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# Hydrocentric Infants and Their Alchemic Sedimentation: Artfully Binding the Bodily Soul among Xié River Dwellers of Northwestern Amazonia

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## Abstract

This article explores alchemic processes at work in the human infant self. It discusses how the acquisition of bodily firmness, as well as the firm, lucid capacities of the mind, can be understood as the crystallisation of the various components of a person (the body, the spiritual body, or body-soul and the soul) into one solid, and fully equilibrated, self. River water is a key substance manipulated in order to instil and sediment the otherwise free-flowing states of infancy. The attentional state of mindfulness is identified as part of the alchemical elixir that binds these aspects together. It promotes and is promoted by the special type of quiescent agency required to transform infants into proper, fully human, persons; and it is that which allows Warekena “to sit”. The paper then explores other forms of transformation achieved thanks to a different type of concerted, and contemplative, volitionally projective agency mobilised via the body-soul, which makes more radical types of shape-shifting possible in later life.

## Introduction

Among Xié river dwellers, infants are the subject of intense nurturing care. Their bodies (G.<sup>1</sup> *pira miri*), unformed, leaky, loose, floppy - akin to slippery fish-bodies (G. *pira miri*) - and their bawling selves, have the budding potential to become fully human; but rely heavily on proper care to make them so. Careful but casual daily encounters with their kin, in the context of their hydrocentric entours, engage a range of textured techniques and processes of which the infant child is the special subject. Frequent (river) bathing, hammocking, (breast)feeding, weaning into an increasing range of proper foods, good handling and the elicitation of kin responsiveness - as well as periodic tobacco blessings<sup>2</sup> - all involve emplaced actions and manipulated substances carefully guided to transform infants into richly vital human kin. But infants are already subjective agents in their own right (see Toren 2001: 156; 158)<sup>3</sup> and, along the Xié river, they are known to cry out for the provision of the preconditions that will allow them to “live well” (G. *keue katu*). Because “they want to grow” -and become firm and hard- as one mother explained it to me, infants solicit specific caring techniques that will allow them to transform their fish-like body (*pira miri*) into “our body” (G. *yane pira*);<sup>4</sup> that is, a body that is relatively manifestly homogenous to the bodies of other kin in terms of strength, posture and attentiveness. This shared “our body” (*yane pira*) allows people to effectively partake in productive relationships including those that enable the positive co-constitution of others, and thus allowing, more fully, for the reciprocity of care.

Clearly infant care offers a special window into person-making processes, but caring is more than looking after and providing for the material needs of developing persons: infants are more than their material bodies and infant care is more than a range of technical procedures that manipulate and transform infant bodily matter, be it through tweaking and shaping, massage or corporeal incisions, in order to secure their otherwise vulnerable position as real human subjects (see Rival 1998; Vilaça 2002). As I was told, and as most

Warekena agree, from the moment of birth babies also have a soul (*G. anga*). A soul, as is also well-known in the Amerindian literature, that is vulnerable to predatory agents due to its very weak connection to the infant self when compared to the more stable soul of adults (Vilaça 2002: 360; Rosengren 2006: 85; Fausto 2007). However, because the soul (*anga*) is not discussed in the context of a healthy baby, and because person-shaping is a more than a once daily event, this article attempts to discuss the ability to become a firm and full-bodied person - perhaps ensouled - in contexts where soul is not discussed. This is not a new problem. Vilaça (2009: 134-5), in a chapter discussing the relative virtue of the embodiment paradigm in the context of Amerindian soul volatility and the chronic instability of the body due to the shapeshifting potentialities of perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Vilaça 2005; Pedersen & Willerslev 2012) observes: “we could say that no living being, when acting in an ordinary manner, has *jam* [soul]”, elucidating further that “...the Wari insist that healthy and active people do not have a soul (*jam*-).”

Like the Warí, and I suspect for other Amerindian groups too, Xié dwellers do not speak of, and when asked, do not like to speak of the soul when one is well and healthy. To do so would provoke illness and misfortune. When Xié dwellers are well, they are strong and steadfast, have stamina and are involved in directed, attentive action, and are in this sense “full-bodied” (Abram 2010). They are able to effectively carry out their special repertoire of productive tasks (be it the felling of timber to make canoes or the reaping of manioc roots from the earth) in a tireless or animated manner and he or she is described as *G. kirimba* (which may be translated briefly as “potently strong”). When one is *kirimba* (and this is also referred to as “having strength”, *ter força* in Portuguese; also see Belaunde 2000; 2001) they are available to be and to work with others in the sense described by Ewart’s (2013: 176-181) elucidation of the Paraná idiom “*suakiin*”. When in such vigorous states of being, soul-talk, for the Warekena, is irrelevant. It is only when the soul aspect is improperly integrated or distant, the body is limp and flaccid, one’s animated state is poor like a weak-powered out-board motor that has no fizz, that a person (or the motor) may be described as *G. pitua* (weak, flaccid).<sup>5</sup> They are not useless as such, but they are not particularly effective in doing the job and don’t inspire much enthusiasm (see also Ewart 2013: 176-181 on the Paraná idiom, “*suangka*”). This apathetic state may be the consequence of sadness, but unchecked and not curtailed, it may also cause *G. sasiara* (sadness/sickness) and provoke the on-set of serious illness.

