

The *Kuwai* Religions of Northern Arawak-Speaking Peoples: Initiation, Shamanism, and Nature Religions of the Amazon and Orinoco

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Abstract. The sacred traditions of *Kuwai* are a central part of the cultural and spiritual heritage of northern Arawak-speaking peoples of the Northwest Amazon region living in an area from the upper Vaupés in Colombia, throughout the Içana River basin in Brazil, to the Guaviare and Inirida, river regions in Venezuela. This study aims to discuss some of the most important dimensions of this religious tradition. Concretely, by mapping the traditions and their variants; by discussing tradition 'mythscape', that is, the sets of sacred sites inter-related by narratives and shamanic chants shared by ethno-linguistic groups; by elaborating on the most important meanings associated with the figure of *Kuwai*, having to do with patrilineal ancestors, cultural transmission across generations, nature/culture relations, and shamanism; and by looking at the cross-fertilization of cosmologies at the frontiers between the *Kuwai* religious tradition and non-Arawakan traditions.

Keywords: Shamanism, cosmology, petroglyphs, Amazonia, Aruaque, sacred geography, mythology.

Las religiones *Kuwai* de los pueblos de habla Arawak del Norte: iniciación, chamanismo y religiones naturales de la Amazonía y el Orinoco

Resumen. Las tradiciones sagradas *Kuwai* son parte central de la herencia cultural y espiritual de las poblaciones de habla Arawak–Norte de la región nordeste del Amazonas que viven en un área que va desde el Alto Vaupés en Colombia, a lo largo de la cuenca del río Içana en Brasil, hasta el Guaviare e Inírida, regiones fluviales en Venezuela. El propósito de este estudio es discutir algunas de las dimensiones más importantes de esta tradición religiosa. Principalmente, queremos mapear las tradiciones y sus variantes, discutiendo los “paisajes míticos” de la tradición; es decir, los conjuntos de lugares sagrados interrelacionados por narrativas y cánticos chamanísticos compartidos por grupos etnolingüísticos, elaborando los significados más importantes asociados con la figura de *Kuwai* que tienen que ver con los antepasados de línea patrilínea, la transmisión cultural a través de generaciones, las relaciones de la naturaleza/cultura y el chamanismo; observando así la fertilización cruzada de las cosmologías en las fronteras entre la tradición religiosa *kuwai* y las tradiciones no arahuacas.

Palabras clave: chamanismo, cosmología, petroglifos, Amazonía, aruaque, geografía sagrada, mitología.

As religiões *Kuwai* dos povos de fala Arawak–Norte: iniciação, xamanismo e religiões naturais da Amazônia e o Orinoco

Resumo. As tradições sagradas *Kuwai* são parte central da herança cultural e espiritual das populações da língua Arawak–norte da região Nordeste do Amazonas que moram numa área que vai desde o Alto Vaupés na Colômbia, ao longo da bacia do rio Içana no Brasil, até o Guaviare e Inírida. Regiões fluviais na Venezuela. O propósito deste estudo é discutir algumas das dimensões mais importantes desta tradição religiosa. Principalmente, mapeando as tradições e suas variantes; discutindo as “paisagens míticas” da tradição, quer dizer, os conjuntos de lugares sagrados inter-relacionados por narrativas e cânticos xamanísticos compartilhados por grupos etnolingüísticos; elaborando os significados mais importantes associados com a figura de *Kuwai* que têm a ver com os antepassados de linha patrilínea, a transmissão cultural através de gerações, as relações da natureza/cultura e o xamanismo; e ao observar a fertilização cruzada das cosmologias nas fronteiras entre a tradição religiosa *kuwai* e as tradições não arahuacas.

Palavras-chave: xamanismo, cosmologia, petroglifos, Amazônia, aruaque, geografía sagrada, mitología.

Les religions *Kuwai* des peuples de langue Arawak-Nord : initiation, chamanisme et religions naturelles de l'Amazonie et de l'Orénoque

Résumé. Les traditions sacrées *Kuwai* sont au cœur de l'héritage culturel et spirituel des peuples parlant Arawak-nord de la région Nord-Ouest de l'Amazonie qui vivent dans une zone allant d'Alto Vaupes en Colombie, tout au long du bassin de la rivière Içana Brésil, jusqu'à Guaviare et Inírida. Régions fluviales au Venezuela. Le but de cette étude est de discuter sur quelques dimensions les plus importantes de cette tradition religieuse. Plus précisément, en faisant un mapping des traditions et leurs variantes; en discutant les « paysages mythiques » de la tradition, c'est à dire, l'ensemble de sites sacrés reliés entre eux par des récits et chants chamaniques partagés par des groupes ethno-linguistiques; développer des significations les plus importantes associées à la figure de *Kuwai*, qui ont à voir avec les ancêtres patrilinéaires, la transmission culturelle à travers les générations, les relations nature/culture et chamanisme; et en observant la fertilisation croisée des cosmologies dans les frontières entre la tradition religieuse *kuwai* et les traditions non Arawak.

Mots-clés : chamanisme, cosmologie, pétroglyphes, Amazonie, Arawak, géographie sacrée, mythologie.

Introduction

At one time, in the distant past, the *Kuwait* traditions were part of a much larger indigenous religious tradition extending from the middle Solimões up the Rio Negro and to the Orinoco. This corresponds predominantly to the culture area of the northern Arawak-speaking peoples, whose history in that area dates back several thousand years (Neves, 2006). Among the defining features of this indigenous religious tradition were: (1) the existence of extensive systems of petroglyphs that can in many cases be directly associated with the sacred narratives of northern Arawak-speaking peoples (one defining feature of what we call ‘mythscape’); (2) essentially patrilineal, exogamous societies the religious foundations for which are grounded in sacred flutes and trumpets, the ‘body’ of an ancestral being, ‘ownership’ over which was disputed between men and women; (3) an ontology in which humans must learn to live according to the cycles of nature in order for them to become cultural beings (a ‘nature/culture’ dialectic); and (4) a hierarchy among shamans, defined by knowledge and power, derived principally from the vegetal world, and bestowed on shamans by the great spirits of sorcery and healing; and (5) the ‘trans-indigenous’ fertilization of cosmologies, along ethno-linguistic frontiers in the Northwest Amazon.

Although I will be discussing primarily the Baniwa of the Içana and Aiary in this study, I will make ethnological comparisons with northern Arawak-speaking peoples along the Orinoco and its tributaries up to the Cassiquiare; along the upper Amazon, Japurá, Uaupés, and the Rio Negro from the mouth to the headwaters.



Figure 1 Arawak languages

Font: Wright, González-Náñez, and Xavier Leal (2017).

Brief history of ethnological studies

The traditions commonly known in the Upper Rio Negro as “Yurupary”, have attracted the attention of scholars since the late 19th Century, when Count Ermanno Stradelli published his poetic rendition of them based on written manuscripts from the Manao, Tariano, Baré, and other peoples of the Upper Rio Negro and Uaupés River region in Brazil. The term Yurupary comes from the *lingua geral* trade language introduced by early colonial missionaries to refer to a demon of the Indians, in opposition to Tupã, the Tupian god of thunder, and the Christian god. Both Yurupary and Tupã are still widely used in the northwest Amazon as globalizing names to substitute for the distinct deities and great spirits of the twenty-two ethnic groups which inhabit the region. For the northern Arawak-speaking peoples in the region, “Yurupary” referred to the traditions of *Kuwai* (and variants of the name, such as *Kue*, *Kuwaiwa*, and *Kuwe*) which had as much importance as the *He masa* had for the eastern Tukanoan-speaking peoples.

