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Apapaatai. Rituais de Máscaras no Alto Xingu

BOOK REVIEWS

***Apapaatai. Rituais de Máscaras no Alto Xingu.* Aristóteles Barcelos Neto. São Paulo: Editora da Universidade de São Paulo/FAPESP. 2008. 328 pp. R\$ 70.00 ISBN: 978-85-314-1066-6.**

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“Animal”, “spirit”. These are, according to Aristóteles Barcelos Neto, the translations that the Wauja Indians of the Upper Xingu River offer to the whites for the term *apapaatai*, title of this remarkable ethnography that follows the author's doctoral thesis, presented in 2004 at the University of São Paulo (USP). But, along with animals and spirits, here comes another kind of entity, which forms with the first two what Barcelos Neto defines as the “fundamental triad of the description and analysis of processes of transformation and objectivation of *apapaatai*”. I refer to the masks in the subtitle of the book, objects that, like flutes, pots, baskets, canoes, etc., “are rarely just objects” (p. 29). The mode of existence of *apapaatai* is thus varied. Invisible or visible only in dreams and shamanic trances, they gain materiality through these Wauja expressive forms, establishing itself as a fundamental presence in social life and ritual of the group. This is the central issue around which this beautiful book is built. Reviewing it is not a simple task for its ethnographic density, the richness and diversity of the data listed, as well as the sophisticated theoretical inspiration which rests upon and articulates complex notions such as that of the “distributed person”, taken from Alfred Gell's theory of agency, and on proper issues of the South American ethnology, such as Amerindian perspectivism, the centrality of the relationship between humans and nonhumans, and also the debate on sociopolitical complexity of the Arawak people, the language family to which the Wauja belong.

Apart from that and considering that the book is aptly prefaced by another specialist in the Upper Xingu societies, Michael Heckenberger, I will focus on some aspects of the book that will certainly fascinate and hold the attention of ethnographers working in other parts of Amazon, mainly those who, like me, are dedicated to the study of indigenous peoples in Northwest Amazon. Regarding this region, we could say something very close to what Barcelos Neto says about the people from Upper Xingu in view of certain generalizations proposed for indigenous societies of Amazonia. Speaking of the current classification of the latter as “cosmocentric” instead of “sociocentric”, the author suggests that in the Upper Xingu the political and ritual reproduction of human social order is as important as relations with the “multiple actors of the universe”. Just as important, for what I believe is perhaps the main contribution of this book, is to show with brilliance and originality how the (re) producing of the Upper Xingu sociopolitical system is done through the relationship with the nonhuman, the *apapaatai*. How does it happen? Somehow, all the effort within in the book is focused on answering this question.

The connection between the social and cosmological is possible from a particular personal experience that the Wauja define as “walk with *apapaatai*”, to be sickened. For such a connection to be successfully achieved, this “walk with” should follow the “bringing” and “doing.” That is, the initial events - the disease - potentially raise other events of great social importance such as the healing and the sponsorship of festivals, rituals that are constituted as “bringing” and “doing” *apapaatai* respectively. These three movements are reflected in the structure of the book, divided into three

corresponding parts: I. Transições de Corpos e Almas; II. A Produção Ritual dos Apapaatai; and, III. Os Rituais de Apapaatai e a Cosmopolítica Wauja. The sequence of the three movements in the same process can be seen as the operation mode of the system as a whole, the sociality of the Upper Xingu in its dynamic state. Disease is a kind of elementary form of relations that cross the system.

Unlike witchcraft, practiced by people close in general, the pathological condition related to *apapaatai* relates to a continuous process of capturing fractions of the patient's soul by animal spirits. The diagnosis is established by a *yakapa*, a shaman who has in his body the substance that allows him to see the *apapaatai* responsible for the patient's soul catch. The shaman sees the aggressor agent in his trance (tobacco narcosis) differently from how it is viewed by the patient. If the *apapaatai* frequents the patient's dreams in a human form, for the shaman it appears in its most characteristic and distinctive appearance under animal form and carrying certain types of masks and sometimes flutes. After the diagnosis the shaman leaves the scene. The next act is to bring the *apapaatai* into the patient's house, which is possible through performances of near relatives. A woman from the patient's house will prepare manioc porridge to attract *apapaatai* and will invite some relatives of other houses in the village as well. One by one, the recruits come together and they learn which *apapaatai* they will be. Each will perform songs and dances characteristic of their characters and uses some object-improvised insignia associated with it. On entering the house, the relatives use a long cigar close to the patient and perform an onomatopoeic communication with him. With cigarette smoke, they restore to the patient a portion of the soul stolen by each *apapaatai*.

The healing process is described by Barcelos Neto as a reversal of the disease process as follows: if the disease consists of a gradual patient animalization, his death as a human person and his partial distribution in the invisible *apapaatai* world, the healing, such as described above, corresponds to a familiarization of *apapaatai* or its de-animalization. But more surprising is that in this way the *apapaatai* pass from predators to protectors of humans. That is, once the cure is achieved, the relationship between victim and aggressor is not canceled, but instead is reversed and somewhat expanded. But it is expanded in a curious way, because as a spirit protector the *apapaatai* remains, paradoxically, embodied by the relative who brings it forth and who makes the *apapaatai* visible to the (ex) patient. Through this relative, now called *Kawoká-mona*, the *apapaatai* shows itself to the patient with its distinctiveness - its singing, its dancing, and its instruments.