This is true especially in the case of infants. While infants similarly display vital signs, evinced by their fat and firm bodies and their reactivity; their limp and flaccid bodies signal a more serious and perhaps irreversible loss of vitality. Unlike in other parts of the world, and indeed among other Amazonian but mainly Andean communities, where soul loss or *susto* is an affliction of both children and adults (e.g. Thomas et al. 2009; Ferrié in press), the distancing of the soul from the body among the Warekena is a child-specific affliction. Soul distancing is caused by *susto* or fright (e.g. *G. nerangaxa*, fright of the bird-cry) which, in provoking the soul’s estrangement, may then lead it to be captivated by the ancestral animal spirits (*G. maina*) who seduce and capture it, luring and/or inviting it to live with them (also see Butt-Colson 1975: 300; Cf. Fausto 2007). Fright also has a specific aetiology. Soul estrangement is a process that begins with one instance of “fright”, that is one shockingly inappropriate act or occurrence, that dislodges the soul. Repeated frights, and a failure to perform remedial tobacco blessings, index a lack of on-going mindful nourishing care and has the consequence of causing the soul to become overly distanced. This process is initially evinced by crying, which in itself attracts the *maina*. It is then increasingly manifest by listlessness, limpness, refusal to feed and excessive leakiness of the orifices (a runny or bleeding nose, or bloody diarrhoea and/or vomiting), all ailments from which an infant-child may die. Fright requires early interventions, by way of tobacco smoke blessings, which prevent this much feared “death from crying”. It is in these contexts that the soul, the *anga*,<sup>6</sup> is identified and needs to be re-seated, or sedimented, in the infant’s body.

People marvel at an infant’s full and firm fish-body when well; and only when limp, sick and in-firm do they mention their soul (*anga*) and its distancing. For an infant’s healthy development and future vitality, it is their firmness and fatness which are of concern to its mother, father, grandparents and other family/community members and it is their job to nurture this state.

In adulthood individuals may also enter infirm states, suffering symptoms such as weakness, fatigue, vomiting and diarrhoea and in the most severe cases, sorcery-induced haemorrhaging. During these times they relinquish their bodily firmness and their capacity to be strong (*kirimba*). Their in-firmness indicates weak personal integrity and it is often said that their spiritual body, or body-soul (G. *mira*, but not their soul, *anga*) has gone to live with some animal ancestor or in a white person's city. Infants, who are categorically limp and loose, are much more vulnerable and it is as if a lack of firmness and the possibility of "liquefaction" (Rival 1998: 623) indexes a loose soul (*anga*) attachment well before the body-soul (*mira*) has been established. This issue of the body-soul (*mira*) I return to in the second half of the article.

Here I argue that caring practices reveal something about the need for the infusion of the soul into the tangible matter of the body. This gradual infusion appears parallel to the process of firming up the body and may be understood as the alchemic process of sedimentation. Focusing on infant bathing, I articulate the Warekena's idiom and vital ability of "knowing how to sit" as a sedentary, or sedimented, skill. A sedimented skill is a skill-in-means (Sharma 1990), at once a material firmness and an immaterial quality that affords the type of agency proper to real people (Warekena). It enables action in synchrony with environmental rubrics, rather than solely physical skills (in the Ingoldian sense). I aim to describe how this skill-in-means, or mindfulness, is the cornerstone of affective, volitionally robust personal agency and the baseline of Xié dweller's personhood: mindfulness is the meta of the alchemic person.

The notion of "sedimentary practices" has been used by Heckenberger (2002: 199) to explain the *longue durée* of the "cultural schemas" of Arawakan sociality and it is an idiom that elegantly conveys the heavily sedimented blackwater rivers of the region, to which many Amerindian groups are intimately entwined. In the context of this paper, it also describes how Xié river dwellers come to consubstantially take on parts of the landscape thanks to the open dialectic of the reciprocal gaze, as developed by Merleau-Ponty's (1962) similarly diachronic and intersubjective notion of "sedimentation". This defines a dynamic, mutually affecting encounter. Thus here, rather than solely elucidating the acquisition of bodily substance; or the formation and perpetuation of bodily techniques and practices (Mauss 2002 [1934]; Bourdieu 1977); I argue that sedimentation is also a useful way of understanding the process of an alchemic ensoulment (Santos-Granero 2009). In the case of infants, this process is facilitated by the baby-bathing technique of splash-washing which, according to Warekena Xié dwellers who insisted I use the same technique with my own infant daughter, secures the relative (bodily) firmness of the infant. Firmness indicates health, and I suggest that an infant's loose body is the mirror of its loose relationship to the soul, with sedimentation through splash-washing describing a ("processual-relational", Conklin and Morgan 1996) "constructivist" ensoulment. Caring practice then reveals something both tangible and intangible about Amerindian persons and comments on the process of embodiment (Csordas 1994) or conversely, ensoulment; or perhaps both.