The first full-length ethnological studies of the eastern Tukanoan traditions were done by Reichel-Dolmatoff (1971, 1985, 1996), and by Christine and Stephen Hugh-Jones (1979, 1979). In his article of 1989, Reichel-Dolmatoff argued that the Yurupary sacred flutes and trumpets —the material embodiment of an extraordinary demiurge which in many ways represented the natural world— actually have active agency in the reproduction of all life. The biological reproduction of natural (plant and animal) species, according to Reichel-Dolmatoff, serves as a metaphor, in the view of natives, for human reproduction. Reproduction in nature is a model through which humans reflect on their own biological and social reproduction. In his 1996 analysis of the Yurupary myth, Reichel-Dolmatoff focuses exclusively on the eastern Tukanoan stories, which are quite different in certain respects (to be discussed in this paper) from the northern Arawakan traditions of *Kuwai*.¹ Reichel-Dolmatoff analyzed Yurupary only as the sacred flutes and trumpets, and their relation to the “law of exogamy”.

For the northern Arawak-speaking peoples, the narrative about *Kuwai* is much more than a story of exogamy. *Kuwai*'s body consisted of both song (melodies produced through the pores and apertures of his body), and sickness (his ‘fur’ primarily, and a series of internal ailments as well), both reproduced after his ‘death’ in a great fire as the sacred musical instruments and all sicknesses in the world today. The figure of *Kuwai* has many common features for the northern Arawak: as teacher of sacred traditions, as sorcerer, as priestly chanter, and as dancer. *Kuwai* has major importance for shamanism, rites of initiation, seasonal dance festivals, and

1 One important Dessano (eastern Tukanoan) sib claims ancestry from northern Arawakan-speaking peoples; the *Hohodene* of the Aiary River include the Dessano amongst the group of ancestral sibs which emerged from the holes in the earth at *Hipana* altogether at the time of creation.

northern Arawak cosmology in general. He is considered to be the ‘soul’ of cultural traditions and ancestral continuity, and, at the same time, he is the ‘soul’ that can destroy if people abuse his knowledge and power.

For the Arawak-speaking Baniwa of the Içana and its tributaries, especially the Aiary River in Brazil where I studied,² Theodor Koch-Grünberg published brief field notes on these traditions in the first years of the twentieth century (2005 [1903-05]). In the 1950s, Brazilian ethnologist Eduardo Galvão left field notes on the initiation ceremonies and stories from the Baniwa of the Içana River (his field notebooks are found in the Biblioteca do Museu Paraense Emilio Goeldi, in Belém do Pará). In 1959-60, the Salesian priest and researcher Wilhelm Saake published half-a-dozen articles in German and Portuguese on Baniwa narratives, shamanism, and ceremonies, including traditions of “Yurupary”, from the Aiary and Içana.

It has been in the past twenty-five to thirty years, however, that the results of prolonged field studies on cosmology and shamanism among the northern Arawak-speaking Kuripako and Baniwa (specifically the *Hohodene*, *Dzauinai*, and *Walipere-dakenai* phratries) have been published, along with the Warekena, Piapoco, and Baré in Venezuela (Hill, 1993; Journet, 1995; Vidal, 2000; Wright, 1998). Since then, a veritable library of ethnological, ethnohistoric, ethnomusicological, ecological, and linguistic material has been produced (in bibliography, see references to: Raffo, 2003; González-Ñáñez, 2007; Rodrigues de Mello, 2013; Da Costa Oliveira, 2015).

Collections of mythic narratives from the Baniwa/Kuripako/Wakuenai, Warekena, and other northern Arawak-speaking peoples exist in several languages. In Portuguese, *Waferinaipe Ianheke (Wisdom of our Ancestors)* narrated by Cornelio *et al.* (1999) from the *Hohodene* and *Walipere-dakenai* phratries of the Aiary River, along with the *Mitoteca Baniwa* (2005) are the most complete sets of narratives. For the Colombian Kuripako, the collection in Spanish organized by Alejandro Filintoro Rojas (1994), himself a Kuripako/Colombian mestizo, on the “Natural Sciences of the Curripaco [sic.]” adds astrological dimensions to the narratives, not noted by any previous author, as well as an extensive glossary and dictionary. The extensive study made by Raffo (2003) of the narratives, shamanic chants, rites and festivals, and petroglyphs on the Middle Guainia, in the territory of the Kuripako, provides notably rich ethnography to complement that from the Baniwa of the Içana and Aiary Rivers. *Mitología Guarequena*, by O. González-Ñáñez (1975), has long been an important collection from the Warekena Indians of the Cassiquiare region in Venezuela.

A notable recent study, based on the existing literature and on her own interviews, Gláucia Buratto Rodrigues de Mello’s *Yurupary* elaborates a book-length

2 First, in 1976-77; again, in the summers of 1998, 2000-1; through Hohodene assistant researchers in 2009-10, and Summer, 2017.

comparative study of the narratives of the Dessano and Baniwa (2013). There, she highlights the theme of gender relations, a central part of the narrative, and their importance in disputes for power.

Sylvia Vidal's historical research opens up regional and long-range perspectives on northern Arawak-speaking peoples, tracing their migrations, hypothesizing macro-political units, and providing a wealth of data on the *Kuwai* religion among northern Arawaks, including graphic images based on the "Voyages of *Kuwai*" chanted during the initiation rites (Vidal, 1987; see also Hill, 1993; Wright, 1993; González-Náñez 2007).

Regional and historical perspective on traditions of *Kuwai*

The idea of looking at the so-called 'religion of Yurupary' from a macro-regional perspective was perhaps first suggested by S. Hugh-Jones in 1979. There is in fact early colonial documentary evidence about peoples in a vast region from the Northwest Amazon (including the upper Solimões River) to the Orinoco River with similar traditions of a cult of sacred flutes and trumpets associated with powerful mythological beings. This is of great importance considering that the chants of the "Voyages of *Kuwai*" which are sung during initiation ceremonies today remember with precision the sacred geographies of the Orinoco, the Rio Negro and the upper Amazon rivers.

The barest of contours of the long-range larger picture can be found in ethnologies, but even these come relatively late in colonial history, after vast areas of the Rio Negro, for example, had been decimated by war and disease. Métraux (1948), in the *Handbook of South American Indians*, cites Jesuit priest Samuel Fritz, who refers to a Yurimagua (upper Amazon) cult bearing similarities to the Upper Rio Negro:

The Yurimagua celebrated a cult reminiscent of the "Yurupary feasts" of the Tucano and Arawakan tribes of the Caiary-Uaupés region (pp. 793, 795; figs. 116-117). It centered around a spirit called Guaricana, whom they worshiped in a special hut barred to women and children. During the ceremony, they played a big "flute" (probably the Yurupary trumpet) and the spirit —actually an old man— whipped the youths with a lash of manatee hide, to make them strong. (Fritz, 1922, p. 61)

The Yurimagua may possibly have been northern Arawak-speaking, since the Manao of the Middle Rio Negro, who had a similar cult, traded with them in "gold, Vermillion [urucu], manioc graters, hammocks with various kinds of clubs and shields, that they worked very curiously" (S. Fritz, cited in Métraux 1948: 707).

Métraux likewise tells us a bare minimum about Manao religious beliefs and practices and he does mention the "flogging rites" during the "principal Manao feast"; the belief in two gods, "the first benevolent, the other evil"; beliefs in great

shamans, diviners, and prophets. We know little else about other northern Arawakan tribes from the Lower to Mid-Rio Negro up to the Baré (see ethnohistoric Map in Wright, 2005). There are a few references to similar kinds of cult activities among the Arawakan Apurinã of the Purus River, in the southern Amazon, who had sacred flutes called *Kamatxi*, ‘enchanted beings’ or spirits, that were played during the festivals of the same name when the *Kamatxi* spirits which are “the ‘chiefs’ of the buriti palms and who live in the buriti palmtrees” (Chandless, 1866), would come and play their flutes with the men. The shamans would go out to bring the *Kamatxi* to the festivals and these were prohibited for the women to see. Women had to remain secluded during the presence of the *Kamatxi* in the villages. In this respect, the *Kamatxi* flutes were very similar to the sacred flutes of the Northwest Amazon. In some sense, also, they were connected with the spirits of deceased warriors (Chandless, 1866).

