexual intercourse. In the darkness of the seclusion hut their incestuous act seemed to be concealed, but Kamayulalu did not notice that Arakuni left the kulupiene design that he had just applied with genipap paint impressed on her stomach and breasts. Immediately after it has been applied to the skin the genipap paint is practically invisible. The painting only acquires visibility and fixity hours later, becoming indelible for days.

In the late afternoon of that same day, Kamayulau's mother returned from the garden with a heavy basket of manioc. Upon reaching the door of the house she called on her daughter to help her and immediately saw her genipap-stained body. Certain that her daughter had been with a man while she was gone, the mother searched for signs of the identity of her daughter's lover. Her mother then saw, in the middle of the village plaza, the young men wrestling. Among them was Arakuni, the only one whose body was painted with motifs. Shocked, she saw that the motif was identical to the one impressed on the body of Kamayulalu. The act of incest had been discovered.

After the wrestling match, Arakuni returned home and was scolded by his parents who burned all his possessions and expelled him from their home.

Desolate and ashamed, Arakuni headed towards the lake near the village with an enormous quantity of *taquarinha* fibre in order to make clothing that would turn him into an "animal" so he could escape. Arakuni started weaving an immense snake out of thin *taquarinha* fibres (figure 2). While he worked, Arakuni sang a lament about his pain, paradoxically affirming his love and desire for Kamayulalu at the same time.

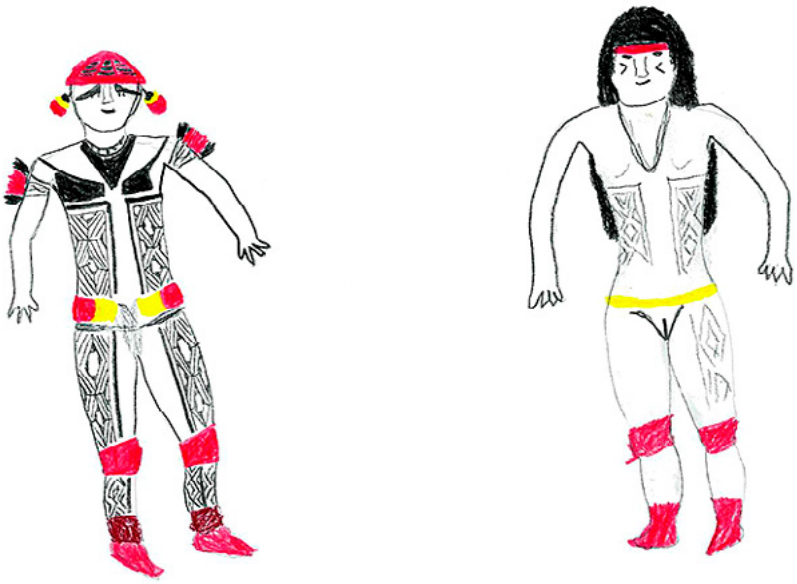

Figure 1
Arakuni with his sister Kamayulalu. Drawing by Aulahu Wauja, 2000.

The designs on the woven snake's body emerged spontaneously from these songs, which have a sacred connotation as they are, and have been from that mythic time onwards, a part of the main intercommunal ritual of the Xingu, the *Kaumai* funeral (known as *Kwarup*, a cognate of *Kwarìp*, its Kamayura name). The "grandfathers of the Wauja," Arakuni's contemporaries, heard from the village the sequence of his songs. They were also heard by the Xinguanos from more distant villages, but without the same degree of clarity and completeness, which is why the Wauja today claim to be the master singers of *Kaumai*.