In the second part of this paper, I tentatively explore other forms of agency that invoke a further part of the person, the spiritual body, or body-soul.

### Bodily Knowledge

Perhaps the clearest explanation of the healthful relationship between the soul and body comes via the notion of bodily knowledge (among the Cashinahua, see Kensinger (1995) and McCallum (1996)). McCallum distinguishes three soul types (the true soul, the dream soul and the body soul(s)) and describes how their interaction dictates physical health. She explains that for the Cashinahua, knowledge acquired via the journeys of true and dream souls becomes incorporated into the body soul, which acts as a repository for knowledge. The correct balance - or "working relationship" - of this dynamic bolsters the body-soul and creates healthy persons (ibid: 362). Conversely an imbalance exposes it to sickness, as it inhibits a person's ability to "know" and to be mindful of one's person. Memory, which forms part of this accumulated knowledge, "does not appear to have a separable existence outside the body, but rather is an intimate part of each developing body" (McCallum 1996:

355). The careful monitoring of knowledge appropriation creates mindful knowledge-able persons, lauded as “*conscious*”, healthy people (ibid: 362, emphasis in the original).

Taking a cue from McCallum’s (2001: 17, and Crocker’s 1985) notion that “other worldly power is an aspect of vital substances at play, not an addition to them”, skills in sitting evince the sedimented quality of the soul-body dialectic. This may be heuristically expounded as the ability for mindful action, as “a global visceral awareness” (Farb et al. 2007: 319) but in this case by qualifying and particularising the clinical definition of mindfulness - “the process of regulating attention in order to bring a quality of awareness to current experience” (Bishop et al. 2004: 234) - as bodily acquired knowledge intrinsically linked to both substances and practice. This reveals mindful action as both an ends and means: at once the agent and catalyst that binds together the body and soul and equally the medium through which full-body knowledge - or persons - are formed. It is understood as a neurophysiological accomplishment known to cultivate and actively structure the body-mind (Baime 2011), remoulding the nervous system and restructuring the brain in such a way as promote health and enhance wellbeing (Davidson 2004). This paper’s alchemical approach to persons does not distinguish between psychological, physical, chemical, social or spiritual states, but rather emphasises the deft inter-connected movement of matter and meaning to create healthy persons at particular moments in time and space. It also stresses the need to ‘ensoul’ or instil<sup>7</sup> soul through acts of proper care.<sup>8</sup> This is indeed how the infant child is said to become strong, firm and hard; where bodily firmness is evidence of a healthy working relationship between a human being’s different constituent parts (Rivière 2001: 78).

### Hydrocentric Infants and Their Sedimentation

The river defines the lived world of Xié dwellers, and in the context of elaborate mythscapes that narrate the river’s landmarks, twists and turns, “hydrocentric” is the term used to define the lifestyles of many regional Arawakan groups (Hill 2002). Indeed, hydrocentricity is a key way of understanding the attention given to the river in all its brimming vitality. The river is home to numerous *maima*, the animal ancestors, who figure in their petrified form by way of prominent rocks, boulders and eddies obscured during the winter rainy season and mostly exposed in the summer; such that they periodically puncture the landscape. Fluctuating river levels, seasonal fish migration and abundance, rapid and shifting currents, and the still wintertime flooded forest lakes make waters cooler in winter when the river is deeper, and barely refreshing in the summer. They carry with them suspended humic substances (organic matter), including podzol soils and clay, as well as more sedimented quartz and gold (see introduction). Water is thus a curious substance (Needman 2008; also see Rahman 2015: 136; 147).

Hot and sticky from the intense productive labour that defines the summer months, Xié river dwellers frequently take to its waters to cool off and cleanse themselves. Reinvigoration is a key aspect of river bathing and men with young families can be seen swimming against river currents to wash away any lingering flaccidities from work and to ensure they are strong enough (G. *kirimba*) to then pace themselves for an intense game of football. Among young children, signs of waning when helping around the house, when collecting water from the river for instance, prompt mothers to instruct children to bathe. For those youngsters who have chosen not to do so, therein one can find the source of their unquiet malaise. When I enquired into infant bathing, one mother enigmatically signalled her son to me claiming, “look at my son, how firm [*kirimba*, P. *duro*] he is. Well, that is because he was bathed [and later bathed himself] frequently in the river.”

Pregnant women, full-stomached and hot due to the growing accumulation of blood in the womb, bathe early morning when the river is at its coolest. Bathing cools and bolsters them, ensuring they are able to undertake their daily tasks with steadfast industriousness and without *pitua* – a known possible state encountered when pregnant, but ultimately unproductive for a good labour and a healthful birth. Rather, to ensure the baby does not get stuck, jammed or cramped in a foot-first or breach position, bathing mitigates improper pregnant posture that could cause this by ensuring vitality. The river’s waters also penetrate the abdomen making amniotic fluids abundant in the womb and thereby preventing a “dry birth”. As one midwife explained to me, a lack of sufficient lubrication (via river bathing)

could provoke complications during labour. Keeping it well-watered, the infant is just like a little fish, as one young mother told me, also citing images seen in her school textbook of the foetus in a state of suspension in the womb. It is thanks to their mother's good bathing practice that mothers' secure an easy birth and healthful neonate.

