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## Patrimony, Publishing, and Politics: Books as Ritual Objects in Northwest Amazonia

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# Patrimony, Publishing, and Politics: Books as Ritual Objects in Northwest Amazonia

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The missionary's soul is the Bible, the  
merchant's soul is a financial record, and  
the anthropologist's soul is his notebook.

—Baniwa shaman

The book is the missionary's gun.

—Desana shaman

The video camera is like a gun.

—Megaron Txucarramae

## Introduction

Over the past thirty years, indigenous Tukanoan and Arawakan authors from the Brazilian Upper Rio Negro region have published a remarkable series of books, the *Coleção Narradores Indígenas do Alto Rio Negro* (NIRN).<sup>1</sup> These books have been produced under joint sponsorship from the Federação das Organizações Indígenas do Alto Rio Negro (FOIRN), Brazil's largest indigenous organization, and the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), a Brazilian nongovernmental organization (NGO) dedicated to defending the environmental rights and cultural heritage of indigenous peoples. Each book provides an account of the origin story, mythology, and recent history of a particular Upper Rio Negro group told from one of the group's component clan's point of view.

Although there is a growing body of indigenous literature from other parts of Amazonia, both the number of books involved and the fact that all of them are published in the names of indigenous authors make this Upper Rio Negro publishing boom unique. An account of some of the factors behind this boom provides a special opportunity to explore a number of interrelated themes: the interplay between oral and written modes of expression, between traditional and more modern technologies of knowledge and memory, and between indigenous and nonindigenous understandings of "culture"; the political implications of publishing oral narratives that are bound up with claims to prerogatives and status; and the way that books have come to serve as an innovative transformation of more traditional ritual objects.

I argue that a combination of historical and cultural factors has created a peculiar elective affinity or fit between the Upper Rio Negro peoples' cultural emphasis on esoteric knowledge and verbal narrative and their current interest in books. The argument specifically references the books produced by Tukanoan Desana and Tukano authors, using the generic term Tukanoan to refer to all of some fifteen different Tukanoan-speaking groups living in the Upper Rio Negro region, totaling a population of some 30,000–40,000 individuals.<sup>2</sup> My focus is intentionally ethnographic, as I deal with phenomena that have not been previously described for the Amazonian context. But I have in mind a set of wider issues associated, on the one hand, with the anthropology of literacy and the explosion of writing amongst indigenous peoples and, on the other hand, with intellectual property rights and the patrimonialization of culture. Let me begin with writing.

To avoid the pejorative implications of terms such as "primitive," "savage," or "uncivilized" used by their forebears, anthropologists of more recent generations sometimes refer to indigenous peoples as "peoples without writing." But this phrase carries problems of its own:

it introduces a binary contrast that obscures continuities between “true writing” and indigenous techniques of memory (see Hugh-Jones 2015), and also obscures how today most of the indigenous peoples of Amazonia are very much “peoples *with* writing.” They have been for some time, and writing plays an ever-increasing role in their lives. This explosion of literacy primarily relates to rapidly rising levels of education amongst younger generations, but there are also other political and cultural factors at work.

Writing is also both a cause and a consequence of the rise of indigenous organizations. These organizations are typically led by a new educated elite, and the organizations themselves, the communities they represent, and the lands they administer all gain legal rights and recognition through official paperwork. Every meeting organized, every resolution reached, and every project generated produces yet more written documents. This results in, among other things, indigenous communities increasingly complaining that meetings, paperwork, and bureaucracy now threaten their culture and way of life, a complaint already familiar to anthropologists and other academics.

But there is a growing body of national and international initiatives to register and conserve indigenous culture, and to protect cultural patrimony under intellectual property rights legislation. Much of this patrimony consists of immaterial knowledge, but the legislation itself takes the very material form of legal documents and generates yet more documents—part of an ever-increasing flood of booklets and papers now emanating from the indigenous communities of Amazonia. As local archives, as programs of education developed in conjunction with NGOs and sent for approval by government ministries, or as compilations of indigenous culture directed at regional, national, or international audiences, these documents serve a variety of overlapping functions, but all seek to render oral cultural traditions in a written form.

Much of the anthropological attention to the phenomenon of writing has approached the subject from the point of view of the *content* of written texts and the different cognitive, organizational, and social *effects* of literacy. This is as true of the more theoretical discussions of literacy<sup>3</sup> as it is of more practical and sociological discussions of the role of literacy in development programs. Approached from either end, such discussions tend to treat the materiality of written documents as self-evident and uninteresting, a mere medium, support, or container for the more important stuff that lies within. Here, I want to redress the balance by paying as much or more attention to form as to content, to books as objects as much as to the words or ideas that books contain.<sup>4</sup>

In paying attention to books and documents as objects I am partly responding to the relatively commonplace ethnographic observation that the form, appearance, and materiality of some documents may be as or even more important than their verbal content. This is equally true of the passports, identity cards, driving licenses, and bus tickets we carry in our pockets, of the legal documents negotiated and ratified at international meetings and conferences, and of the land titles and letters patent colonial authorities issued to indigenous communities.<sup>5</sup>

My interest in books as objects also takes inspiration from Alfred Gell’s (1998) theoretical writings on art. For Gell, a properly anthropological theory of art should turn away from meanings and values, semiotics and aesthetics, and focus instead on the role art objects play in the social relations of those in their vicinity, a focus on what art objects do, and not on what they mean or on their aesthetic merits. Although Gell takes a broad view of what should be included under the label of “art object,” he nonetheless excludes books from consideration, presumably because books are obviously verbal, and his argument is explicitly antilinguistic. However, Gell’s ideas can certainly be applied to books,<sup>6</sup> and his contrast between agency, on the one hand, and semiotics and aesthetics, on the other, is allied to the contrast between the material form and verbal content of books mentioned above. But along with opposed pairs such as form/content, material/immaterial, or agency/meaning, contrasts between with/without writing or literate/oral may sometimes obscure as much as they clarify. I am more interested in continuities, and I want, in particular, to examine how ethnographic observations on the relations between the nonverbal and verbal or material and immaterial components of indigenous culture can shed light on one aspect of this explosion of indigenous literacy, Northwest Amazonia’s unique publishing boom.

To date, nine volumes have appeared in the NIRN series, with others likely to appear in the future. This publishing boom might appear to be just one more manifestation of the well-known, worldwide phenomenon of the objectification, institutionalization, and

patrimonialization of indigenous culture associated with the modernization of traditional societies. But this still leaves open the questions of “Why books?” and “Why specifically the Upper Rio Negro?” for nothing like this has happened elsewhere in Amazonia. I want to suggest that this regional propensity to publish cannot simply be reduced to an effect of modernization. Instead, it must be understood as the outcome of some very general forces operating in a specific historical and cultural context.

Building on previous work (Hugh-Jones 1997), I show below that the Tukanoans’ tendency to objectify their culture and to understand it as property, patrimony, or “culture”<sup>7</sup> long precedes recent legislation and almost certainly precedes their first contacts with outsiders some four hundred years ago. This inbuilt tendency to treat “culture” as patrimony is directly related to a peculiar feature of Tukanoan social structure, the presence of patrilineal groups whose identity depends on control of material and immaterial property. It is also related to a system in which power and status are associated with control over ritual knowledge such as genealogies, origin narratives, chants, and spells. The *kumu*, or priest-shaman, a figure whose high status depends on mastery of an unusually elaborated and canonical narrative corpus and knowledge of its esoteric implications, exemplifies this political economy of knowledge. Historically, this same linkage between esoteric knowledge and political power and cultural emphasis on learning made the Tukanoans particularly receptive to the education religious missionaries offered. But this educational system also dealt a severe blow to indigenous culture.

Today, the NIRN series forms part of a wider program of culturally appropriate bilingual education and other initiatives, sponsored by FOIRN in conjunction with ISA, that seek to preserve the integrity and sustainability of extensive reservation lands and to revitalize and conserve indigenous culture, reversing the decline of Tukanoan culture brought on by contact with outsiders. ISA, as a secular NGO with a mission to promote indigenous cultural heritage, has thus displaced the Salesians, a religious missionary group and an NGO *avant la lettre* that sought to eradicate this heritage.

In short, that Brazilian Tukanoans should understand the problems of modernization and external contact in cultural terms and choose to deal with them through the medium of books is not simply a matter of chance. With land rights assured, the Tukanoans have a problem with “culture” and deal with it through books just as, for example, the Kayapó have problems with land, dams, and other large-scale development projects and confront them through politico-ritual displays filmed with camcorders.<sup>8</sup> In each case, the solution adopted fits not only the nature of the problem involved but also fits in with and transforms some well-established cultural patterns. To proceed further, I must first locate the Tukanoans geographically, briefly outline some of their salient cultural features, and provide some basic facts about the NIRN series.

