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Tubes and Androgyny: Comment on “Thinking Through Tubes”

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Androgyny as Totality at the Core of the Tube’s Exegesis

The Yuruparí male initiation ritual in Northwest Amazonia prompted Stephen Hugh-Jones’s lifelong ethnographic questioning of sexuality, procreation, and gender. From various angles, he has addressed the apparent contradictions between ceremonial segregation and domestic intimacy between men and women in the Barasana exogamic, patrilineal, and clan-based social order. The concept of androgyny proved instrumental to insights about the “house” (1995) and later to comparison with Melanesian understandings of gender (2001). It is invoked again in “Thinking through Tubes.” In this article, the reader is made to “see” and reconsider a basic Amazonian form, the *tube*, or more specifically the “body-tube,” with its multidimensional and intricate aesthetic, conceptual, and social implications in the Upper Rio Negro, an area where tubular forms are exceptionally elaborated.

In this Comment, I focus on the pivotal role of androgyny in the “one sex/two genders” model that Stephen develops around the tube. His remark that “while tubes are (only too obviously) about sex and fertility, they are much more than this... for metaphors work both ways” (Hugh-Jones 2019:22) invites comment on distinctive aspects of androgyny. The ritual control of apertures and flows is not only related to myths of creation; directly or indirectly “sexual mythologies” (Strathern 2016) are implicated in the making and remaking of Amazonian bodies by means of both consanguinity and affinity. Through Yuruparí, single-sex (male and female) parents are created; gender and cross-sex mediated exchange between sibs is made possible. As performed with marvelously complex artifacts, androgyny, it seems, traces the contours of sociality in the Upper Rio Negro and settles past arguments about men’s control of the Flutes.

In his dazzling ethnography, Stephen bypasses Claude Lévi-Strauss’s reluctance to engage with the self-reflective and quasi-priestly character of Northwest Amazonian mythology as incommensurable with the shamanic mythology that is his principal concern. Could the understandings and use of androgyny as a concept be slightly different in Northwest Amazonia in relation to the character of the mythology that fascinated Lévi-Strauss? I venture to suggest Northwest Amazonians play on a dual acceptance of androgyny in their semiotics, which may be of interest to disentangle in relation to the tube. To explore this ambiguity, which I link to shamanism, I focus on the processes of totalization,¹ detotalization, and retotalization referred to in “Thinking through Tubes.”

Androgyny variously circumvents oppositions such as predator/prey and cosmo/socio-centrism that work as organizing templates in Amazonia’s anthropology. The transmutations mediated through androgyny on the various registers of life appear to be closely related to shamanism. Mythical beings, who offer a vision of original androgyny as complete, unified closure, are split, cut open, and dismembered to allow the emergence of human gender. They are purposefully retotalized in Northwest Amazonian male initiation rituals to ensure and control the perpetuation of human life. Fractal imbrications between daily life and the categories of ritual and myth—a main theme in the work of both Stephen and Christine Hugh-Jones—underlie the androgynous dimensions of tube-forms and most particularly men’s flutes, which Lévi-Strauss neglected in his discussion of blowguns, pipes, and pots as tubes. This points to a morally and aesthetically admirable equanimity and balance between genders. Yet both the myths and the ethnographic details of Northwest Amazonian rituals allude to androgyny as more ontologically challenging. I argue that the *tube* conjures up the open-ended dialectics of Amazonian shamanism in relation to the socially operative distinctions between male and female, human and nonhuman bodies.