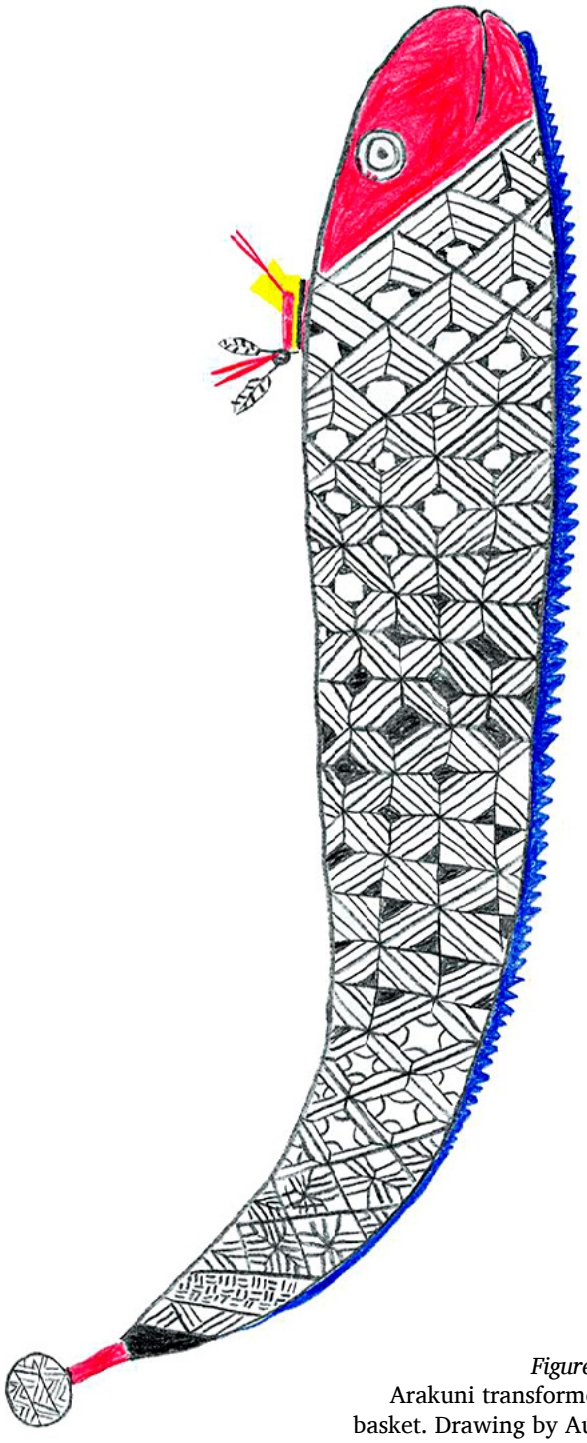

Figure 2
Arakuni transformed into a snake-basket. Drawing by Aulahu Wauja, 2000.

When he had finished the snake and the chants, Arakuni and his song created a series of graphic motifs. Two important objects were added to the body of the snake: a headdress of toucan, macaw and harpy feathers, and a rattle at the tip of its tail. The first symbolized its aristocratic status (*amunaw*) and the second its shamanic-musical capacities. When everything was ready, Arakuni entered into the snake-basket, swam into a deep part of the river, let out a thundering sound and submerged himself, disappearing forever. The Wauja say that Arakuni is like a submarine. When the whites arrived and showed them pictures of submarines, they finally knew that Arakuni had gone to live in the sea.

From a Wauja point of view, one of the most significant peculiarities of this snake-basket is that it contains "all" of the Wauja graphic motifs. However, if we limit ourselves to the denomination of the motifs, the Arakuni snake contains only 13 (or 14, depending on the version) motifs, which at first sight may appear contradictory since it falls short of the "totality" of Wauja graphic motifs. The totality, however, is in this case defined by a principle of almost endless transformation, rather than by the fixed repertoire of named motifs.

The *kulupiene* was the first motif that Arakuni made—initially painted onto his body and later impressed onto the skin of his sister as a consequence of their incestuous union. The other motifs were made while he sang (or conjured) and wove his "clothes" starting with the head and moving toward the tail. The reader should observe in Aulahu's drawing (figure 2) the first motif of the snake-basket of Arakuni is the *kulupiene*, which, being located near the head, is transformed in a sequence of motifs moving towards the tail. There is no precedence of the visual over the musical or vice-versa. The production of both is simultaneous, a true synesthetic transformation of what is seen into what is heard and of what is heard into what is seen.

Close attention to the representation of Arakuni reveals that the motifs flow into one another following changes in the course of the lines and the lozenges of the original matrix, the *kulupiene*. This is a model of continuity and transformation. Barbara Keifenheim made a similar observation concerning Kaxinawa textiles: "On large weavings where the patterns cover the entire surface, seamless transitions from one *kene* (graphic motif) to the next are often found. It becomes apparent that every pattern can be transformed and that the totality of visual transformations engenders a shifting pictorial continuum" (Keifenheim 1998: 11). In Indigenous Amazonia, this graphic continuum is also perceived as a sonic continuum.

