

# Culture in our hands: semantic bridges between indigenous and western society in the era of projects

Cultura en nuestras manos: puentes semánticos entre las poblaciones indígenas y la sociedad occidental en la era de los proyectos

*A cultura em nossas mãos: pontes semânticas entre indígenas e a sociedade ocidental na era dos projetos*

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## ABSTRACT:

The Katukina (Noke Koi) people have their territory within the state of Acre in Brazil. Their first contact with Western society was in the late XIX century, when migrants traveled through the Amazon basin in search of rubber trees. Since then, they have been in permanent contact, first helping the rubber tappers and bosses as guides, hunters, and in the production of rubber. The recent success of neighboring peoples in obtaining resources from NGO projects has awakened in the leaders' the interest of doing something similar and thus promoting through "culture" the entry of resources in their land. This article describes the collaboration between the anthropologist and the Noke Koi in the founding of an association and its development contextualized by the strengthening of indigenous peoples and their associations in the Amazon. From the ethnographic encounter we will be able to analyze the complexity of the relations between the Katukina and the surrounding society as well as what our interlocutors really seek when engaging in these emerging activities.

## RESUMEN:

Los Katukina (Noke Koi) tienen su territorio dentro del estado de Acre, en Brasil. Sus primeros contactos con la sociedad occidental se produjeron a finales del siglo XIX, cuando los migrantes viajaron por la cuenca del Amazonas en busca de árboles de caucho. Desde entonces han estado en contacto permanente, primero ayudando a los patrones y recolectores de caucho como guías, cazadores y en la producción de caucho. El reciente éxito de los pueblos vecinos en la obtención de recursos de proyectos de ONGs ha despertado en los líderes el interés de hacer algo similar y, por lo tanto, promover a través de la "cultura" la entrada de recursos en sus tierras. Este artículo describe la colaboración entre el antropólogo y los Noke Koi en la fundación de una asociación y sus desarrollos en el contexto del fortalecimiento de los pueblos indígenas y sus asociaciones en la Amazonia. A partir del encuentro etnográfico podremos analizar la complejidad de las relaciones entre los Katukina y la sociedad circundante, así como lo que nuestros interlocutores realmente buscan cuando participan en estas actividades.

## RESUMO:

O povo Katukina (Noke Koi) tem seu território no estado do Acre (Brasil). O primeiro contato com a sociedade ocidental foi no final do século XIX, quando migrantes viajaram pela bacia amazônica em busca de seringueiras. Desde então, mantiveram contato permanente, ajudando primeiro os seringueiros e os padrões como guias, caçadores e na produção de borracha. O recente sucesso dos povos vizinhos em obter recursos de projetos de ONGs despertou nos líderes o interesse de fazer algo semelhante e, assim,

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promover através da "cultura" a entrada de recursos em suas terras. Este artigo descreve a colaboração entre o antropólogo e os Noke Koi na fundação de uma associação e seus desdobramentos no contexto de fortalecimento dos povos indígenas e suas associações na Amazônia. A partir do encontro etnográfico, poderemos analisar a complexidade das relações entre os Katukina e a sociedade envolvente, bem como o que nossos interlocutores realmente buscam ao se engajar nessas atividades.

## 1. Metsá's speech for the 2019 Salsa conference

— Well... I am Metsá Varinawa, I am a spiritual leader of Varinawa people, and I am also the president of the association, the Varinawa Sociocultural Association. I represent the Association. The Association was created within my people and we thought of creating it to represent our people despite our difficulties. We thought to create the association to help us with our difficulties. This Association is more than strengthening our Varinawa culture. We created it to represent our culture in Brazil, and outside Brazil. We are strengthening our culture with our chants, our stories, our medicine, our body painting, our traditional food. Our association is strengthening all of that, besides our culture. I am a researcher and coordinator of our Noke Koi culture. The Association is for the future generations of my people, for these new generations of my people. For that new generation that is coming which will also strengthen our culture, our chants, stories, medicine, and food tradition. The Association exists, above all, to strength our culture.