Slightly north of the Amazon, on the tributaries of the Japurá, Caquetá and Miriti, lie the southern fringe of what might be called the “classic” area of the “Yurupary complex”. While some of the earliest documents from the Japurá River region and its tributaries suggest the existence of sacred flutes and trumpets among the northern Arawakan Yumana, Passé, and Resigaro, those societies suffered drastic reductions and relocations in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The Yukuna, Kabiari, and Matapi, however, have received far better ethnographic treatment by anthropologists such as Jacopin (1988), Dussan (1987), and Oyuela-Caycedo (2004).

The Yukuna ritual of sacred flutes corresponds to the same ceremony among the eastern Tukanoan-speaking peoples with whom the Yukuna have been in intense interaction for generations.

On the Orinoco, a Jesuit source of the eighteenth century likewise noted the centrality of flute cults, sometimes related to treatment of the dead, sometimes—as in the case of the Maypure—related to a “cult of the serpents” with the name of *Cueti* (cognate to the Arawakan word for the flutes, *Kuwai*): “*Cueti* means animal. The Maypure believe that serpents come from time to time into their villages, that they drink with them, and that they enjoy dancing with the men” (Gilij, *Ensayos*, 2: 235-36, cited in Wright 1981: 111).

The Achagua of the savannahs also had masked dances which they called *Chuway*.

When naturalist Alexander von Humboldt visited the Tomo River, tributary of the Guainia, in the 1780s, he thought that a key area in the development of the *Kuwai* religion was around the confluence of the two rivers, which was at that time the territory of the Guaypunaves, Baniva (distinct from the Baniwa of the Içana), and Kuripako. He described the playing of the sacred flute instruments under palm trees “to secure their fertility”. He also noted that they represented “the ancestor” and, more specifically, the ongoing relationship between humans and their ances-

tors. The relationship is creative and dynamic, for it sustains the periodicity that is vital to the growth of the harvest. The ancestral flute cults, in short, promoted the growth of the harvest as they provided for the growth of social groups. Their importance for societal development could not be under-estimated:

There are but a small number of these flutes near the confluence of the Tomo and Guainia... Had colonization not destroyed indigenous societies in the early eighteenth century, then the *botuto* cult [sic] could have been of some political importance where the guardians of the trumpets would become a ruling caste of priests, and the oracle of Tomo could gradually form a link between bordering nations. (von Humboldt, 1907: 362-363, 364)

The “oracle” flute may rather refer to the Baniwa *Kuwai* flute called *mulitu*, which has this function of ritually answering questions posed to it by the women (Hill, 1993, 2009).

In her M.A. thesis on traditions of the Piapoco (1987) of the Meta, Vichada, and Guaviare rivers of Colombia, and later publications, S. Vidal defined the historical manifestation of “the *Kuwai* religion” as a kind of institution, that, as for the Warekena and Baré, was the “sociopolitical and religious basis for the regional leadership of powerful Arawak-speaking chiefs and groups” (2002: 253)

This religious system [of *Kuwai*] embraces a hierarchical sociopolitical organization, a map (or imagery) of sacred routes and places, and a corpus of narratives that encompasses ritual, geographical, ecological, botanical, and zoological knowledge. *Kuwe* has served the Arawakan-speaking peoples (more specifically, the Warekena and Baré) as a model of and for society and their geopolitical and interethnic relations on which they have built their strategies of resistance. (Vidal, 2000: 636)

This is in accord with descriptions from other peoples such as the Tariana (middle and lower Uaupés) and the Baniwa. She highlights the following aspects of the “*Kuwai* religion”:

- (1) The central importance of rites and secret societies associated with *Kuwai* (i.e., the sacred flutes and trumpets) throughout the Northwest Amazon region;
- (2) The link between *Kuwai* and biological and sociological aspects of indigenous peoples of the northwest Amazon; and
- (3) The links between *Kuwai* and sociopolitical organization involving the formation of powerful religious leaders in conjunction with war leaders and powerful chiefs.

Social and political organization was, according to Vidal, originally linked to “stratified religio-military macro- units” and later, in post-contact times, the formation of multiethnic confederations. The “*Kuwai* religion”, she argues, “was the highest expression of religious life of the Arawak-and Tukanoan-speaking peoples” (Vidal, 2000: 636)

Many vestiges of its importance can be seen on the upper Guainia, Guaviare, Atabapo, and Inirida Rivers (in the 1750s-80s, the territory of the “Guaypunaves”, Baniva, and Kuripako, a meeting-place of Arawak-speaking peoples) where there are numerous petroglyphs and sacred sites (González-Ñáñez, 2007; see also Ortiz and Pradilla, 2000; Raffo, 2003; Xavier, 2008; Wright, González-Ñáñez, and Leal, 2017), as well as the names of the *Kuwai* ancestral spirits that populate vast stretches of the upper Guainia River (Hill, 1993; Wright, 1993). In one section of the Guainia River, there are at least a dozen places where the name *Kuwai* appears.

Beyond this, the “cults” were instrumental in “resisting” culture loss due to the constant colonists incursions. Two hundred years after von Humboldt observed their importance, Hohodene jaguar shaman Mandu da Silva visited that same area to warn the people of an impending disaster if they forgot their traditions, because they were the people’s only means of surviving against colonial domination (Wright, 2013).

Set in stone: Mythscapes of *Kuwai*

By the term ‘mythscape’, we refer to the set of all places referenced in sacred narratives (e.g., the narrative of *Kuwai*) and their interconnections. A ‘mythscape’ is not only a way of structuring space defining centers and their interconnections with other centers, but it is also a way of creating a larger community of shared meanings and values (as in, for example, a phratry). Each ethno-linguistic group of northern Arawak has/had its own sacred mythscapes.

A ‘mythscape’ is not just a sacred geography, but it refers to a shared model for orienting a community as to the central values of the culture. They are ‘multi-centric’ with multiple sacred centers where life-defining transformations occurred. Mythscapes connect vertical and horizontal spaces in a dynamic flow of meanings that charge the mundane with the sacred at critical places spread out over a large region. In so doing, mythscapes create large communities in a region where actual settlements are separated by significant (overland and riverine) distances and—at least in the upper Rio Negro— population that is proportionate to the availability of food resources.³ Finally, mythscapes are intimately connected with ecological cycles (e.g., rainy and dry seasons), as we shall explain below, which is another indication of shared values held among communities spread out in the Northwest Amazon.

Northern Arawakan creation stories and the territories to which they refer are marked by multiple ‘centers’ (particular river rapids, outcroppings of rocks, or

3 Remembering that the Rio Negro is a nutrient-poor river, that areas of highly productive food resources are not as numerous as one finds, for example, in the upper Xingu.

hills) at which major transformational events occurred in primordial times (first birth, first death, first initiation rite, emergence of the first ancestors). These centers are described in minute detail by the religious specialists —the jaguar shamans, seers and savants— who, based on their direct experiences of the sacred, are capable of explaining holistically nearly every shape and form, petroglyph inscription, locations and inter-relations among elements of these sites (See Ortiz and Pradilla, 2000; Raffo, 2003, for the Kuripako; Andrello, 2006, for the Tariana of Iauareté; for the Guainia; Wright, 2013; and Wright, González-Náñez, and Leal, 2017, for the Baniwa/Kuripako).