Having bathed throughout their pregnancy, so accustomed are babies to bathing in-the-womb that when they are born they "ask" for more of the same "as they are used to it". The first pressing calls post-birth are for bath water: just after the neonate and the placenta have emerged from the womb and the umbilical cord has been cut, the tiny infant is sat slumped over the arm of the mother-in-law's/grandmother's lap waiting to be bathed. River water is promptly fetched by a relative in preparation for bathing. A properly qualified blesser (*benzedor*) insufflates the water with the drying and hardening properties of tobacco smoke. His blessing "closes the eyes" of the water spirits (*mainva*). The baby is then bathed at length using a specific technique that involves neither reclining nor submerging the baby – for this would "frighten" the baby, (i.e. potentially cause "fright" and soul distancing). Rather, the neonate is sat on the grandmother's foot, its buttocks submerged in the basin full of river water, and water is then cupped by the hand and splashed onto the infant's back in rhythmic succession. The washer accompanies the splashing with a trumpeting sound produced by the forceful expulsion of air through her pursed lips. When he cries, the baby is consoled by back-patting, but the practice then continues for some ten to fifteen minutes or so, as does the trumpeting sound. After a week of home washing, the baby is bathed using the same technique in the river itself (See Figure 1).<sup>9</sup> By now the baby is used to his routine and displays serenity in spite of the sensorially replete commotion of splash-washing. This kind of splash-washing is carried out with notable frequency throughout the infant's early life: four to six times a day and two to three times in the night, the baby is bathed because he "wants to grow", crying out for his bath before he is fed on his mother's breast and put to sleep in his hammock. Carers observe how the baby, due to splash-washing, cries less, has developed neck firmness, is alert and eventually, has begun to sit. It is when their skills in sitting have been firmly established that the practice of splash-washing ceases.



**Figure 1.** Splash-washing in the river, beside the petrified ancestor rock.

### Sitting

While the infant is surrounded by its bathing waters in the womb and is somewhat like a fish, rather than swimming around aimlessly, the baby is said to be sitting. In the womb, the baby has its own special stool, the placenta - the infant's stool (*G. taina banco* or *W. weperi irari*) -, which it sits on until it "wants to be born"; and there is a sense in which bathing when

pregnant aids the infant's ability to sit on it until the moment of birth. At birth, the baby is understood to exercise its own volitional force (*força*) to get off its stool and head straight for the birth canal.

The infant's seat (placenta) is integral to its development and wellbeing long after the birth itself<sup>10</sup> and indicates its capacity to become a human. Post-birth, the infant is immediately encouraged to sit: this is the first posture he / she assumes post-birth when sitting on his / her grandmother's lap waiting to be bathed. And indeed, the infant is always sat in order to be bathed, be it on the foot of the washer at home or a week-post birth, when bathing moves to the river and takes place slumped but seated on the knee of the washer. Further, while initially a neonate spends much of its time near horizontal in the hammock, no handling leaves a baby's body reclined. Rather, the tiny infant is held in a one-handed, semi-upright position and the growing baby is invariably carried so that it is sitting and facing outward. The vast majority of handling encourage the baby to be seated, whether in arms, on the lap (see figure 3), in the back of a manioc basket (*G. watura*, see figure 4), or sat in a specially crafted infant swing rigged up at home (*G. makuru*, the same word is used for the sling, where the infant also assumes a semi-upright position). In these last instances of handling, where the baby is akin to an "extra-somatic body part[s]" (Erikson 2009: 187) and not the centre of directed attention, babies develop a full-bodied kinaesthetic awareness. As Guerts (2002: 74) has described for the Ghanaian Anlo-Ewe, this is "a sense located in the muscles and tendons and mediated by bodily movement". All this enables the infant to establish a sedentary stance, even when in motion.



**Figure 2.** Sofia hesitatingly sat in the watura, carried by a child.



**Figure 3.** Sofia held in a sitting position by Irienu.

### Hammocking

The (*G. taina makira*) or baby hammock, is a place where infants spend much time, resting and sleeping. Whilst newborns need not be rocked in a hammock, from about one month onward babies gradually start to be swung gently; babies more than a year old are often vigorously hammocked. They keep their place by pure momentum. The swinging action may be accompanied by a lullaby or a shaken maracá (*G. yamerú*), but is invariably complemented by the trumpeting sound, also used to calm an infant when bathing. As Walker (2009: 90) observes among the Peruvian Urarina, the centrifugal hammocking action makes the infant "most receptive to the formative messages which inaugurate it as person and subject."