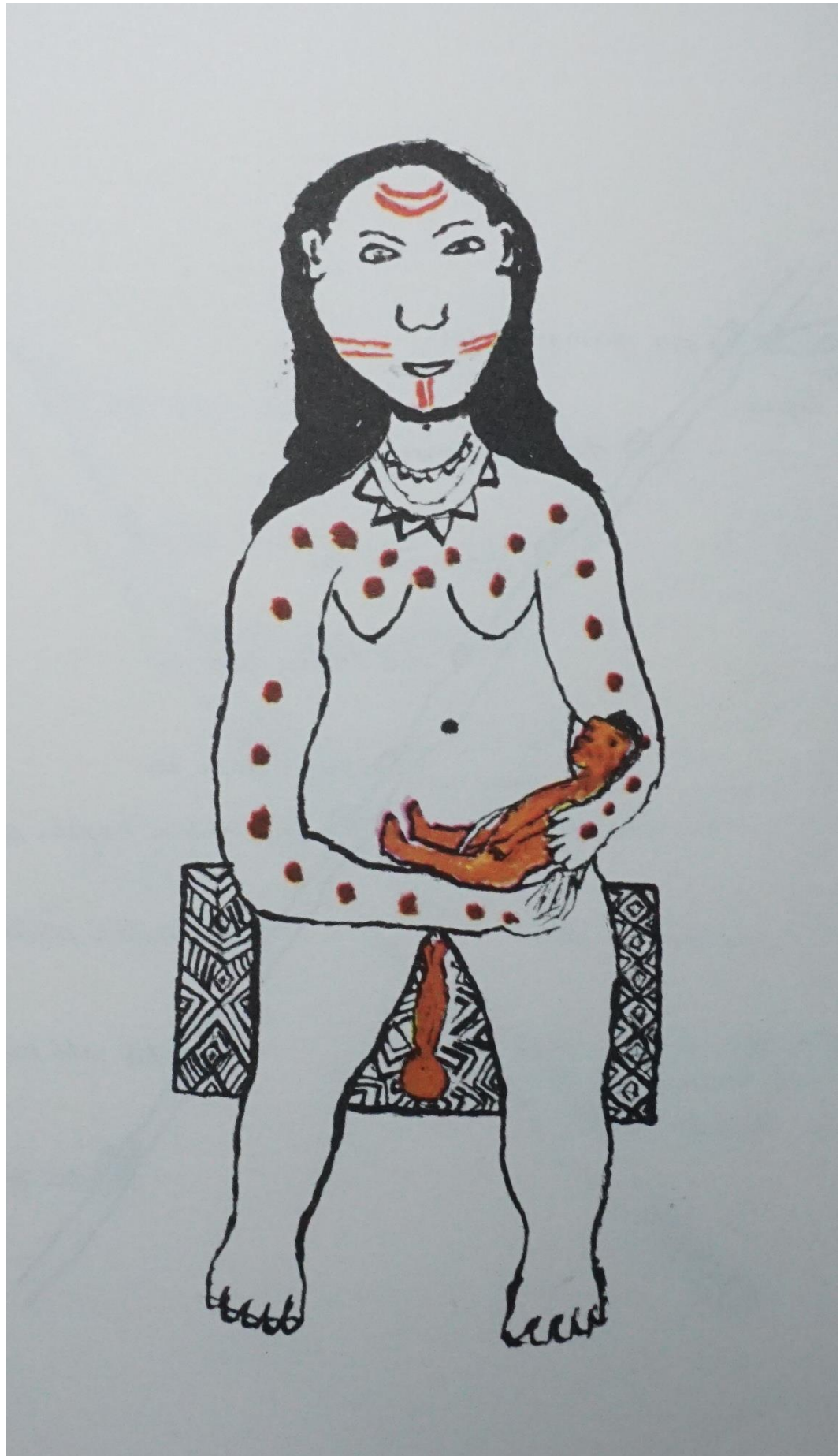


Figure 1. Yagé Mother holding the new-born Yagé (Feliciano Lana)

Multimodal perceptual experiences bind together the rituals and myths associated with the double figure of Yuruparí, the primal spirit ancestor, and Yagé, its counterpart or twin, a hallucinogenic vine. All details matter. Yagé was born during a rite of Yuruparí, whose mother's body was painted red by a shaman. The birth took place on mats decorated with white duck down and woven designs (see Figure 1), also causing these designs to appear, "while the men sharing in the mother's birth pains and sweating experienced these as the patterns, colors and sounds that yagé inspires" (Hugh-Jones 2019:40). Today, shamans invoke the names of these basketry designs both to guide men's yagé experience and to diminish the pains of women's labor. The birth blood that flooded the house is at once yagé, the effects of yagé, and all the visual and acoustic effects of Tukanoan ritual. Yagé's body is then dismembered, and the resulting cascade of differentiations extend to life and death, day and night, animals and humans, human groups and men and women. Individuals play flute and trumpets ritually used to "remember" (retotalize) Yuruparí-Yagé's body in a synesthetic experience in which sound has primacy.

