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The Objects of the Whites: Commodities and Consumerism among the Xikrin-Kayapó (Mebengokre) of Amazonia [i]

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss the recent phenomenon of conspicuous and increasing consumption of goods among the Xikrin-Kayapó (Mebengokre) of Pará, Brazil. Money and goods have become embedded in every domain of Xikrin life, including kinship, economy, politics and ritual. Merchandise can now be seen as a total social fact in Xikrin-Kayapó society. I show that this sort of consumerism results from a complex interaction between general principles of Mebengokre sociocosmology and the particular historical conditions in which such principles operate and are actualized. In particular, I suggest that the meaning and function of manufactured goods and money (“Whites’ stuff,” in the words of the Xikrin) in Mebengokre society must be understood as a structural transformation of the meaning and function of a class of indigenous objects related to the ritual system (e.g. ceremonial ornaments and ceremonial names) which have great symbolic and cosmological significance. In the last part of the paper, I describe the changes that this process of incorporating the “Whites’ stuff” may cause in Mebengokre political and symbolic economy.

PROLOGUE

In August 2005, the Xikrin Indians of the Xikrin do Cateté Indigenous Reservation organized a football tournament involving sides from their own villages and from those of the Kayapó-Gorotire. The idea was to host a large and luxurious event, conspicuously featuring commodities, objects and the technology of the Whites (or *kuben* in the Kayapó/Mebengokre-language). The Xikrin built wooden stands around the pitch, hired a sound system crew from the neighboring town of Ourilândia do Norte to liven up the party and to comment on the events, and sent trucks and cars to pick up the Kayapó-Gorotire players at their villages some 250 miles away. They also offered some aero-taxi flights between the two villages in order to bring chiefs and the elderly whose presence in the Cateté villages was deemed important. In the weeks leading up to the event, village activity was at a high and the preparations for the party were diligently followed. The Xikrin periodically visited the small towns on the outskirts of the Indigenous

Reservation (Tucumã, Ourilândia do Norte, Água Azul) in groups of three or four trucks in order to acquire industrialized food, soft drinks and all of the necessary paraphernalia for a sporting event, such as complete football kits, balls, boots, whistles, red and yellow cards and fireworks. On the day of the party, cattle was purchased for slaughter, so as to guarantee a copious supply of meat.

The event had a special significance for the Xikrin, representing something of a victory over the Kayapó-Gorotire, their kin and former enemies. The Xikrin were celebrating the fact that two of the Gorotire chiefs originated from Xikrin families, as well as showing off their power, wealth and their success in obtaining money and industrialized goods from the Whites. This was an important matter, and the Xikrin had been swallowing their pride over it for quite some time. Years back, in an inter-village gathering, the Gorotire, who were then at the peak of their business dealings with gold-miners and loggers[ii], had provoked the Xikrin, who at the time had little money and did not wear new clothes, sunglasses and other accessories, by saying of them: “*aröm ne me bikênh bôjx*” (“the paupers have arrived”). Now the situation had been inverted and it was time for a Xikrin payback, through a party in which their supremacy would be expressed by their command over the esteemed foreign objects.

This is only one among many examples of the way in which foreign objects produced by the Whites are used as a sign of beauty, prestige and strength among the Xikrin and the Kayapó peoples. What emerges here is an intense inter-village competition between the different Kayapó-Gorotire and Xikrin villages. What is at stake is the greater or lesser capacity of each village to incorporate and consume industrialized goods, as well as the relative wealth of each in relation to the others. The same competitive drive occurs within each community, this time between certain families and individuals, especially between chiefs and non-chiefs (see Gordon 2006:58,135,171; and Chapter 5).

This episode provides the backdrop to my discussion of the meaning and the role of industrialized goods and money within an indigenous social system[iii]. I shall discuss the field data I collected among the Xikrin from 1998 to the present, and present some of the analyses set out in my book *Economia Selvagem* (Gordon 2006).

We know that, at present, monetization and the increasing consumption of industrialized goods are more and more visible phenomena in a large number of Amazonian indigenous groups. These issues, however, are yet to be adequately tackled by anthropologists[iv], some of whom are still caught in the paradigm of acculturation, thus arguing that money and manufactured goods have a profoundly disruptive and harmful impact on indigenous life, leading eventually to the total destruction of traditional social bonds (Hoffman 1964). Other authors, on the contrary, have tried to explain these phenomena as expressions of

indigenous economic and political resistance against the national society (Turner 1993, Howard 2002).