Lullabies are sung to infants, and Walker insightfully includes the Urarina (canoe) hammock lullaby (ibid: 86-87). Although he does not comment on this association between hammocks and canoes, it appears that there is not only a semantic but a kinaesthetic and

somatic union between hammock and canoe use, as both develop and exercise essential skills in kinaesthetics. Staying balanced within the canoe is deemed an essential personal skill, nurturing familiarity with sensations of inertia and sure-footedness on uneven ground, and reducing the hazards of vertigo. Boys two years and older are encouraged to master balance in their tiny, notoriously unstable canoes and to learn to stand upright, braced against the canoe's narrow gunwales. Similar poise and agility is needed in the collection of high-hanging fruits growing on the riverbanks; both women and men expertly balance on the canoe's ledge to reach up and pick the fruit, or climb into the trees. Thus they develop the proprioceptive, and well equilibrated state and capacity of balance. Even when bathing, infants remain seated through minute bodily adjustments that attune the positions of both washer and baby alike to rapid water flows.

## Discussion

After birth, infants are hand-crafted in order to make them into seated subjects, and water is a co-opted substance that, thanks to the splash-washing technique, can be said to sediment the infant. In this way the qualities of cool river water are instilled into the infant. Speaking of the landscape, Ingold (2000: 345) describes it as the “crystallisation of activity within a relational field, [with] its regularities of form embodying the regularities of movements that gave rise to it.” Infants themselves may be said to be the “condensation or crystalizations of activity...” (Ingold 2011: 45), ensouled and imbued with elemental forces due to the craftsmanship of their mindful carers. This caring practice lends them more stable bodily boundaries and a less permeable surface (skin).

Merleau-Ponty (1968: 248) described the importance of place when he spoke of “the flesh of the world”: “that means that my body is made of the same flesh as the world (it is perceived), and moreover that this flesh of my body is shared by the world, the world reflects it, encroaches upon it and it encroaches upon the world.” These are the embodied resonances that Ingold (2000: 200) describes as being “historically incorporated into the enduring features of the landscape but also developmentally incorporated into our very constitution as human beings.” Whilst body and place may be said to become ‘attuned’ to one another; they also facilitate the acquisition of a particular type of corporeality, a corporeality that is intrinsically emplaced, inter-subjective and co-opts substances. This is a special kind of “knowledge bred of familiarity [which] does not give us a position in objective space” (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]: 144), but is rather a context-specific and relational understanding of the self.

It is this embedded understanding of personhood that led Xié dwellers to comment that if I left the Xié, my daughter Sofia, who was born and bathed there, would be required to “exchange her flesh” (*P. vai ter que trocar a carne dela*) or “change her flesh” (*P. vai mudar a carne - G. pirera- dela*). The changing of the flesh, and the affects and dispositions that it contains, is a gradual process, as gradual as are the processes that allow for the accumulation of emplaced flesh. This makes the mutually receptive encounter of perception, in Aristotelian idiom, “a movement of the soul through the medium of the body”: it has qualitative affects. Among Xié dwellers this movement is radically dynamic.

The contrast between the Xié river world and more distant milieus led some people to voice concern that, if we left, my daughter would “not get used to the change [*não acostuma mais*]” and become ill. In short, she would suffer a ‘displacement’ - the feeling that one is “disconnected from one’s physical and social environment” (Guerts 2005: 7), a state that for Xié dwellers can provoke ill-health. The special and capacitating flesh of a child should not then be caused to radically alter or change context. Rather, proper growth and good health (ensoulment) rely on processes such as splash-washing and hammocking in order to sediment a sense of self in mindful relation to one’s surrounds; and to the status-conscious society in which they live.

In these contexts “sedimentation” describes how people come to incorporate their history and society and the riverine mythscape speaks of this practice as linked to their contemporary more sedentary existence of living on the banks of the Xié River (Figure 4). The sedimentation of water in the body must then also be understood as a defining feature

of the Warekena's particular riverine status that sets them apart from, what they consider to be, local and inferior forest-dwelling Makú groups (Athias, this issue). In this way, splash-washing and attunement to one's surrounds facilitates the inculcation of their riverine standing, and Xié River dwellers come to literally embody their hierarchical status (see Toren 1999). It may well be that this status has been more recently acquired when compared to other, perhaps longer standing, regional river-dwelling groups (Aikhenvald 1998; Nãnez 2005). Nonetheless, their place in the regional hierarchy appears timeless against the backdrop of the riverine mythscape.



**Figure 4.** The image depicts one of two locales named as ‘the infant’s waterfall’. According to the narration, culture-hero Napiruli, arrived at this spot to find a woman bathing her baby, and he named it as such.<sup>11</sup>

### Growth, Transformation and Grafted Agency

The body-soul (*mira*) is a further aspect of persons. For babies, the body-soul is like the baby's body (*pira mira*): it is in the process of rapid development, undergoing a parallel yet immaterial process of firming up and thus is hardly even spoken of in the contexts of infancy. For adults, the body-soul appears as a direct reflection of the already firm relationship between the body and the soul with the *mira* the watery reflection of this firm relationship. It would appear then, that the mindfully sedimented agency that is acquired through hardening, which allows babies to develop into persons and become strong (*kirimba*) river dwellers, is with time, that which also establishes the *mira* (body-soul).