Therefore, I am representing this Association as the president and I am thinking of improvements to Varinawa people. So, my people, this new generation that is coming, will give continuity to our culture, because this knowledge will pass on from generation to generation and it will never end. This knowledge of the "Sun people" is from father to sons, so that knowledge will never stop. The Association is meant to strengthen all the aforementioned. From its very roots to medicine and ayahuasca. Ayahuasca brings our culture from its roots, therefore we always maintain our culture alive. Nowadays Varinawa will never lose its culture, it will keep practicing it. And now we are divulging our chants so people can get to know the Varinawa culture. Therefore, we are, we are... the Association comes after those projects. The Association is already obtaining projects for improvements in our communities... and today, as the president, I am like a hunter, who is searching for the paths, searching for projects, for friends, so these friends can help us, the Association, to develop projects, to make partnership with the aldeia Varinawa, to visit our aldeia Varinawa (Haux Haux, extracted from the video recorded to 2019 SALSA conference concerning "indigenous futures").

## 2. Historical circumstances and dynamics of interethnic relations in Acre

First, I would like to thank SALSA association for accepting this proposed paper and for the opportunity to debate such important topic nowadays, considering the political changes in Brazil and the attacks to the rights of the indigenous population. The Katukina people who I work with are facing difficulties to sustain their way of living due to the over exploitation of the land by their local neighbours<sup>1</sup>. This Association is most of all something about their strategies to survive in contemporary circumstances. So, the story I am going to tell here is about the spontaneous collaboration between me and some leaders of the Varinawa people, a branch of the interchangeable matrimonial groups that compose the Katukina<sup>2</sup>. But before I shall reconstruct the historical circumstances in which this boom of organizations in Amazon flourished.

The origin of this boom of associations, at least for its legal emergence, goes back to the "articles 231 and 232" of the so-called "democratic constitution of 1988", now threatened and patched with constitutional amendments totally at odds with its original purpose. The articles correspond respectively to the recognition of the indigenous right for "traditional culture and territory" and the right to enter in court in defense of "their rights and interests". Those are the main functioning rights that permitted the indigenous people to organize themselves as associations, organizations that can represent them in legal issues concerning the relations with the surrounding society, land rights, territory disputes with farmers, denunciations of illegal exploitation of their land,

### KEYWORDS:

Culture; projects;  
shamanism;  
ethnicity.

### PALABRAS CLAVE

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the selling of local production or finding funds to sponsor their projects. With this changes and through the articulation of partners and indigenous groups, emerged an expressive number of formal associations that deal with a variety of topics such as health, territory, culture, environment, and education.

With the help of activists for indigenous rights many groups who inhabit within the borders of Brazil are engaged in such activities. The *Kayapo* were pioneers selling “natural extracts” to an international renowned cosmetics brand. The *Pataxó* situated in the state of Bahia and the *Potiguara* in Paraíba are engaged in some sort of “tourism”: people passing close by their territories along the northeast coast of Brazil may visit their aldeia, listen to the elder’s stories and acquire handcrafts. With that they hope to profit, create allies, and reinforce their culture among the younger generation. In Maturacá, a *Yanomami* Village located in the state of Amazon the “project Yaripo” plan ecotourism and conservation projects for the *Yanomami*. The *Guarani* at Tenondé Porã indigenous land, in the state of São Paulo, offer trekking to waterfalls, traditional food and handcrafts. According to the leaders, the establishment of partnerships with social-environmental-cultural actions is bringing to the aldeias significant and positive social change.

In Acre, the *Yawanawa* certainly were the pioneers in engaging such activities, first cultivating *uruçu* - the red colored seed from which the ink for their body paint is extracted - for cosmetic wellness market. Later, their relationship with surrounding society evolved to new possibilities for them and their partners. After regaining control of their territory, the end of epidemic crisis and reorganizing themselves they started a renewal of their shamanism by engaging once more in fasting diets and isolation in the forest using plants such as tobacco and ayahuasca to acquire knowledge. These practices caught the attention of outsiders who also supported the cause.

Now there are a vast number of associations nowadays, and each of them comes to develop their own lines of working, considering that ethnic groups and their geographical locations are related to the historical context and circumstances of the contact. The alliances established with outside countries NGO’s as well as the economical partners helped the leaders to be more aware of Western world and make their speeches reach the larger audiences.

That means that these contemporary changes renewed the relational contexts between the so-called “natives” and the Western society, from the regional situations to international. The conditions emerge also because of the change in historical and sociopolitical contexts in Brazil, the end of the dictatorship and military regimen and the elaboration of the actual Brazilian Constitution. For many groups, the scenario after the conquest of the so-called “land rights” was in such a way that keeping up the relations with the surrounding society became key to maintain themselves alive.