If anthropologists remain trapped between acculturation and resistance, however, they will leave little room to understand these issues from a truly indigenous perspective, that is to say, a perspective in which the interest of indigenous peoples and their desire for money and goods do not appear as an epiphenomenon or as a simple *reaction* – be it positive or negative – to contact with the Whites, but instead as the expression of sociocosmological factors. I take a different approach here, arguing that Xikrin interest in and demand for industrial goods can only be understood if we apprehend them in a broader and deeper sense as the historical actualization of an indigenous social and cultural system of reproduction[v]. Of course, this does not mean that we should assume a subjective or idealistic approach, one that does not take into consideration the objective changes that come from the outside and that have profoundly affected Xikrin history and life.

What I am proposing, following the arguments of Peter Gow (1991, 2001) and others, is a change in perspective in which the Whites and their merchandise are seen in the light of Xikrin history rather than the other way around. Xikrin history is part of an Amazonian cultural landscape in which alterity plays a fundamental constitutive role (Albert 1985, 1988; Descola 1987, 1993; Erikson 1986; Fausto 2001; Menget 1985; Overing 1984; Rivi re 1984; Vila a 2002; Viveiros de Castro 1992). It is thus necessary to inscribe the Whites (and their most visible cultural expression, i.e. merchandise and money) in the complex field of Xikrin relations with alterity.

CONTEXT: THE XIKRIN AND THEIR MONEY

The Xikrin are one of the Kayap  sub-groups (auto-denominated Meb ng kre) who live in the region between the Tocantins and Araguaia rivers, in the Brazilian state of Par . They are a young population, numbering some 1,000 people, 80% of whom are below the age of 30 years old[vi].

At present, the Xikrin maintain a certain relationship with money and with industrialized goods that, for lack of a better term, I have called “inflationary consumption.” In other words, there is an ever-increasing demand for money and for industrialized goods. A visitor’s first impression when reaching a Xikrin village is that the Indians appear obsessively materialistic. Industrialized goods lay about all around the village and they are integrated in most quotidian activities. The Indians, furthermore, are not only interested in objects that are geared towards material production or subsistence. On the contrary, there is great desire for what we would classify as “luxury goods” (soft drinks, clothing and

accessories, television sets, electronic goods, satellite dishes, DVD players, automobiles, etc.).

This desire for outside goods is, it seems, never abated. Between 1998, the year of my first visit to the Xikrin, and 2005, year of my most recent stay, impressive changes in the pattern of consumption have taken place. In 1998, there were no brick houses, electricity or automobiles. In 2005, all the houses were made of brick, the whole village had electric power, and there were about ten motor vehicles. One could see parked just outside the men's house right in the centre of the village a shiny red car belonging to the chief's son, with its black-out windows and trick wheels. Today, money is on everyone's minds. Many of the conversations in the men's house, and those in the domestic space on the house-periphery, turn inevitably to the matter of money.

This state of affairs is part of the more general Mebengokre's historical investment in the objects of the Whites. These objects were already a matter of concern before the establishment of definitive peaceful contacts with Brazilian society, which occurred some time around 1950. Desire for industrialized goods guided indigenous action, acting as a catalyst in internal and external political dynamics, in warfare activities, and in processes of group re-configuration (see Fisher 2000; and also Verswijver 1992).

Despite some local specificities, the project of obtaining merchandise and becoming the owners of money itself occurred more or less simultaneously among all the Mebengokre groups. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, these Amerindians became renown not only for their political mobilization in defense of their rights and the demarcation of their lands, but also because of their intense relationships with local markets, in which they sought to acquire industrial goods and monetary funds. Their engagement with the logging and gold-mining industries is notorious, as is the emergence of prestigious and wealthy chiefs. A number of anthropologists have studied these phenomena (e.g. Turner 1993, 1995; Fisher 2000), which have also received much attention in both the national and the international press (e.g. Rabben 1998; Freire 2001).

Yet the Xikrin case is remarkable because of a historical contingency: the fact that they inhabit an area that is contiguous to the Serra dos Carajás, a region in which the Programa Grande Carajás, one of the largest mining ventures in the world, is developed under the auspices of the Companhia Vale do Rio Doce (or Vale), a Brazilian and multinational firm. The right to extract mineral from this area, which straddles Xikrin land, was granted by the Brazilian government, on condition that the Amerindians be rightly compensated for the impacts caused by the industrial activity. In the late 1980s, the company therefore signed a contractual agreement with the Brazilian national agency for indigenous affairs (Fundação Nacional do Índio, or FUNAI) in order to assist the Xikrin. Over the years, this agreement has secured relatively large cash and merchandise flows to

the community, thus promoting a certain level of affluence, as well as the maintenance of Funai's indigenous outpost, infrastructure development (construction of roads, houses, installation of a generator), health care, education and public transport. Almost all of the resources that the Xikrin have today stem from their ties to Vale.