The *mira* appears to capacitate a secondary form of agency, that is not essentially corporal, but which is nonetheless important for all adult persons and also has a more quotidian aspect important for the reproduction of social life. This is true because the word *mira* is also used to talk about, and I use the word tentatively, the embodiment of a person's sib identity (sib-lingship), namely their agnatic line or clan identity. In this latter context, *mira* may mean human persons (da Cruz 2011: 36), or persons with a properly human bodily form, within which their *mirasa* (sib or clan) describes categories of people with regard to affinal relation and rank. The *mira* then has a function for daily sociality. But it is more than this.

*Mira*, for the Warekena, is akin to the elucidation of *wakan* provided by Taylor (1993: 206) among the Achuar: a “shadow”, doppelgänger, “double”, “image” (P. *imagem*) and watery reflection of a person and also their “dream consciousness”. Among the Warekena, *mira* is used to talk about how the image or spirit of a being (its *mira*) becomes grafted onto a tree, thereby affecting its being and making it into a potent and highly agentic subject. Or

indeed how a tree spirit is grafted onto another being to enhance particular aspects of its agency (Kondo, this issue). When this is involuntarily, such as is described by the predatory aetiology of sickness, it can also impeded human actions (albeit whilst developing - unwanted - non-human capacities). Sometimes the invisible “image” of a human or non-human being (their *mira*) can negatively affect a person who has unwittingly failed to take the proper precautions (such as prior bathing) when coming into its/their presence. Mindful of the *mainva*, bathing is a sensible precaution to avoid their sickening gaze when venturing into the forest, or out into the river. Sometimes provoked by a malignant sorcerer, such body-images (*mira*) can also be sent in dreams to afflict dis-ease and illness onto their victim.<sup>12</sup> This kind of grafting is unlike examples elsewhere that describe the transfer of one substance onto another as the result of a tactile connection (e.g. Rival 1993).<sup>13</sup> Rather, they describe spirit or body-soul grating, which is invisible but nonetheless affects the being of others.

The *mira* is then the outward form, that is, how one might appear to another person or how they may be subtly perceived - or not - when they are otherwise invisible. Not infrequently, the body-soul is other than one’s quotidian bodily form. Amongst Warekena, such deceptive bodies are apparent when working in the forest extraction, and the piassava palm especially shifts its shape, transforming into the *kurupira* - as well as gold (see introduction) - take the unsuspecting younger children of an extractor’s family deep into the forest. In other contexts, malignant sorcerers, who in their daily attire already take on a sub-human decrepit appearance, purposefully transform their bodies to those of bats, river dolphins or jaguars, so as to remain inconspicuous during their planned attacks. Rather than the soul per se, for the Warekena it is the G. *mira* or the body-soul that allows beings, including humans, to transform in this way. Shamans and sorcerers alike, and to a lesser extent any Tom, Dick and Harry, can also project images of themselves in order to converse and dialogue with other beings and thereby mobilize animals to move and act on their behalf.

Babies become easily frightened by “images” (*mira*) in their dreams, and this is especially true as they cannot yet distinguish between dreaming (*kirî*) and waking (*paka*). As such, incidents in dreams are potentially more dangerous for infants than for adults, for whom the fright in a dream could prove lethal. This is unparalleled for adults. I suspect this is partly because a baby’s own-body image is comparatively underdeveloped. Adults too can suffer serious consequences from their dreams, as falling prey to the seductive attempts of *mainva* - who may appear as attractive women in dreams - can led to sickness, but rarely to death. Adults however, are able to effectively mobilise their body soul in dreams and as such, are able to better resist the *mainva*’s seductive attempts. But the onus is on adults to restrain themselves in dreams, so as to not suffer potentially negative consequences in waking life. Children, who lack the rudiments of sedimentation, do not have the abilities to exercise such caution.

Certain children have a more complex relationship with their own and the body-souls of others. Pregnant women, who eat inappropriately “hot” foods, can be negatively affected by the body-souls of the animals or large fish she consumes. These animal aspects are thus transferred onto the developing infant itself and the child is born with mental and physically incapacities. Such children are called *machîra* by siblings and other children, which is a play on the word for malignant sorcerers (*machî*). This is because, like sorcerers themselves, their bodily forms are decrepit compared to their peers and their thoughts are the cause of suspicion.

On other occasions, *mira* may visit a woman in her dreams or in waking life (be river dolphins) appearing as men. When a woman falls prey to *mainva* and elopes with them, she can fall pregnant with the “child of the *mainva*”. It is through their *mira* (the body-soul) that these beings interact with her. The children born of such relations are in many ways similar to those described as *machîra*, however other than disobedience, there is no overt manifestation of their being children of the *mainva*. Perhaps it is the children of unions such as these that have historically or in other Amerindian contexts, become child sorcerers (Cf. Santos-Granero 2004). It is possible that such children are imagined to have a potent body-soul that is not a reflection of themselves, but rather of the ‘other’ that helped conceived them.