The ‘world centers’ (*pamudzua hekwapi*, in Hohodene) are the most significant of these multiple, interconnected ‘centers’. The ‘world centers’ are highly charged sources of cosmic life force. Their sacredness involves both a deep respect for their intrinsic significance, a strong taboo (enforced by sorcery) against disturbing any aspect or feature in them, and their connection with the invisible (visible to the specialists) “Other World” of the spirits and creator deities. Based on research done by Raffo (2003), Leal (2008), and Ortiz and Pradilla (2000) among Baniwa and Kuripako, we can confirm that there are ‘world centers’/rapids for different ethno-linguistic groups that go by the name of *Hipana*, and that at each of these primordial portals to the sacred “the story of origin repeats itself” (Raffo, 2003: 83, my transl.). The narratives provide the conceptual framework while the sacred chants derived from the narratives contain the power to expand the sacred ‘world centers’ centrifugally outwards to the furthest reaches of the known world and contract centripetally back inward and upwards to the ‘Other World’ connected to ‘This World’ at the center.⁴

It is possible to say that, in the long-range view, there are ‘mythsapes’ with which a people may fully identify in the present-day, but which contain elements that are not entirely ‘explainable’ by the religious specialists because they refer to prior settlement by ‘other peoples.’ This occurs at *Hipana* on the Aiary, for example; nevertheless, the most of the totality resonates with the sacred stories told by the people living nearby. A people may also not recognize the meaning of the signs and symbols in any one site because they belong to another cultural and linguistic group’s tradition: From his study, Raffo concluded that “the basic characters common to the petroglyphs of the *Aiary*, *Cuyari*, *Guainia*, *Isana* and *Atabapo* [my emphasis] are visibly distinct from those of the Iniridá River, which is inhabited by the Puinave people, or the graphisms of the Cubeo of the Cuduiary River; in neither case legible to the Kuripako” (Raffo, 2003: 22-3, my transl.) In fact, the upper Guainia is a multi-ethnic space shared by the Puinave, Baniva, Warekena,

4 Expansive phases of the story can have multiple meanings, including exile from the World Center to the extreme peripheries (the boundaries with alterity), followed by a return home and regaining of power.

and Tsase (Piapoco) —each has its own “*Kuwai*”— narrative, variations on the same themes.

Evangelization has been generally associated with the ‘forgetting’ of ancestral meanings in the case of the Kuripako of the upper Içana River. A major site on the upper Içana is a hill that marks the place of the Creator’s house where death came into the world. While the site is rich in symbolism of primordial times, evident in the arrangement of boulders and caves, what makes it distinctive is that it has no petroglyphs whatsoever (Xavier Leal, 2008). Kuripako elders explained that petroglyphs began with *Kuwai* at *Hipana*, and that they, the petroglyphs, are reminders to initiates of what they should not do, that is, disobey initiatic restrictions. The hill site is in danger of losing its meaning, however, as it has been depredated by the evangelicals, few of whom remember the meanings attributed to the site.

Due to the dislocations resulting from historical contact, not many peoples have been able to maintain their relation to the ‘mythscape’ of their ancestors. Nevertheless, each community may affirm a relation with a nearby ‘mythscape.’ The sacred power of mythscape centers such as *Hipana* on the Aiary River is of greatest importance to the community located nearest to it, who consider themselves to be guardians of the traditions.

It has been found that there is a very clear relation between petroglyphs and seasonal activities (Raffo, 2003). In their intense connections with the natural world, the ancient artists who chiseled the petroglyphs into the boulders made them in such a way as to be mostly visible when the rivers are low (the dry season), but at the height of the rainy season, the petroglyphs disappear altogether, submerged by the powerful waters of the rivers. The petroglyphs all refer to natural processes referenced in the narrative cycles. For example, at *Hipana*, on the Aiary, there are glyphs of a lizard and a plant on one boulder, which refer to the beginning of growth and vegetation in the early rainy season. This has to do with the Master of Garden Plants *Kaali*, who it is said, obtained the first earth from *Kuwai* to make the first gardens (Cornélio *et al.*, 1999).

To illustrate the semantic density of the ‘world center’, I now focus on the “*Kuwai* mythscape” in the traditions of the Hohodene, consisting of the following key places (located on Map 2 below): the rapids of *Hipana* on the Aiary River, the birthplace of *Kuwai*; *Ehnipan*, on the Içana River, where the first male initiation ritual took place with *Kuwai*; *Mothipana*, a hill at the headwaters of the Uaraná tributary of the Aiary, where the first female ritual with the flutes and trumpets ‘*Kuwai*’s body’ took place; *Tunui*, a hill on the middle-Içana, where the men obtained extraordinarily powerful weapons to use in the war against the women; and all other rapids, geographical features, etc., that bear some reference to *Kuwai*. All of these places are marked by petroglyphs, traces or reminders of primordial acts, beings and events; some even have cosmologically significant arrangements of boulders.

But it is most especially at *Hipana* that the signs and symbolic elaboration in the petroglyphs are a narrative in themselves.

Hipana is considered the ‘center of the universe’ (*Hekwapi pamudzua*) in both a vertical and a horizontal sense. Vertically, it is situated between the upper world of the great spirits and Creator, and the lower world of the bones of the deceased along with a variety of spirit-entities (see Wright, 2013); horizontally, it is from this center place that “This World” grew outwards to its geographical limits, to “where the earth meets the sky” (*eenu táhe*).



Figure 2 The sacred waterfalls of *Hipana*, birthplace of humanity at the holes in the center of the rapids; the first earth is the boulder on lower left

Font: Serial photo: M.C. Wright (Wright, 2013).

The boulders and petroglyphs illustrate (Figure 3 below) the following elements representing *Kuwai*: (a) a line of boulders mark where *Amaru*, *Kuwai*'s mother, ‘squatted’ as she gave birth to *Kuwai*, and where girls at their menarche sit today so that their bodies may become strong; (b) a boulder with petroglyphs of the Pleiades constellation, visible at the time for holding the rites of initiation; (c) a boulder with petroglyphs of a serpent representing the ‘pain of the whips’, and spirals that are the ‘sounds of the flutes’; (d) another boulder, a short distance away, is said to represent the ‘true *Kuwai*’; (e) a stone that bears the shape of the ‘placenta of *Kuwai*’ after he was born, in the shape of a freshwater stingray; (f) several boulders representing the sacred flutes of *Kuwai*, and hawk feathers that empowered the

original flutes to open the ‘voice’ of *Kuwai*; (g) a place of the ancient village where *Nhiaperikuli* made the *Kuwai* flutes; (h) stairway from the port to the present-day village. The sequence of boulders (b, c, and d) may very well represent two of the three initiates who were devoured by *Kuwai* during the first initiation rite, and one initiate who was spared.⁵

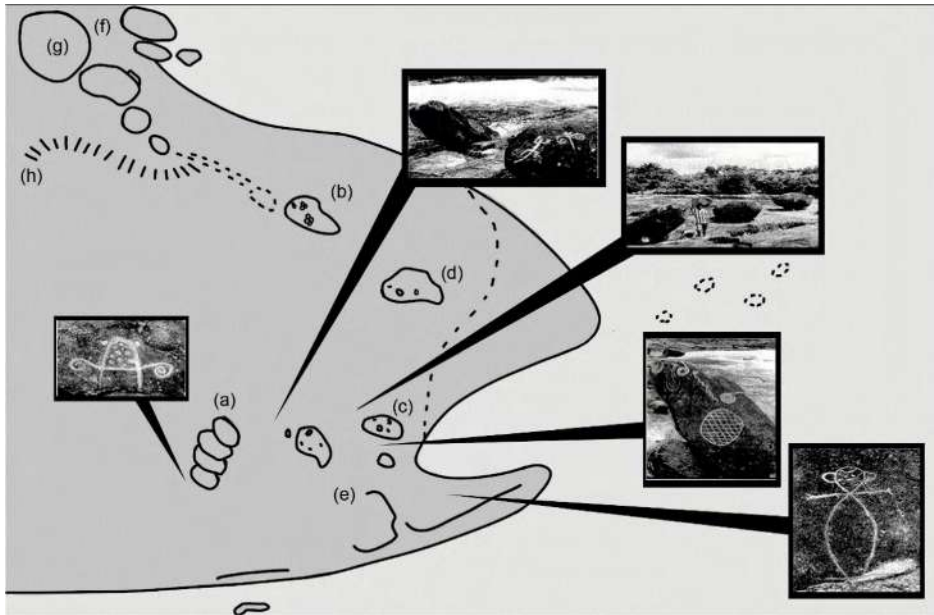


Figure 3 Sketch of petroglyphs and mythscape at *Hipana*, the World Center

Font: Adapted from Ortiz and Pradilla 2000, by M.C. Wright (Wright, 2014: 212).