### The Tukanoan Regional System

The Tukanoans and their Arawakan-speaking neighbors make up an open-ended regional system covering thousands of square kilometers of the Upper Rio Negro area on both sides of the frontier between Colombia and Brazil. I have visited the Brazilian Uaupés, the focus of this paper, several times, but my own field research has concentrated on the Pirá-Paraná area in the southern Colombian Vaupés, a region where missionary influence arrived late and was relatively benign, and where many more traditional features of Tukanoan society and culture persist to this day. In what follows, I use an ethnographic present that still applies in the Pirá-Paraná region to discuss general features of Tukanoan society and culture, some of which missionary influence radically altered in the Brazilian Uaupés.

The Tukanoan regional system functions through an interplay between principles of unity and diversity or similarity and difference. On the one hand, Tukanoan speakers have a common lifestyle, share conventions regarding communication, behavior, dress, architecture, ritual performance, and use of space, and share a set of values that emphasize mutual respect and peaceful exchange. Collectively, they see themselves as *masa goro*, “true people,” who share a distinct civilization that marks them off from their uncivilized, foreigner neighbors, or *gama*, a category that includes both White people and other indigenous groups. Alongside shared territory, a shared body of oral narratives concerning the creation of the world and the common origins of all Tukanoan peoples underwrites this shared identity and common set of values.

However, the Tukanoans are divided into some fifteen distinct exogamous, patrilineal groups (the Tukano, Desana, Barasana, etc.), each with its own language and territory and each defined by a common patrimony passed down the male line that gives the group a specific identity. In part, this patrimony takes the form of sets of sacred ritual property known as *gabeuni* “valuables, wealth,” such as sacred flutes and trumpets, boxes of feather ornaments, stools, gourds, gourd stands, and cigar holders, many of them passed down the generations as heirlooms. As the bodies of the first ancestors and as the operators in a series of transformations that lead to the creation of human beings, these objects figure prominently in the stories of creation published in the NIRN series (see Hugh-Jones 2009).

These sets of material property are complemented by immaterial, verbal property including the group’s spoken language, a set of group-specific personal names, and various songs, spells, chants, and origin narratives. These narratives are at once the genealogy of the group and the pedigrees of their sacred material property, and they indicate significant differences between objects such as flutes or feather ornaments that, in purely material terms, might appear to be identical. Language, names, songs, origin narratives, and other verbal property act as emblems of identity and also affirm territorial rights and claims to status and other ritual prerogatives. As such, Tukanoan origin narratives are inherently political statements open to contestation and vary according to the position and interests of the narrator. They are what Bronislaw Malinowski (1926) refers to as mythological charters and what Claude Lévi-Strauss (1996) discusses as clan mythology.

Three further points must be noted. Firstly, the relevant items here are objects *and* their pedigrees, persons *and* their names, or groups *and* their language. The verbal components of property are less alienable and more durable than their material aspects: human bodies may perish and material objects may be lost, be stolen or experience decay, but they still live on in name. Secondly, objects, language, names, and music are understood as different manifestations of ancestral vitality, power, or spirit. Thirdly, the interplay between the visible, material, and verbal noted above in relation to sacred objects also operates in the interplay between the visible and musical registers. Thus, colored feather ornaments are a visible manifestation of sacred flutes and trumpets that must not be seen—but must be heard—by women and children.

The Barasana term *ketioka*, from *keti*, “story,” and *oka*, “chin, language, behavior,” conveys this simultaneous conjunction of ancestrally related word, knowledge, thing, thought, vitality, and spirit. *Ketioka*’s more material counterpart is *gabeuni*, which refers to ritual objects such as flutes, feathers, stools, and more loosely to all material goods. Spanish and Portuguese-speaking Tukanoans translate *gabeuni* as “wealth,” but its meaning overlaps with “culture” for, in the modern context, and especially in dealings with outsiders, “culture” is understood to refer to ritual and ritual objects, to songs, chants, dances, feather ornaments, musical instruments, and to the patrimony that both signifies a collective Tukanoan identity and serves to mark internal differences. There is thus a close correspondence between the Barasana categories of *ketioka* and *gabeuni* and indigenous usage of the term *cultura* or “culture” understood as art, ritual, music, etc.

Internally, each group is comprised of a series of clans ranked according to the birth order of their founding ancestors, the sons of the group ancestor. At a higher level, ancestors of the different groups are sons of a single common Tukanoan ancestor. Differences in rank are also associated with differences in territory, wealth, and knowledge: members of higher-ranking clans tend to live in more favorable areas and have greater control over both material and immaterial property, the ritual items and knowledge of genealogy, pedigree, and ritual formulae mentioned above. Reciprocally, individuals and their clans or clan segments may advance their prospects and status by moving to territory once occupied by another group or by gaining control over ritual property. Over time, they are likely to adjust their origin narratives and other stories to reflect current circumstances. In this sense, “groups” are as much sets of people who share ritual property, names, ways of speaking and singing, and who tell the same stories as they are the phratries, clans, sibs, and lineages of anthropologists’ jargon. It is also for this reason that knowledge is political, and narration is always a political act.

In addition to the shared conventions and values mentioned above, this regional system is held together by the exchange of sisters and daughters in marriage and by exchanges of food and goods at ritual gatherings known as *dabucuri*. *Dabucuris* are key politico-ritual arenas for the negotiation of identity and status. Offerings of fish and counterofferings of meat given by

one group to another connote group identities related to cosmic divisions between water, land, and sky. The stools, baskets, and other craft goods once exchanged were likewise associated with different language groups and produced through a specialized, totemic division of labor whereby Tukanoans made stools, Desana made baskets, Tuyuka made canoes, etc. (see also Hugh-Jones 2001, 2018). These rituals also provide the occasion for competitive, conspicuous production and consumption of beer, the display of items of traditional wealth, for reciting genealogies, for ritual speeches concerning past interactions between the groups involved, and for long chanting sessions that rehearse the ancestral origin stories that are also the focus of the NIRN series. Gifts of beer, food, and objects, displays of wealth items, and ceremonial dialogues all serve to assert group strength and identity and claims to differential rights and status. Their implications for identity, status, and prerogatives, and their typically affinal character, mean that the form of dabucuri rites plays upon a simulated or real opposition between the parties involved and that the politically charged ceremonial dialogues often take on a simulated or genuinely aggressive tone (see also Chernela 2001).

In the eyes of Catholic missionaries, the indigenous dabucuris and other rituals were nothing short of orgies and devil worship, and thus became the target of an intense campaign of suppression. Today, throughout much of the Brazilian Uaupés region, dabucuris have been transformed into relatively low-key events celebrating college graduations, Father's Day, Mother's Day, and similar events and involving the circulation of money and Western merchandise as an affirmation of community (see Andrello 2006; de Oliveira 2016). I want to suggest that this transformation of ritual activity is one among several factors behind the NIRN series and the series functions, in part, as a new form of self-publication that increasingly substitutes for an older form that has been undermined.

### **The *Coleção Narradores Indígenas do Rio Negro***

FOIRN published the NIRN series in conjunction with ISA and with sponsorship by the Austrian Development Agency and European Union. The books are written in Portuguese but contain copious use of indigenous names and terms explicated in footnotes. Each book is published simultaneously in the name of a particular group; in the name of a particular Desana or Tukano clan; and in the names of its two indigenous author-narrators, a knowledgeable *keumu* (priest-shaman) father, the principle source of information, and his literate son, a teacher or member of a local indigenous organization who acts as amanuensis and translator. In addition, each book has involved an anthropologist, either Bertha Ribeiro, Dominique Buchillet, or Geraldo Andrello, who has helped in the editing and preparation and supplied an introduction, explanatory footnotes, and other additions.

Each book also follows a relatively standard format: a short introduction followed by three principal sections. The introduction outlines the need to halt the progressive erosion of indigenous culture by recording, in book form, information that might otherwise be lost. The first section then provides a version of the Tukanoans' shared origin story told from the perspective of the clan responsible for the book in question. The story is one of progressive differentiation from a common source, the Tukanoans' collective anaconda ancestor, who traveled upstream from the east as an anaconda-canoe containing his sons, the Transformation People who become differentiated as the ancestors of each exogamic group. Emerging from the water through a hole in the rocks of the rapids at Ipanoré on the Brazilian Uaupés, these ancestors spread to their respective territories and entered into marriage alliances with their neighbors. From here the narrative then focuses on the group to which the author-narrators belong, describing their acquisition of group-specific ritual property, their division into ranked clans, these clans' historical migrations, and ending with the history and genealogy of the particular clan to which the authors belong.