There is a clear association between the techniques of basketry and textile weaving and snake skins in various parts of Amazonia. In both techniques the designs emerge from the weaving process, there being no dichotomy between the material media and the design, as occurs in pottery, on the body and in wooden artefacts. Furthermore, weaving is a technique of a mimetic nature:

its products are like "the skins of the snake." In this sense, basket and textile weaving are logical inversions of ceramics, a contrast between malleability and fixedness and between rectilinear surfaces that point towards an infinite *continuum* and circular surfaces spatially closed in upon themselves. Much symbolic relevance is attributed to weaving due to the idea that the very process of producing baskets and textiles "naturally" imbues them with designs. In other words, designs emerge from the act of weaving as a function of the technical specificities of producing baskets and textiles.

Serpents are prototypical figures of the invention of graphic motifs among Panoan (Gebhart-Sayer 1985, 1986; Lagrou 1996), Carib (Velthem 2001) and Tukanoan (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1978, 1985) groups. The Wayana myth of the supernatural snake Tuluperê (Velthem 2001) narrates how humans kill and skin it to produce woven objects. Arakuni is an inversion of this theme. It is from the *kulupiene* motif, the matrix of all designs, painted on the skin of the young Arakuni, that the gigantic basket is produced, which became the homonymous supernatural snake. Rather than expose a perspectivist position in the predator-prey scheme, the inversion of this theme reveals a complex way of making visual things in which basketry can be entangled in a musical universe. The rattle at the tip of Arakuni's tail merely serves to reinforce its double musical and spiritual character, the horizon of which is shamanism, less a therapeutic technique than a multinaturalist epistemology (Viveiros de Castro 1998).

Amazonian baskets: beyond the visible and the material

In an article called "Le serpent aux corps rempli des poissons," Lévi-Strauss (1947) drew attention to the double iconographic and mythical elaboration of the body of serpents as containers for other bodies and things, an image that is common to a variety of South American serpents that swallow their prey whole and take many weeks to digest them. The serpent analysed by Lévi-Strauss is a Nazca ceramic vase, but it has certain correspondences in Amazonian weaving arts, the tipití being probably the most well-known (Velthem 2001: 206). The tipití is a snake-basket used to squeeze the poisonous juice from the grated pulp of manioc, and it therefore functions like constrictor snakes, highlighting the common predatory identity of certain artefacts and animals.

A considerable body of Amazonian myths narrate how a series of objects and aspects of knowledge used by humans have their origin in relations, predatory or otherwise, with snakes. Baskets and songs are the most widespread of these objects. But there is more. In former times, snakes transported, within themselves, the ancestors of various peoples (Hugh-Jones 1979). Like baskets, snakes were (and still are) essentially containers of valuable things.

While the mythological themes of the Amazonian serpents have been amply defined and studied, the same cannot be said of the visual styles associated with them. Like mythological themes, designs also pose complex problems, many of which have only recently been identified (Lagrou 2007). From an anthropological perspective it would be inconsistent to carry out an analysis of a particular visual style (or, in Alfred Gell's terms, of culture) without a wide knowledge of the themes represented (or, in Viveiros de Castro's terms, the modes of conceptual imagination). Many studies of Amazonian myths set aside the strictly plastic aspects of material culture, disregarding the fact that certain particularities of mythological themes are fused in the quality of visual forms.

The wealth of analytical alternatives made available by recent advances in the anthropology of art and in Amazonian ethnography allow us to widen our understandings of conceptual imagination through an analysis of visual forms. According to Gell (1998), all visual forms possess internal and/or external dynamic agencies. What is particular to Indigenous Amazonia is that the internal dynamic not only relates visual elements to each other, it also relates them to sonic elements. The matter has more complex ramifications: sonic forms act in chains of semiotic transformation (Menezes Bastos 1990, 2007), the pivot of transformation being music. We will return to this point shortly.

Amazonian basket-weavers spend much effort decorating the surface of baskets, in elaborating the geometric and/or figurative designs that cover the weave. The shape of the baskets, although equally important to our argument, generally has fewer cosmological implications than their surface (or "skin"). It is through the surface designs that Amazonians enter (or return to) the sonic and narrative dimensions of basketry (Guss 1989). Amazonia, the civilisation of straw, is also the civilisation of song. Music is the movement that entwines the fibres or the images that result.