The fact that they can rely upon continuous and virtually infinite funding from the mining company makes the Xikrin a particularly interesting case study within the Mebengokre universe, since it amplifies and gives visibility to processes that occur in many other Mebengokre communities, but in varying degrees and at different rates (see Fisher 2000; Turner 1993, 2009). With the company-community agreement, the Xikrin have found the right mechanisms to institutionalize the acquisition of money and merchandise. Alongside the resources allocated to the assistance programs, there is a fixed sum, called the "Monthly Income," which has been set aside. It is paid monthly to the Xikrin, who use it to purchase a wide range of consumables. With all these resources at their disposal, the Xikrin have organized a system of dividing and distributing the goods they acquire, as well as a system of wages.

Funding and its uses are decided during annual planning meetings between representatives of Vale and the Xikrin. These are highly political occasions in which the Amerindians hope to meet their demands by pressurizing the company. The way that the Xikrin act during these meetings can be analyzed in terms of a logic of symbolic predation and warfare (Gordon 2006:210-228). Even if no actual violence takes place, from a symbolic point of view, everything occurs as if the Xikrin were assuming the perspective of subjects in a predatory relationship, while shifting the representatives of Vale (and, metonymically, all of the Whites) towards a prey position (see also Turner 1991). These political meetings also have sacrificial connotations that replicate mythic narratives and ritual practices.

POLITICS AND WAGES

The internal division of monetary resources, whose terms are defined by the Xikrin themselves, sheds light on the political organization and the hierarchical structure of prestige in villages. Let us briefly analyze the process which serves to institutionalize chiefly wages.

In the early 1990's, after the decline of business with the logging industry[vii], the Xikrin chiefs, who had been the prime beneficiaries of this business, began talks with Vale, proposing the implementation of a policy of wages within the terms of the agreement. Thus although the Monthly Income was

considered to be money for the community, a part of it came to be used to pay the salaries of chiefs.

At first only the four main chiefs (that is, the two village chiefs and their respective fathers, ex-chiefs) were paid a sum total of wages at around 10% of the Monthly Income. They then began to set aside a part of their own wages in order to pay “secretaries”. But they were quick to notice that they could expand the wage system. In little time, some “lesser chiefs” (that is, age-grade chiefs, or chiefs of the age-based masculine groups, known as *turma* in Portuguese) began to receive their own wages. By 1998 there were seven wage earners in Xikrin community.

At the time, the Xikrin considered the value of the Monthly Income to be low. This led to intense negotiations and was a constant source of tension between the chiefs of age-based male groups and also within each one of the groups. It is important to note that it was through the chiefs’ mediation that the Monthly Income was passed on to the community in the form of “products” (industrial goods). Each “*turma* chief” was responsible for the distribution of merchandise among members of his group through the preparation of a “shopping list”. Every month the members of age-groups met at the home of their respective chief and discussed their necessities and priorities concerning industrialized goods. A young man who could write would then prepare a shopping list, one containing the name of every member and the other with the products that were to be acquired in the markets of neighboring towns. I reproduce below, as an example, an extract from one of these shopping lists.

Name	Item
1	One fish net, two pairs of <i>havaiana</i> sandals (size 38 and 42), two shorts, 2 meters of cloth
2	One fish net, one short, two quilts, 3 meters of cloth, one pair of sport shoes
3	One television set
4	Four meters of cloth, three pairs of <i>havaiana</i> sandals (size 36), one pressure cooker, two quilts, two shorts, one sport shoe (size 40)
5	One bike, one CD player
6	Three hammocks, three quilts, three meters of cloth, two pairs of sport shoes, one wrist watch
7	One parabolic antenna, one wrist watch
8	One bike, two shorts, two masculine jeans, two meters of cloth
9	One four burner oven, one small cooking gas cylinder, four meters of cloth, one pair of football shoes (size 39)
10	One bike for 7 year old children, one pair of <i>Penalty</i> football shoes (size 40), one pair of <i>Rider</i> sandals (size 40)
11	One tape deck system with speakers, two short jeans, two small size shorts for children
12	One pair of <i>Munique</i> football shoes, three black or blue panties, one CD player

Once the list is ready, chiefs go to the town to acquire the merchandise, which is later transported to the village, by truck, boat or even chartered flights. When the merchandise reach the village they are immediately taken to the house

of the *turma* chief, who proceeds to redistribute them. There are not always enough resources to attend to all demands and the *turma* chiefs needed to resort to various criteria in order to establish priorities, which always resulted in some tension.