The Warekena, I believe, see *mira* as the acquired ability for projective imagination. Developed through contemplative states on the cusp of dreaming and waking, this lucid

dream consciousness gives rise to an agency that displaces a seated intentionality of the body-soul, projecting it outside the body and in the mind's eye. This active disembodiment (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 195) may also depend on nurturing substances in the same way in which the body requires on-going nourishing care. However, the substances that feed it are those of potent agents, such as that acquired through consuming large game animals and large fish with spores, or for men, through smoking tobacco. Consuming these substances define adult personhood. Shamans, on the other hand, use both greater quantities of tobacco (see Barbira Freedman 2015) and the psychoactive snuff, *W. pariká* to augment their projective agency.<sup>14</sup> Shape-shifting is their prerogative, and it is precisely because their body-soul is so malleable that they drive a fine line between the benevolent and dangerous. They are seated outside the community, often both logistically and metaphorically, as marginal figures that don't quite conform to everyday states of living well and being strong. Even so, their potential for radical transmutation, may rely on prior sedimentation; and the subsequent mobilising of the agency of the body-soul itself, thanks to this later, grafted agency.<sup>15</sup> Thus the *mira* may allow for more radical shape-shifting potentialities in later life.

Bodily transformation, or shapeshifting, are often ethnographically described in typically deceptive forest-encounters (Rivière 1994); in male experiences of warfare (Rival 2005); in shamanism, sorcery and in sickness (Wright 2013: 7-8; 328). Classically, the analytical schema that allows for such shape-shifting is reliant on soul detachability: the body shifts its shape, voluntarily in the former instances but involuntary in the case of sickness, because the soul aspect is loose and/or is seduced and living with other beings and the body is chronically instable. But these theses necessarily require a degree of scepticism as to the actual phenomenon of bodily transformation (can people really turn into jaguars?) and through ontological abstraction, tell us little about the actual phenomenon of transforming (*see* Shepard 2013). I have suggested that the *mira* is that which potentialises the capacity to shape shift, but that such a capacity is reliant on prior soul sedimentation.

## Conclusions for Amerindian Persons

Sedimentation describes a constructivist (Santos-Granero 2012) approach to the soul which is otherwise absent in these discussions and elucidates quotidian but no less miraculous transformations. Thoroughly infused into the matter of the body, remarkable personal and bodily transformations may occur, in women as much as in men, and include those key to the processes of growth and reproduction evinced during the perinatal period: seated men make highly-prized baskets with intricate designs and seated women, those that “know how to sit”, enable healthful births. The seated stance is a highly contextualised personal style, developed through training that “is as much moral, intellectual, and spiritual as it is technical, for sitting still and making things are forms of meditation” (S. Hugh-Jones 2009:49). In adulthood, seated skills such as those required of pottery and basketry, are the “hallmarks of a particular civilization” (*ibid*: 48). Ultimately then, sitting is self-domestication made manifest and demonstrates both rank and riverine status.

Seeking an equilibrium between oneself, others, animist or otherwise, and hence also the wider environment is a delicate operation. In practice, the balance to live well is so delicate that it is akin to a minute alchemical process that occurs inside, outside and between people and places, intertwining matter with meaning. Thus whilst “mindful and relational bodies” have been well described in Amazonia, mindfulness as a concept is a useful heuristic device to expound how indigenous socio-physio (Seeger et al. 1979) and cosmic (Viveiros de Castro 1998) logics affect health and personal development.

Mindfulness as defined in the biomedical literature (Bishop et al. 2004: 234; Kabat-Zinn 2003, Kabat-Zinn 1990) is in anthropology perhaps most akin to Ingold's (2001) notion of “attentional act”, which describes how people become enskilled in their taskscape. However, attentional acts such as splash-washing also inculcate capacities which are not readily identifiable as ‘skills’. Rather, the carers attentional washing must be understood as both the means and the ends of a wider project of instilment; that is, the development of a skill-in-means, the mindful capacity embodied and the most flexible and transferable ‘skill’ or demeanour. In defining this general and flexible mode of apprehending and responding to situations of a general sort, clarification can again be sought in the work of Merleau-Ponty

(1962 [1945]:142): "...the learning process is systematic; the subject does not weld together individual moments and individual stimuli but acquires the general power to respond with a certain type of solution to situations of certain form." The Warekena idiom of knowing how to sit perhaps best translates this capacity as the means through which to full-fill the self, and processes of sedimentation and instilment have helped to explore how relationships between body, mind, body-soul and soul promote health and affect agency. Mindfulness, I have used as a concept to more precisely expound how, in the words of Stephen Hugh-Jones (2009: 49), "mastery of a technique is mastery of self".

Developing such a mindful stance unfolds and co-opts a range of substances and cultivates synchrony between environmental rubrics within and between the body-person and the surrounding social, political and physical environment by virtue of the practice of specific techniques. But the success of these applied techniques depends on the mode, manner or quality of these interactions - their mindfulness or otherwise - and it is this that I suggest is the binding principle that makes persons both affective and volitional. Mindfulness allows for robust personal agency; and is the means and ends of the good life.

In the absence of sickness, effective transformation, the kind that has the positive potential to ensure the continuation of the patterns of daily life and that are often experienced by women and growing children, depend wholly on these processes of soulful inculcation. Carers, like alchemists, transmutate the malleable plastic of the body which helps babies sediment their souls, and enables them to develop diverse agentive forms in later life.