In addition, the sacred place of *Hipana* is ‘announced’ to anyone approaching it from downstream by a large petroglyph of *Kuwai* on the face of one of the main boulders at the mouth of this portal to the sacred. It faces downriver, recalling the moment in the narrative after *Kuwai* had devoured three of the boys and flew with them downriver where he vomited them up into bread baskets laid out on the village plaza at *Ehnipan*. In the reproduction below, the petroglyph shows parts of *Kuwai*’s segmented body along with rounded and swirl shapes that are the musical sounds emitted from his body.

5 Interestingly, the one boulder which is said to represent “the true *Kuwai*” has no petroglyphs on it at all, while the other 3 do. This suggests that the initiate who was spared acquired “true” knowledge of the world. The others represent aspects of the knowledge to be acquired (whipping, growth) by the spared initiate.



Figure 4 Petroglyph of *Kuwai-ka-Wamundana*

Font: Koch-Grünberg, 1907: 112

Kuwai's sounds and singing made the world 'open up' (expand) from its primordial, miniature size, to the huge territory and world that the Baniwa know today. The story develops through the following episodes (see figure 5 below):

(1) *Kuwai* is born at *Hipana*, the child of *Nhiaperikuli* and *Amaru*;

(2a) *Kuwai* begins the initiation of four young boys at *Ehnipan* but, he devours 3 of them at *Hipana* due to their disobedience of ritual diet.

A part of the 'mythscape' of *Hipana* is a giant uacú tree "on the other side of the river" (that is to say, "in the forest") where *Kuwai* and the boys were gathering nuts prior to completing their ritual fast. The boys broke their pledge of keeping their fast to *Kuwai*. As a result a huge deluge of water inundated them⁶ and *Kuwai* swallowed three out of the 4 boys.

(2b) *Kuwai* returns to *Ehnipan* to conclude the initiation by blessing sacred pepper with the chants called *kalidzamai*, at the end of which *Nhiaperikuli* pushes him into a great fire. Later, a giant paxiuba tree, *Kuwai's* body, shoots out of the ground at *Hipana*; from it, *Nhiaperikuli* fashions the sacred flutes and trumpets;

(3a) *Kuwai's* mother and the women steal these flutes and trumpets and flee from *Nhiaperikuli* to the hill called *Mothipana*, where they hold the first female initiation ritual;

6 The inundation refers to the covering of the boulders by the high rivers at the time of the Pleiades, when the rites of initiation are scheduled and the boys enter seclusion. Thus, the narrative refers no more and no less to the 'swallowing' of the boys into the "House of *Kuwai*", their seclusion until the final part of the ritual, when they "come out" of the House and eat sacred pepper.

(3b) *Nhiaperikuli* summons his bird and animal allies at the hill of *Tunui*, and together, they make war against the women at the conclusion of which they regain the flutes and trumpets;

(3c) *Nhiaperikuli* sends the women off to the four directions, where they marry (exogamy), and the men finish adorning the flutes and trumpets at *Hipana*;

(4) *Nhiaperikuli* brings forth the first ancestors at *Hipana*.

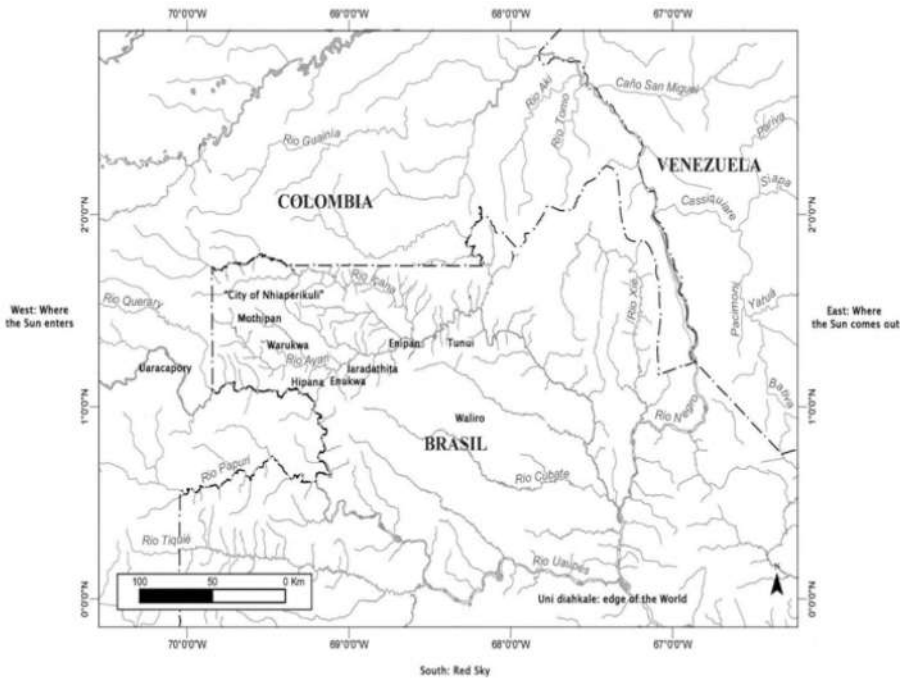


Figure 5 *Kuwai* narrative mythscape

Font: Wright, 2014: 209.⁷

7 At the far left of the map is the site called Uaracapory where, it is said, there was a gigantic tree (probably a sumaúma tree) which, in primordial times, contained the first shaman's beans, called *marawathi*, as well as powerful shamanic instruments such as the jaguar-tooth necklace. An important narrative tells how, after this great tree was felled, the Tapir (*Amaru*'s father) stole the jaguar-tooth necklace and *marawathi* from *Nhiaperikuli*, the Creator. The location of this great tree is around the upper Vaupés, in Colombia, in the present-day territory of the Uanano and/or Cubeo; however, in the 18th Century, Baniwa built settlements on the upper Vaupés, which explains why the site is of great importance as a pre-creation and pre-*Kuwai* location of a felled vertical axis.

Like all Baniwa stories having to do with rites of passage, the *Kuwai* story is ‘musicalized’ (Hill, 1993) by a set of chants, called *kalidzamai*, that remember the “voyages of *Kuwai*”, when *Nhiaperikuli* chased the women in order to retrieve the sacred instruments and bring them back to *Hipana*. These ‘voyages’ encode both the centrifugal and centripetal actions of “blessing” all places in the world, making them safe for the new initiates (see Vidal, 1987; Hill, 1993; Wright, 1993).

The ‘voyages of *Kuwai*’ traditions vary in some of the places remembered, according to the specific histories of commercial routes, and political relations of each phratry. These ethno-maps are extraordinarily comprehensive and cumulative. They show the limits of the known “*Kuwai* world”, combining knowledge of the sacred stories, the oral histories, the sociopolitical limits of the phratry’s territory all together under an over-riding shamanic action to make the world safe for the newly-initiated boys and girls. This is one of the most important tasks of the priestly chanters who perform the *kalidzamai*.

A Warekena version of *Kúwe* elaborates how the sacred instruments were then distributed to the peoples of Venezuela and Brazil:

...at the beginning of *Kúwe* (= *Kuwai*), who was born on the Aiary River, a branch of the Içana, the Creator of the Arawak commenced the partition of *Kúwe* for the entire world. The parts were divided amongst various lands. One part went to Brazil (in the south). The part of *Kúwe* which corresponded to the Warekena ancestors went along the following route: it descended the Inirida River (Colombia) from the upper Içana and from there it continued on. On the Inirida it reached the rapids of Kubalé (Kúwaili). It formed this great rapids. It is believed that almost all fish go to lay their eggs at this rapids. This was the work of *Nápiruli*, who was the same *Kuwai* of the ancestors (my emphasis). He made it this way so that it would be easier for people to catch fish for the *kalyama* (*kalidzamai* in Hohodene) ritual food for initiation. *Kúwe* and his procession continued on downriver to the Vichada. (González-Náñez, 1975: 225)

***Kuwai* as continuity of “the father’s soul”**

Kuwai was conceived through a shamanic act in which *Nhiaperikuli*, *Kuwai*’s father, sent his thought into *Amaru*’s body. *Nhiaperikuli* wanted to have a child through whom all of his knowledge and soul would be transmitted. It had to be the result of an endogamic union (not an “incestuous” union as so many writers have erroneously claimed) with a woman of the same descent group: hence, *Amaru*, the mother of *Kuwai*, is *Nhiaperikuli*’s “aunt” (*likuiro*).⁸ The Hohodene say that *Amaru* was not a biological ‘aunt’ to *Nhiaperikuli*; she was the “daughter” of Tapir, according to the

8 Affinal ‘others’ are considered to be intrinsically dangerous; Baniwa stories are replete with instances in which the survival of the descent group is threatened by these non-kin.