Stephen takes us back to the end of *The Palm and the Pleiades* (1979), to open anew the ritual space of Yuruparí with an abundance of new signifiers and inter-connections between myths, male dancers' and initiates' bodies, women's menstruating and birth-giving bodies, fish and birds, feathers and sounds. The display of—and play with—previously overseen correspondences, ambivalences, symmetries, and asymmetries between male and female aspects of the flutes as tubes call upon anthropological work conducted in the Upper Rio Negro in the last three decades. As such, the *tube* is an indigenous model unraveled through a multilayered ethnography and designed to remain open to interpretation by actors and observers alike.

Congruent Sexes: One Sex/Two Genders?

The *tube's* centrality to life processes is anchored in the origin of menstruation and ensuing sexual reproduction. For Tukanoans, sexual reproduction with women from other sibs amounts to the creation of life-flows through the tubes of others. Far removed from the hackneyed understanding of gender as an attribute of persons in modern Euro-American cultural heritage, congruence between the sexes is accentuated. Flows and transmutations between the top and bottom halves of male and female bodies, and between their tubes and other tube-forms in the cosmos (palm trees, anacondas, fish) or in the domestic world (artifacts) are identified through a detailed ethnography outlining the use of analogies and homologues over signs or symbols. As correspondences between myths, artifacts used in ritual and seasonal cycles are revealed; dynamic relations between container and contained, apertures and closures, tangible and intangible aspects of both body substances and ornaments are disclosed as well. Ambiguity and ambivalence reign supreme in this convergence of sexes, exemplified by the contrasting stories of Yuruparí and Yagé's dual mother figure. The latter, an androgynous female figure, is displayed blowing smoke from a cigar (penis) held in a cigar holder (vaginal opening) (see Figure 5). She is fertilized with flesh of the caimo fruit (*Chrysophyllum cainito*) that is sperm-like, held in a gourd (womb-like). Yuruparí's mother is also a vagina-lacking parthenogenic being "opened" from stomach down by a loud sound, causing menstruation. Yet, later, in her differentiated female avatar, Yuruparí's mother embodies the "hyper-open state" of menstruation and childbirth in its most extreme form. Portrayed as a sexually voracious ogress associated with poisonous plants, animals, and originating plagues and sickness, she embodies "detotalization" taken to the extreme, without the rebalancing dimension of a controlled sexuality in the mediated cross-sex exchanges characteristic of the sexual division of labor widespread in Amazonia.

To illuminate Northwest Amazonian perceptions, Stephen draws on Thomas Laqueur (1990), and beyond him the ancient Greek physician and philosopher Galen, in an appeal to the premodern view of what men and women share, in contrast to what distinguishes them. Well-known graphic representations of male and female reproductive organs (like those drawn by Andreas Vesalius) show homologous tubes inverted and everted in an inside-out permutation. Irrespective of the preoccupations with genital sexuality among moderns, there is an apparent collusion of these representations, in their double reference to Aristotle and Plato, with Amazonian perceptions.

Stephen shows how the Barasana select sexual forms in the natural world to both represent and think about male-female relations, although none can be thought of as a symbol.

Tukanoans consider the paxiuba palm (*Socratea exorrhiza*) an iconic form of androgyny, as its new stilt roots have the shape of a penis but can also look like a “penis/clitoris emerging from a vulva” (Hugh-Jones 2019:26 and Figure 3). These features may merely amuse other Amazonians. As Philippe Descola notes (2001:102), “these metonymies are not taken very seriously by the Achuar.” Not all Amazonians elaborate on humanlike sexual traits in plants and animals, but I would say most shamans do so as part of their acquaintance with the spirit world. The hard-soft categorical opposition, ranging from male bone/female flesh, is developed through the contrast between various palms by many Amazonian forest dwellers. In Northwest Amazonia, hard paxiuba palm trees in the forest are contrasted with soft dioecious Cecropia (*Cecropia* sp.) in abandoned swiddens, with the former’s dense fruit opposed to the latter’s semen-like pulp. This contrast is extended to flutes and thumping tubes, intraclan rituals, and interclan affinal exchange rituals.

