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## INTRODUCTION

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## The Alchemical Person

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This Special Issue oscillates around the theme of alchemy, a useful way for thinking about Amerindian persons and the societies in which they live. Taking as its key coordinates indigenous epistemologies (McCallum 1996; Santos-Granero and Mentore 2006) and the ethnographic fact of person-making (Conklin and Morgan 1996) as a moral project that allows people to live well (Overing and Passes 2000; Londoño-Sulkin 2012; Echeverri 2013), this Special Issue delves further into the classic Amerindian themes of transformation and transmutation. Alchemy provides the forge for recasting three classic themes: 1) the body, as a site of constitutive relations (e.g. Rival 2005a); 2) food, and its processing, as a social act (see Rivière 1987; C. Hugh-Jones 1979a; 1979b); and 3) the articulation of personhood at the frontiers of the nation-state (see Clastres 1977). The People of the Center (Uitoto and Muinane) of the Colombian Amazon, Shipibo-Conibo of the Western Amazonia, Makushi of Guyana, Piaroa of the Colombo-Venezuelan border, Yanomami of Venezuela, Xié River dwellers (Warekena) and Hupd'ah of the Upper Rio Negro basin, Wayana of Brazil, as well as the Panamanian Emberá and the piedmont Apoleños, provide the ethnographic loci of these enquiries.

### Why Alchemy?

Alchemy, for Lévi-Strauss, was founded on the “logic of the concrete”, “a system of correspondence”, based on animal and “plant emblem systems” found amongst the alchemists of antiquity but also “very closely reproduced in exotic societies”. Lévi-Strauss draws on examples of intimate and precise knowledge of plants, animals and other species, to discuss how techniques such as those required to “change toxic seeds or roots into food stuffs or poison for hunting” required “a sustained and watchful interest” (1966:14). Regional ethnography has gone on to investigate the particularities of a pan-Amerindian cosmology that informs and is informed by acute perceptual facilities as they unfold in the particular lived worlds of diverse Amerindian groups.

Semi-nomadic, relatively egalitarian, forest-dwelling (interfluvial) groups, such as the Ecuadorian Huaorani and the northwestern Amazonian Maku, pride themselves on intimate knowledge of the forest and draw their personal metaphors from the immediate environment in which they dwell (Rival 1993, 2002: 640, 645; Cf. Luna 1984: 141). The more status-conscious groups of the Amazonian northwest appeal to human action (crafting) as the primary means through which to explicate their personhood. Here, people see themselves as akin to their highly valued and defining horticultural and processing practices (C. Hugh-Jones 1979a; Echeverri, Duin and Duin, this issue), as well as the specially crafted objects which they make (S. Hugh-Jones 2009: 49). These practices unfold in the more sedentary contexts in which they live; and sitting surfaces as a salient idiom with which to express self-mastery, or embodied knowledge (Chernela 1993; Århem 2000, S. Hugh-Jones 2007; Micarelli, Rahman, this issue).

Alchemists working with physical matter saw their experiments as intractable from their own processes of personal transformation. This is perhaps most clearly evinced by the philosopher's stone: at once a spiritual metaphor and the material product of an alchemic pro-

cess that transforms the *materia prima* into a life elixir (Duin and Duin, this issue). In this sense, the long-lived person himself becomes the refined gold s/he seeks to find. A range of Eastern and Western alchemic traditions, at some point in their history, evince the fact that “the experimental processes that were taking place within the body exactly paralleled those taking place in the alchemist’s laboratory, and that within the body itself there resided the equipment with which to practise the refinement of those substances necessary for the sustaining of vital processes” (Clarke 2002: 123). Clarke argues that even after a separation between outer and inner alchemic process, the “technical vocabulary of furnaces and chemical processes, and talk of refinement and transmutation of elements” was identical.<sup>1</sup> These same themes ring true in many Amerindian contexts.

The Witoto, who lick tobacco paste enhanced with vegetable salt, refer to the alchemic practices of its making as a marker of who they are as People of the Centre (Echeverri, Micarelli, this issue). The Witoto’s deep ethnobotanical knowledge, combined with their refining processes, constitute a form of bodily knowledge (Santos-Granero and Mentore 2006; Echeverri 2013) at once creating the refined salts and the person who makes them. In a classic alchemical axiom, “the salt of the matter” is an on-going endeavour to apprehend the culinary parallels of this *Sal Sapientie*, in terms of a well and healthful reproductive and family life, in all its “concrete simplicity” (Echeverri 2015: 125).