Baniwa, whom *Nhiaperikuli* called “grandfather”.⁹ *Nhiaperikuli*’s union with *Amaru* was purely cognitive, shamanic. That *Kuwai* emerged such an ‘odd’ combination of features derives from the conjunction of these elements, and not because of any ‘biological’ question.¹⁰ Other stories make *Amaru* out to be the most important woman of the descent group. She is an “aunt”, “grandmother”, or “mother” but not a “sister” except to affinal peoples.¹¹ As *Kuwai*’s mother, she wanted her son back, for he had been taken from her by *Nhiaperikuli*.

Kuwai’s body was “full of holes” which emitted musical sounds. He was “not of this world”; so his father sent him away to live for a while first in the forest and then in the sky world. *Kuwai*’s identity is thus framed as being of the forest and of the sky: both are associated with the spirit worlds. He is defined as being the ‘soul of the father’ (*haneri ikaale*), the ‘soul of the Sun’ (*Kamui ikaale*). As child of *Nhiaperikuli*’s “aunt”, *Kuwai* was of the same generation as *Nhiaperikuli* and therefore his “brother” [parallel cousin]. The child was an anomaly: an astonishing mix of creative sound and violent pain and destructiveness, which was banished to the ‘edge’ of the world, then still miniature in size.

Kuwai’s form and growth defied all forms and shapes known in the world. At his death, *Kuwai*’s body was transformed from a single, magnified, giant animal/person into multiple, vegetal/animal/bird entities out of which were produced sacred flutes and trumpets, each of them represented a part of *Kuwai*’s body and the first ancestor of a phratry, or a relation of alliance or antagonism that characterized the primordial way of life. These instruments were to be played at initiation rites to reproduce “the father’s soul”, as the story states. They could also be played to make the forest-fruits grow. Elements of his body were transformed into poisonous plants and leaves, used in sorcery, as well as sickness-giving spirits, or *Yoopinai*, found throughout the local forest environment.

The life force that *Kuwai* represents can be understood as an explanation for how the patrilineal ‘heart-soul’ (*ikaale*) came to be embodied in material forms (the sacred instruments) and reproduced over time and space. As long as there have been ‘people’ in this world, the belief in the *Kuwai* first ancestors has been the foundation for organization into society. The first ancestors are included in all the parts of *Kuwai*’s body. The Baniwa of the Aiary and Içana stated that the meanings

9 Tapir is thus two-generation ascendant; *Amaru* is one-generation ascendant. Tapir stole *malikai* [the jaguar-tooth collar which gives the shaman the power to transform into a jaguar] from *Nhiaperikuli*, but *Nhiaperikuli* was able to take it back. *Amaru* ‘stole’ the *Kuwai* instruments from *Nhiaperikuli*, but he was able to get them back, in a ‘war’ against the women.

10 Within the context of the myth’s dialogue with “exogamy”, the episode makes better sense.

11 For example: in the most important story of how *Nhiaperikuli* was killed by the animals and later brought back to life, the elderly woman who nurtures *Nhiaperikuli* back to life is sometimes an old grandmother, or an “aunt”. She also has the remedies against the poison of the animals.

of the traditions of *Kuwai* have to do with cultural continuity, the transmission of culture and knowledge, from the patrilineal ancestors and elders to their living descendants, especially the newly-initiated.

Nhiãperikuli's child, *Kuwai*, was his own heart-soul shamanically thought into being. His body (bones in particular) became the sacred flutes and trumpets. These were stolen by *Amaru*, but *Nhiãperikuli* struggled with the first women over who was going to keep that power. Nearly all narrators agreed that the women "lost the war" over ownership of the sacred flutes and were sent away from their homes to the ends of the world, where they became "Mothers of the Whites", i.e., the women reproduced relations of alterity. If, in the beginning of the story, *Kuwai* was the product of an endogamous union, in the end, the mothers become agents of exogamous unions.

If *Amaru* had retained power over him, society would have turned out very differently. The evangelical Kuripako of the upper Içana (Xavier Leal, 2013), in fact, have elaborated a remarkable inversion of the struggle for parental control in which *Amaru* *did* retain possession of the sacred instruments and that she is the Kuripako "Mother" deity. *Nhiãperikuli* is not responsible for bringing the ancestors into being, according to evangelical Kuripako; he may, in fact, still be "in this world".

The flutes which remained with the men in Catholic or unaffiliated communities are considered to be the 'body of *Kuwai*', symbol of the continuity of the primordial world for all future generations (*walimanai*). Identity will never be lost as long as power is maintained over its most potent, primordial symbol. Ancestral power embodied in flutes and trumpets, known collectively as '*Kuwai*', distinguishes one phratry's collective identity from another.

Continuity of these traditions is perceived to be constantly threatened by enemy outsiders. The mission of the jaguar shamans turned prophets is to alert society of the threats to this continuity and to assure people that there will be an end to their suffering.¹² If the young adults are not initiated, society will be vulnerable to the enemy outsiders who impose the kind of change that breaks connections with the ancestors, in the same catastrophic way as if there were no more jaguar shamans, then society would become vulnerable to the attacks of sorcerers and new diseases.

12 For further discussion of Baniwa jaguar shamans and prophets, see Wright (2005, 2014, 2016).



Figure 6 *Kuwai-ka-Wamundana*, the Spirit Owner of Sickness

Font: Drawing by Thiago Aguilar, 2010.

***Kuwai* the animal, *wamundana*: Nature/culture**

Figure 6 above is a drawing of *Kuwai* by a shaman's apprentice and artist; the 'body' of this spirit of sickness and sorcery, its 'shadow-soul' (*idanami*), 'the dark interior which is projected outwards as a shadow' is that of a black sloth (*wamu*) but with the face of a White Man and the teeth of a jaguar. *Kuwai* is a univocal mixture of alterity and identity, exceedingly dangerous to humans.

This graphic representation highlights several critical features of *Kuwai* that help understanding the power of this image. Why was *Kuwai* a sloth? What could possibly make the sloth such a powerful figure? I suggest there were several reasons: (1) the seasonal behavior of the sloths, its descending from the trees at the transition from the end of the dry season and the beginning of the major rainy season to forage on the ground, is significant (narrators sometimes mimic the 'song' of the sloth at the moment it descends the tree) because it is also the time when male initiation rites should be scheduled. (2) After *Kuwai*'s 'death' by fire, his poisonous fur 'ran' and penetrated the pelt of the large black sloth and the small white sloth. This moment coincides with the ritual moment when the elder gives to the initiates the fiery pepper that protects the initiates from sicknesses. The Baniwa say "burning sloth fur is a remedy for pepper", which cryptically states this idea. Additionally, the fur of the sloth is what Pajés extract from the bodies of sorcery victims. (3) The sloth is an icon of what initiates should not be. They are expected to be hard-working and alert, not lazy and inactive like the sloth.

The face on the image is that of a White Man, and his teeth that of a jaguar. For initiates, the White Man is the paradigm of alterity, like the sloth it is the op-

posite of what initiates are expected to be in their true identity. The White Man, according to Baniwa sacred stories, was sent away in the time of creation to the periphery of the Baniwa world, to live in a totally distinct and other reality.

The teeth of the jaguar, most powerful of the predators, are iconic of an enemy sorcerer. Here we have a *coincidentia oppositorum* where the preyed upon (sloth) has the teeth and facial features of the predator. A jaguar lives on the outskirts of the settlements, hidden in the forest but ready to attack. It can also be, the stories tell, an unsupervised shaman's apprentice who has transformed into a killer jaguar after taking *pariká*.