In 1999, after long negotiations with the representatives of Vale, in which the Xikrin threatened to invade the company's office and to stop industrial operations in the Carajás mine, they succeeded in doubling the value of the Monthly Income. The wages of the "main chiefs" were raised in the same proportion in which the Monthly Income increased (100%). The balance sheet came to furthermore include new chiefs. There were now not only seven, but ten wage-earning chiefs.

But these values, too, soon came to be seen as insufficient. In the beginning of 2001, a new meeting was arranged, along the same lines it always had been, and Vale once more found itself under pressure from the Indians and was obliged to readjust the value of the Monthly Income. In what concerns wages, the same expansive tendency was maintained in both directions: 1) a raise for the chiefs and leaders that were already wage-earners; 2) an extension of the balance sheet to incorporate new individuals, almost always people related to the chiefs through consanguinity or affinity. Now there were not only ten, but fifteen wage-earning chiefs, all of them related to the chiefs by ties of consanguinity or affinity.

The process seems to proceed indefinitely due to the mimetic nature of Xikrin consumerism. With each new raise the situation calms down for some time, before the need for a future raise is felt. Let us look at the increase in the Monthly Income from 1998 to 2005 on a graph (Figure 1).

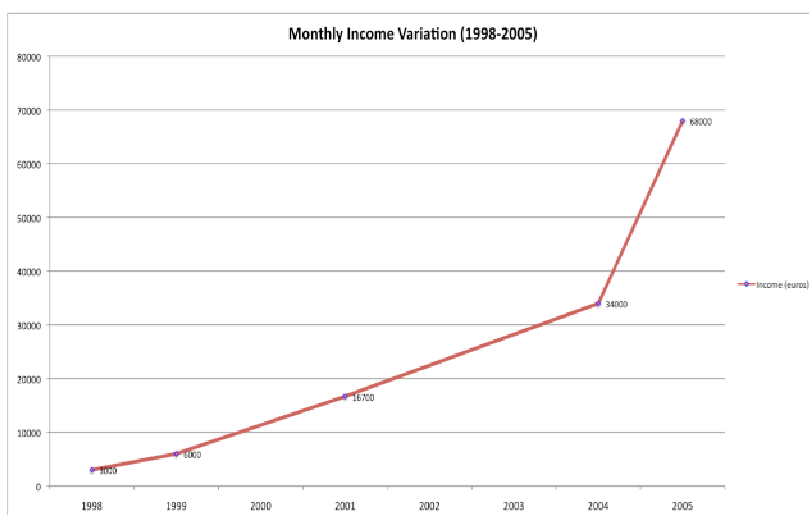


Figure 1: Monthly Income Variation (1998-2005)

The graph shows us what this over 1,000% increase over six or seven years looks like! For the sake of comparison, let us also look at the wages of village chiefs (only the main chiefs) during this same period (Figure 2).

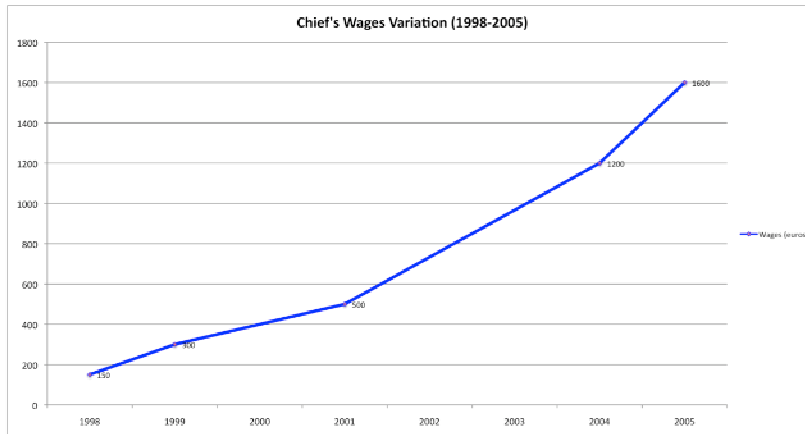


Figure 2: Chief's Wages Variation (1998-2005)

It is interesting to note that the hierarchy between chiefs and leaders is marked by the value of their wages. The main chiefs of each village receive the highest salaries (R\$1,600). They are followed by the *turma* chiefs (R\$1,200) and by the leaders (R\$1,000). Finally, there is a group of young leaders who receive lower wages. Recently, after the latest increase in the Monthly Income, the Xikrin abolished the shopping list system and decided that every married man in the village would also receive some money, roughly R\$100 or R\$150, in order to buy their own goods.