From a purely visual point of view, baskets are mute things. A strict division between the visual and the sonic, however, is little relevant for many Amazonian people. The tenuous passage from the visual to the sonic, or vice-versa, occurs in a terrain where the play of alterities itself defines the symbolic economies of meaning (Lagrou 2002, 2007). Thus in a field of multiple perspectives, what one being apprehends as image, another will apprehend as sound. This is why drawings are often said to be the melody of spirits (Gebhart-Sayer 1986). As Luna (1992: 233-237) reminds us, the power of the *icaros*, magical songs from Peruvian Amazonia, are directly linked to the hallucinatory visions of *ayahuasca*; there are no icaros for those without a wide vision of the cosmos, hence the shaman must see (from the other side) in order to sing. The songs are a translation of the designs.

It is the transformational condition of beings and things themselves that enables the exchange of perspectives, thus favouring intersemiotic channels of transformation. It is not, therefore, a matter of representing the sonic

through the visual. Rather, the visual becomes sonic depending on the point of view in question. Viveiros de Castro (1998) developed the idea that a point of view exists *in* the body of someone or something; i.e. it is embodied. This *someone* can be a fish, a serpent or a shaman, and this *something* can be a basket, a rattle or a flute, for example.

How do the symbolic economies of meaning and alterity associate baskets to the universe of the material culture of music? How can baskets, which are objects that are not organologically classified as musical, be treated in this manner? Baskets are obviously not musical instruments, nor do Amazonians think of them as things that produce music, but rather as things that contain music within their bodies. Let us delve further into the intersemiotic matter of objects, taking them, initially, as entities whose bodies tell us something about their points of view.

For the Wauja, the sonic, formal and material qualities of objects are associated with, in varying degrees, the *apapaatai*, the prototypical beings of alterity[2]. This association is thought to exist because the qualities mentioned above invariably originate in the body of the *apapaatai* or in their past and/or present actions. This non-human origin of objects has two important consequences.

The first consequence concerns the concept of owner, or master[3]. All the elements that constitute a Wauja object have spiritual owners that are *apapaatai*. From the smallest graphical motif to the most abundant raw material, nothing escapes the agency of these spirit beings. Each element may have one or more owners and it is the shamanic potency of an owner that creates a particular object, its raw materials and graphical motifs, all of which are more or less dangerous to humans. Owners take care of raw materials and knowledge and they punish those who misuse them or purposely disrespect the rules of manufacture and presentation. Furthermore, many raw materials, specially fibres, woods and resins with "strong odours" are dangerous in themselves and can cause people in weakened states to fall gravely ill. For the Wayana Indians, this notion of danger is explained through its mythical backdrop, the main theme of which is the body:

> Everyday artefacts are conceived as being 'transformed bodies'. Several myths describe them as having undergone a process that amounts to their being dismembered, with the resulting suppression of their original, chaotic and uncontrolled characteristics. If everyday tasks are to be undertaken, primeval beings must be dismembered and transformed into objects that humans can master. Thus, the indigenous women may use a woven object (sieve) for processing cassava without fear of being devoured by the serpent it relates to. (Velthem 2001: 206)

The second consequence concerns the identity of objects. The bodies of various Wauja objects have a metaphoric or metonymic relation with the bodies

of animals, or their parts[4]. Thus bullroarers, which imitate the anatomical form of fish, have specific identities in accordance with their graphic motifs and colours (figure 3). In other words, the ichthyologic specification of bullroarers maintains a metonymic relation with the graphic motifs and colours that are found on the fish that they embody. Carrying baskets (*mayaku*), for example, may have graphic motifs that allude to the insects and vermin that live in manioc gardens and which eat the plants and tubers.

Most of the woven objects of the Wauja can be functionally divided between, on the one hand, the transport and processing of manioc and the storage of its sub-products and, on the other hand, fishing. The objects associated with fishing are mostly traps, which, despite the increasing use of nylon fishing lines, steel hooks and harpoons, have not fallen into disuse. Wauja carrying baskets are light but sturdy. They are usually made from a combination of an internal structure of rods covered by a woven pattern and are finished off by reinforcing the edges with cotton strings, as such they tend to last up to three years[5].

Relatively distant from this sphere of alimentary production are masks, a type of woven clothes voracious for Wauja food. From a technical point of view almost all Wauja masks are basket-like objects, particularly the *kuwahãhalu* and *atujuwá* masks, which are basically mats, circular and oval respectively, adorned with straw accessories that give them the appearance of clothing (Barcelos Neto 2008, 2011), which, from a shamanic point of view, functions as contingent bodies.