The second section contains a body of other, more cosmological and shamanic narratives, some of them similar to the material examined in Lévi-Strauss's *Mythologiques*. The final section of the book shifts from the register of ancestral history to recent everyday history dealing with the arrival of slavers, rubber gatherers, and traders and with the missionaries' onslaught on indigenous culture. The section emphasizes the missionaries' campaign against religion and shamanism, their burning or removal of feather ornaments and ritual equipment, and their destruction of the Indians' communal houses or *malocas*. The effects of this missionary-led onslaught link back to the book's introduction and provide material for it. The moral decline

resulting from missionary activity; the sense of loss focused on a declining body of ancestral knowledge in the hands of a few elderly experts; a younger generation unwilling to listen to their parents and grandparents and all-too-willing to adopt the ways of White people; and the potential role of the book as a means to halt this decline and preserve knowledge for future generations are given as pretexts for the work itself.

The first volume in the NIRN series, *Antes o mundo não existia* (Lana and Lana 1980) is illustrated with thirty-two drawings by author Luiz Lana and his cousin Feliciano Lana. These drawings set a visual precedent that is carried through in the later volumes, with Miguel Azevedo and Antenor Nascimento Azevedo's (2003) and Fernandez and Fernandez's (2008) also containing illustrations, and with the whole series having its own logo and illustrated covers that make each volume different from, but also recognizably similar to, the rest. Outsiders and insiders will read the images on the covers in different ways. To outsiders, images of stools, gourds, cigar holders, rattle lances, decorated basketry and painted malocas will instantly connote "Amazonian Indians"; to knowledgeable insiders, the same objects allude directly to the narratives of ancestral creation the books contain, where these objects play a prominent role. As suggested above, objects and narrative are, in effect, two forms of the same thing, *ketioka*. I suggest below that, in the Tukanoan context, this visual dimension is of key importance.

There are several reasons for arguing that, in addition to being without precedent, the NIRN series forms part of a wider phenomenon unique to the Upper Rio Negro region. To begin with, there is the sheer volume of publication involved: eight volumes in the NIRN series and some ten other volumes published elsewhere by indigenous authors from the region.<sup>10</sup> A second point is that it is relatively unusual for indigenous Amazonian literature to be published in the name of indigenous authors. Instead, books are typically published either in the name of an indigenous organization or ethnic group or, more usually, in the name of a nonindigenous author. Until recently this has also been the case in the Upper Rio Negro.

The NIRN collection and other Upper Rio Negro publications comprise part of a longer, more ancient literary lineage that stretches back at least to the late nineteenth century which, until recently, remained submerged under the names of nonindigenous travelers, antiquarians, and anthropologists. This lineage begins with the work of Maximiliano José Roberto, the son of a high-status Tariano woman and of mixed Baré and non-indigenous descent on his father's side.<sup>11</sup> Maximiliano travelled extensively in the Upper Rio Negro and was an assiduous collector of indigenous narratives, which he wrote down in notebooks. His manuscript *Legend of Yurupary* was published under the name of Italian nobleman, explorer and ethnologist Ermanno Stradelli (1890), and his compilations of Upper Rio Negro myth and legend provided much of the material for works published by botanist-explorer Brandão de Amorim (1928) and folklorist Barbosa Rodriguez (1890).

Of these works, Lévi-Strauss (1966:232, my trans.) later wrote,

It seems that several already ancient researchers, foremost amongst whom would figure Barbosa Rodrigues, Amorim and Stradelli, were still able to collect, in the Amazonian basin, esoteric texts relating to a learned tradition. Unfortunately, we know nothing or next to nothing about the ancient indigenous societies that were once established on the middle and lower Amazon. The existence of oral traditions, whose extreme complexity, elaborate composition and mystical tone makes them attributable to schools of wise men and scholars, speaks in favour of a much higher level of political, social and religious organisation than anything we have been able to observe since, the vestiges of a true civilization common to the whole of the Amazon basin.

This submerged lineage of indigenous authors continued into the next century, first with Marcos Fulop's (1954, 1956) publications of extended narratives from the Tukano shaman Manuel Sierra and his son Marcos, and then with Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff's (1968) *Desana*, a work based on interviews with his Desana informant Antonio Guzmán. Educated first by his uncle, a respected kumu, and then in a Catholic mission boarding school, Guzmán went on to military training and work as an Evangelical missionary translator before his work with Reichel-Dolmatoff. Marcos Sierra appears again as one of the sources for Reichel-Dolmatoff's (1996) work on the Yuruparí myth. Much later, Guzmán went on to publish, in his own name,

along with James (2003), a version of the Yuruparí myth and associated Desana creation narratives.

In a more general sense, this lineage also underlies much of the ethnographic work on the Uaupés region, characterized as it is by a superabundance of complex esoteric mythology and cosmology. But if anthropologists have found in Tukanoan cultures a rich source of material for academic reflection, it seems their indigenous “informants” also saw in anthropological research an opportunity to circulate, in a new medium, their own knowledge and reputations to a wider audience and to record it for posterity—albeit under someone else’s name. It was not until 1980 that two Desana authors, Firmiano Lana/Umúsin Panlõn Kumu and Luiz Lana/Tolamã Kenhíri, assisted by anthropologist Berta Ribeiro, published their *Antes o mundo não existia*, the first book to be published by indigenous Amazonian authors in their own names. Later re-edited as the first volume of the NIRN collection (Lana & Lana 1995), the book was originally conceived as a response to Reichel-Dolmatoff’s portrayal of Desana cosmology (see below).<sup>12</sup>

The existence of a submerged Upper Rio Negro indigenous literary tradition with ancient antecedents, the active collaboration of would-be indigenous authors in the projects of anthropologists, and that books are being published as a response to other books, would all suggest that a perceived loss of culture and an ignorant and unruly younger generation are by no means the only motives for publication. I suggest that this interest in the publication of narratives may also be connected to a historical process that has led to the progressive weakening of dabucuris and other rituals. These rituals once provided the context for displays of dancing, for the deployment of sacred objects, and for ritual chants and ceremonial dialogues that allowed reaffirmation of rank, prestige, and social difference on which the indigenous political system depended. As Andrello (2006a, 2006b, 2008) has shown with reference to the indigenous city of Iauaretê, traditional differences relating to the relative ranking of clans and to the territorial rights of distinct groups remain highly pertinent in a modern, urban context. These same issues of rank and ethnicity also play important roles in the internal politics of FOIRN and of the more local indigenous organizations grouped together under its name.

I shall return to the politics of publishing below but want, first, to examine some of the historical and cultural factors that contribute to books having such high prominence in the Upper Rio Negro context. I am of course aware of both the crucial institutional support offered by ISA and of the organizational, editorial, and related aid given by anthropologists working with indigenous authors under ISA’s auspices, but I want to suggest that there are other factors at work. There are plenty of anthropologists and NGOs throughout Amazonia, but nowhere else do we find publications like the NIRN collection. Let me begin with relations with outsiders.

### Contact History in the Upper Rio Negro

Compared to many other parts of Amazonia, relations with outsiders in the Upper Rio Negro have been long and drawn out, sporadic, low key and relatively nonviolent. After the first eighteenth-century slaving expeditions that decimated the populations of the lower Rio Negro and continued throughout much of the following century, extending progressively upriver to affect the inhabitants of the upper reaches, for most of the twentieth century the Brazilian Uaupés was dominated by rubber gatherers and other traders, and by Salesian missionaries who afforded the native peoples a certain measure of protection from abuse by their nonreligious competitors. However, this came at a price. In return for protection, the Indians were required to live in mission-dominated villages, forced to send their children away to boarding schools, forbidden to speak their own languages, and forced to suffer in silence as the missionaries burned or stole their feather ornaments and ceremonial equipment, the basis of indigenous identity and status, and destroyed their traditional malocas, foundations of the indigenous cosmos and arenas for collective rituals, dancing, and display.

The pressures on the younger generation were especially intense. For them, the strong push of missionary hostility to indigenous culture was increasingly reinforced by the attractive pull of modernity in the growing towns and cities of the Rio Negro. By the 1970s, when liberation theology and the pressure of liberal opinion caused a major rethink of missionary policy, knowledge of origin traditions, mythology, and shamanism was mostly in the hands of a few elder men, and life in malocas with full-blown traditional rituals involving full ceremonial



regalia largely confined to the Tuyuka, a group living in a remote headwater area close to the frontier with Colombia.