As a matter of fact a significant amount of the available funds is thus concentrated in the hands of chiefs, leaders and their families. Differences in access to resources between chiefs and non-chiefs is a general characteristic of how the Mebengokre relate to Western goods, which has already been noted by authors such as William Fisher (2000) and Terence Turner (1993). The latter describes the phenomenon as the emergence of a class hierarchy in Kayapó society. In a more palpable and expressive vein, this difference emerges in the discourse of many Xikrin (particularly non-chiefs) who often told me: "chief is rich, community is poor". This poverty, of course, is relative, since the system of dividing funds that I have described guarantees moderate levels of consumption for all Xikrin. What statements of this type express, at any rate, is a clear process of differentiation.

There are two questions that emerge from this situation and which I will try to answer:

1) Is differential access to resources a completely new phenomenon for Mebengokre society, a sort of intrusion of a capitalist logic into a previously “undivided” society (to use an expression dear to an egalitarianist such as Pierre Clastres)? Or is it a transformation of a pre-existent process of differentiation?

2) How are we to explain its inflationary character? In other words, why does there appear to be no limit to the Xikrin’s spiraling demands for money and Western goods?

COMMODITIES: PRODUCTION OF KINSHIP AND RITUAL

The Xikrin, it must be stressed, do not accumulate the money that they obtain, but rather convert it rapidly into goods that are consumed in daily life and in ceremonial periods. They perceive money to be the instrument for transformation *par excellence*, the means to acquire peacefully desired objects; objects which only the Whites produce and which they possess. Money for them is sort of a “capacity” for capturing industrial goods, i.e. foreign objects. But what is the importance of foreign objects in the Xikrin and Mebengokre social system?

The capturing of foreign objects is a crucial theme that takes us back to the Mebengokre ritual universe. Indeed, it is here that we find a set of symbolically valuable items, all of which are associated with exteriority or alterity, whose differencing effect is paralleled by the current separation of “rich” from “poor” obtained by means of different access to industrial goods and money. I am referring to Mebengokre ritual goods – personal names and prerogatives (*nêkrêjx*) – that have been described as the “wealth” of traditional Kayapó society (Lea 1986).

The association between *nêkrêjx* and commodities has already been pointed out, first by the Indians themselves and later by anthropologists (Lea 1986; Turner 1993, 2009). Initially, the Mebengokre term used to designate commodities was, precisely, *nêkrêjx*. This fact offers clues with which to answer the first question asked above: a continuity indeed exists. It is not, however, a simple and immediate continuity, since industrial goods are not currently regarded as ceremonial goods among the Xikrin. Let us look closer at this, investigating in greater detail the ways commodities are used and consumed by the Xikrin.

One of the aspects of the daily use of commodities that the Xikrin highlight is the care for kin. We know that caring, good living, and the moral virtues of sharing and inter-personal relations are recurring themes in the anthropological literature on Amazonian Indians, and that these have been systematically studied by Joanna Overing (2000). Through commodities the Xikrin have found new ways of realizing these values and practices. Industrial foodstuffs complement the daily sustenance of families.

Traditionally, this sustenance was produced by the domestic unit and particularly by work in the gardens. Yet care and sharing, in the form of offerings and exchanges of commodities, is not restricted to foodstuffs, nor to the group of close kin (or those who reside in the same house), but rather cut across the universe of an individual's social relations, which includes his parents, children, nephews, grandparents/uncles, girlfriends, lovers, affines and formal friends, extending even to neighboring villages. For the Xikrin, commodities are objects that should serve to please people and to indicate kinship ties and social relationships.

Giving gifts to kin is a means to recognize them, to "remember them", to "think of them". Commodities that are received as gifts are said to be *mekindjà*, "pleasantries". They are distributed between people, offered as gifts, as benefits to kin. In short, one of the uses of commodities is for the production of kinship, of the bodies of kin and of the community as a body.

A second aspect of the consumption of goods is associated to ceremonial production. Among the Xikrin there are two modalities of material production. On the one hand, there is a "domestic economy" at the level of nuclear families and uxorilocal extended kin, aimed at the production of food. On the other, there is a "ritual economy", geared towards the production of food that is necessary for the performance of public ceremonies. These modalities of production serve to produce Xikrin people, and they must be understood within this process. Material production has no other aim than consumption directed towards the production of bodies and the beauty of people in the community.

Ritual is the focal point of the constitution of beauty. Ceremonies basically consist of the attribution of special names considered to be beautiful (*idji mejx*) and of certain prerogatives and ornaments that come to compose the identity of the people who are so honored in the feasts. Although rituals are collective activities, there is also a private character to them. The child's parents, who pay in food so that the people of a village can dance and take part in the festivities, must sponsor them. But not all families are always capable of bearing the productive costs or possessed the necessary kinship relations to sponsor feasts for their children[viii]. Thus, the ritual system creates an internal division between beautiful people (*me mejx*) and common or ordinary people (*me kakrit*)[ix].