As *tubes*, many Amazonian blowguns, wind instruments, tobacco pipes, and snuffing tubes are androgynous, consciously made of contrasted materials extracted from the natural world with cosmic gendering connotations (Barbira Freedman 2010; Chaumeil 2001; Erikson 2001). By selecting and nurturing palm trees as part of the rainforest for many uses, including indexing the flow of life, Amazonians represent a valued androgynous ambivalence in various ways through multiple elaborations of male hunting with blowguns and palm fruit festivals celebrating fertility and palms as mothers and guardian ancestors cared for by shamans. Stephen adds a further detail relevant to the link between androgyny and the cosmos: “From his ashes [Yurupari’s] a paxiuba palm sprang up, an umbilical cord/*axis mundi* allowing shamans and dead souls to pass between underworld, earth, and heaven” (Hugh-Jones 2019:30).

Premodern views help take distance from bounded oppositions without taking up an assumption that Northwest Amazonians perceive the genders and their sexual biology as reflecting larger themes of the similarity of men and women and their common humanity. While Galenic aspects of Amazonian indigenous shamanic medicine such as the “Doctrine of Signatures” and hot/cold categories have long been matters for debate, sexual complementarity does not appear to have attracted the same attention so far, with few exceptions (Jackson 1996). Here it is invoked to support the view—mediated by the *tube*—that genders are not self-contained entities but partake of a system of meaningful signs through which complementarity is elaborated relationally in matters of sex, pregnancy and birth, feeding, making adult bodies, and orchestrating social reproduction in the cosmos.

Yet this is not just a case of “physiologics as sociologics” (Seeger et al. 1979): to understand the way Amazonian rituals integrate the annual round and life cycle with various astronomical, seasonal, and ecological cycles, the bodies and ethology of animals, plants, and rivers need to be grasped with the richness that characterizes Amazonian indigenous perceptions. This paper could not have been written without Stephen’s long-standing firsthand familiarity with nonhumans (animals, plants, elements, and aspects of the landscape). The striking hissing of anacondas, the whining of tapirs, the extrauterine reproduction pouches of opossum and Surinam toads, the tubular swim bladder and loud spawning sounds of catfish, and the digestive antics of sloths, howler monkeys, and tapir, are just a few examples in this feast of naturalist detail illuminating the making and use of tubular ritual artifacts as not just “good to think with” but also “good to relate with.” Rationales for the uses of particular feathers, furs, or barks in ritual attires (some shared, others idiosyncratic), new twists, and an abundance of visual images expand and enrich the multiple strands found in this praxial “middle ground.”

Amazonian Androgyny Compared: Flows of Body Substances

The comparative exploration of Amazonian and Melanesian ideas of gender in Thomas A. Gregor and Donald Tuzin’s edited volume (2001) exposed similarities and differences in perceptions and ritual uses of androgyny in the two regions. In his revisiting of interpretations of women’s exclusion from Northwest Amazonian male flute rituals (Hugh-Jones 2001:245–78), Stephen conferred more salience to a relational constitution of gender after Marilyn Strathern (1988; 2001). Yet in doing so, he underplayed the relationality between human and nonhumans. The daily and ceremonial exchanges between male clan members, their spouses, and visiting affines had been shown to be facilitated in the androgynous house (1995). In his 2001 article, Stephen highlighted the complementary equivalence between gendered in-house and external transactions, in a juxtaposition and succession of single-sex and mediated cross-sex

exchanges contrasted with those found in Melanesia. Processes were privileged over referential matrices. In “Thinking with Tubes,” he addresses semiotics in a novel way, with a focus on the fungibility not just of body-tubes but also of the substances that flow through them.

