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Geraldo Andrello
UFSCar (Universidade Federal de São Carlos), Brazil

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A Brief Comment on Hugh-Jones's "The Origin of Night and the Dance of Time"

Geraldo Andreello

Universidade Federal de São Carlos

BRAZIL

Hugh-Jones's article on the "origin of the night" evinces many years of reflection upon, and intimacy with, the ethnography and mythical narratives of the indigenous people of Northwest Amazonia. As it is impossible to comment on all that is offered in his dense article in a short space, I focus on the initial methodological remarks, as they relate to Hugh-Jones's conclusions in this paper and also to the author's now-classic study of the relation between myth and ritual among the Barasana (Hugh-Jones 1979).

Hugh-Jones reviews more than forty different versions of origin-of-night narratives, provided by various Tukano and Arawak-speaking peoples, to demonstrate equivalence between the mythical box that contained the night and the actual boxes of clan ornaments suspended in the ceilings of longhouses. From this demonstration, we can draw fundamental lessons about the cosmology of Northwest Amazonia and about ritual ways of dealing with origin times. The emergence of alternation between day and night, because it introduces movement in time, is associated with the basic parameters of the current human condition, namely its finitude, the shortness of life. At the same time, the onset of alternation between day and night seems to open the possibility of managing such a contrast to the benefit of the reproduction, transformation, and growth of social groups. A number of other contrasts are associated with that between light and darkness (such as birds/insects; colorful/colorless; chants/cacophony). Hugh-Jones shows how all of these are handled ritually through a complex interplay between the containers in which these elements are kept (the box of ornaments, the longhouse, and the universe proper). These symbolic associations correspond to the means selected by the indigenous imagination to reflect and act on the lives of people and collectives—notably in their successes and misfortunes. The author asks: What is the relevance and implication of the unequal distribution of knowledge in a region where many peoples are connected by marriage and ritualized exchange? This consideration forms the basis for Hugh-Jones's discussion of the different motivations and circumstances in which people narrate versions of myths that complement each other, such that the anthropologist's understanding of the themes elaborated in a narrative depends on working with the greatest number of versions possible. Here Hugh-Jones aligns with Claude Lévi-Strauss's ideas and the foundations of the structural analysis of myths. However, by applying it to Northwest Amazonia he highlights a specific aspect of the problem regarding the salience of the teller's group identity to the narrative. In this case, the group identity of the teller may be stated, among other reasons, precisely in order to explain the origin and nature of differences between groups. In other words, social groups and the narratives of their genesis and composition are inextricable.

According to Hugh-Jones, it would be a mistake to take particular versions of origin-of-night narratives as "Barasana" or as "Desana" because these narratives are not stand-alone units (Hugh-Jones 2019:76) but are interconnected and widely shared. They can be told on their own and are often published as a discrete "myths," but they may also appear as parts of a larger whole, preceded by stories about earth, trees, *caraná* roofing leaves, and followed by stories about songs, ornaments, dance, water, mortality, and other topics (ibid). In fact, this statement about narratives could just as well be applied to social units in Northwest Amazonia in my view because, similarly in this case, understanding of the internal dynamics of a given group is only possible when taking into account their relationship with the others. This point is implicit in Hugh-Jones's initial methodological notes, where he states that names used to refer to groups refer to social or linguistic units of heterogeneous types and scales, only some of which the people of the unit concerned recognize. For example, named linguistic exogamic groups, such as Tukano, Desana, Tariano, Cubeo, Barasana, Tatuyo, etc. are each internally

constituted by a highly variable number of clans or sibs, which are also spatially dispersed to varying degrees. The existence of a greater or lesser frequency of matrimonial alliances between them has produced many different local arrangements.

These local formations are the subject, precisely, of narratives dealing with fusions and fissions of units at different scales, either in mythical times, or through historical times of contact with whites. This complex situation makes the task of establishing the current composition of a given group extremely difficult, especially because the way each clan explains its insertion into more inclusive units can vary considerably. In this context, the existence of multiple versions and interpretations of the same story is widely known. When people become aware of a given version that does not belong to their group, they often make the following comment: “My grandparents also told this story, but in a different way.” This statement could be applied to local collectives. And so, as a narrative, a group would be subject to different versions, according to the point of view. As Marshall Sahlins (1985) commented about lineages in Polynesia, perhaps Northwest Amazonian groups may correspond more to “an argument than a structure.” In the same vein, groups here seem to gain existence through the development of their own narratives—group and narrative would be one and the same.