The 14<sup>th</sup> century alchemical text *The Book of Lambspring*, by the German mystic of the same name, details self-development based on a hermetic philosophy influenced by Christian and Qabalist traditions, among many others, which ultimately congregate around the purpose of joining the higher aspects of self with God. The theological concept of *persona* is here an insightful compass. Acclaimed Russian Orthodox theologian Vladimir Lossky explains: “Every attribute is repetitive, it belongs to nature and is found again among other individuals. Even a cluster of qualities can be found elsewhere... Eluding concepts, personhood cannot be defined. It is the incomparable, the wholly-other” (Lossky 1978: 42; Vilaça 2005; Rival 2005b).<sup>2</sup> Here, the quantifiable individual, as a cluster of independent and unrelated characteristics or personal traits, finds no ground (Martin 2006: 274; Cf. Strathern 1988).

This personal and cosmic logic of *Alchymia*, from the Arabic *al* and the Greek *kemeia*, evinces a complex and indeterminate etymology, itself the mixing of or incorporation of others (cultures). The Arabic *kbemia*, used by Alexandrian alchemists, also curiously adds to this etymology. The fertile Nile Delta, “the land of black earth” became a Hellenistic melting pot, and a place in which alchemic practice flourished.<sup>3</sup> This medley continues to underscore alchemic practice, with one of the most renowned alchemists of 17<sup>th</sup> century America, George Stockly (Eirenaeus Philalethes),<sup>4</sup> better known as The Cosmopolitan, being the cited source of inspiration for the creators of modern science.

According to Newman and Principe (1998: 2-3), Helene Metzger (1922, 1923), in the 1920s and ‘30s, divided alchemy from chemistry on the basis of mechanism and corpuscularianism. She visualized alchemy as organic and vitalistic, and chemistry as “scientific” and mechanistic; thus, alchemy naturally withered at the advent of Cartesian mechanization. While any rigid distinction between two latterly contemporaneous fields would appear difficult (Newman and Principe 1998), chemistry is championed as science due to its edicts of rationality and modernity (Boas 1958; Newman 1996). This led to the conclusion that “students of nature must have recourse to experiments and scientific instruments in order to gain knowledge” (Abbri 2000: 212). Academies and institutions supporting this project, work to both standardise and ultimately normalise knowledge, people and vital processes themselves (Foucault 1970; Carneiro de Carvalho, Brabec de Mori, this issue), in search of the “epistemic virtue” of objectivity (Daston and Galison 2007).

Perhaps one of the most defining features of alchemy is the inseparability of matter and meaning, or substance and soul, which merge within a psychic and somatic “intersubjective field”<sup>5</sup> (Schwartz-Salant 1998). McCallum (1996: 352), writing about the Cashinahua, explains that the body “is the place in which social and supernatural processes coalesce and is made by others in a constant flow involving nutrition, abstention, the application of medicines, body painting, baptismal rituals, and formal training.” People are formed through a diverse array of substantial personal encounters, causing subtle but profound transformations in human development.

Amerindianists have shared alchemist Baudelaire's interest in the "forest of symbols" and Rimbaud's "Alchemy of the word". Prayers, orations, songs and spells, often carried by smoke, make breath a powerful force that carries words with penetrating effects (de la Hoz, Micarelli, this issue). The talismanic magic of the word manifests as an illocutionary force that has tangible effects in the world (Brabec de Mori, this issue). Alchemy investigates these subtle relationships between matter and meaning, highlighting the moral and aesthetic value of substances and collapsing any separation between other and this-worldly forces. Alchemy affords the possibility that melding with bodily myrtle is more than a metaphor.

### The Alchemical Person: as Good as Gold

Londono-Sulkin (2012: 99) details the manipulation of elemental forces in order to manage plant-persons. Writing on vegetable salts he notes they are "...extracted from certain palms and plants in a process People of the Centre portrayed as the predatory transformation of itchy, thorny, slimy, poisonous, ill-willed plants and their animal inhabitants into a tasty, life-giving substance, by means of fire and water." Manioc, its processing and consumption (Duin and Duin, this issue), its abundance and an appreciation of its qualitative properties (Carneiro de Carvalho, this issue; Ewart 2005) is an essential part of leading a good life (on the further virtues of manioc, see Santos-Granero 2011). Commenting on the virtue of Makushi foods, one man observes, "We (Amerindians) take poison and make it into food. You (non-Amerindians) take food and make it into poison." (Carneiro de Carvalho, this issue).