The rise of FOIRN and the arrival of ISA and anthropologists in the 1990s placed the Indians of the Upper Rio Negro in a quandary. Under the old missionary regime with its emphasis on “civilization,” the strategic choice, especially for the young, was to deny knowledge of indigenous language and culture and to downplay or hide any visible signs of indigenous identity. If talk of indigenous culture had any currency, it was only as the antithesis of the civilization indigenous people supposedly lacked, which the missionaries were now bringing them.

Suddenly the terms were reversed. With missionaries influenced by liberation theology, with constitutional reforms granting new political and cultural rights to indigenous peoples, and with NGOs linking ecological conservation with the conservation of indigenous cultures, the status of indigenous culture underwent a rapid change. “Culture” epitomized by the feather ornaments and body paint now emblematic of indigenous identity in lowland South America, was something to be cherished, reinforced, and recuperated, something that guaranteed land rights and a special status and that could be used to good effect in political meetings and demonstrations recorded on video and shown to a mass audience (Conklin 1997; Turner 1992).

In this new situation, the Tukanoans of the Brazilian Uaupés faced a dilemma. Whilst many of them retained considerable knowledge of mythology and ritual, the more overt, visual signs of their culture, such as traditional architecture and feather ornaments, the very things that signaled and guaranteed their authenticity as “real Indians,” had long ago been stolen or destroyed by Salesian missionaries. As one elder is reported as saying, “We have not lost all of our culture, only 50% of it” (Andrello 2006a:281). But in recent years, this other 50 percent, the verbal component of Tukanoan culture, has also come under increasing threat. Each time one of the few surviving elders with good knowledge of the pre-mission period dies, significant bodies of knowledge regarding the traditions of his or her group die with them—and, anyhow, educated and increasingly urban young people are more interested in other things.

The double character of books makes them ideally suited to be vehicles through which to deal with this dilemma. Like the ritual objects of old, they are at once both visible, material objects and also the containers of immaterial knowledge and verbal tradition. On the one hand, they can serve to preserve cultural traditions and transmit them to a literate younger generation who may be educated in the ideas and values of outsiders but who are, in consequence, relatively ignorant of the traditions and ideas of their people. On the other hand, books not only preserve verbal culture but also render it visible and tangible in the potent medium of *papera*—a book is a *papera tuti* or “pile of paper.” Borrowed from the Portuguese and Spanish, the term *papera* is used in a way that goes well beyond paper as stuff to act as a shorthand for an entire system, for a particular style and capacity of thought, and for a whole way of being. This overlaps with the English notion of papers as a part of the magic of the state, but it has yet wider, more shamanic connotations in the indigenous context, for paper is inherent to everything that allows White people to make manufactured goods and makes them powerful, dangerous, and coercive.

Surrounded by their libraries and living in a world saturated with papers, documents, and writing, anthropologists read the words, but few have noticed the books. Those interested in literacy have tended to overlook the material form of written documents whilst those interested in material culture typically exclude books from the field.<sup>13</sup> There is good reason to suppose that, for many indigenous peoples, paper as a medium is often as important as its message. One reason for this is that, in indigenous communities where papers and written documents are relatively rare, those that do exist are typically associated with powerful institutions and have performative effects as instruments of power.

With money applying throughout, the following is a nonexhaustive summary of relevant documents:

**State:** letters patent, identity documents, land titles;

**Traders:** account books;

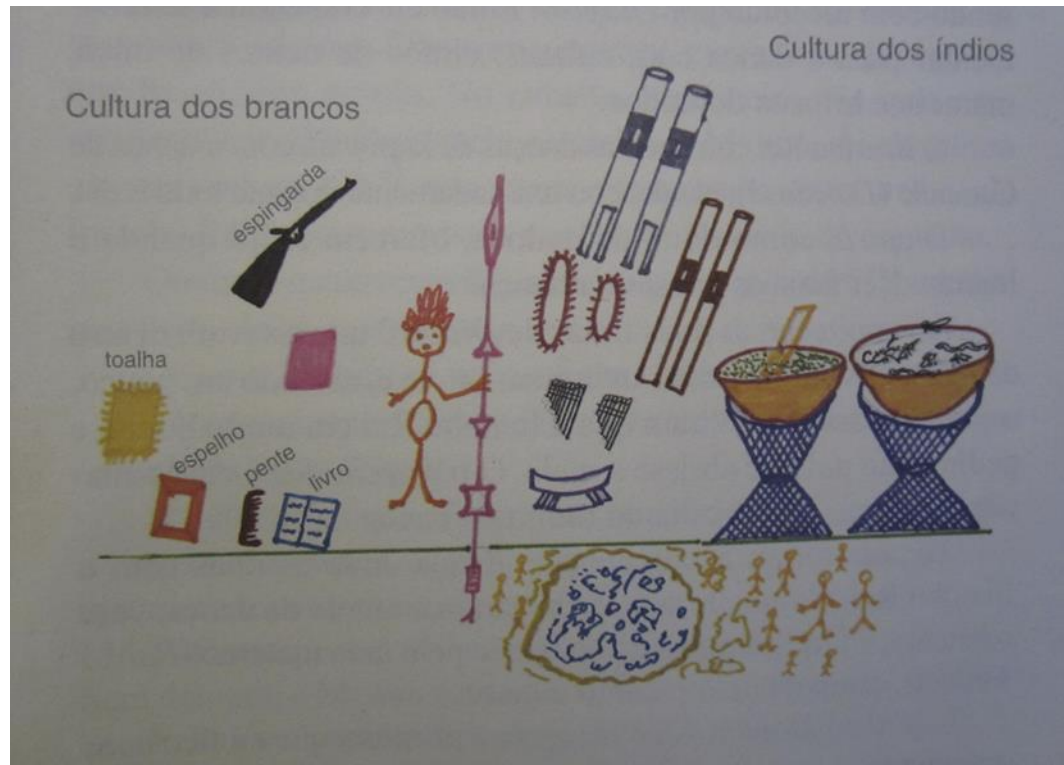
**Missionaries:** Bibles, religious images, calendars, hymnbooks, schoolbooks;

**Indigenous Organizations:** the legal constitution of the organization; contracts and documents concerning land rights, health, education, etc.;

**Anthropologists and NGOs:** ethnographies, maps of ecological resources and sacred sites, schoolbooks, contracts and documents concerning land rights, health, education, projects, etc.

Indigenous people's experiences of paper would certainly lead them to associate books and other documents with issues regarding wealth, power, identity, and rights. This, in turn, would suggest analogies between literacy and shamanic knowledge and, more concretely, between White peoples' books and their own feather ornaments and sacred ritual equipment, wealth objects charged with verbal histories and pedigrees that are the very stuff of power, identity, and prerogatives.

Each of the books considered here provides a version of the well-known Amerindian story of a fatal choice that determines the respective powers and values of White people and Indians. In addition to the usual choice between a gun and bow (see Hugh-Jones 1988), in several of the versions given in the NIRN books, this choice figures as one between flutes and ornaments, on the one hand, and guns and paper, on the other (Figure 1).<sup>14</sup> Here the contrasted objects act as metonyms for whole sets of behavior, capacities, powers, knowledge, and moral worth. They also act as metonyms for the shamanic powers, knowledge of myth and ritual, and a peaceful, reflective disposition of indigenous people, on the one hand, and for White peoples' technological knowledge and productivity, their obvious power, and their violent, domineering disposition, on the other.<sup>15</sup>



**Figure 1.** The choice between Indigenous culture and White Peoples' culture (Azevedo and Azevedo 2003:207)

This contrast is echoed in another version of the story (Fulop 1954:114) where, after giving sacred flutes and feathers ornaments to Indians, a deity says "You [White people] will have all the wealth in the world: arms, shotguns, knives, axes and papers (notebooks). But you will never be able to remember things by memory. You will have to write them down on paper. [Indians] will not need to make notes on paper; they will remember all that happens by memory. And you White people won't be able to take away their memory" (my trans.). Guns, paper, and memory are brought together in another version of this story that adds "the book

is the missionary's gun. Our knowledge is not in books—we keep our chants, our dances our ceremonies and our prayers to cure disease, in our memory.” Finally, a Baniwa shaman states, “White people do have collective dream souls but (these) take the form of books and papers. The missionary's soul is the Bible, the merchant's soul is a financial record, and the anthropologist's soul in his notebook” (Hill 1993:6).

These references to papers and writing as adjuncts to memory make clear that one reason for recording traditional knowledge in books is precisely to prevent its loss. The effects of schooling and the attractions of urban life mean cultural transmission based on memory alone is no longer reliable. Paper has now become a necessity. But the material above also makes clear that there is more to paper than just memory. Books and papers play on several different registers at once.