It is not by chance that these narratives, without exception, culminate in the definition of the identity of the narrator’s group vis-à-vis the others, determining their relations in different directions—the identity of in-laws, and especially of older and younger brothers, the focal idiom to deal with hierarchical social relations between clans and exogamic groups in the region. Thus, these narratives provide the keys from which hierarchical positions are formulated, discussed, and potentially transformed. The story of the box containing the night is especially interesting in this regard because, thanks to Hugh-Jones’s article, it is now possible to comprehend the relationship between the theme of the passage of time and the hierarchical series of older and younger brothers, who are precisely the protagonists of the story. The argument seems, therefore, to reinforce the hypothesis that narrative genesis of social groups in Northwest Amazonia operates through hierarchical distinctions drawn from a temporal code, allowing the teller to specify who occupies the positions of older or younger brother by means of the appropriate rendition of the mythic narrative. In other words, each group seeks to specify their position through the enunciation of a proper speech.

One of the versions of the origin-of-night story cited in the article is provided by a low-status Desana clan, the Guahari Gamiseró. More than the version itself, what matters in this case is the great emphasis placed on this episode within the larger origin narrative. The obvious intent of the Guahari Gamiseró was to point out how a little brother can come to occupy a preeminent position, for in this story the younger brother is the one able to close the unduly opened box midway between the longhouse belonging to the Owner of the Night and that belonging to the brothers. By remembering the incantations the Owner of the Night taught, the younger brother alone restored the day and ensured the conditions for the return of the brothers to their house. He managed to do this because the first time the brothers experienced night, he had controlled sleep by staying awake. In this episode, the younger brother behaves as a longhouse owner should, commanding the rhythm of days, the passage of time, and the ritual cycle (Hugh-Jones 2019:80). The men of the Desana clan claimed their clan’s autonomy in relation to their older brothers by stressing this episode, alluding to their old longhouses that historically flourished on the Papuri River, as well to their own shamanic knowledge.

After the origin of night, we have thus a proper human time, one endowed with a transformative potential: it is now possible for the positions of elder and younger brothers, seniors and juniors, to be reversed. In short, the potential reversal of hierarchies is integral to origin-of-night narratives. Before, time was immobilized, and so was hierarchical order. Evidence for this comes from the field of kinship through the accelerated growth of a low-status clan, when his older brothers of other clans face difficulties in their reproduction (for example, if they have few sons or only daughters, which often leads to accusations of witchcraft). This process of differential population growth thus registers the effects of the vertical proliferation of generations of a junior clan vis-à-vis other agnatic senior clans. This would be a movement by which the vitality of a low-status clan equals that of its older brothers. In this process, older and younger brothers become equidistant in relation to prehuman time. In terms of successive generations, their respective durations are becoming equivalent in human time—or in extensional time.

In fact, as we read at the paper's conclusion, rituals in which the box of ornaments is opened produce this process of neutralizing temporal differences (Hugh-Jones 2019:94–96). This section develops a dense discussion on some of the main themes of Northwest Amazonian cosmology, that is, the complex issues of scale and reversal between interior and exterior. The problem of scale is very explicit and demonstrates that action at one level affects others, so that to open a box of ornaments inside a longhouse is to act upon the world as a whole. What is striking is that the box always operates in phase with the longhouse-world, and both are "out of phase" with the human longhouse, so to speak: when the longhouse is illuminated by the light pole and the ornaments in use during the nightly rituals, the box and the world are in the dark, and vice versa. The inversion between interior and exterior operates simultaneously at different scales, with the macro and micro scales aligned, and both at odds with the intermediate human scale: as content the human longhouse contrasts with the cosmic scale of the longhouse-world, just as, as a container, it contrasts to its smaller version, the ornaments box. The fascinating point is that when you open the box, the human longhouse becomes coextensive with the world, and the world itself and the box disappear in the darkness. Opening the box of ornaments is therefore like returning to a state prior to the passage of time; that is, it is to gain control over the conditions from which the world and humanity came to be. This is what ornamentation and ritual chants allow: touching primordial time to affect the current time.

Maybe this is why the Tukanoans so often use the Portuguese term *instrumentos* (tools) to refer to ritual objects, and especially those stored in the box. We could say, therefore, that they are devices that confer agency. Intriguingly, stories of past wars often pinpoint the abduction of women and theft of boxes of ornaments as the main reasons for attacks on distant longhouses. If, on the one hand, the abduction of wives is a means by which a given clan can augment its reproduction and growth, the usurpation of the ornaments boxes, as Hugh-Jones once told me (pers. comm.) is "a robbery not only of the basis of human temporal power (the politics of ritual) but also the basis of all cosmic powers (cosmo-politics)."

I suggested earlier that Northwest Amazonian groups could be taken to exist in their narratives. But at this point it is important to consider that this has not only to do with an inventive ability to produce new versions of stories already known. What, for us, seems to refer to different ways of telling a narrative, for Tukanoans is a singular way of enunciating speech that comes from prehuman time. It is not just a form of expression but a real performance that mobilizes primordial power of life in order to alter a present state of things. I think this formulation can be applied to the ritualized display of the box's contents in a sensory performance that makes this feat visible and audible.

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