The alchemical person is formed as if in a *tipiti*. Part of the process includes molding a fluid and suspended mass, and depositing this into a specially crafted container. As excess fluids are gradually expelled, the mass becomes firmer and harder. Gradually filling its woven skin, which becomes taught and less porous, the mass dries out. In this Special Issue we are led to reflect on how various types of containers (including the skin), and their contents, are reformed in transnational (Carneiro de Carvalho, Gonçalves, Duin and Duin, this issue) and transontological contexts (Micarelli, Kondo, Rahman, this issue).

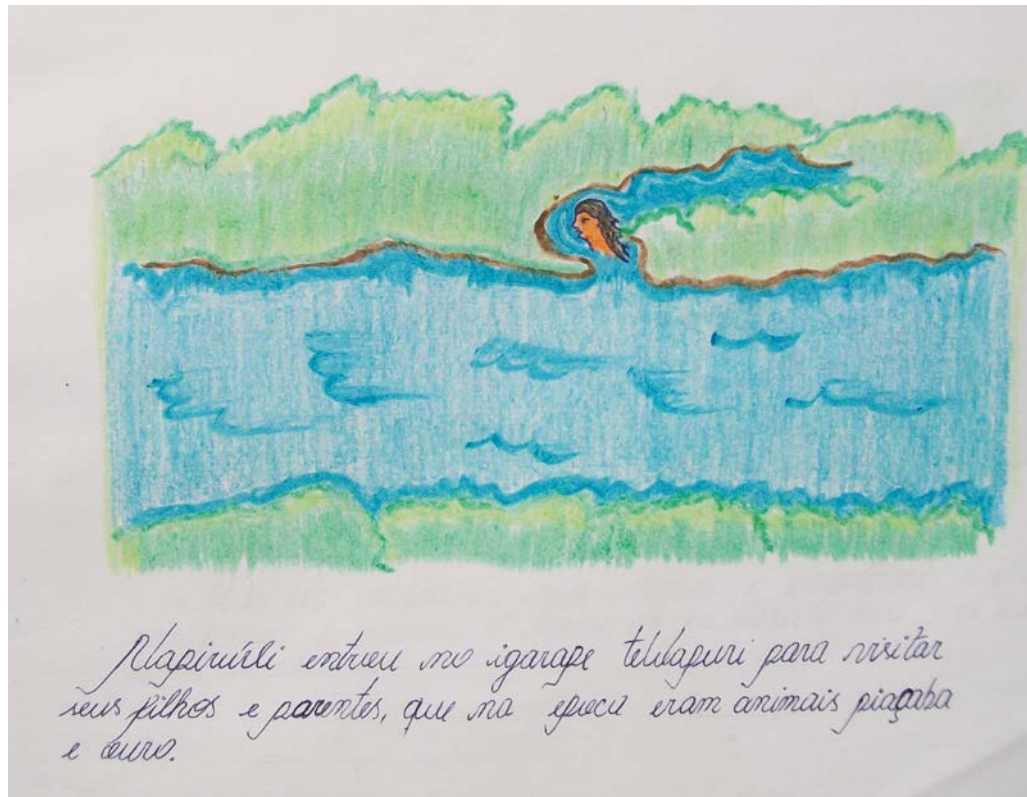
Good health is a minute alchemical project that equilibrates resonances within the body, but also outside of it; as macro-cosmic forces aid the micro-constitution of Amerindian persons. Amongst the Hupd'äh, two vital and cosmic forces are balanced when in a state of health, but imbalances caused by the predominance of the ghost aspect (*b'atib*) manifest in sickness and are only remedied when the shaman comes to perceive the soul (*bãwäg*) and can offer a diagnosis. Athias summarises, "The *bãwäg* and *b'atib* are fluids that are usually opposed to each other, but together provide a balance to support the body in this world." Just beyond the Amazonian frontier, Ferrié describes the piedmont Apoleños' cosmos as a flow of vital forces between the celestial, and the human and non-human bodies encountered. In these contexts, the *Wira pacha tika* literally the "fat of the earth" can be used to appease non-human entities, thereby ensuring that equivalent nourishing substances eaten by humans manifest as bodily fat. This type of ensouling literally gives body to well-balanced human persons (Rahman, this issue).