Nowadays, the introduction of commodities has facilitated the means that propitiate ceremonial activity and they have thus amplified it. The activity of chiefs, as mediators of the system of obtaining goods, occupies a central place here. At present, the input of industrial foodstuffs and other technical facilities that chiefs are able to obtain through political coordination has greatly unburdened families, leading to a considerable increase in the number of children who can participate in the ceremonies and have their names confirmed.

With a greater number of tools, shotguns, ammunition and other implements, such as chainsaws, and, in some cases, even with hired workers recruited among the neighboring Whites, who are paid to help to cut down forest to make gardens (not only the large gardens, but also the small, private lots), more families are able to produce more food for the feasts. Ritual food consists mainly of traditional manioc-flour cakes (*djwö kupu*) with meat or fish filling, baked in a stone oven; small game, such as tortoises; as well as banana, maize and other cultigens. Ceremonies thus rely not only on garden work and the preparation of manioc (under the responsibility of the “mothers” of the nominees); they are also preceded by collective hunts, in which the “fathers” of the nominees seek to guarantee large amounts of meat. Today the chiefs make use of the new roads that cut across the area, and they articulate the movement of hunters, transported in trucks or vehicles to specific zones which are underexplored and at some distance from the village, ensuring that the “fathers” of the children being celebrated obtain copious amounts of meat, particularly of the most admired varieties, such as ungulates, tortoises and so on.

During ceremonial periods, the Xikrin often obtain goods that facilitate the fabrication of feather ornaments: cotton and nylon threads (to weave the ornaments), for example, which, as I have previously described, chiefs distribute to the members of his age-group (*turma*). Other industrial items can also be used in ornament confection as substitutes for raw material that is difficult to obtain. Clothes may be bought for the dancers, such as shorts – normally of different colors, to distinguish between age sets – and undergarments for the women. Chiefs may contribute directly in the acquisition of drinks, powdered refreshments, boxes of soft drinks, and hundreds of loaves of bread and packets of biscuits, which supplement ritual food, notably during the period of rehearsals that precede the grand closure (*ami a prām*).

In short, it can be affirmed that the incorporation of Western goods within the ritual system has enabled an increment of ceremonial activity and, consequently, a significant increase in the number of children being celebrated (who will obtain their names and prerogatives), coming thus to be considered beautiful people. If we compare the data presented by Turner and Verswijver, we can empirically verify this increase. According to the latter (Verswijver 1992:78-ss), from 1924 to 1968, the annual average of naming ceremonies among the Kayapó-Mekranoti was 1.2 ceremony/year. In 1968 this rate had increased to 1.7. More significant was the increase in the number of children being celebrated, which went up from an average of 3 per year between 1924-1968 to an average of 7 per year from 1968-1980. Among the Xikrin I was able to verify an average of 4 or 5 ceremonies per year between 1998 and 2002, with about two dozen or more children being celebrated (Gordon 2006:336-339).

THE BEAUTIFUL AND THE COMMON

But we must still explain the continuities between Western and ceremonial goods. An essential detail in the correlation between the two is that both ceremonial and industrial goods are perceived to have an exogenous origin. In other words, they are seen to be elements originally created in the exterior of Mebengokre society which were, at a later moment, appropriated and transformed into Mebengokre culture or knowledge (*kukradjà*). I will now turn to the analysis of ceremonial objects so that we may isolate the properties that they hold in common with industrial goods, and the effects that the incorporation of the latter have on the Mebengokre social system.

Mebengokre groups traditionally possess a range of symbolic goods that include personal names (called grand or beautiful names) and ceremonial prerogatives (*nêkrêjx*). These function as signs of individual and collective distinctiveness and they are, as we have seen, the basis for a mechanism for producing value, expressed in the Xikrin concept of beauty (*mejx*). Names and *nêkrêjx* are the properties of certain people or certain families and they are transmitted from individual to individual, from one generation to the next, through a fixed rule that involves cross-kin.

One aspect of the potency and beauty of names comes from their external and “animal” origin, as can be ascertained from myth. For the Mebengokre, these names originate from supernatural beings associated with the aquatic domain (mythical fish). The Mebengokre obtained the names through shamans who stole them from the fish. The potency and beauty of prerogatives, knowledge and ritual objects also have an external origin. Many feathered ornaments, ceremonial objects, songs and even whole ceremonies were appropriated by the Mebengokre from foreign peoples (*kuben*) throughout their history. Furthermore, the origin of feathered ornaments is itself expressed in myth as the result of a predatory act of the Mebengokre against a gigantic supernatural and cannibal Bird.