My fieldwork in Panoan groups located in Acre started in 2014. The reality of indigenous peoples located in this state of Brazil is changing due to the exponential growth of interest in their practices related to “ayahuasca”, a specific brew commonly known in anthropological studies<sup>3</sup>. This brew is traditionally used for shamanic purposes by many Amerindians in Peru, Northwest Brazil, Colombia, and Ecuador. In the past 15 years a movement of ethnic affirmation related to strengthening the bound with tradition and culture united the ethnic groups located in Acre and through the meetings of FUNAI and CPI-AC<sup>4</sup> emerged a network connecting them through a renewed way of using ayahuasca and tobacco, related to reinforcing the bound with tradition. This comes together with the increasing of population and territorial rights.

In a similar frame, other indigenous people are just across the border of Acre, in the cities of Iquitos, Pucallpa and Puerto Maldonado have been receiving visitors with the specific interest in the uses of ayahuasca, tobacco and many other plants. This started as a way of making profits and acquire local recognition and grew fast to a kind of spiritual tourism that receive hundreds of people to ayahuasca ceremonies. At the present, people also enter in long term apprenticeships, diets, learning such things as shamanic courses with natives as well as westerners engaged in these activities (Labate & Cavnar, 2014). The exponential growth of search for self-acknowledgement or of an integrated being with nature is voracious and is surely making ecological impact in the forest that we are not quite aware of.

The first to affirm in the inter-ethnic context such a thing as a “revitalization/strengthening” of their shamanic practices were the *Yawanawa*. The local leaders trace the beginning of it to the times of the land rights’ conquest, the active work of specific leaders, the expulsion of missionaries and the growth of population. A decade later they started a project in which *Yawanawa* received money incomings for planting *urucu* for a cosmetic producer that also associated the image of indigenous people as an aggregated value to the product. The funds generated from this activity changed the reality of *Yawanawa* who before were dispersed along the river, trying to raise resources to exchange for manufactured products. The project reunited the people in only one village, and they started, as they say, to revitalize their culture through recording the elder’s stories, doing handcrafts with beads representing their designs and especially by engaging in their shamanic practices focused on the use of *uni* (ayahuasca) and *romê potu* (tobacco snuff).

In the year 2002 the *Yawanawa* re-established a festivity that received their neighbor allies from other villages to share the harvest of that season, with dances and games. The governor of the state back then visited the village during the event and suggested to the *Yawanawa* chief to create the same meeting but for the visitors from other countries interested to meet Amazon forest and indigenous cultures. The governor himself made the promise of releasing information about the festival and giving good number of resources for them to create the event. There were a series of investments in infrastructure to receive and host the visitors who came far away from the capital, at least 7 hours by car and then 7 more by small boats.

They created the “Yawa Festival” and opened it to outsiders at that moment, which was described as a celebration of their reunion and culture. According to the *Yawanawa* chief Biraci Nixiwaka, the result was that, after a few years, people from other states started to arrive and invite friends. Now the Festival has become a big event through which *Yawanawa* make allies with people from Brazil and all over the world interested in supporting their “cultural revitalization”.

Projects related to culture aesthetics such as the bead artwork, body painting and music were approved in the past years. They managed to create the audiovisual recordings that had not existed before and to insert resources in the community which soon caught the attention of the representatives of other indigenous groups. In the meetings occasionally in the cities for FUNAI matters or NGO’s programs of health, education and environment, the news spread quite fast.

It happens that now, seventeen years after the beginning of the Yawa Festival, the state of Acre has not less than forty indigenous festivals related to shamanic healing knowledge and “traditional culture”. All groups started to proclaim and make visible their cultural renaissance, trying to make allies, create associations and raise resources. Understanding the context of these projects, indigenous leaders seek to get associated with influential politicians or NGOs, to approve projects related to their culture. This ‘era of projects’ is inserting investments and in many ways changing social reality inside the *aldeias*, considering that together with the regular daily activities come the elaboration of projects, the presence of visitors, handcraft production and so on.

In October of 2018, the Association’s papers were ready. While writing the statute, I considered one of the Noke Koí’s reflections: they said that they would keep “strengthening their culture” and that is also one of the reasons why they needed projects for bringing better conditions to the *aldeia*.

A main complaint of my interlocutors was that in the past decade the animals they hunt became scarce due to the over-exploitation of the land by locals and the *Katukina* themselves. Together with Metsá I entered a friendship with a law professor at a local university that helped us in the administrative process (registering members of the Association and opening the Association’s bank account).