Like their sacred ritual items, books published in the name of a specific group and containing its own specific narratives and genealogies are a visible sign of the group's power, identity, and vitality. They are also an equivalent, at the group scale, to what identity cards are at the individual scale. These cards are spontaneously produced and shown to outsiders and, crucially, they validate names derived from White people.<sup>16</sup> Likewise, books are emblematic of various levels of collective identity: Indian > Tukanoan Indian > Desana or Tukano > a particular Desana or Tukano clan. Like sacred ritual items, indigenous books also represent congealed “culture” and are objects that are set apart, sacralized, and treated with respect—by writing as a potent technique, by paper as a potent medium, and by their being stored alongside other important books and papers in hallowed places such as libraries and offices. All this is clear in a reference to the sacred origin site of the Carib-speaking Karijona in a spell uttered by kumu-shamans in the Pirá-Paraná region that integrates books and papers as potent shamanic objects. The Karijona are *hode gawa*, “foreigners of the headwaters,” and their origin site is likened an administrative office or library. The logic here is that the Karijona, as one kind of gawa-foreigner, share the attributes of White people as another kind of gawa.

Books are also a sign of a system of education now increasingly in the hands of indigenous communities, a form of indigenous “culture” that is a retroactive response to “civilization,” the White peoples' version of “culture” that the Salesian missionaries imposed on the Tukanoans through their boarding schools and own system of education. Addressed to an external, nonindigenous audience, one message implicit in the production of books would be, “We too are educated and civilized. We remain Indians despite your civilization, but we can also use selected aspects of your civilization to further our own ends and continue our own life project.”

In short, as the story of the choice between paper and ornaments makes clear, books and sacred objects are two sides of the same coin. Books share with ritual objects the quality of being objectified, tangible and visible “culture,” and, like Tukanoan ritual objects that come with verbal pedigrees, books too are word-objects, tangible things that condense intangible speech and knowledge.

We are now able to pull together some of the threads of this argument and suggest some of the factors that might explain why the people of the Upper Rio Negro should be especially prone to publishing books of traditional knowledge. One line of argument follows from the unusually high value that Tukanoan peoples put upon esoteric knowledge, learning, and education.

The Tukanoans' politico-religious system sets great store on accurate memorization and repetition of a received tradition as a sign and source of power, a form of priestly learning that downplays the more individualistic, performative version of shamanism characteristic of most other Amazonian peoples (Hugh-Jones 1994). This ancient priestly tradition has links with a long history of cooperation between priest-shamans and anthropologists, resulting in a submerged line of indigenous literature. It was this same tradition, one that links power and status with knowledge and learning, that made Upper Rio Negro peoples particularly receptive to the missionaries who brought them education, new knowledge, and literacy. Missionaries and education also provided protection against abuse by rubber gatherers and traders, but it came at the price of indigenous culture, and in particular at the expense of its visible, tangible aspects. With their lands already secured by the alliance between FOIRN and ISA, Brazilian Tukanoans still face a double problem of culture: the verbal culture they have retained is mostly in the hands of a few elderly men, and most of the visible signs of indigenous culture that other Brazilian Indians have used so effectively elsewhere have been lost. As visible repositories of

knowledge, books provide a solution to this problem of culture with the anthropologists and NGOs who displaced the missionaries now working actively to help in their production.



**Figure 2.** Ritual celebration for the publication of *Livro dos antigos Desana-Guahari Diputiro Porã* (Arquivo Instituto Socioambiental© Robert Dabdad)

A second line of argument picks up the analogies that Upper Rio Negro people themselves draw between White people's books and papera and their own ritual objects. In both cases, these objects serve as indices of much wider cultural systems, capacities, and associated moral values (see also Hugh-Jones 2009, 2018). The story of a fatal choice between papera and

ceremonial goods can be read as a statement about generic sociocultural differences between White people and Indians signaled by different kinds of goods or wealth. But, in the new context in which the Tukanoans now find themselves, it can also be read as a statement that books are to be understood as new forms of ceremonial wealth objects that should take their place alongside the more traditional feather ornaments, stools, gourds, gourd stands, and cigar holders. As many groups have lost much of this paraphernalia and, more critically, have lost the sacred flutes and trumpets that were the core of their identity and ancestral vitality, books can stand in for what has been lost.

The origin stories recounted in the books establish a circular relationship between objects, people, and narratives. They first explain how a set of primordial sacred objects gave rise to human beings and then how human groups came to possess these same objects as potent ritual equipment endowed with transformative powers. At the same time, the stories also serve as pedigrees that allocate particular versions of the same kind of object to different groups—these flutes are the bones of our ancestor; those flutes are the bones of yours. The circle is closed when, during their rituals, people recite the origin narratives in conjunction with ritual objects to reaffirm their identity and status and to re-establish links with ancestral times.

The same circular, recursive relationship also applies to the self-referential nature of the books themselves. The books' narratives begin with creator deities whose bodies are made from the same sacred objects illustrated on the book cover, objects the deities then use to create human beings. The narratives then proceed to draw analogies between sacred objects and books in the episode of the fatal choice discussed above. They conclude with an account of the missionary activity that led to the current cultural decline. Finally, a preface explains that the books have been prepared as part of a program of ethnic revival that is a response to this decline.

If the books serve to direct messages about “culture,” education, and civilization to an external, nonindigenous audience, they also direct messages about their status as sacred objects to an internal, indigenous audience. A photograph (Figure 2) of the ceremonial launch of a book in the NIRN series suggests this is clear and explicit to the people concerned. The origin story given inside this book explains that the stacked stool, gourd stand, gourd, cigar holder, and cigar illustrated on its cover are the body parts of the deities who created the first human beings, the stack as a whole making up the deity's body (see Hugh-Jones 2009). Like the sacred musical instruments identified with ancestral bones, the Tukanoans' other ritual objects, *hee gabeuni*, or “things of the ancestors,” are to be understood as a form of relic. The book placed in the gourd instead of the cigar and cigar holder means that the book instantiates, in physical form, what it also tells as a story. The book brings together appearance, form, function, and content, a transformation of the ritual objects; the book takes its place alongside them as a new kind of verbal-physical relic.<sup>17</sup>

The Tukanoans' sacred objects, their *gaheuni* or “valuables,” are heirlooms and relics in a triple sense: they are ancestral bodies or body parts; some have been inherited from previous generations; and words of the ancestors passed through the generations as oral tradition imbue all of them. Seen in this light, books are hybrid forms, at once heirlooms from the past and newly appropriated objects of foreign power. In this sense they share some of the qualities of the axes, guns, and other potent foreign objects appropriated in previous generations and assimilated to the indigenous category of *gaheuni*, a point also suggested by the stories of a choice between types of goods mentioned above. As potent foreign objects, it is the substance of books, their *papera*, that constitutes their message.

### **The Politics of Publishing**

The NIRN books have a double message addressed to two different audiences at two different levels. To an external, nonindigenous audience, (and with reference to the general arena of calls for cultural autonomy and self-determination by indigenous movements in Brazil and beyond) these books of myths and histories assert that, despite their relative lack of visible signs of indigenous identity, Upper Rio Negro peoples are indeed indigenous peoples with a living indigenous culture. The sheer number of volumes in the series, the common format, and the common trademark as the *Coleção Narradores Indígenas do Alto Rio Negro* all serve to reinforce this message.

To an insider, indigenous audience, and in the context of a political system based on a play of similarity and difference, the books condense words of the ancestors. At one level, these words assert that all Tukanoan peoples are the same and equal, “true people” who share the same overall territory, culture, and a common tradition of origin. At another level, the words sustain and give legitimacy to a system of differences: each group has its own version of this origin tradition that gives it a specific identity and legitimates its claims to a specific territory. At a lower level still, different versions of the same group tradition serve to legitimate differences in rank and status amongst its component clans.

It follows from this that publishing books of sacred narratives is a political act. This is true both with reference to the external arena of indigenous ethnic and cultural politics in Brazil and, more particularly, with reference to contemporary intergroup and intragroup politics in the Upper Rio Negro. One aspect of this politics concerns narratives as group property. Because cosmological knowledge is distributed between different groups that are themselves associated with different cosmological domains—a point underscored in the narratives themselves—and because whole narratives or versions of narratives are bound up with the identity and prerogatives of a particular group, books published by one group should respect the rights of others. Groups associated with one cosmological domain are thus cautious about discussing sections of their common origin narrative that deal with another domain. In a book published by the Tukano Oyé clan, the authors emphasize that, as People of the Earth, Tukanos do not have the right to enter into details about incidents relating to the Sun. Such matters are properly the concern of the Desana who, as People of the Sky, control knowledge of heavenly beings (Maia and Maia 2004:22–4). In the Tukanoan political economy of knowledge, to exercise possession over a story is to claim the prerogative to recount it in an appropriate way. The system depends on the mutual recognition of subtly different versions of stories shared as common knowledge by all Tukanoans but that are also associated with particular subgroups.