Stephen’s contribution to the understanding of Amazonian “fabricated bodies” is well known. Stephen’s illustrated ethnography supports his insights on differentiated life-flows in male-cum-female and male-versus-female body-tubes. The extent to which substances such as blood, semen, and milk complement or substitute for one another in different contexts as substances both sexes transmit warrants attention. Menstrual blood and the blood of childbirth, polluting to men throughout Amazonia, are also manifestations of the detotalization of androgynous mythical ancestors and signal the origin of human sexual reproduction. The “nonfoods” (coca, tobacco, and yagé) consumed by Barasana men and given to pubescent boys in the Yuruparí ritual are analogous to both semen and maternal milk, in analogical opposition to manioc foods (bread and beer) women serve to men. Amazonians conceptualize gendered selves in a notably embodied and sensuous way. The containing or porous qualities of body-tubes are marked by designs painted on human bodies (black or patterned) and by the making of contrasting artifacts (baskets for men, pots for women). Sensuous qualities are not univocal; body-tubes (such as women/pots) are described in myth with moral and aesthetic inflections that collapse ordinary separations between this and other world’s dimensions and between genders. Nonfoods double up with the blood marrow of flutes and trumpets as agnatic ancestors, with semen fed to fetuses during repeated intercourse in pregnancy and with the milk of the milk-river (Rio Negro). The term “fungibility” is an apt descriptor of this interchangeability of substances engaging multiple dimensions of the relational self: inside, outside and inside out, container and contained, sealed and porous, above and below. Many of these dimensions are contiguous or fused in the experience of synesthesia, which is facilitated by the consumption of hallucinogenic yagé combined with tobacco during rituals such as Yuruparí.

Besides fungible substances, Stephen invites us to think beyond categories of objects—indeed, beyond objects—about the interlinked ceremonial and day-to-day transactions sustaining life-flows in Northwest Amazonia through both “making” and “self-making.” The fabrication of artifacts, ornaments, and instruments in seclusion and often under strict diet follows the logic of the Tube and affirms the gendered identity of makers. Cross-sex exchanges of codified gendered objects (baskets and pots) signal the regulation of flow in the sexual division of labor, from men’s garden clearing to women’s cultivation and processing of manioc for general consumption. Same-sex exchanges of analogic body substances prompts comparison between Yuruparí and Melanesian initiation rites in performing a double transitional androgyny (of initiators and initiates) leading to the emergence of young men. However, the complementary role Amazonian women play in the process is highlighted to a greater extent than in Melanesian rites. The androgynous totalization manifest in elaborate Northwest Amazonian male ornaments combines tube feathers, hair, fur, and bark cloth, all in association with observed animal traits. Like the ritual wealth and secret knowledge of clans, this androgyny needs to be contained, yet far from being drastically segregated, women are shown to be active in this staged containment. Wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters together, most acutely barred from “seeing” the men’s flutes, partake in Yuruparí.

Mothers feed initiates red *kana* berries (*Sabicea amazoniensis*) associated with the origin of life. They also actively signal the boys’ ontological transformation, first by painting their bodies with black paint and later by applying the designs marking manhood. The unity of male dancers moving in one rhythm around the house pillars after consuming androgynous nonfoods cannot be separated from the normative intimacy of Tukanoan conjugal living and the sexual division of labor that sustains it. Women barred from “seeing” the male flutes and from consuming the vision-inducing Yagé are nevertheless part of the synesthetic experience: later they will reproduce the patterns of dancers’ rhythmical movements in their painting of bodies and pots. In a universe replete with analogies, metonyms, and metaphors, the androgynous house provides spaces for totalizing and then detotalizing recombinations of signs to implement male initiation and inter-sib ceremonial exchange. The complementary roles of women in the male-led rituals of Northwest Amazonia, previously overlooked, are integral to the balance of patrilineality and domestic intimacy. To conclude Yuruparí, women dance with men in the house.