During all that time, I started to visit Cruzeiro do Sul, the city situated about two hours-way from the aldeia by one interstate highway. I used to spend there a few days to be able to make a good search for national and international funds dedicated to “the traditional and indigenous population”. Finally, thanks to a friend who



lives in Acre and with whom we collaborate, I discovered an interesting and well-developed NGO's program, Fundação Casa. I got all the information needed to make possible a project created together with the local *Varinawa* leaders. As Fundação Casa's funds should have been devoted to buy equipment, food and transportation, the Association had to think about their needs and present its counterpart. Bearing that on mind, they decided to call a general meeting where we discussed the subject together.

In October 2018, *Varinawa* leaders decided to work on their first project centered in the construction of the traditional ceremonial center, *kupixawa*, and two hosting houses. It is important to remember that the *Varinawa* forms part of the *Katukina* whose healers had already established some partnerships in the main capitals of the countries abroad Brazil<sup>5</sup>. The registration of the Association gave them the real and fruitful opportunity to create new allies that would be transformed into long-term relations.

Having that in mind, we must emphasize that the *Yawanawa* people (as well as the *Ashaninka*), have a great experience in receiving visitors in their territory and there are many neighboring people which, reckoning the advantages of that relation, urge to gain the benefits for themselves. In a previous research (Bomfim Neto, 2016), *Yawanawa* representatives said that more recently they have also travelled to do "ayahuasca ceremonies" in many countries all over Europe, defending Amazonia and also, generally speaking for, "the indigenous cultures" to an audience interested in their culture aesthetics and mainly their knowledge on the use of ayahuasca, tobacco, and the toad *kambô*.

The result of this five-month process here described has been successfully led and proceeds: luckily, we conceived a project focused on one hand, to create a place to receive visitors and on the other, to work in the forest. A *kupixawa* (traditional house), a shared kitchen, two hosting houses and four dried bathrooms were the constructions we planned to build.

Once we received the money (in total R\$ 16.000,00, the payment through a bank transfer) in December 2018, the Association with the help of the law professor managed the transportation of the material previously ordered by me and the members of the Association in the local warehouse in Cruzeiro do Sul.

As far as I know, the first project signed by Association *Varinawa* was selected, among others. The counterpart about which I have recently mentioned were wood cut by *Varinawa* and their work on the constructions. By May'19 everything was done, and it occurred that they also constructed more structures necessary to receive foreigners and decided to make some other works such as clearing a trail to the forest and opening a bath area on the small riverbank. In May we planted together crops of ayahuasca plants and other *Varinawa*



Image 1. One of the meetings in the local school dedicated to the foundation of the Association (2018). Source: Author's archive.



Image 2. *Kupixawa*, supported by the program Fundação Casa 2018. Source: Author's archive.

planted fruit trees which the Association decided to do thanks to the grant received. Finally, from 20<sup>th</sup> to 27<sup>th</sup> June of 2019 *Varinawa* made a great celebration with the participation of the visitors. *Varinawa* leaders know that, apart from the money, the Association can bring them a lot of benefits.

According to my interlocutors, the Association is the formalization of a process which was activated many years ago. The truth is that the reinforcement of *Varinawa* tradition and the growing dialogue between them and all the people from outside are both notably strengthening the bond with what they perceive as “our culture” and their land. We note that the process prevents the use of alcohol and encourage the *Varinawa* young generation to “hold with their culture” through composing new chants and organizing Ayahuasca weekly gatherings. I may emphasize that the maintenance of this process is possible because the *Varinawa* leaders are committed with the reinforcement of shamanism and articulate this movement with the relations constructed with the surrounding society.

### 3. Associação Sociocultural *Varinawa*

Even before the formalization of the Association, the *Katukina* representatives, who occasionally visit the nearby city of Cruzeiro do Sul, were inviting people to meet their village and “see their culture”. The festivals of culture related to shamanism, music and traditional games became the favorite way of making allies. This mode has its precedent in the past when according to the *Katukina* they made similar meetings with their neighbors during harvest and abundant supply of fish.

Festival Ancestral de Cultura *Varinawa* was the name of the event, which counted with 14 visitors from different countries, arriving at the *Aldeia* in groups<sup>6</sup>. The Festival had in its program traditional food, body painting, singing, dancing, rituals, and games. The representatives made speeches on different occasions during the event. The visitors were people they already knew from other meetings, their friends from outside the village and a few others that they knew by the internet website.

The idea was that each participant had to contribute, then it would be used by the *Varinawa* to hold the event. The request was that people paid a thousand and four hundred to participate and contribute to their association. The money helped *Varinawa* in dealing with some practical issues such as buying and bringing food and supplies from Cruzeiro do Sul to the indigenous territory and create all the necessary conditions to receive the visitors.