In "La serpent aux corps rempli des poissons," Lévi-Strauss explores, through a study of Nazca iconography, the classic Amerindian theme of the relationship between predator and prey and its variations in visual and verbal discursive modes. Lik, the snake whose body is filled with fish (or with the visual motifs of fish), holds a spear in its hand which pierces its prey, which Lik then carries inert, but still alive, between its teeth. This image is also familiar to Wauja mythic iconography. However, it is not through a discussion of predation that I would like to continue my discussion. There is something in the bodies of Lik and Arakuni that deserves a more careful examination. This concerns the visual elaboration of the surface designs, which visually impregnate both characters. In Lik these are the stylised figurative images of little fishes; and in Arakuni the geometrical motifs of these and other animals. The *kulupiene* graphical motif, present in every class of objects in Wauja material culture, is identified as "fish," an identification which has endured unaltered since 1884, when Karl von den Steinen (v. 1894) first visited the people of the upper Xingu.

The *kulupiene* motif can be represented in two different patterns. The choice of which pattern to use is usually linked to the shape of the material medium. The motif can be drawn in a pattern of radial or parallel lines. The

former is almost exclusive pots and pans for toasting manioc bread, and the latter is common in baskets, stools and posts. Often a pattern will combine one or more motifs, but it will always be named after the main motif, the one which imprints a particular rhythm on the pattern. It is interesting to recall, in light of this, some thoughts of Gell on the illusion of movement in graphical patterns.

> The root of the pattern is the motif, which enters into relationships with neighbouring motifs, relations which animate the index as a whole. […] Patterns can be distinguished from all other indexes by virtue of the fact that they have salient visual properties of repetitiveness and symmetry. It would be wrong to imagine that because symmetry and repetition are mathematical properties of forms, that it is not these properties which most readily provoke the illusion—if it is only that—of immanent causality of the index. (Gell 1998: 77)

It is rhythm, created by combinations of repetition and symmetry that produces the illusion of animation, which, from a material point of view, enables the idea of the causality of index. The ontological backdrop to this causality can be the shamanic potency of animals, at least in Indigenous Amazonia. In Arakuni the simultaneous combination of the visual (perceived as a motif of little fish) and the musical (perceived as the songs of lamentation) in the production of a contingent body (the basket) and of an animal subjectivity (the snake) expresses an interest in synesthetic animation. In this way, the same body that is filled with fish is full of songs.

In Wauja mythology fish are even more musical than birds. In one of the myths that narrates the theft of the powerful *kawoká* flutes, the virtuoso flutist is Tupato, a fish with a crooked mouth. Another edible fish, talapi, is also the name of a small clarinet, some 22 centimetres long and 16 centimetres in circumference (figure 4). The talapi clarinet, which is phallic and clearly ichthyomorphic, is a palpable component of sexual symbolism that also includes flutes and bullroarers. The bullroarer (figure 3) is one of the many Amazonian musical instruments that point to a clear sonic relationship with animal alterities, in this case with fish; amongst the Kamayura it also embodies snakes (Menezes Bastos 1978). I now turn to Wauja musical production and to other characters who, along with *Arakuni*, point to a *grand visual theme* of Amerindian art.

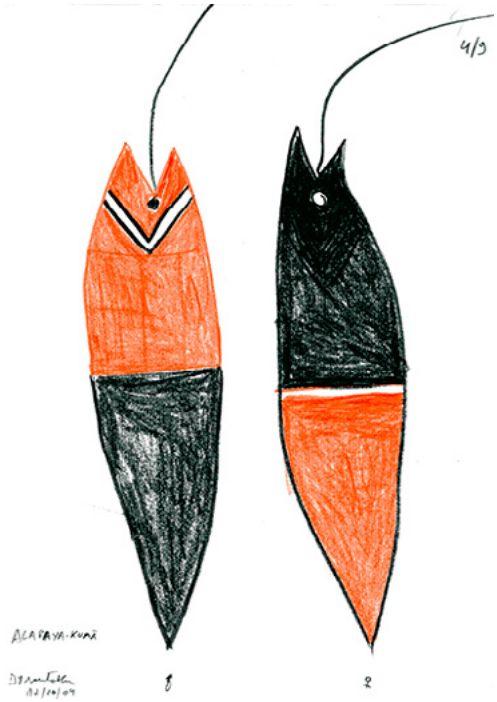

Figure 3
Drawing of pair of bullroarers embodying the fish alapaya
by Itsautaku Wauja, 2004.