So, it seems to me somewhat imprecise that *apapaatai* have been de-animalized, though they have been made familiar through the consumption of human food – the cold tapioca porridge. In my view one could suggest that, although attracted by human food, the effecting of a cure would be more properly to determine who is the human in the relation to *apapaatai*. If the patient has seen them as humans, the reestablishment of his health, so to speak, corresponds to regaining a perspective from which they return to be animals. That is, one passes to the determination of the indeterminate. Moreover, as Barcelos Neto notes, citing an article by David Rodgers on another Xingu people, the Ikpeng, it is a “living condition” only possible through the regulation of these “dangerous or deadly encounters with other bodies, persons and substances” (p. 177). This condition, although favored by predation by others, is the guarantee for a person to create their own network of ritual protection in the form of establishing relationships with one or more *kawoká-mona*, relatives who set the scene of the *apapaatai* responsible for diseases that affected the person during one or more occasions.

The expression *kawoká-mona* is illustrative and subsumes two types of relationships that operate simultaneously here: *kawoká* is the term for “the famous wooden flute forbidden to women”, and *mona* is a term that is part of a series of four modifier affixes, which mark the qualities and states (false, apparent, true/prototypical superlative) of things and beings. In this case, *mona* refers to the second of these modalities, i.e., to the actual, visible body. Hence the complexity of the term, because while the first part refers to a flute which corresponds to the “model form of Xingu spirituality” (p. 173), the second part denotes its bodily version. Something like an embodied spirit, the *kawoká-mona* is the expression - or a replication? - of relations interwoven with spiritual beings in the social field. The recruitment of relatives who become *kawoká-mona* is thus directed towards those who hold ritual knowledge and/or expertise in the production of certain artifacts such as masks and ceramic pots. As Barcelos Neto suggests, “they became *kawoká-mona* so that the patient receives his soul back, its principle of human subjectivity” (p. 177).

From there, we can say that the process, hitherto restricted to relations between the patient’s household and some near relatives, reaches gradually expanded social spaces, which takes the form of ceremonial activity, primarily involving the whole local group, and subsequently other villages. This is the phase that is established from the “to do apapaatai” and that culminates accordingly as the (ex) patient makes himself *amunaw*, “noble”.

First he must take initiative as a sponsor of a ritual in the village in which his *kawoká-mona* will make their *apapaatai* masks as well as other artifacts. The (ex) patient owns the ritual, and should provide the community with food during the relatively long period of preparation for the ritual. With that he acquires, beyond the permanent spiritual protection from the *apapaatai* responsible for the illness that had originally struck him (including attacks against other *apapaatai*), the position of the recipient of a series of products and services provided by the *kawoká-mona*, including *apapaatai* masks, which henceforth will be maintained and nurtured at home. Other property received by the owner of the ritual, especially large and decorated ceramic pots, will be offered to chiefs of other villages within a circuit of exchange that characterizes the complex Xingu ritual system. These luxury items are the security of the successful participation of the owner of the ritual in the ceremonial inter-village sphere. What does this mean? The means to obtain recognition by others of their *amunaw* status, and recognition of their nobility. Based on a “politics of affluence”, in this system it seems not enough to belong to a lineage of chiefs, have a proper name, or have the body ritually made to ensure status and prestige. Above all else, it is necessary to be sick, and then and throughout one’s life to demonstrate efficiently how one’s integrity came to be restored, in my view as the dissimilarity between humans and *apapaatai* came to be restored, and objectified.

Barcelos Neto refers to the items transferred to the owner by their ritual *kawoká-mona*, and from those to other heads of villages - the political and economic alliances - an extension of agentive power of *apapaatai*. Trying to take the reasoning further, one might think that this spiritual power, once tamed, works in favor of an eminently human agency, and thus the distribution of the person *apapaatai* corresponds to a progressive movement of personal *amunaw* distribution; the expansive mechanism acknowledged in ethnography on the Xingu. If, as I suggested perhaps incorrectly, the disease is an elementary relational form of the system, it seems reasonable to assume an analogy between the healing and confirmation of *amunaw* by others. In his hammock, the awake patient sees the *apapaatai* in his *kawoká-mona*, a relative using their characteristic insignia. Later, as an owner of ritual, he can be recognized as such in the important

inter-village ceremony of the *Yeju* - when *kawoká-mona* from different villages dance together, and where the *amunaw* receives the highest possible recognition in life. In the first situation, the patient should see the *apapaatai* like an animal again, and these, especially after the ritual of making *apapaatai* and its magnificent production of masks, are supposed to go back to seeing them as humans - *mona*? In the second situation, the (ex) patient will be seen by other humans as a “noble”. But what does it mean to be noble in the Xingu?

If I am correct in pointing out the analogy above, the conclusion would be that a noble status means to be more than human. Remembering the series of modifier affixes cited above, we can then say that the *amunaw* status would be equivalent to an authentic human condition, to one’s full potential as human - as determined by the Wauja affix *kumã*. Maybe the superlative human condition, *ivajo*. But in both situations this must also be seen by others, i.e. to be *amunaw* you have to be recognized by other *amunaw* chiefs. I could not resist this digression, risking to apply certain Wauja concepts over others. Partly because Barcelos Neto concludes that *apapaatai* rituals are not only of *amunaw*, but are especially for *amunaw*. The other influence is certainly my own ethnographic experience among the peoples of the Uaupés River in the Northwest Amazon, for which high-level positions are a matter of recognition and expansion of relations. As I suspect occurs as much in the Xingu as in the Uaupés, nobility, rank, wealth and other forms of social status are most likely a matter of perspective, or rather, an exchange of perspectives.

At the end of the book, Barcelos Neto says that the xinguano socio-cosmological expansion regime is still an important issue to explore. In my view, a good portion of the path already traversed is in this excellent ethnography of the Wauja.