During that time, we had talks about *kambô* (known as “*medicina do sapo*”), *rome poto* (tobacco pulverized with ashes from specific trees) and *Oni* (ayahuasca). Most *Varinawa* want to profit from selling them and now their leaders are becoming aware of legality matters. They had been informed about it by *Funai*, which had noted the increasing interest in these articles and the more and more frequent arrivals of *gringos* to the indigenous territories.

In the video recording, Metsá makes his point clear: he is a hunter, and he searches for guaranteeing the survival of his group. Together with his relatives he administered the food (bought with the money deposited



Image 3. One of the hosting houses built by Associação Sociocultural *Varinawa*, program Fundação Casa 2018. Source: Author's archive.



in the Association's account) necessary to feed everyone during the Festival, oversaw informing the visitors about the program and of the Festival's activities.

Most of the visitors seek ayahuasca experience with the native tribes to enter in contact with shamanic practices of the Amazon (Bomfim Neto, 2016). There is a large network connecting the forest to the cities, with modern communication, flights, and roads; the forests receive a lot of people with that specific interest (Labate & Cavnar, 2014; Losonczy & Mesturini, 2010). Many of our visitors had previous experiences with ayahuasca and other related plants. It is surprising that many had their first experiences in countries where its use is illegal. Four of the visitors had already been to other festivals in *aldeias* of the Jurua. They were also all engaged in participating in the activities such as the traditional games and the speeches.



Image 4. Scene from the first Festival de Cultura *Varinawa*. A recent strategy of the indigenous representatives to face nowadays challenges with surrounding societies. Source: Author's archive.

The ayahuasca ritual is the most prestigious moment for the Festival and the *Katukina*, in general, adapt well to the visitors (a few of them were especially interested in how outsiders experience ayahuasca and like to represent their people, depending on his level of Portuguese and the outsiders' language competence). The few members of the *Varinawa* group who know Portuguese were the ones responsible for taking care of the visitors during the days of the festivities.

Outsiders interest in their so-called "shamanism" is sure bringing dynamic and strength to that type of knowledge. They arrive interested not only in the ceremonies but also seeking the possibility of taking home some of the plants related to shamanism.

As mentioned before, the uses of ayahuasca were significantly reshaped after the beginning of relations with western societies, but it was not because of the visitors that the *Katukina* opened shamanic knowledge and practices to the whole *aldeia*. This change is related with the will of the leaders to strengthen the bond with traditional knowledge, trying also to bring younger generations closer to tradition. The awareness of the growing value attributed to "ayahuasca traditions" outside their indigenous territory is changing their perspective on themselves.

Different from some well-developed shamanism tourism in Peru, the *Varinawa* did not change anything of their ceremonies because of the presence of visitors. Visitors popped in the *aldeia* and participated in their ongoing movement. Shamanism for healing purposes is also relevant and the privilege of incomings from the new alliances is awakening in the young generation even more interest in it. A few are complaining about others' envy and secretly inflicting "witchcraft" to them.

During the Festival most of the *Varinawa* were interested also in selling handcrafts, *rapé*, *kambo* sticks, *urucu* ink and finding allies for continuous selling of these products. Leaders are aware of the high prices these items may acquire far away from their land and are also willing to find the right person that can take them out in a cross-country journey from where he may come back with lots of goods, just like others from nearby rivers had done.

The musical instruments that are appearing in the *aldeias* everywhere are remarkable influences from outside. The *Katukina* are now listening and learning the ayahuasca worldwide known songs as well as the use of camping and trekking material. The younger generations are learning how to play the instruments with people



from outside as well as in the ayahuasca gatherings, as they say, “learning in the strength of ayahuasca”. Now they compose songs in their own language, related to their shamanic visions and dreams, to the power of the plants and ancestors. They want to record their songs and represent their people.

Eventually Metsá and few other representatives closely related are travelling outside Acre to hold ceremonies in the outskirts of the main Brazilian cities, just as they were planning to do so. There is a growing space for indigenous representatives of their ayahuasca culture in institutions that are dedicated to activities related to the so called sacred and/or traditional use of the plants, master plants or as commonly named *medicinas da floresta* (forest medicines).