Figure 4
Clarinet embodying a male talapi fish (*Sorubim lima)*.
Aristoteles Barcelos Neto's collection at the Museu Nacional de Etnologia de Portugal.
Photo by António Rento, 2000.

A musical view of material culture

In *A Musical View of the Universe*, Ellen Basso (1985) developed an ethnographic theory of Xinguano ritual as defined by various modes of musical exchanges between men and women, humans and non-humans, aristocrats and non-aristocrats, or between the members of different villages who visit each other during ritual[6]. In this multilingual and multiethnic mosaic, ritual and its music are the *lingua franca* of the Upper Xingu. This system of musical exchanges, with its varying effects and intensities, is fused with other systems of exchange, particularly of objects and politico-moral values.

The qualities and values of ritual music correspond to their capacities to produce human persons of basically two types (in a non-dualist sense). There are ritual songs executed in the production of notables/aristocrats (*amunaw*)—the songs that Arakuni sang to his sister Kamayulalu are currently a part of this repertoire. And there are songs which are not executed in the production of a specific type of social person, but rather to keep humans human, that is seeing the world differently from animals. These are songs that make up the shamanic complex and are used in recuperating the human point of view for those whose soul was kidnapped by animal spirits. Every illness that does not result from human sorcery is a transformation of the human into animal (Barcelos Neto 2007). This repertoire, which I call songs of the apapaatai, acts upon human ontological instability.

The songs of the *apapaatai* are executed by female, male or mixed choruses, in solo or in duets. Another repertoire, as extensive as the vocal repertoire, is executed in a series of musical instruments, mostly aerophones, which are themselves apapaatai. The materiality and sonority of the instruments play an important part in their definition as ritual characters and as things which are quintessentially Amazonian.

In a previous work (Barcelos Neto 2009), I presented the ethnographic data that explain the relations between durability, musical and shamanic capacities and alimentary production and consumption, and I analysed the effects of the imbrication of these material relations in Wauja social ties. The most sonorously powerful and durable object of the system, the *trocano* drum (*Pulupulu* in Wauja), has not been made by the Wauja since the 1950s, after they were affected by a violent measles epidemic. Even though it is absent from the current ritual scene, the trocano drum remains integrated within this system, as are other objects which remain "asleep," but may one day be awoken.

The notion of curing is the basic conceptual axis of the system of ritual objects. But some of them do much more than cure, since they mediate between a series of intra- and inter-communal exchanges. Each one of these objects has a specific animal spiritual identity that defines its iconography (in

the case of masks and bullroarers) and the music (in the case of aerophones) that is played through them. Masks and aerophones may embody all non-human beings, including natural elements and phenomena, such as rainbows and fire, while bullroarers only embody fish. The trocano drum is the only ritual object of this system whose animal identity is related to a single species, the anaconda. Aruta, the main Wauja shaman-chanter, drew the trocano drum (figure 5) that the Wauja burned in the 1950s. It is identical to the only trocano drum that is still in use in the Upper Xingu (figures 6 and 7), which is kept in the Kamayurá village of Ipavu, some 16 kilometres distant from the Wauja village. Both trocano drum share the paintings of the anaconda across the whole of their lateral extent. Aruta's drawing also reveals some of the animal-objects that were kept in the body of the trocano drum: four fish, an eel and a stingray, respectively materialized as masks, *kuluta* and *mutukutaĩ* flutes (figure 8), objects that make up the trocano drum ritual complex. While Arakuni, the snake-basket, has music on its skin, Pulupulu, the anaconda-drum, has music within it (figure 7).

Figure 5
The kuwakuho ceremonial house with the anaconda giant drum inside.
Drawing by Aruta Wauja, 1998.

Figure 6
The anaconda giant drum. Kamayurá village. Photo by A. Barcelos Neto, 2001.

Figure 7
A set of aerophones kept inside the anaconda giant drum. Kamayurá village. Photo by A. Barcelos Neto, 2001.