Gold itself is a substance of particularly ambivalent value. The Incas made personal doubles of themselves in gold, silver or bronze, according to their rank. Large and unusual nuggets or conglomerates of the metal found in underground galleys were called *mamas* (mothers or sources) of the mine (Mateos 1956). As early European explorers were spurred by the prospect of finding the golden age of Greek mythology in a contemporaneous New World, the allied notion of an Arcadian noble savage confounded the reality of a green inferno that was ultimately to become the focus of an enslaving colonial endeavor (Boxer 1962; Hemming 1978).

Investigations elsewhere suggest a similar ambivalence to gold, due to its trophy-status and later, market value. Perinbam (1996: 263) writing in the context of western Africa, describes the "endemic poverty" that characterizes mining towns, due to a number of mitigating factors including poor soils and the disruption of agriculture caused by averse climatic conditions. The most serious threat however were the covetous raids. While the devastating effects of gold prospecting often out-shadow an understanding of gold outside of a commercial context, Perinbam (1996) gives voice to a customarily salt-gold alchemy among the Mambe, with salt and gold forming part of men's and women's respective transformative po-

tential. While salt, like tobacco, may be an androgynous master or mistress (Echeverri 2015), very little is known of the values attached to gold in Amerindian cosmologies.

Gold prospecting is prohibited in the northwestern Amazon, although practiced illegally;<sup>6</sup> and enquires into gold and other precious stones and metals are often met with suspicion. Amongst the Warekena, such resources are the coveted domain of the knowledgeable *kurupira*, a potent multimorphic shapeshifter and polyglot whose most frequent incarnations include the tamandua or the long-maned piassava palm, both species commonly found in periodically flooded sand patches in the watershed. In one, previously bountiful piassava grove, gold is named alongside piassava as a child of the Warekena's mythic ancestor, Napiruli (Figure 1). At this site, the children of extractors have been known to disappear, as they follow the *kurupira* through the forest thinking it to be one of their kin. Potentially counterfeit bodies such as these should be handled with care: one could be tricked and led astray, becoming lost in the forest, or they could be attacked (Rahman 2014: 101-118). The risk of such encounters are significant deterrents against forest extraction and the over exploitation of resources (Århem 1990; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976). Illness and misfortune go hand and hand, and amongst the Hupd'äh, gold prospecting is linked to the aetiology of epidemics (Athias, this issue). Both piassava and gold have been heavily extracted resources, but much more is known about the former than the latter (Meria 1996). Further investigations may reveal important insights into the strong spirits or souls of metals such as gold; and tell us more about their particular relationship with the people that use them.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 1.** Tewapuri forms part of the Warekena's sacred landscape. The caption reads "Napiruli [the Warekena's culture-hero] entered the stream tewapuri to visit his sons and relatives, who at that time were the animals piassava and gold."<sup>8</sup>

### The Papers in this Issue

The overarching themes of the articles in this issue are the flow of vital forces along with the substances used to constitute the bodies of people. The articles discuss how people are enhanced, transformed, and made well through a variety of interactions that take place through penetrating material and immaterial realms. While these themes resonate throughout the articles, each has its special focus, which have been organized into three major parts.

The first four papers constitute “body matter(s)”, or a focus on the body as the site of personal constitution. Each considers how tangible and intangible substances (acting as persons) are transferred and permeate Amerindian bodies, so as to co-author them individually, or more commonly, as members of a group (dividually).

The human body is as an assemblage of parts, enfolded by a skin. Hiroshi Kondo’s paper elaborates on the Emberá skin painted with designs and decorated with animal parts. Those designs, impregnated with animal or vegetal parts, “are not representations of a species itself or a whole assemblage but a specific materialized capacity or quality, which is one component of the body as an assemblage”. Kondo explains that, by disembedding another’s capacity and affects from their original assemblage, specific qualities are manipulated to re-configure human bodies.

While Emberá designs operate on a porous skin, the songs of Shipibo specialists open up equally penetrating lines of communication between human and non-human entities. Dissolving classical understandings of sonic - and silently sonic - potency, “the singer inscribes the non-human’s qualities in the human client’s body, very much like ingesting a substance”. Bernd de Brabec de Mori’s discussion of the phenomenology of hearing canvasses physical and neurological reactions and the chemistry of audition, allowing for a subtle appreciation of the substance of sound: sound undulates through bodies, possibly in molecular form.