Image 5. Festival Ancestral de Cultura Varinawa, June 2019. Source: Author's archive

#### 4.Theoretical endeavors

If anthropology, as Sahlin's proposed, initially dealt with a “living archeology”, seeking to register the “traditional” cultures before their end caused by an irremediable advance of civilization, nowadays the expectations and epistemological paradigms are others. Indigenous people are far from disappearing, on the contrary, despite continuity of conflicts in various regions, they grow demographically and are engaged in the defense of rights. This sociopolitical pan-indigenous activism is deeply rooted in contemporary inter-ethnic relations and is a major influence on the way many natives perceive culture nowadays.

Considering that ethnicity and culture are the main topics to be theorized, in this article I opted for the type of anthropological analysis proposed by Wagner (1975), and later in the Amerindian ethnology by Viveiros de Castro (2002), which affirms that culture is the point of view and objective of the anthropologist. It is necessary to start our theoretical endeavors by comprehending and recognizing epistemologically that anthropology itself is a cultural fact and that the construction and even existence of the anthropological knowledge, analysis, and generalizations, are culturally circumscribed.

Through this understanding we abdicate the alleged absolute objectivity for a relative objectivity in which the researcher recognizes that his own construction of knowledge emerges from cultural contexts. It is mostly anthropological work that questions science mainstream epistemology. It is important to bear in mind that these cultural processes are understood from our points of view and we must also present a meta-reflection. Observing the cultural process as symmetric and structurally dynamic, we can better apprehend the results of these meetings, observing the inter-ethnic dynamics and in which circumstances they will occur.

In what concerns the inter-ethnic contexts and about the widespread initiative of the Amerindians to register “tradition” and promote it, Carneiro da Cunha (2009) proposed that what we call Culture can be understood in two aspects: one is its structural characteristic, which is the object of anthropological study, and the other, “culture”, which is a self-reflective dimension of Culture that is constituted in the context of inter-ethnic relations.

We should be aware also of an important aspect emphasized in the work of Carneiro da Cunha; “*termos como índio, indígena, tribal, nativo, aborígene e negro são todas criações da metrópole, são frutos do encontro colonial. E embora tenham sido genéricos e artificiais ao serem criados, esses termos foram*

*progressivamente habitados por gente de carne e osso*" (2009, p. 278). These *de carne e osso* (flesh and bones) people do not deny the role attributed to them and the value for themselves in this interethnic context in analysis.

Like the natives, the visitors and collaborators get to know another "Indian", a real one and not just an image that exists in the cosmopolitan cities, a representation of the indigenous from a distant past, from the time of the conquest, without any relationship with the actual reality lived by them.

Going back to the "Indians", in this particular case their cultural "revitalization" begins within these actual relationships and their favorable circumstances, through alliances, friendships and projects that give them form and strength, with the opening of the Festival or the "cultural projects".

Considering that shamanic knowledge and practices are living a renaissance and the *Varinawa* are aware of the external interest in them, the representatives found the Association willing to find new allies anywhere. Earlier ethnography and my interlocutors confirm that parts of these practices were almost totally abandoned in the last decade (Lima 2000; Carid 1999). Now things are changing with cultural renaissance and the opening of plant-chanting based shamanism to all members who want to participate in the gatherings. Shamanism is conquering new fields in life and continues to be a powerful source for dealing with the others, the spirits, and the outsiders.

In some way "demands" also arise from the seekers of the "native culture". "People are curious on how we use ayahuasca and tobacco... they want to participate in our ceremonies", says Metsá. Although there is a huge semantic gap on what ayahuasca represents to each group in question, this new and fresh context is now building semantic bridges between them. Their shamans recognize that the collective ayahuasca ceremonies are powerful in the realm of *yushin* influences, equivalent to when they do their healing sessions, where interactions with the spirits, especially the anacondas, gives them power to heal or damage others. At this moment they also send away the spirits that bring diseases and misfortunes. The visions they have during these gatherings are meaningful to their shamanic investigations, they say that they gather lots of information on how to proceed strengthening culture.

The ayahuasca rituals definitely bring resources for the communities and legitimacy in a context where this knowledge is valued by segments of the western societies at the global level. In the worst political scenario, they are an organized association, seeking allies who might contribute to the continuity of their cultural renaissance. As I heard often, they trust in their ancestors, ayahuasca and tobacco wisdom as a way of guiding new generations.

As said above, in Acre there is an effervescence around ayahuasca as the element of ethnic distinction and recognition, as an instrument to guarantee the entry of resources, of making fruitful collaborations with westerners. Ayahuasca is well known for its widespread utilization in the Amazon and beyond (Labate; Cavnar, 2014), there are as many uses as many names and since a long time it has been mediating interethnic relations, connecting the river people in a significant area of Amazonia (Gow, 1996).