With the advent of indigenous organizations and the peaceful, cooperative coexistence that these organizations promote, care is also taken to avoid stirring up old quarrels when publishing the stories of past feuds and intergroup fighting once retold at dabucuris and that still form an important part of the collective memory of the groups concerned. This delicacy over groups’ rights and past quarrels is clearly shown in the introduction of a book published by the Colombian Makuna, which states:

In some stories, the names of the protagonists have been hidden so as to avoid bringing up past conflicts or causing problems for their descendants. In the same way, we have tried to reduce to a minimum any reference to knowledge or property owned by other groups. This is because, in the region, people insist that, to avoid problems, each should speak about their own things. (Århem et al 2004:16, my trans.)

Because publishing is a political act, when one group or clan publishes a book, this is likely to precipitate another group, as yet lacking their own equivalent, to do the same. The publication of *Dahsea Hausirõ Porã ukãsehe niophesase merãbueri tuti. Mitologia sagrada dos Tukano Hausirõ Porã* (Azevedo and Azevedo 2003), the first volume a Tukano clan published in the NIRN series following four publications by Desana and Baniwa clans, can be seen in this light. Furthermore, because versions of the Tukanoan origin story speak of the ancestors of the different exogamic groups emerging from the rapids at Ipanoré in a particular order, because each version typically reflects the interests and seniority of the group to which the narrator belongs, and because publication in a book appears to fix and lend legitimacy to the version concerned, other groups may be motivated either to respond in kind or to remain silent but resentful (see also Chernela 2011).

This politics of publishing is yet more evident at one level lower in the contested hierarchical relations between the component clans of the same exogamic group, something that is especially clear in the four Desana volumes that comprise half of the NIRN series. *Antes o mundo não existia* (Lana and Lana 1980) was originally published as a standalone volume intended, in part, as a response to claims about Desana myth and cosmology made in Reichel-Dolmatoff’s (1968) book *Desana*, itself based on information from Antonio Guzmán of the Desana Sime Peyáru Põrã clan (Becerra Cano 2007:40). *The Heroic Mythology of the Desana Indians*: the subtitle of this first edition indicates that, like the book to which it responds, it was

published in the name of the Desana as a whole. Here, contestation is operating at two levels. At one, Desana authors are questioning the authority of the nonindigenous Reichel-Dolmatoff to speak about their people. At the same time, insiders can tell from the authors' indigenous names that members of one Desana clan, the Kēhíri Pōrã, are questioning the authority of a member of another, the Sime Peyaru Pōrã, to speak in the name of all Desana.<sup>18</sup>

This intragroup, interclan level becomes more apparent with the second edition of *Antes o mundo não existia* (Lana and Lana 1995), republished as the first book in the NIRN series and now in the name of one particular clan, *The Mythology of the Ancient Desana-Kēhíri Pōrã* rather than *The Heroic Mythology of the Desana Indians*. This was soon followed, or countered, by books from two other Desana clans, first *The Sacred Mythology of the Desana-Wari Dihputiro Pōrã* (Fernandez & Fernandez 1996) and later *The Book of the Ancient Desana-Guahari Diputiro Porã* (Galvão and Galvão 2004).

In principle, the rank of the clans making up a Tukanoan language group is based on the birth order of a single line of male founding ancestors. However, in practice, not only may there be two or more lines but the waters are further muddied by the historical extinction of some clans, the fission or fusion of others, and by ambiguity over the relative status of elder-brother, chiefly clans with political power and younger-brother, priest-shaman clans with ritual power. These ambiguities in ascribed status combine with the fact that, over time, high-born clans may become demographically weak and/or lose control of territory, client groups, and strategic ritual goods, whilst lower-born clans may increase in size, move to better areas, and acquire clients, ancestral flutes, and a box of feather ornaments, and thus achieve ritual dominance.

In the Desana case, the Sime Peyáru Pōrã are a second-rank clan of the senior or chiefly, “grandchild” line; the Kēhíri Pōra are a fourth-rank clan of this line; the Dihputiro Pōrã are group leaders of the junior, “grandfather” line; and the Guahari Porã are a second-rank clan of the junior line (Buchillet 1983). Leaving historical contingency aside, this is already complex enough for potential dispute. The details of the different Desana clans need not detain us further<sup>19</sup> except to say that within a series of publications all the contested ambiguities typical of the hierarchy characteristic of all Tukanoan groups play out. Although each may be presented as a truth agreed upon by all, different versions of the group's origin story told by its component clans have always served as a language of argument. So much so, as far as the Tukanoans are concerned, it might be more accurate to say that far from being some pre-existing entity, the anthropologists' “clan” or “sib” is better viewed as a set of people who tell the same story. It is the story that makes the clan, not vice versa.

In the NIRN volumes by Desana authors, we see claims to prestige and relative status being negotiated through publication, with a premium put on the display of esoteric shamanic knowledge. Local people consider *Livro dos antigos Desana-Guahari Diputiro Porã* (Galvão and Galvão 2004) to be most complete book published to date (Andrello 2010:15). It has this reputation in part because of its sheer length, size, and weight—it is over twice the length of the other books. But its impact lies above all in its open revelation of many of the shamanic spells normally kept latent in the origin narratives. Although these spells form much of the content of the chants recited at ritual gatherings, as secret clan property they are not normally revealed in everyday language or nonritual contexts. But the Tukanoan political economy of knowledge is such that, to show that one knows more than others, one must be prepared to give some knowledge away in carefully calculated revelation. Raimundo Castro Galvão, one of the book's authors, sums up the impact of this combination of size and revelation as follows: “This book has power. It's alive. It has so much power that when Lana's book sees my book it gets weak. My book's strength is not just in its size but also because it contains the scared chants from the creation of humanity. That's where its power comes from. The other books don't have that” (Figalli de Angelo 2016:332, my trans.).

The first NIRN volume published by a Tukano clan, the Hausirõ Porã (Azevedo and Azevedo 2003), can be seen as a claim for equal recognition due to the Tukano after a string of Desana and Baniwa publications. But this Tukano clan's initiative brought a response from the Oyé (Maia and Maia 2004). The sequential appearance of different publications as responses to earlier ones thus reproduces, in a different form, the manner in which one ceremonial recitation would trigger an ongoing series of responses both on the occasion of one ritual gathering or dabucuri and between a series of such gatherings.

Yet further aspects of the play between the external equality of language groups and internal hierarchy of their clans can be seen at work in Moises Maia and Tiago Maia's (2004) book. In part, the work can be seen as an effort on the part of the high-ranking Tukano-Oyé living in the city of Iauaretê to reassert their superior status. Missionary influence, urban living, and other factors meant that members of lower-ranking Tukano clans were neglecting to refer to the Oyé as "elder brothers." The book is intended to set the record straight and remind those clans that they should do so.

The book is also part of an effort to remind the now-dominant Tariano of the Tukano's own legitimate claims to Iauaretê in the context of a potential territorial dispute. This gives the contents (Maia and Maia 2004) a politico-genealogical emphasis that stands in marked contrast to the esoteric, shamanic quality of Wenceslau Sampaio Galvão and Galvão (2004) mentioned above. The dispute in question arose from a Tariano initiative to register the rapids and associated mythology of Iauaretê as "Brazilian Cultural Heritage" under the Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional (IPHAN). Initially, IPHAN had begun by negotiating with the Tariano alone, despite the interests of several other groups living in Iauaretê, all of whom tell different versions of widespread stories relating to the stones in the rapid.

The Tariano-Koivathe, a high-ranking Tariano clan that dominates the Iauaretê area, have now published their own version of the relevant narratives in the ninth volume of the NIRN series (de Jesus et al. 2018). Their book contains details of an extended genealogy giving legitimacy to their current occupancy of Iauaretê, a site lying within territory traditionally associated with the Tukano. It explains that a Koivathe ancestor married the daughter of a chiefly Tukano clan living at Iauaretê. The Tukano then moved upstream to the Papurí River to avoid being carried off as indentured labor by Portuguese soldiers building the fort at São Gabriel da Cachoeira in the mid-eighteenth century, leaving their Tariano affines in situ. Later, with the establishment of Iauaretê as the Salesians' principle base, the Tukano and several other groups installed themselves around the mission.