Elizabeth Rahman elaborates on water as a medium in the construction of the infant self among the Xié River dwellers: “River water is a key substance manipulated in order to instill and sediment the otherwise free-flowing states of infancy.” Water here is not simply a cleansing substance of the outer cover of the body; carefully mediated relations with water promote the “attentional state of mindfulness”, part of the *lapi*<sup>9</sup> of the agentive “alchemical elixir” that transforms infants into fully human persons.

These three papers show how bodily designs, songs sung (or even merely sung-thought) over the patient, or water cleansing and washing, are more than just external operations on the body. They induce bodily transformations. The fourth paper in this part, by Renato Athias, deals with two immaterial substances that constitute the Hupd’äh’s body—*bämüg* and *b’atib*—as a way to better understand processes of health and illness among a people seriously affected by recurring TB and malaria. All of Hupd’äh’s healing practices are based on a constant attention to the increasing of *bämüg* (life force) and to the controlling of *b’atib* (“shadow” or malevolent force), both of which are necessary for life.

The next three papers turn to consider the place of foods, and ingested non-foods (see Hugh-Jones 2007), through a consideration of their origins, processing practices and their recipients. If designs, sounds and water are “substances” that instill body capacities and affects, the category of food is the quintessential and most powerful of Amerindian idioms of ‘dividual’ body formation. True human bodies are made through the ingestion of appropriately processed and combined foods.

Giovanna Micarelli presents a Muinane (one of the groups of the People of the Centre) myth about “the origin of education”. It tells of the works of the Creator to establish the human condition, and concludes with the figure of the Grandson-Orphan of the Center, who must learn to reestablish the world left by the Creator. His search for knowledge is expressed in the myth as the search for the flavor of coca—not just the coca plant, but rather the coca adequately processed and combined with ashes: “he tasted the powder. In that moment, the essence filled his mouth and all his being—*taab*— something fresh, sweet, effervescent! “That is it! That is what my Grandfather gave me to taste!” At last he had found the taste of knowledge – the taste of the true coca and tobacco of life”.

Juan Alvaro Echeverri’s paper deals with the culinary space of the Uitoto, another group of the People of the Centre. The production of food and the production of true people are referred to with the same set of terms and the instruments and technical transformations of cooking are conceived of as at once culinary and bodily processes.

The third paper in this part deals with Apoleños, a Quechua group of the Andean piedmont, and their ritual use of fat, a quintessential human substance and a nourishment to nonhuman entities. Fat is a nourishing foodstuff that strengthens and seals the vital force in the body, but it can also be conceived of as a protective coating which acts as a barrier that isolates and reduces porosity. Francis Ferrié considers diverse material and immaterial mani-

festations of fat, or the lack of it, as it circulates—in hydraulic fashion—between cosmological domains, near and far.

The subsequent four papers deal with “alchemic borders” and consider the perversion of persons at the edges of markedly transcultural contexts. Confrontations between the myrtle of Amerindian persons, and the marble of the nation-state—to use Viveiros de Castro’s (2002) apt images—are here explored through agents in the hospital (Gonçalves), at the geopolitical border (Carneiro de Carvalho), in the school (de la Hoz) or as represented in the museum (Duin and Duin). All these borders evince the ontological dimensions of cultural equivocation and show how Amerindian persons deal with these border crossings to construct new (or failing) bodies.

Drawing an analogy with alchemy, Johanna Gonçalves represents hospitals as *containers*, which provide all the wrong sensoria (the stinky smell of food, alien sounds and voices, frightening spirits) for Yanomani body-containers. It is a sequence of layered containers: within the hospital-container, the ill body (another container), is eventually surrounded by the containing care of relatives (through practices of rubbing, massaging, cleaning), who, in an effort to save their relative, wrap his or her soul in palm leaves (another container) to be dispatched to the shamans back home for further treatment.

The Makushi of Guyana are constantly and actively fabricating their bodies. Lucas Carneiro de Carvalho exploits the notion of an alchemical person as a way to explore Makushi understandings of bodies, persons and substances. These native notions are put to work when Makushi cross the border to neighbouring Brazil and seek to transform their bodies to make them “Brazilian bodies”. A change of name, language acquisition, and the ingestion of Brazilian food all facilitate this process. This article shows how the Makushi perform notions of nationality and citizenship, in another case of cultural equivocation, this time in relation to Brazilian authorities and their ideas of what constitutes citizenship.