It is fruitful to remember that this cultural revitalization using specific plants in Acre also recalls the new wave of diffusion of the peyote simultaneous with consolidation of the Native American Church and its renewed ritualistic uses, spread among indigenous peoples, becoming the key element of ethnic affirmation and a way of establishing allies.

What can we say about these visitors-allies? Considering the opinion of my interlocutors, I can affirm that they are now been incorporated into *Yawanawa* and *Katukina* society through contexts that refer to a previous socialization space, the festivals from the past. According to the people, these were the circumstances for diplomatic relations with other ethnic groups of the region, where during the festivities they could reaffirm alliances, find marriages, and share food. From the point of view of ethnology (Seeger, DaMatta & Viveiros de Castro, 1979; McCallum, 1996; Langdon, 1996; Perez-Gil 1999), the cosmologies and sociality of indigenous

peoples are elaborated in close connection with their understandings of corporality, identity, and alterity. All these elements are strongly present in these encounters which remember us how meaningful they are for framing the relations with outsiders.

The “shamans” are largely described as travelers between the different realms of reality, where they see a true essence of beings, learn about the world and where they interact with powerful forces of existence, with ancestors. The more they visit these places the more knowledge and power they acquire. It is well known that lowland South America shamanism deals mostly with alterity. “Animals”, “spirits” as well as “neighbors” can be included in the label of otherness (Vilaça, 2000; Langdon, 1996; Lima 2000; Lagrou 2018). For the *Katukina* the power of the *shuindya* is intrinsically related to his use of a variety of plants from who he receives power to interact in the world. “There is *yushin* everywhere and our shaman knows how to talk with them, invoke or send them away”, says Cacú Kamanawa. By travelling through dreams and by ingesting plant combinations, the *Katukina* healer visits the home of other beings and experience reality in another way.

Living among other neighbors has been recognized as a way of acquiring knowledge and recognition, inside and outside the group. The presence and actuation of shamans among non-indigenous people comes from much before and from many different contexts, representing internationally “indigenous peoples” and their concern with environment (Albert, 2015), in the confluence of rivers and commodities (Gow, 1996) and learning by travelling to “other” villages (Carneiro da Cunha, 1998). For centuries, the “shamans” have managed to expand their influence among westerners. As researchers confirms, outsiders were interested in them, especially in northwest Amazonia (Labate & Cavnar, 2014; Luna & White 2016; Langdon, 2012).

In a certain way, these new contexts and circumstances for encounters are in the direction to reshape relations between “westerners” and “natives” from the dramatic predatory context to some sort of alliance for the sake of the forest, for exchanging knowledge, and for sure *projetos*. Curious visitors ask questions about the plants and shamanic knowledge to *Katukina* which, in response, answer the questions in the way that he is able or willing to.

It seems that, after all, the *Katukina* concepts of corporeality, shamanism and of their origin will not be confined to our books and debates about “amerindians”. In some way, like anthropologists (Luna & White, 2016), people that are venturing into the forest are grasping the meanings of the “shamans” flights and comprehensions through experimenting the use of plants. It is evident that plants are the main actors/agents of this encounter (Bomfim Neto, 2016), the aesthetic and ethical value attributed to them are insightful for both indigenous and visitors.

According to *Yawanawa* interlocutors, these festivals are not far from the old meetings that brought together the peoples of the region. They create an equivalent social space that triggers links with otherness and is effective in managing relations with the *nawa*, like they eventually call outsiders (a term that can be translated as “people”, in the sense of ethnic group, or enemies). It seems that *txai*, the term used to refer to a potential brother-in-law, became also the current main denomination of outsiders that are reaching their territories now.

In this study case, authenticity may emerge as a topic of reflection for purists and orthodox perspectives. I argue in favor of the following idea: any cultural creation, in the past or today, is naturally an authentic creation of a human being culturally circumscribed. Clearly, the celebration does not correspond directly to the one made before cultural strengthening. They say it is different, as well as their way of drinking ayahuasca nowadays and this does not seem to be a problem at all for them.

I have opted to be careful about how commodification is rebuilt when it is brought to societies that are bounded through a system of kin relations, with specific ascribed tasks to each other and modes of reciprocal relations that are fundamental in their way of making a living. We cannot establish a one-way cause effect relation between commodification and cultural authenticity. As Sahlins wrote two decades ago:

If it is true that commodification is the death of authentic culture, how come Americans still have one? Or if you think they do not, consider that the following things are produced or reproduced there as commodities and distributed through market relations: Beethoven's *Fifth Symphony*, sons and daughters of Americans adopted from Mexico, the *Bible* (or word of God) (Sahlins, 1999, p. 7).