Altogether, the drawing of *Kuwai Wamundana* is a paragon of alterity within, projected as someone totally distinct from that which one truly is to become – a wakeful, alert, healthy, member of one's people. It is interesting that, until the late 19th Century, the Tariana people of the Uaupés had “masks of Yurupary”, made from the pelt of the sloth braided together with the hair of young girls who had just been initiated (at their first menstruation). The Tariana called this figure *Izi* and it corresponded very closely with *Kuwai* of the Baniwa: it appeared during the male initiation rites, at which time it was used to whip young initiates. The power of the paradox surely did not go unnoticed by the initiates; again, they were shown the opposite of what they were expected to become, and in a rigorous way: *Kuwai* whipped the initiates for them to grow quickly and to be resistant and strong. Insofar as *Kuwai* represents the natural world, it is from there that the boys will learn to become fully cultural beings.

This dangerous life force that *Kuwai* represented may be understood as the ‘body of the cosmos’, permeated with holes through which the breath of the Creator's heart-soul blows, which is capable of transforming into multiple spirit entities, embodying the forces of nature (the forest and rivers, the devastating deluge of the rains, the fearful darkness of night and predatory sorcery), and the hidden source of all deathly ailments. He also taught to humanity everything there is to know about sickness and its cure.

At a critical moment of transition in the story of *Kuwai*, he takes four young boys being initiated to the forest “on the other side of the river” from the primordial settlement at *Hipana*. There, *Kuwai* ascends to the top of a uacu tree (Monopteryx cf. *uacu*), throws down raw nuts to the boys, which three of them roast and eat breaking their fast. They “eat his flesh”, provoking a catastrophic situation in which *Kuwai* transforms into an “other (neg.)” demonic spirit with one eye called *Inyaimé*, who devours the three boys. There is a clear association of “the other side of the river” with the natural world (in contrast with the ‘cultural’ ritual house of initiation) and the vengeful demonic spirit who devours those who break the laws of the natural world. Humans must respect the laws of the natural world, in short, in order to become fully cultural beings.

The powers of sorcery, healing and beyond: *Kuwai*, *Dzuliferi*, and *Nhiaperikuli*

For the Hohodene, *Kuwai* is the “owner of sickness”, having left all fatal illness and sorcery in the world at the moment of his “death”. Yet *Kuwai* also bestowed all his knowledge of healing (including the specific chants for a series of sicknesses) to humanity, and it is to him that Pajés travel in their cures of humans suffering from lethal sickness (especially *manhene*, plant sorcery) today. *Kuwai* was an eminently shamanic being of great power, who makes multiple transformations throughout the story. He dominates the knowledge of a jaguar shaman; a sorcerer; a dance-leader, in leading the songs and dances of the rites of initiation; and a priestly chanter, in finishing initiation for the boys of the story.

Kuwai and *Dzuliferi* (*Nhiaperikuli*'s elder brother and co-creator) are two distinct spirit entities, though they are socially related as uncle (*Dzuliferi*) and nephew (*Kuwai*), parallel in a fashion to the relation of *Amaru* and *Nhiaperikuli* (‘aunt’ and ‘nephew’). The shaman-uncle *Dzuliferi* cannot transform into the sorcerer-nephew *Kuwai*, although *Kuwai* can transform into the “shadow-soul of *Dzuliferi*” meaning that he can appear to be *Dzuliferi*, but is actually *Kuwai* impersonating *Dzuliferi* in order to teach apprentice Pajés how to extract sickness. Ultimately, apprentices learn how to cure from the very source of the poison or sickness that afflicted the ill.



Figure 7 *Dzuliferi* watches over and protects people in their villages of this world

Font: Drawing: Thiago A., Uapui, under the guidance of M. da Silva, *paje*, 2010.

In Hohodene cosmology, *Dzuliferi* is the primordial “owner of the *pajés*’ snuff and tobacco”. Shamans’ snuff, derived from the dark reddish resin extracted from the inner bark of the *Virola* tree, is said to be “the blood of *Kuwai*”. The *Dzuliferi*’s body is said to be covered by tobacco plants. The “bones” of *Kuwai* came from the *paxiúba* palm tree.¹³ The two great spirits complement each other in their relation to the plant world: the ‘bodies’ of both are, integrally, from the vegetal domain. *Dzuliferi*, however, ‘owns’ shamanic plants.

There is a hierarchy among shamans, defined by knowledge and power, derived principally from the vegetal world, and bestowed on shamans by the great spirits of sorcery and healing. The shamans who heal sickness are directly connected with *Dzuliferi*, who gives them their chants and advises them on the whereabouts of lost souls; and *Kuwai*, the source of sicknesses caused by sorcery, who demonstrates to the shamans how to cure sorcery. The chanters, who work with tobacco, and those who empower pepper at initiation (pepper shamanism, *kalidzamai*), utilize thought-journeys that encompass all known and named classes of being in order to ‘bless’ them (take away their harmful elements, de-animate them for human consumption, and other shamanic actions). Pepper shamanism was taught by *Kuwai* to his father and uncle (*Dzuliferi*) at the first initiation rite. Powerful shamans frequently combine the knowledge of both, including the pepper shamanism, which is a priestly type of knowledge in that it applies to groups (sometimes large) of initiates.

Viveiros de Castro (2014) in *Cannibal Metaphysics*, argues in support of Hugh-Jones’ use of the analytic distinction between ‘horizontal’ and ‘vertical’ shamanism in the Northwest Amazon:

Those shamans that Hugh-Jones classes as horizontal are specialists whose powers derive from their inspiration and charisma, and whose actions, which are directed outside the socius, do not preclude aggression and moral ambiguity; their chief interlocutors are animal spirits, who are perhaps the most frequent cause of illness in indigenous Amazonia (illness is frequently conceived as a case of cannibal vengeance on the part of animals who have been consumed). As for the vertical shamans, these comprise the master-chanters and ceremonial specialists, the peaceful guardians of an esoteric knowledge indispensable if reproduction and internal group relations (birth, initiation, naming, funerals, etc.) are to come off properly. (2014: 153-154)

Viveiros de Castro makes no mention of the ethnographic work produced by a generation of specialists working with northern Arawak-speaking societies; he cites

13 Another connection between *Kuwai* and the vegetal world is the type of sickness known as “*Dzawikumale litsidapoko*”, “Jaguar cumare ball of hair”, that is, fibre that comes from the great moriche palm tree in *Kuwai*’s plantation in the Other World of the sky. The moriche palm tree is a source of both poisonous shamanic darts (*walama*) and fibre/ “hair” that produces severe pain. The ball of hair is the “fur” of *Kuwai*, or *manhene* – poison, sorcery.

rather Hugh-Jones' 1996 analysis of eastern Tukanoan societies as being definitive for northern Arawakan societies. The problem with this is that northern Arawakan societies have features in their history of shamanic practice that distinguish it from Tukanoan versions. The search for structural regularities at times obscures a more fine-tuned ethnographic description.

From what northern Arawakan specialists have been able to determine, the 'wise men'/savants combine the features of healer and chanter; their charisma derives from their capacity to "die" through consumption of potent quantities of *pariká*, converse with deceased ancestors, and act as emissaries of the Creator. The most cited of the prophets, *Kamiko*, was said to be a "dreamer" (*talisri*) (Wright, González-Ñáñez, and Leal, 2017), as was his spiritual "son" *Uetsu mikui* (Wright, 2005, 2014). Dreams are the means by which the shaman prophets experienced divinity, conversed with the Creator deity.

The Baniwa prophets (*Kamiko*, *Uetsu*) consumed large amounts of *pariká*, the "blood of *Kuwai*" (also mixed with *caapi*, a mixture they obtained from more northern Arawak), which potentiated their visits to the House of the Sun.¹⁴ After they obtained "authorization" from *Nhiaperikuli*, they served as his emissary to the people. However, they refused the verticality associated with a high priest status. Obtaining "authorization" is nothing unusual for jaguar shamans must obtain this also, but from *Dzuliferi/Kuwai*. Of course, *Kamiko* was influenced by the popular Afro-Venezuelan, Catholic, 'folk saint', named "Father Arnaoud" (Wright, 1981), and certainly *Uetsu* expressed Catholic beliefs as well (it is said he sang "praises to God" as he dreamt in his hammock) (Wright, 2005, 2013). In short, they were part of the "folk Catholic" tradition that had cross-fertilized with Baniwa shamanism.