Western schooled education is another border, and one that the Colombian Piara have to cross. The Piara confer great value to the power of the word: “the word goes on a long journey, which begins in its first dwelling, travelling to the interior of each person where, given the conditions, it blooms” (de la Hoz). But nowadays, de la Hoz explains, the “sounds” of schools, health centers, religious doctrines, and foreign political systems impede the safe passage to wellbeing. Incoherently fractured by these sounds, Piara must now reconstruct relations to the *ukuo* (“the Word of respect and sacredness”) and selectively incorporate these sounds into this body of sacred speech.

Museums are supposedly meant as spaces to represent and display other societies and cultures. Renzo and Sonia Duin aptly show how curatorial practices and a museum emphasis on visual display fails to represent the alchemical person: “Multi-sensory experiences that are essential to the embodiment of the Amazonian alchemical person challenge classic modes of representation in the museum”. In their paper, the Duins relate their attempts, as guest curators in two North American museum exhibitions, to introduce these phenomenological aspects of everyday Wayana life into the visitors’ experience. However, this proves to be the most difficult of border crossings, fraught with epistemological indeterminacy.

The authors herein tease out alchemical directions in Amerindian anthropology. Ideas about the artefactual anatomies of these body bricolours (Santos-Granero 2009, 2012) canvas the body as a vessel and speak of inner and outer resonances and their cosmic equilibrium. Such collaborative endeavours in Amerindian ethnography open us up to the possibility of genuinely cosmopolitan ways of being persons, rather than individuals; allowing us to reflect on what this might mean for our own continued health and wellbeing.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This idea is clearly expressed by the British historian of science Sherwood-Taylor (1962). Describing the analogies between man, and the world around him, he describes alchemical perception (ibid.: 116): “The combination of two bodies he saw as a *marriage*, the loss of their characteristic activity as *death*, the production of something new as a *birth*, the rising up of vapours, as a *spirit leaving the corpse*, the formation of a volatile solid, as the making of a *spiritual body*. The conceptions influenced his idea of what should occur, and he therefore decided that the final end of the substances operated on should be analogous to the final end of man – a soul in a new, glorious body, with the qualities of clarity, subtlety, and agility.” (*emphasis* in the original).

<sup>2</sup> Also see Rivière (1999: 85) on the concept of the soul as “the person within the person”; and Rahman, this issue.

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Ball’s (2015) fascinating biography of water.

<sup>4</sup> Author of *The Marrow of Alchemy, being an Experimental Treatise, Discovering the secret and most hidden Mystery of the Philosophers Elixer* (London, 1654).

<sup>5</sup> Schwartz-Salant (1998: x) clarifies, “Rather than seeing a relationship as something two people did to one another, or as a kind of partnership, I began to see a relationship as – to use a mathematical phrase – a field that both people engaged and which, most mysteriously, moved and moulded their processes, both individually and together, as if these processes were mere waves upon a larger sea.” He goes on to describe this as “an intermediate realm of relations *per se*...affected by the individual subjectivities of both people and also much deeper and larger currents...” (ibid: 18)

<sup>6</sup> On the devastating effects of contemporary gold prospecting, see, for example, The Washington Post article by Sebastião Salgado, “The Yanomami: An isolated yet imperiled Amazon tribe”, July 25, 2014. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/world/2015/10/06/loggers/>. Also see, Apoorva Joshi’s article on Mongabay, “Gold mining explodes in Suriname, puts forests and people at risk,” 30th October 2015. <http://news.mongabay.com/2015/10/gold-mining-explodes-in-suriname-puts-forests-and-people-at-risk/>

<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, the golden colour of one bodily substance, urine, spurred an important alchemical investigation that eventually isolated the element phosphorus.

<sup>8</sup> This picture is one of over fifty that sequentially describe Napiruli’s upriver journey along the Xié and his encounters along the way. These are the outcome of a project instigated by a Tukano teacher working in the lower-river community school of Campinas. The pictures were collated into an unpublished booklet entitled ‘The Warekena’s Evolution’. The teacher granted permission for the Elizabeth Rahman to photograph the pictures for academic use and publication.

<sup>9</sup> Which in Arabian alchemy is “...any substance from which the elixir is made (even if it is not stone).” (Moureau 2013: 288)

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