Projects like the one I spoke about are maybe means to achieve constructive dialogues with local representatives, with the participation of the whole community. We took half of year to build together the Association, through the local modes of making decisions. That still does not guarantee the success of this enterprise. Taking into consideration previous experiences of indigenous representatives and the impacts in communities, Alcida Rita Ramos (2018) made herself clear, "development rhymes with enchantment". It is necessary to be aware for the fact that "projects of development" are mostly conceived by exogenous monetary economies and structured by globalized modes of productions that are far away, both physically and culturally, from many societies interested in the possible benefits from them.

## 5. Conclusions

Metsá's and his companions count with the support to search for new possibilities of facing the challenges of nowadays life. Although it is not unanimous, I am sure that most of them want these activities to happen and are willing to keep the new goods. Will the changes after all be good for these people? I am not sure we can reduce something of that complexity to a simple answer such as "positive in the community". Just as Panoan groups fragmented before and occupied the land in other ways, these are aspects of their contemporary relations with territory and other ethnic groups.

For some, projects like these may pass unseen as the perfect utopia for dealing with the post-colonialist reality, as it may represent an extra help to deal with contemporary situations such as the one *Katukina* people are starting to face. For others, it represents the subtle neo-colonialist way of guiding indigenous people to adhere commodity-economic activities.

Even though project elaborators try to consider native culture as a key element to respect, there are differences between local modes of production and social life from people like the *Katukina* and the commodity organized market. Money can enter in the preceding gift relations but can also propose new challenges to them. It is not possible to measure how projects may affect the locals' way of dealing with social life, but the groups have their autonomy of choice to decide either to engage or not with these activities.

Here we can also appreciate something that has been observed before and probably accompanies us as humankind: the interethnic relations and interactions as a form of constituting new meanings, a space where semantics face the gaps of cultural differences but where we may also create bridges of meanings. I chose to emphasize an epistemological truth that affirms that ethnic relations such as these are symmetrical encounters of natives. In that sense, both sides could be analyzed in the same manner, each with its particular "nativeness". Although, it is evident that difference here is the very core of the template.

Finally, it is necessary to emphasize the importance of engagement and collaborative actions by the scientific community. In view of what we are currently experiencing, it is essential to co-operate, to hold hands, to keep on the horizon the ideal proposed by constitutional rights, which are nothing more than a *sui generis* recognition that is hardly found in practice. I conclude the reflection by translating and recalling Paulo Freire's ever-present words; "The theory without practice becomes verbalism, just as the practice without theory becomes activism. However, when practice and theory are combined, there is praxis, the creative and modifying action of reality" (Freire, 1989, p. 67).



## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The *Varinawa* are one of the segments that, together with Satanawa, Nomanawa, Nainawa, Kamanawa and Waininawa, form the Katukina. The Katukina circulate between the Gregório River Indigenous Territory and the Campinas Indigenous Territory.

<sup>2</sup> Both the author and the research have the necessary authorizations for the production and publication of the images present in the article.

<sup>3</sup> It is the beverage popularized by the name of ayahuasca, a name that comes from the Quechua language. The combination I witnessed made in the Juruá region is composed of uni (*Banisteriopsis Caapi*) and kawa (*Psychotria viridis*), the resulting drink being called uni between the Yawanawa and Katukina and daime, vegetable, hoasca and ayahuasca among the regional population of Acre.

<sup>4</sup> Founded in 1979, Comissão Pró-índio Acre (CPI-AC) is a decisive institution in the affirmation and fight for indigenous rights, especially of the peoples located in the Acrean region. Among the tasks developed by the CPI were the mapping of the indigenous peoples of the region and the creation of socio-political articulation by guaranteeing their rights. CPI promoted meetings between leaders to debate indigenous issues, created training courses for teachers and indigenous health agents that were regularly offered. It also helped the creation of teaching materials and the written and audiovisual record of indigenous peoples.

<sup>5</sup> Instead of using the terms of their own language, the Katukina present themselves outside the villages as “shamans” or “pajés”, terms that are common in the dialogues in Portuguese outside the villages.

<sup>6</sup> There were people from Rio de Janeiro, England, Mexico, Argentina, Austria, Spain.

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