Part of the dispute between the Tariano, Tukano, and others with interests in Iauaretê centered on the story of the Diroá brothers, who fought and killed the Jaguar People who once lived at the eponymous Iauaretê—"Jaguar Rapids." The Tariano cited their version of this myth as evidence for their claim to a particular association with Iauaretê. Other groups cited their own, different versions of the same story, some of them already published in other NIRN volumes. They also pointed out that whereas they, as Tukanoans, share a common origin story involving a journey in the anaconda-canoe up the Uaupés River where Iauaretê is located, Uapui, the origin site of the Tariano and other Arawakan-speakers, lies well to the north on the Rio Aiari.

In the end, in 2006, the rapids were registered in the name of all the indigenous peoples of the Rio Uaupés, the first cultural resource to be registered in IPHAN's *Registry Book of Places*. Significantly this initiative went hand in hand with the reconstruction two new malocas at Iauaretê, one by the Tariano-Koivathe and one by the Tukano-Oyé, with the Indian's recuperation of feather ornaments the Salesians removed from the Uaupés region and previously held in their Museu do Índio in Manaus. The ornaments now rest in a special maloca that serves as a cultural center in Iauaretê (IPHAN 2007).

It is clear then that, from one point of view, the publication of sacred narratives can be seen as a transformation of an older form of broadcasting or publication: the recitation of origin myths, clan histories, and stories of past feuds in the context of dabucuris and other ritual gatherings. These recitations served to buttress claims to territory, status, and prerogatives, made by a particular group or one of its component clans, and to challenge the claims of others. Cast in an esoteric ritual language, these chants took many years to learn and were mainly in the hands of elder men. Today, publishing books of sacred knowledge plays a similar political role as an assertion of claims to identity, rights, and status but now in a nonritual context and under new conditions. The traditional status system based on control of sacred goods and esoteric knowledge is increasingly eclipsed by new marks of status in the form of education, literacy, salaried work as teachers and health workers, political positions in the indigenous organizations, trading, and the accelerating circulation of western consumer goods, spheres that younger people largely dominate.

The NIRN collection is the outcome of two sets of alliances that are symptomatic of some of the tensions involved in this transition. On one hand, there is the alliance between knowledgeable elder kumus and their younger, well-educated but still traditional-leaning sons. On



the other hand, there is the alliance between FOIRN, an indigenous organization, and ISA, an NGO dedicated to reviving and reinforcing the more traditional aspects of contemporary Tukanoan society and culture.

The publication of books of traditional narratives also makes sense in relation to the progressive expansion and extension of Tukanoan politics to national and international arenas. This expansion goes hand in hand with the rise of FOIRN as a successful indigenous organization with dealings at regional and national levels, and with the activities of São Paulo-based ISA, Brazil's largest environmental/cultural NGO. The books on sale on ISA's website reach far and wide, spreading the renown of different Tukanoan peoples and gathering allies for their project of cultural revitalization. At this level it matters much less that the books are read or understood than that they reach their intended audiences. The books' scholarly, anthropological tone and the choice of Portuguese as their language both suggest the principal intended audience is neither indigenous nor local. Combined with their very materiality as things that can be bought alongside the usual Indian handicrafts, a collection of books with a recognizable trademark and frequent use of illustrations on their covers and within can be seen as a response to the Tukanoans' need to increase their visibility on the Brazilian indigenous scene.

### **Publication and Patrimonialization**

I have argued above that the NIRN collection is part of much wider spate of publishing by peoples of the Upper Rio Negro, that some of the previous ethnographic works relating to the Tukanoans belong to this line of publications, and that publishing books represents an extension of a more traditional Tukanoan mode of politics in a new context and through a new medium: cultural traditions objectified in nontraditional form.

In some ways this reification and politicization of "culture" is but one more example of a very general phenomenon observable amongst indigenous peoples throughout Amazonia. At the same time, the form this politicization of culture has taken is far from usual in the Amazonian context.

I want now to suggest that the Tukanoans' propensity to publish books of sacred narratives relates not just to how books can stand in for their ritual objects but also to how some more general features of their society make Tukanoans pre-adapted to the idea of "culture" as a form of property and preadapted to the idea that "culture" is something that can easily be objectified, an idea that has come to the fore in recent national and international legislation concerning intellectual property rights and the registration and protection of cultural patrimony.

Within anthropology, the notion of culture as property harks back to outdated notions of culture as unchanging tradition exemplified in myth and ritual—outdated because culture is also the routine and unselfconscious practice of everyday life. With its roots in Durkheimian sociology, this ritualistic view of culture is well exemplified in the following quote from Victor Turner (as cited in Schechner and Appel 1990:1) "Cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures." It is this self-conscious, visible, ritualized, and identity-defining, Olympic-games version of culture that indigenous movements in lowland South America have assimilated, an understanding of culture that also underlies much of the legislation concerning culture as the patrimony of nation-states and ethnic groups.

The notion of culture as property happens to fit well with Tukanoan views of a timeless order based on ancestral heritage from a mythic past, a heritage displayed in ritual performances and made up of tangible ceremonial goods and less-tangible rights to various kinds of verbal property. This cultural property can be exchanged between individuals and groups, can decay or become forgotten, and can also be forcibly prohibited or destroyed by outsiders. In short, if the Tukanoans' reification of culture as something that can be retained or lost, nurtured or neglected, has been given a new meaning and importance in the context of interethnic relations and recent legislation regarding cultural patrimony, it also has a clear precedent within their own traditional conceptions and builds on an already-existing set of ideas. This is why I suggest that Tukanoans are preadapted to the idea of "culture" as a form of property: when they talk of "culture" they have in mind their ritual objects, their songs and dances, their names, and their own versions of shared stories of origin.

In general, Western notions of culture do not correspond easily with indigenous Amazonian categories (Vienne and Allard 2006). However, the Tukanoan category *gaheuni* or “wealth” fits quite well. In an extended sense, *gaheuni* refers to any personal possession or manufactured good, but it refers specifically to ritual objects such as sacred musical instruments or feather ornaments. And here it carries the implication that such objects also are paired with knowledge and narrative, *masise* and *ketioka*. It is this group-specific verbal counterpart that makes essentially similar ritual objects different—so distinct groups are constituted and distinguished as much by what they say as by what they own. *Gaheuni* thus maps quite neatly onto “culture” as patrimony, something that can be objectified in material form and signals difference—the “culture” that makes “cultures.” In this sense, books mediate between *gaheuni*, “culture” and patrimony, bringing them together in a single form.

### A Comparative Conclusion

I have identified three interconnected factors that appear to underlie the extraordinary number of books published by indigenous authors in the Upper Rio Negro region. One is the peculiar historical circumstance of indigenous relations with outsiders, a relatively long, drawn-out contact history dominated first by traders interested in indigenous products and labor and then by the protective influence of Salesian missionaries more interested in bringing civilization and saving souls.

The second is the presence of a set of sociocultural features, including patrilineal groups whose identity depends on the control of material and immaterial ancestral property, features unusual in the Amazonian context. These features create a fit between ritual objects and books, and a more general fit between indigenous categories and Western understandings of “culture” as patrimony.

A third factor is having anthropologists working with an NGO engaged in a program that links environmental issues with the defense of indigenous cultural heritage. Here the NIRN books can be seen as transformations of the monographs and compilations of mythology produced by previous generations of anthropologists. This goes together with a transformation in the role of the anthropologist from participant-observer to observant-participant and collaborator.

With the largest indigenous reservation in Brazil, with FOIRN as Brazil’s largest and most successful indigenous organization, and with preferential assistance from ISA, Brazil’s largest pro-environmental, pro-indigenous NGO, the Tukanoans’ problem is not one of land but one of culture.

The Tukanoans’ contact history stands in marked contrast to many other parts of Brazil, where the role and influence of missionaries has been slight or nonexistent and where contact between indigenous peoples and outsiders has been relatively recent, violent, and associated with expanding economic frontiers involving agriculture, ranching, and, more recently, dams and other large-scale development projects. Here the Kayapó are an exemplary case, and the contrast between them and the Tukanoans is instructive. The Kayapó’s problem has been one of land and development projects, and they have used politico-ritual performances capitalizing on a vibrant visual culture as a way of dealing with this problem. To provide a lasting testimony of these otherwise ephemeral performances, to emphasize their visual impact, and to ensure that as wide an audience as possible sees them, Kayapó make extensive use of camcorders. As with Tukanoan books, Kayapó use of visual media is also, in part, the outcome of their collaboration with anthropologists and NGOs.<sup>20</sup>

Comparison with the Kayapó is especially appropriate because, as I have suggested elsewhere (Hugh-Jones 1993, 2006), Tukanoans and Kayapó share sociocultural features. In particular, the Tukanoans’ patrilineal clans and lineages as social units founded on the retention and transmission of an estate comprised of ritual objects, names, titles, prerogatives, and reputation share features with Kayapó houses, as understood in the Lévi-Straussian sense (see Hugh-Jones 1995; Lea 1995; Gordon 2006). Allied to this, the Tukanoan category *gaheuni*, which refers to this estate, is strikingly similar to the Kayapó category *nekrêth*.