Vital Flows and Well-Tempered Body-Tubes

In articulating the web of contiguities between tubes and orifices of the top and bottom halves of human bodies, between the tubes of male and female bodies, and between human body tubes and other tubes, Stephen draws out ethnographic pointers to androgyny as a modus operandi to ensure the flow of life. Fish bladder (*bubua*) is a generic term for tubes that include flutes, fish, and both male and female genitalia. The two renderings of Yuruparí's hairy naked body and of an accomplished adult Tukanoan man (Figure 6) foreground a main insight in "Thinking through Tubes," gained through the double focus on "hairy tubes" and hearing as the most neglected sensory aspect of Amazonian ritual. *Tube* mythology and *tube* thinking provide the previously invisible "extensive middle ground" (Hugh-Jones 2019:22) for approaching the conundrum of Northwest Amazonian patrilineal ideology not just in relation to affinity but to the constitution of androgyny-based relations both between men and women and between humans and nonhumans as well. As objects, Yuruparí flutes are *sounds* women need to hear while they are barred from "seeing" them. On the other hand, women are expected to *see* the ornaments of men's upper bodies that become sound in ritual. Sound, light, and the colorful shine of anaconda skin enlivened through hallucinogens are not only analogues or transformations of each other; they are manifestations of *h/air*, and then also of the menstrual blood they precipitated when women were opened by sound in the origin of time. Cognitive differentials—"bedo," "boti," "boa"—substantiate the processes from an indigenous point of view (Appendix 1). Implicitly, we are presented with an original take on Amazonian semiotics, in which analogies orchestrated to activate differentiated human gender need to be reaffirmed within an encompassing cosmic matrix. Beyond sensory inroads made by earlier ethnographers such as Anthony Seeger (1987) and Irving Goldman (1963), the congruence of *hair* and *air* as "*h/air*" is perhaps the most original aspect of tube-forms in Northwest Amazonia, bringing together flutes and trumpets with men's feather head ornaments and women's long hair in complementary opposition.

Ethnographic details such as the mounting of men's egret feather headdresses with the shaved hair of pubescent female initiates provide exquisite evidence of the sophisticated constitution of a one sex/two genders model opaque to modern sensibilities. In the web of correspondences making ritual operative, the flow of women's hair from the circular whorl on their crown is associated with the flow of their blood below, whereas ear piercing is a male, upper-body equivalent of female menstruation. This modeling by analogy or metaphor is at once a conceptual and social process, an embodied and abstract use of concrete elements in the environment as cosmos. This humanist grid, sitting somewhat awkwardly within an animist ontology, takes us back to the drawing board of *La Pensée Sauvage*. Lévi-Strauss saw the "logic of the concrete" as "a system of correspondences" based on animal and "plant emblem systems" found among the alchemists of antiquity but also "very closely reproduced in exotic societies" (1966:14). Metaphorical equivalences such as those linking flutes, ancestor bones, and women's vaginas are uncovered through interpretation rather than explicitly revealed by reference to the *tube* as form/model.

But there are dissonances in the equivalence hinted at in the cumulative expressions of congruence between sexes. First, women are leaky tubes, with connotations of uncontrolled management (by men). While Lévi-Strauss noted the links between blowpipes and digestive tubes, and between pots made by women and oral/anal continence/incontinence (1988), he did not—could not, with the material at his disposal—anchor the Amazonian moral philosophy and gender relationality sketched out from these homologies. Stephen's depiction, after his Barasana male hosts, of well-tempered female tubes points to the uneasily attained ideal of in-marrying women as self-contained icons of Tukanoan femininity.

H/air and blood jointly subsume vital energy. The art of blowing is applied throughout Amazonia in shamans' therapeutic blowing of tobacco smoke to seal the most important opening of the body: the baby's fontanel aperture that holds the soul firm whenever it is threatened with excessive openness, inviting predation by nonhumans. Couvade rituals bring parents to be and new parents into androgynous-like pairs with semen replaced by breast milk to feed the new baby. Without any elaborate attires outside body paint, couvade provides a pan-Amazonian way of temporarily retotalizing genders to protect androgynous newborns who will be progressively assigned markers of gender. "The extent to which man-woman and parent-child relations are metaphors for one another in Melanesia," a question Strathern raised with

reference to androgyny (2001:240), can be asked in Northwest Amazonia, albeit in different terms. Children as persons of androgynous/mixed sex constituted through relations between parents do receive markers of a single sex identity. This identity, however, is constituted as much in contradistinction with androgyny qua ontological threat as in transactions with partners of opposed single-sex identities. From a shamanic perspective, androgyny stands for an accumulation of the power of both sexual and nonsexual reproduction. Although this perspective is not explored in “Thinking through Tubes,” it is apparent in the ethnography and exposes tensions not just in Northwest Amazonia but throughout the region in the interplay between gender relations and human/nonhuman ones.