Baniwa prophet shamans did transcend the most powerful of the jaguar shamans in the sense that they rejected the warrior element so intrinsic to their power struggles. Yet, the prophet shamans went beyond *Kuwai* and *Dzuliferi*, in their search for the "hidden world of happiness" (*kathimakwe*) of the Creator deity, *Nhiaperikuli*, in order to bring that light and "happiness" down to earth, reveal who the sorcerers are, and reform society from above (as "authorized" messengers of the highest power in the cosmos). This is a spiritual experience, of course, which structural analysis is incapable of appreciating.

14 Northern Arawak shamanism (from the Içana, north) most definitely uses *pariká* (and *niopo*, *nyumpa*) more than ayahuasca. It is important to take into account the nature of the psychoactive experiences resulting from the mixture of the two: both are alkaloids, with DMT (dimethyltryptamine). Both of them produce experiences with souls of the deceased and dead ancestors. Both together produce intense "light" experiences that may have something to do with the prophets' experiences of the House of the Sun.

Trans-indigenous traditions at the frontiers

One of the fascinating aspects of the *Kuwai* religion is what happened to these traditions at the frontiers with non-Arawak-speaking societies. These frontiers include: between Tukanoan and Arawak-speaking peoples of the upper Vaupés; between any other language group and the northern Arawak-speaking peoples; between the evangelicals and non-evangelicals (who maintain the *Kuwai* traditions); and, as we have just seen, with folk Catholicism. Any one of these ‘frontiers’ should manifest some “trans-indigenous”¹⁵ cross-fertilization of ideas, at work.

We referred previously to the region von Humboldt visited in the late 18th Century, around San Fernando de Atabapo, today the capital city of Amazonas state in Venezuela. It seems plausible to suggest that the ethnic frontiers between the Arawak-speaking peoples of the upper Guainia, Cassiquiare, and Orinoco, and the Saliva-speaking peoples such as the Piaroa were characterized by a mixing of traditions early in colonial history. Gilij (1965, III: 30) reported that the Maipure, Avane, Guaipunave, Caberre, Baré and other northern Arawakan groups referred to the supreme being by the same name, “*Purrínaminári*” According to Zent (2008), cognate forms of the term appear in the Saliva languages of Sáliva and Piaroa (Zent). The Piaroa may have absorbed “shattered remnants” of Maipure and Atures communities which, by the late 18th Century, had become assimilated into the Piaroa population. (Zent, 2008).

Goldman’s 2004 study discusses at length the trans-indigenous exchanges that were constructed between eastern Tukanoan and northern Arawakan religious traditions. Cubeo territory lies in the frontier region between the largely eastern Tukanoan-speaking peoples of the upper Vaupés River and the predominantly northern Arawak-speaking peoples of the nearby Aiary and upper Guainia rivers. Since the early 1900s, the upper Aiary River region has been settled predominantly by Baniwa phratries (*Hohodene*, *Maulieni*), along with Cubeo (*Dyuremawa*) villages at the headwaters of the Aiary.

Goldman observed (1963) that in the Colombian Vaupés region, both Tukanoan and Arawak-speaking peoples are organized into societies based on patrilineal “descent”, localized patri-sibs, and exogamic phratries. Each phratry consists of a number of sibs ranked according to the birth order of a mythical set of agnatic ancestors. Each sib was traditionally associated with a ceremonial function (chief, shaman, warrior, dancer, servant), especially important during the complex rites of passage in which sacred flutes and trumpets were played. The *Hehenawa*, among whom Goldman worked, are the high-ranking “keepers” of the religious traditions;

15 The term “trans-indigenous” recognizes the shortcomings of such terms as “syncretism” and “hybridity” by expressing the exchange that occurs across cultural frontiers.

in other words, they are held to understand the dynamics of cosmology and the principles of cosmogony in far greater depth than the lower-ranking sibs.

From the ethnohistory of the upper Rio Negro region (Wright, 1981, 2005), we know that in the mid-eighteenth century, the upper Uaupés around the Cuduiary and Querary Rivers was inhabited by both the Baniwa and the “Panenoa” (probably the present-day Uanano). Historical records indicate that, until the end of the nineteenth century, Baniwa (*Kapithi-minanai*) and Cubeo (*Dyuremawa*) sibs lived along the Querary River, a short distance away from the Cuduiary where the Cubeo had their principal settlements. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century, there were intense movements of Cubeo and Baniwa to escape the violence of the rubber boom. It is thus not surprising that *Hehenawa* and Baniwa religious traditions were cross-fertilized. The *Hehenawa* in fact were originally an Arawakan sib which adopted the Tukanoan language (Correa, 1997; Goldman, 2004) and created a trans-indigenous religious tradition.

The *Hehenawa* sib seems to have elaborated trans-indigenous forms on many fronts. Comparing the stories of the “*Kuwaiwa*,” creator deities of the *Hehenawa*, and the *Hohodene Kuwai* reveals that for the *Hehenawa*, the creator was *Kuwai*, helped by the collective *Kuwaiwa*, the ancestral people, known to the Tukanoan peoples of the Uaupés as the *He masa*. Goldman (2004) quotes one of his *Hehenawa* interlocutors, who wrote:

In the general tradition of the tribes of Amazonia, it is told that there existed at one time an ancient era of the most powerful spirits and knowledgeable beings [more powerful] than those that are of the present era. That era was known as the ‘Era of the *Kuwaiwa*’ in the Cubeo language. There existed then two classes of *Kuwaiwa*: the seniors, authors of all good things, and the juniors, [authors] of all bad things. (p. 195)

Does it mean that the *Kuwaiwa* represent two different moments in the history of the formation of a tradition between the older northern Arawakan and the younger eastern Tukanoan?

According to Goldman, the first of the *Hehenawa* Pajés is *Djuri*, “the singing one,” which would be, for the *Hohodene*, equivalent to *Dzuliferi*, the elder brother of *Nhiaperikuli*. Goldman asserts that *Dzuliferi* is “for the Arawakan Baniwa, a name for their *Kuwai* who was a leading *Pajé*” (2004: 310). As discussed above, for the *Hohodene* Baniwa, the powers of sorcery and healing are understood to be very closely related, and both great spirits are considered to be masters of ‘song’ as a healing modality: *Dzuliferi* provides the songs necessary for the *Pajé* to reach *Kuwai* and obtain the remedies necessary for curing. *Kuwai*’s song-voyages ‘open up’ the world in a horizontal and vertical sense; they are a form of shamanic power (*malikai*).

To examine the *Hehenawa* and *Hohodene* cross-fertilization of ideas in depth requires a more extended treatment than we are able to give here; suffice it to say that *Hohodene* of the upper Aiary River and *Hehenawa* of the upper Cuduiary produced a unique frontier version of eastern Tukanoan and northern Arawakan traditions. The figures of *Kuwai* and *Dzuliferi*, along with *Kuwaikaniri* and *Kaali*, all of the northern Arawakan tradition, were essentially transformed into other entities in the Cubeo tradition. Goldman seems to recognize this in discussing the *Pajés*: “mystical associations are complex and devious and not necessarily subsumed...” (p. 311).

Conclusion

In this essay, I have mapped out the northern Arawakan *Kuwai* traditions, drawing specifically on ethnology of the northern Arawak accumulated since the mid-1970s; discussed the central meanings of the *Kuwai* ‘religion’ as an initiatic tradition with a shamanistic metaphysics and narrations that elaborate a dynamic nature/culture relation; and discussed the interchanges between the *Kuwai* religious traditions along the northern Arawak/non-Arawak frontiers, contrasting particularly with the eastern Tukanoan traditions. I hope to have thus contributed to the knowledge of an ancient and widespread religious tradition of the Northwest Amazon.

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