In each case, the indigenous category has both material and immaterial referents—wealth, property, ornaments, privileges, prerogatives, names; in each case, the term is extended to include Western merchandise; in each case this wealth refers to items collectively owned by discrete social segments and serves to differentiate these segments against a common cultural

backdrop; and in each case wealth is a tangible, material manifestation of specific immaterial knowledge, attributes, capacities, and powers transmitted across generations and serving to define specific kinds of people. Like the Tukanoans' gaheuni and ketioka (see above),<sup>21</sup> *kukràdja*, the Kayapó term for such knowledge, is used to translate the outsider's term "culture."

Given all this, one might imagine the Kayapó as sharing the Tukanoans' inbuilt tendency towards patrimonialization. In fact, quite the opposite appears to be the case. The prime exemplars of Tukanoan gaheuni, their ritual goods, are all heirlooms. These unchanging objects, with their attached stories, are transmitted within the group, embody ancestral vitality and powers, and are associated with a highly conservative ritual and intellectual tradition. This tradition acknowledges a backdrop of common origin and shared values against which difference, complementarity, and reciprocal exchange are brought into relief. Ritual objects as gaheuni certainly have connotations of alterity and otherness, especially female otherness and, in the creation stories, this otherness reappears in the assimilation of ritual goods to Western merchandise as the products of two twin sisters or two sides of the same coin (see Hugh-Jones 2009, 2018). This hybrid, dual form is also apparent in the Tukanoans' books, foreign objects condensing ancestral powers within whilst projecting outwards the visible signs of indigenous culture. But ultimately books and ritual objects remain as specifically Tukanoan and indigenous patrimony. Foreigners and their attributes must be held in check as an ever-present threat to Tukanoan values and culture, especially regarding the young.

In contrast to these agnatically transmitted heirlooms, the essence of Kayapó nekrêтч is that they are trophies—objects, ornaments, clothing, songs, and names captured in war, stolen on raids, or coerced from outsiders through intentionally belligerent negotiations (Gordon 2006:208–9). Nekrêтч are part of what Turner (1992) calls the Kayapó "intercultural adultery," their penchant for borrowings and hybridity. As objectifications of the exotic properties, attributes, and powers of others, these trophies are domesticated, resignified, and put to specifically Kayapó ends as markers of hierarchical social distinctions based on notions of beauty and valor. But nekrêтч in the form of Western goods tend to make Kayapó both more like White people and more like each other. As Cesar Gordon (2006) shows with reference to the Xikrin-Kayapó, the assimilation of Western goods to the category nekrêтч has resulted in an ever-increasing spiral of consumption and a shift from a relatively closed system of ritual differentiation, based on a restricted class of beautiful names controlled by a few powerful families, to a more open system in which status distinctions are marked by differential consumption of consumer goods that are, in principle, accessible to all.

In short, if Tukanoans tend towards closure, conservatism, and an emphasis on the lineal inheritance of differentiating ancestral verbal traditions allied to sacred objects, Kayapó are open, dynamic, innovative, and well-practiced in acting in unison. This is shown in accelerating transformations in their system of rituals that affirm differences in wealth and prestige, in the more performative quality of the rituals themselves, and in the Kayapó capacity to create new political rituals that cut across divisions based on faction, village, or territory to create a political community united in opposition to hydroelectric dams (Turner 2006). This capacity to transcend internal factional divisions in the face of external threats stands in contrast with the Tukanoans' tendency to highlight differences between their component groupings. Like the choreographed aggressive ritual performances that accompany the Xikrin's negotiations with the managers of the goldmine on their territory, the Kayapó's political displays build upon their age-set system and exploit to the full an adaptation of traditional self-decoration, singing, and dancing to produce the physical and emotional identity of a single body, a homogeneous bloc that thinks and acts in unison. This sense and achievement of unity corresponds to the Kayapó's strongly visual aesthetic of "beauty," which also stresses uniformity, harmony, and coordinated action.

And here is where the camcorders come in. To own such expensive, high-status consumer goods, to use such complex pieces of technology, and to know how to edit the images they produce, are all indications of Kayapó mastery over White people's *kukràdja*. Camcorders not only serve to record demonstrations and political confrontations for posterity; they also figure as an integral component of these highly choreographed, supremely visual displays. Kayapó make sure their use of camcorders is recorded on film and broadcast by Brazilian and foreign media. The camcorder itself becomes an intentionally visible part of the events that these same camcorders record, a device that renders these events yet more visible.

In conclusion, Kayapó camcorders appear as the analogue of Tukanoan books. Both figure as transformations of earlier forms of ritual wealth objects and both encapsulate in visible, material form what they also record so that their medium is an integral part of their message. The camcorder records in a primarily visual register, with verbal content playing a secondary, supporting role. Tukanoan books record in a primarily verbal register, but the visual impact of their covers harks back to past visual displays.

In making this comparison I am certainly not suggesting it is inevitable that the Tukanoans should resort to books any more than it is inevitable that the Kayapó make use of camcorders—both make use of both. Given books and camcorders, I am interested, rather, in exploring the fit between technology and cultural style, in how new media fit in with the practices and ideas of the people who use them, and how they might relate to an ongoing process of cultural transformation. This paper is thus intended as an elaboration of Marshall Sahlins's dictum that "the continuity of indigenous cultures consists in the specific ways in which they transform themselves" (1997:126, my trans.).

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Trans.: "Indigenous Storytellers of the Upper Rio Negro."

<sup>2</sup> Although there is considerable overlap between Tukanoan and Baniwa culture, the cultural differences involved, combined with differences in the circumstances surrounding preparation and publication of their books, are sufficient to put the two NIRN books by Baniwa authors beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>3</sup> See especially Goody and Watt 1963; Goody and Watt eds. 1968; Goody 1977, 1986; and the copious literature inspired by these works.

<sup>4</sup> For a more general discussion of books as objects, see Hugh-Jones and Diemberger 2012; Diemberger and Hugh-Jones 2013.

<sup>5</sup> On identity cards and other papers, see Guzmán-Gallegos 2009; Dardy 2006; Gordillo 2006. On conference proceedings, etc., see Riles 1998; Riles ed. 2006. On colonial documents, see Rappaport 1990. And on documents in Amazonia, see Allard and Walker 2016.

<sup>6</sup> See, e.g., Boutcher 2012.

<sup>7</sup> On culture-in-quotation-marks, see also Carneiro da Cunha 2009.

<sup>8</sup> See Turner 1992, 2006.

<sup>9</sup> All indigenous terms are given in Barasana.

<sup>10</sup> Árhém et al. 2004; Asociación de Capitanes y Autoridades Tradicionales Indígenas del Pirá Paraná (ACAIPÍ) 2016; Gentil 2000, 2005; Guzmán (Míru Púu) and James 2003; and Pedrosa Moreira 2001 are notable examples.

<sup>11</sup> The Tariano and Baré were originally Arawak speakers. Today most Tariano speak Tukano, and virtually all Baré speak *Língua Geral*.

<sup>12</sup> For a detailed history of how this first book came to be written and published, prior to the inception of the NIRN series, and of the catalytic role of the Lithuanian Padre Casimiro Béksta, see Figalli de Angelo 2016.

<sup>13</sup> Books do not figure at all in the text or index of Chris Tilley et al.'s 2006 *Handbook of Material Culture*.

<sup>14</sup> See Lana and Lana 1980:73–4; Fernandes and Fernandes 1996:175–6; Azevedo and Azevedo 2003:205–7; Galvão and Galvão 2004:230–2.

<sup>15</sup> See also Hugh-Jones 2018.

<sup>16</sup> On externally derived names, see Hugh-Jones 2006; on the spontaneous production of identity documents, see also Gordillo 2006.

<sup>17</sup> On books as relics, see Diemberger 2012 and Diemberger and Hugh-Jones 2013.

<sup>18</sup> The *Kēbiri* of *Kēbiri Pôrã* is the same as the *Kenbiri* of the author's name *Tolamã Kenbiri*.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed discussion of the Desana case, see Figalli de Angelo 2016:285–337.

<sup>20</sup> My discussion of the Kayapó draws mainly on Turner 1992, 2006; and Gordon 2006.

<sup>21</sup> The roots *masi-*, *mabi-*, “know,” common to all Tukanoan languages, would appear to be related to *masa*, “people,” quintessentially “true” or Tukanoan people.

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