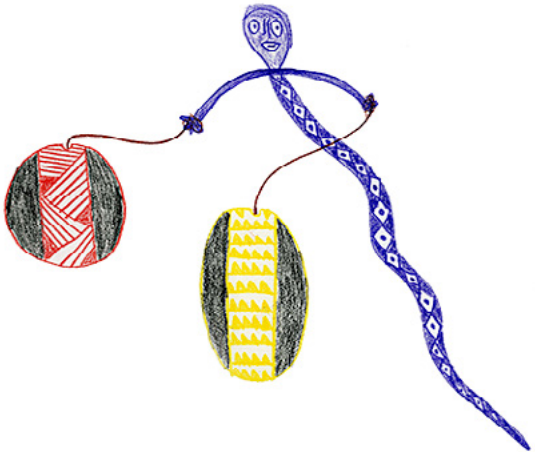

Figure 8
An anaconda holding a pair of *mutukutaĩ* flutes. Drawing by Kaomo Wauja, 1998.

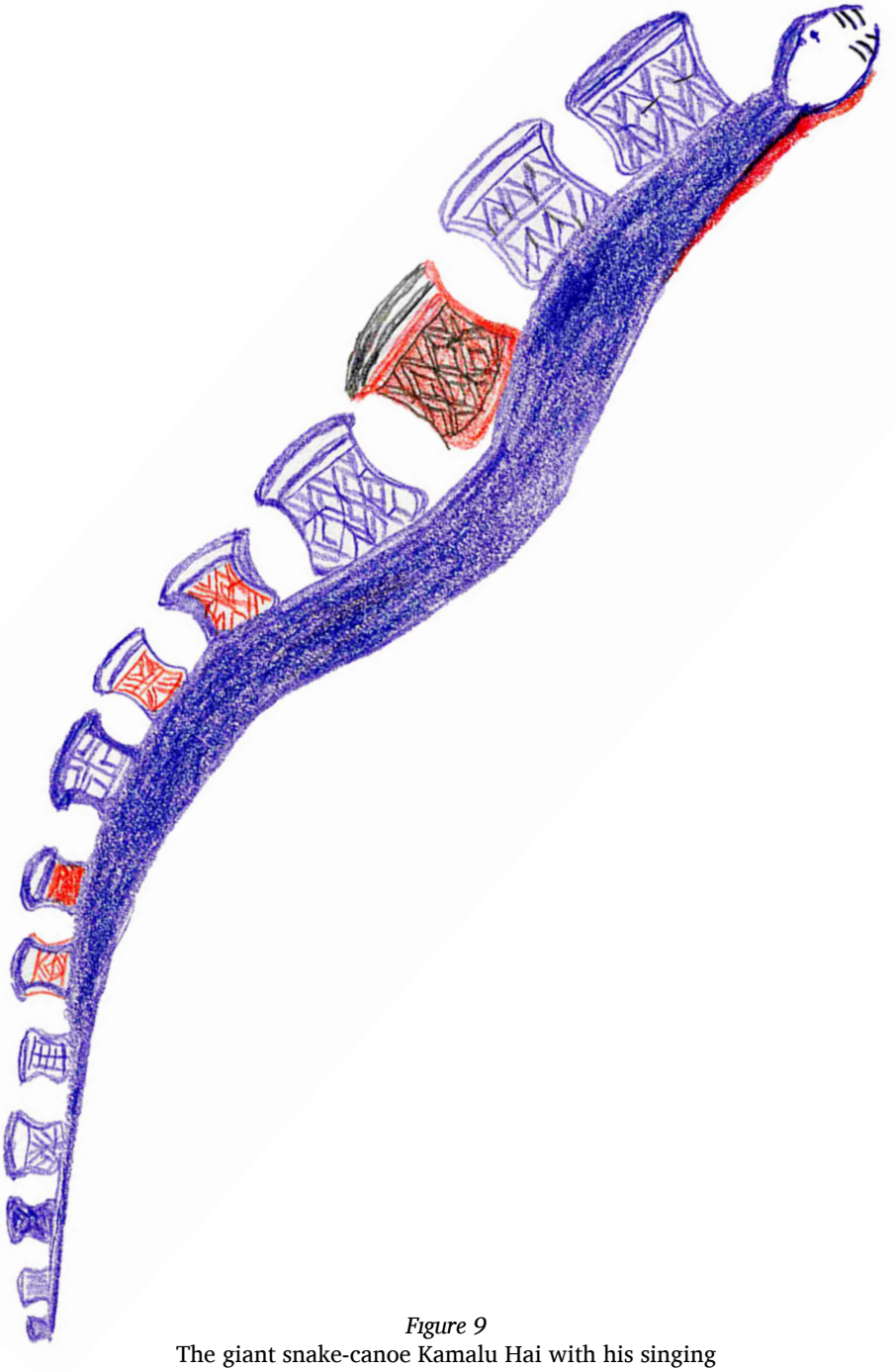

Figure 9
The giant snake-canoe Kamalu Hai with his singing ceramic pots. Drawing by Kaomo Wauja, 1998.