In the past, the set of names and prerogatives may have constituted a clanic-totemic system, similar to the ones that we know from other Jê and Bororo speaking groups. Yet for some reason, as Vanessa Lea (1986) has shown, names and prerogatives have become the object of disputes because they constitute symbolic wealth. They have become instruments for the establishment of differences in hierarchy and prestige within the group, as I point out (Gordon 2006). Families and individuals try to accumulate names and *nêkrêjx* by rigidly controlling the mechanisms for their transmission, through loans and returns, so that they may thereby avoid the dispersion of the object or the name. It is important to be able to trace the genealogical lines within which an item circulates, from its origin to the present. Evidently, this is not always a simple

procedure and tends to lead to disputes and accusations of the theft of names and prerogatives.

A fundamental aspect of this is that exogenous origin needs to be ritually re-actualized in order to assure the value and beauty of names and *nêkrêjx*. Top-down generational transmission does not, in itself, guarantee the value of names and ritual prerogatives – on the contrary, it may act to depreciate them. It is instead ritual confirmation that connects ceremonial objects to their original owners in a top-down manner that guarantees their true value and beauty.

The aim of the great Mebengokre rituals, as we have seen, is to publicly and collectively confer or confirm the ceremonial names and prerogatives that were transmitted to children by their name-givers. Children who are so homaged or honored during these rituals are called *mereremejx*, an expression that can be glossed as: “those upon whom beauty is confirmed”, “those who become beautiful” (and the children’s parents are called *mekrareremejx*, “those whose children have become beautiful”). The importance of the ceremonial tie of names and prerogatives for obtaining these qualities is quite clear: names are said to be *kajgo*, that is, uselessly beautiful, falsely beautiful – lacking a true effect of value or beauty – unless they are confirmed during a ceremony with this aim (each set of names is associated to a specific ritual).

Through a series of rituals of metamorphosis – when the Kayapó transform themselves into Others – ceremonial goods are once again symbolically re-connected to their original owners, thus gaining a new differentiating or regenerative potency. Ritual therefore results in the re-subjectification of these goods (conferring upon them a sort of sacred value). It can be said, through an analogy, that ceremonial rituals function as a type of battery recharger. Like a battery, the object is there, but it is, in a way, inert, until it is recharged with energy.

But if ritual confirmation recharges the energy of batteries (the objects), conferring upon them an exceptional value, generational transmission discharges them. Excessive circulation functions as the inverse of ritual re-subjectification – that is, it causes the devaluation and objectification of an item. Objectified, it becomes something common, something that can be used by the group in general, but less interesting to certain people and families who seek prestige and distinction.

In order for these objects to confer beauty and prestige, it is therefore necessary to simultaneously control their transmission (preventing them from spreading too much, which depreciates them and makes them into simple objects), and to guarantee their ritual re-subjectification.

This mechanics produces value, but, at the same time, enables potential devaluation, making the system dynamic and open. Historically, this has been reflected in the centrifugal character of Mebengokre society, which always

practiced warfare in the aim of obtaining new external elements that could be incorporated into their political economy of value and beauty. Now it is clear that the “objects of the Whites”, when they were first discovered, were processed by a very complex ritual system of production of value. When the Whites first appeared before the Mebengokre, bringing with them such a fascinating quantity of new objects, they became the focus and motivation for capturing and renovating the stocks of distinctivity. Their goods became new *nêkrêjx*. In this sense, what we are at present witnessing in the Xikrin relation to goods and money is a movement that has always occurred in relation to ceremonial objects, and it is linked to the way they conceive their relationship with alterity and how they ritually process the objects that manifest this relationship.

There are, nonetheless, certain important differences. For one, most of the merchandise that circulates among the Xikrin is not clearly linked to the ceremonial sphere and to the system of vertical transmission anymore. As I have already pointed out, there is too much merchandise and it is everywhere, and there is thus no means for restricting its circulation through inheritance rules. In the past, however, things were otherwise. The first industrial goods obtained by the Xikrin were treated exactly as *nêkrêjx* are – they became prerogatives of certain people and families and were transmitted within the cross-kinship rule mentioned above. In the course of history, and with the intensification of relations with Brazilian society, the accumulation and the growing quantity of industrial goods (many of which manifested an utilitarian quality that seemed to restrain an exclusively ritual use) modified their ways of circulating.

In fact, as we have seen, money and merchandise began to circulate through the system of male political (age-based) groups, in a horizontalized and general mechanism of distribution. However, as we have also seen, even this distribution, tied to the political system, shows a strong tendency towards concentration and exclusivity, as if even outside of the ritual system merchandise continues to serve to create (or to help compose) internal value differences. Previously, the important difference had been between beautiful and common people. Now it is between those who have plenty of money and merchandise and those who have little.