Subversive Shamanic Androgyny

Besides the ethnography presented in “Thinking with Tubes,” details in Stephen’s previous work refer to shamans’ roles in the contrasting Yuruparí and *He* House rituals. Bodily segmentation (through dismemberment) and vomiting are elaborated throughout Amazonia as the original asexual modes of procreation. The *tube* reinforces Stephen’s long-held assertion that the vegetative mode of reproduction is the primordial one (1995:56), leading to part-whole equivalences. The archetypal shaman, Rumi Kumu, is as a female-androgynous being (see S. Hugh-Jones 1979:125–26 and 2001:263), the reference for male shamans in their role as keepers of the boundaries that sustain human sociality. A counterpart of Manioc-Stick Anaconda, Rumi Kumu leads the theft of men’s flutes in myth (a subversive role), but she is called upon at the beginning of *He* House rituals to preside over affinal relations (Hugh-Jones 2001:263). She is also a palm tree womb, and the gourd of beeswax that is a crucial female element in the Yuruparí ritual is homologous with her. Giving birth to two flute sons (transmuted into an androgynous beeswax gourd) and to two manioc tuber daughters, Shaman-Woman is a supreme source of homologies that affirm complementary processes of manioc cultivation: men’s making of gardens that women cultivate and harvest and from which they process manioc, making beer served to men and bread eaten by all.

Anaconda also gets singled out as the Amazonian epitome of embodied animal-androgyny in its devouring, vomiting, regurgitating, and generative functions. In Northwest Amazonia, it is elaborated as “Anaconda canoe,” an extreme body-tube originating the tree-like Rio Negro river and its branch-like tributaries. During Tukanoan male initiation, Yuruparí/Anaconda swallows initiate boys, who become “meal” like manioc mash in a manioc squeezing tube (women’s tool par excellence) but are also like fish in a fish trap (an androgynous artifact with male and female forms). Anaconda also pairs with fish as a sound-producing tube and, like flutes and fish, has various androgynous associations. We could not be further from a concept of androgyny as blurred gender. Life-supporting flows, both cosmic and mundane, are enacted through a periodic and cyclical retotalization of flutes’ and trumpets’ androgynous character to ritually reenact the initial journey of “Anaconda-canoe.” NW Amazonian representations of the creation of the world do not attribute to human beings an origin different from other living beings, plants or animals; for example, flutes and trumpets partake of the cycles of fish spawning with loud sounds, and the fruiting of palm trees is similarly brought together with sensorial cues and analogic semiotics. As the supreme androgynous form of the archetypal shaman, Anaconda is dangerous to women in their “open tube” states (menstruation or childbirth) in that it can overcome their human “perspective” (in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s [1998] sense) to seduce, impregnate, or devour them.

The process of sexing and gendering, and its social contours, are constantly replayed in both ritual and daily life. Body-tubes need to be opened but also duly tempered; as the arbiters of these apertures, shamans need to approximate and even embody androgyny to contain human gender relations at the core of society. The one sex/two genders model of the *tube* implies totalization is both a threat and a seduction throughout the lifecycle and, as such, it is ever present in transactions between men and women. In Yuruparí, men collectively act out retotalization as androgynous beings. In *He* House palm festivals, affinal exchanges (with women as “mothers of the ritual”) are subsumed in relations replete with androgynous connotations between humans and palms, and between domesticity and the forest-as-cosmos.

Shamans, whether in their prophetic or priestly roles in Northwest Amazonia, are expected to approximate androgyny for the practice of their art. But they cannot, and must not, fully achieve this state, since it negates life. Shamans officiate on the borders of humanity,

blowing tobacco smoke to reinstate life-supporting body boundaries in situations when re-totalization has been ritually engineered or when cosmic in-differentiation has accidentally encroached upon human sociality (spontaneously or through the mediation of a malevolent sorcerer). “Wasting away,” a syndrome found throughout Amazonia, is a feared state of excessive body openness causing death if shamanic treatment is not rapidly available. For babies with open fontanels (the soul aperture in the body-tube), women in their hyper-open state of menstruation and childbirth, men while hunting in the forest-as-cosmos, and shamans journeying to the spirit world, the threat of being engulfed in totalizing immanence through permeable body-tubes is constant. Overall, creating persons amounts to controlling the *tube*.