The third and final snake of this mytho-musical universe is *Kamalu Hai*, the gigantic snake-canoe that carries on its back a long series of singing pots (figure 9). The size of the pots decreases as we move from the head to the tail. The larger ones sing in a very high and deep tone, and the smaller ones in a very low and acute tone. The polyphony of the singing pots is materially analogous with the diversity of the size, shape and function of Wauja ceramics. The myth concludes with an explanation as to why only the Wauja know how to make all sorts of ceramic artefacts. Kamalu Hai appeared only once, in the lake of the Wauja, "making noises." The Wauja learned how to make ceramic objects because they *saw* and *heard* the pots singing.

The conceptual imagination of Wauja material culture is profoundly anchored in musical experience: the baskets are made of songs; pots, in turn, sing. It seems to me that this Wauja emphasis on linking materiality and the intangibility of sound is another Amazonian means of marking the fundamentally musical character of alterity. Although the objects, musical or otherwise, are made by the Wauja themselves, they have never ceased to be a population of other "peoples." For the Araweté Indians this same radical alterity, represented by the *Mai* gods, is manifest as song (Viveiros de Castro 1992). Unlike the Wauja, they prefer the material minimalism of the rattle, a condenser of spirits. Another extraordinary example of the manipulation of relations of alterity through musical objects is analysed by Menezes Bastos (2005) for the Kamayurá: the mere presence or proximity of these objects can define the socio-political ethos. A systematic investigation of the ethnographies of western and North-Western Amazonia would offer us several elements that make this model even richer.

Even though Arakuni's snake-basket is not a musical instrument, it is no less conceptually musical than flutes, drums and clarinets. It seems to me, following Menezes Bastos (1990, 2007), that what is interesting when thinking about Amazonian music and/or its material culture is the complete semiotic chain in which myth is transformed into body, including also artefacts. Arakuni is an ambiguous being, whose body has both artefactual and animal qualities. He is an extraordinary synthesis of different modes of transformation—from brother to lover, from human to animal, from visual to sonic and back, from vegetable fibre to skin, and from young wrestler to shaman-singer-dancer (figure 10). The Wauja have made ophidian transformations central to the conceptualization of their material culture and sensorial experience. Seen from a wider comparative perspective, the snakes Arakuni, Kamalu Hai and Pulupulu are clearly representatives of a grand visual theme of Amerindian arts, particularly when compared with Mesoamerican and Northwest Amazonian examples. It is this special emphasis on the idea of weaving songs what makes the Wauja case remarkably original and complex.

Figure 10
Arakuni transformed into a dancing snake.
Drawing by Kamo Wauja, 1998.

Notes

This iconographic study is a revised and modified English version of the article "A serpente de corpo repleto de canções: um tema amazônico sobre a arte do trançado". *Revista de Antropologia* 54(2): 981-1012, 2011.

[1] A crucial difference between designs on baskets and ceramics must nonetheless be observed. While the designs on baskets last until these face the ravages of time and wear, those of the pots and pans disappear after they are first used due to the soot that impregnates them. The human body is a further support for the graphic repertoire, but its visual durability is as impermanent as that of the ceramics.

[2] Alterity, in the case of the *apapaatai*, refers to exceptional shamanic creative, technological and predatory capacities, materialized in a wide range of musical and lethal artefacts.

[3] For a detailed and comparative analysis of the concept of "owner" or "master", see Fausto (2008).

[4] The metaphoric or metonymic relation of the body of objects with the bodies of animals is a recurrent aspect of the conceptual imagination of Amazonian material culture (Hugh-Jones 2009; Velthem 2003).

[5] The Wauja are particularly fond of their durable and visually elaborate baskets, which, along with other objects considered 'beautiful', are part of the system of ritual exchanges that confers prestige upon those that are to be involved in the transactions (Barcelos Neto 2008: chapters 6 and 7).

[6] Along with Basso's (1985) book, the work of Menezes Bastos (1990), Mello (2005) and Piedade (2004) are the main references concerning the system of musical exchanges in the Upper Xingu.

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