Mindfulness appears as the immaterial and alchemical elixir that binds and makes persons who work effectively in their communities, and outside of them. From such a perspective, notions of personhood move from being curiosities, to being actively valorised for their effects on the health and wellbeing of the particular types of persons made in northwestern Amazonia.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> At their first mention, all words in Géral are prefixed with "G." (according to the phonology of da Cruz 2011); words in Portuguese are prefixed with "P." and follow standard Portuguese phonology rather than actual normative speech which, due to close bordering with both Colombia and Venezuela, is often a mix of Spanish and Portuguese. Words in the Arawakan language, Warekena, are prefixed with "W."

<sup>2</sup> Tobacco blessings are an important part of understanding soul infusion in infants, but beyond the scope of this article (see Rahman 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For Toren, the worldly condition of intersubjectivity "entails that children socialise themselves: they engage those who care for them in the process of constituting their own understandings of the world."

<sup>4</sup> When I enquired further, it was described simply as the *P. corpo humano*.

<sup>5</sup> In mythic times, tools and utensils laboured by themselves and humans needed not to be strong. Due to an early transgression however, today's world necessitates the exertion of force or strength in subsistence; but it also requires moments of vulnerability: there are certain lifecycle events when persons must necessarily be weak and flaccid (*pitua*), for instance during menstruation and post-birth. *Pitua* is a periodic consequence of having expelled energies and as such is recognised as necessary consequence of exertive action. While moments of *pitua* may be mindfully respected, being or becoming *pitua* is not a cultivated state as being strong (*kirimba*) is.

<sup>6</sup> The *anga* is associated with the head (*kanga*) and may be translated as head-soul. The *anga* aspect of the person is the most formless, and may be understood as "the person within the person" (Rivière 1999: 85).

<sup>7</sup> In the Oxford dictionary, there are two definitions of the verb to instil. The first is to "Gradually but firmly establish an idea or attitude in a person's mind". In this sense it is often related to the gradual acquisition of a certain morality, and as such something that a parent may do to child, as in the example: "the standards her parents had instilled into her". The second use is to do with fluid substances, i.e. to "Put (a substance) into something in the form of liquid drops". The verb here is frequently used with reference to therapeutic techniques, such as instilling medication into the eye, or the instilling of medicinal fluids

through an intravenous infusion. Taken together, they blur the boundaries between material and immaterial substances and convey the notion of a process that is slow, persistent and perhaps formative, and at the least salutary, in the broadest sense.

<sup>8</sup> It is something of an artifice then to speak concurrently about the *pira miri* (the baby's fish-body), the *pira yane* (a productive adult body), the *mira* (the soul-image or the body-image) and the *anga* (the soul), not least because I doubt how much these aspects of persons are held in any given Warekena's mind contiguously, that is as an interrelated frame of reference. I didn't notice people talking about them contemporaneously in the context of any single conversation, and when initiating discussion to try to form a coherent picture of the relationship between them, the conversation invariably led to a moral discourse of how to promote or bolster strength. These latter patterns are detectable in infancy and form the focus of this paper.

<sup>9</sup> This is marked by the Iyumi ritual, see Rahman 2015.

<sup>10</sup> Once the umbilical cord has been cut, the placenta, spoken of as "part of the child", "should be treated properly" and buried outside, at the corner of the birth house. If the placenta is buried shallowly a baby's first teeth will come quickly, if it is buried too deeply, they will come late. Simply throwing the placenta away is considered "sinful" (G. *pekadu*) and can make people sick. On the intimate relationship between the child and its other, the placenta, see Gow (1991).

<sup>11</sup> In the state school of Campinas, the Tukanoan supply teacher brought together a group of adolescent students from the Xié River communities of Vila Nova, Tunu and Campinas. The group also included some of Campinas' adult population. Each student produced different pages of material that were then bound together in a single booklet, entitled "Map of the Warekena's evolution". Built around the story of their culture-hero's (Napiruli) up-river journey in pursuit of the great snake, they comprised a portrait narrative of the Xié's sacred landscape.

<sup>12</sup> This was the case with a menstruating woman who, because of a spell sent by a distant Baniwa relative who coveted her husband, was forced monthly to experience a jaguar pouncing and biting her in her dreams.

<sup>13</sup> Rival's (1993: 645) work among the Ecuadorian Huaorani discusses connections between manioc and balsa, noting: "When bundles of stalks are ready to be planted, they are beaten with large balsa leaves, a process aimed at vitalizing the stalks by transferring to them the balsa's fast-growth energy." This transfer of substances to human persons is also evinced by the use of a hard, slowly grown wood used to pierce the earlobes of male adolescents, which Rival (1993: 640) suggests symbolises the inculcation of the qualities of acceptance and conformity.

<sup>14</sup> For more on *pariká* and the jaguar shamans of the neighbouring Baniwa, see Wright 2013.

<sup>15</sup> For a detailed description of this practice, see Kondo, this issue.

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