The antithesis and specter of well-tempered gender relations is played out in the undifferentiated sexuality and uncontrolled orifices of Yurupari’s mother as portrayed in myth. Only in old age, when their reproductive power has waned, can women emulate the androgynous attributes of Rumi Kumu by becoming shamans. Stephen’s allusion to Monteverdi’s subversive lady singers implicitly foregrounds Tukanian moral philosophy, in which women can only assume androgyny before the creation of the world and, to a limited extent, as socially marginal female shamans. Here, perhaps, lies an ambivalence not found elsewhere in Amazonia. Tukanians subsume the ontological horizon of androgyny under an order that somehow encompasses ambiguity and its incumbent disorder. The story of the theft of Yurupari instruments, notes Stephen, “tells us that it is Women, portrayed as enemies, who represent these Others [affines] in their pure form” (Hugh-Jones 2019:42). Subversion of the ritual order is putatively punished by gang rape, as it threatens the staged androgyny of male flute players as a source of overall fertility.

A Feminist Reading of the *Tube*

A feminist reading of the *tube* is indeed invited despite, or perhaps on account of, the perverse invocation of androgynous features in the cosmos to reaffirm the patrilineal ideology of Northwest Amazonians. In the margins of rhetorical complementarity and impressive display of symmetrical features, women as body-tubes are intrinsically perceived as dangerous in their lack of containment. While Tubes-flutes are presented as signifying a generalized capacity to reproduce, shared by men and women, the figures of both Lévi-Strauss’s “jealous potter” (1988) and Yurupari’s outrageous mother are subversions of the ideal Amazonian feminine norm. The denial of women’s claim to androgyny is a constitutive aspect of the logic of the Tube and of the complex permutations it allows as a form and model of social relations. This logic acknowledges the inherent risk of subversion but suppresses it in mythical inversions and in the symbolic exchanges of complementary gifts, daily and ceremonial, between men and women in the house and between intermarrying sibs. The congruence of “one sex/two genders” is never perfected.

The Dialectics of Ambiguous Androgyny in Northwest Amazonia

The passage of androgyny to single-sex identity is momentous. It needs to be constantly reaffirmed, both in ritual and in day-to-day living. As Stephen notes, Northwest Amazonians’ gendered identities, like their bodies, are perhaps less intrinsically threatened by ontological transformations than those of other Amazonians. Stories of sexual encounters (usually fatal) between humans and animal or other spirits seem to be less common than in other parts of Amazonia. Apertures of body-tubes are, however, more extensively regulated and require shamanic intervention.

The extent of congruence between androgyny as ontological threat and androgyny as constitutive of gender relations for Barasana men and women is another question altogether. Androgyny as ambivalence, ever unrealized yet real potential of in-differentiation, versus androgyny as performed complementary opposition of gendered roles, are two interrelated facets of the tubes with which Northwest Amazonians think. Rituals offer staged opportunities to perform the tension between the two and affirm the normative transition from the former to the latter at puberty, making one ready for marriage alliances. By moving away from a classificatory approach, Stephen reminds us the *tube* and its web of analogies is something that says and does many things at once and for which there can be no one true account. Northwest Amazonian

“thinking through tubes” has potent implications, all the more so if no commonly accepted dogmas exist in indigenous forms of thinking. Stephen situates his insights into the *tube* as form/model on the same scale of communication as Barasana elders. Is this implicit model conducive to a transparent dialogue with Northwest Amazonians? Innovative indigenous education and cultural revival are rapidly developing, and shamanism and forms of neoshamanism have acquired heightened visibility within Amazonian politics of indigeneity. In this context it is conceivable that Stephen’s insights might inspire local young anthropologists to reflect on the ambivalence of androgyny as both a source of social regulation and a shamanic/mythic force, with all the nuances in between.

Notes

¹ The terms “totality” and “totalization” refer to the possibility and practice of complete, unified closure.

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