PARADOX AND INFLATION

We can finally return to the problem of “Xikrin inflation”, summarizing what has been said in order to conclude. In Xikrin cultural and socio-political dynamics, the mechanism for producing value and distinctivity – expressed in the idea of beauty (*mejx*) – was based on a certain processing of symbolic goods (names and *nêkrêjx*) that functioned as signs of an external relationship (with what the Xikrin

define as alterity). In contrast to other goods that are common to all and which have to be shared (food, for example), these symbolic goods obtained their distinctive value through two procedures: a rule of vertical transmission – that guaranteed a restricted circulation and identified, with some clarity, a familial line; and a symbolic process that I have called ritual “re-subjectification” – that serves to re-potentialize the exogenous character and the regenerative and differentiating capacities of these items. The system as a whole had a dynamic tendency, based on a constant play of valuation and devaluation, linked to the ways in which the items at stake could become more or less common, with a more or less restricted access to the whole of the community.

The penetration of the objects and values of the industrial capitalist world – even if it was promoted by the Xikrin and geared towards their own ends – resulted in some important modifications to this system. As merchandise overflowed from the traditional processing mode (vertical transmission and re-subjectivizing ritual tie), it posed a certain sociological paradox: merchandise became *simultaneously* objects that should circulate restrictively (according to the logic of distinctivity) and objects that should circulate widely (they were used to intensify community ties and those of kinship between people). For this reason, they caused an acceleration in the whole dynamic of the system, insofar as the pressure to widen access to them generates new attempts at particularizing them on behalf of those individuals and families who have chiefly or prestige-related ambitions – attempts which become concrete through the impulse for new forms of consumption and access to greater quantities of merchandise, but which are then submitted to new demands for the widening of access to them, and so forth.

To make matters even more intense, the increase in ritual activity (a result of new technological and material conditions) seems to promote a generalization of the ceremonial status of beauty, dissolving the distinction between beautiful and common and ensuring that the right to use various ritual objects that had previously been the preserve of certain people and families becomes communal. The beautiful/common distinction thus becomes unmarked in favor of a new formula: rich (with money) vs. poor (without money). I do not mean to say that the beautiful/common has been obliterated or disappeared. I just call attention to a shift in emphasis that occurs among the Xikrin. Currently they seem to insist much less on this distinction than they did in the past. Rather what we can observe today is a growing tension around another distinction, knowingly who possess or do not possess goods and money.

As I have already mentioned, money is not amassed, but rather serves as a means for immediate access to an ever greater and more varied amount of merchandise. Yet as the system accelerates and acquires velocity, the ability to re-subjectivize and to confer value upon this merchandise through quantity or variety also begins to exhaust itself: the successive increase in the Monthly Income and

the organized and constant mechanism for its redistribution has guaranteed a relatively universal access to merchandise within the community, albeit with temporal differences. For example: the chiefs were the first to buy television sets, but in little time all of the houses of the village came to have them; the chiefs were the first to possess refrigerators, but in no time these were widespread between all families; the chiefs then needed to find new items, and acquired DVD players, and so forth. All of this results in a growing pressure on the volume of financial resources. Hence the expansive or “inflationary” dimension of Xikrin economy.

Faced with this picture of a rapid devaluation of elements of internal distinctiveness, the matter of wages, or money, acquires an interesting aspect. The Xikrin may have begun to realize that money can be seen as an infinite capacity for differentiation, not for its buying power, but in as much as one focuses on its quantitative nature. In opposition to concrete objects, money is something that can grow indefinitely while maintaining its distinctive capacity, so long as scale is kept constant. If I today have ten and you have one, there will not be any problem if you come to have ten tomorrow, so long as the proportion is maintained and I come to have one hundred. The growing influx of monetary resources into Xikrin society obeys this logic, as can be ascertained from the wage hierarchy of chiefs and leaders, scrupulously separated into levels. To indefinitely increase the amount of money seems to be the solution that the Xikrin have found to suppress the incredibly rapid loss of the differentiating value of their objects. This, then, is “Xikrin inflation”.

The Xikrin now find themselves faced with a new paradox. And they know that they must simultaneously look to the past and to the future in their search for answers.

NOTES

i A first version of this article was read to the “The (dis)empowerment of things in Amazonia Cosmopolitics” Workshop, Sainsbury Research Unit for The Arts of Africa, Oceania and Americas, University of East Anglia. I would like to thank Aristoteles Barcelos Neto for his kind invitation. I benefited greatly from the insightful and helpful comments of Aristoteles Barcelos Neto, Paolo Fortis, Stephen Hugh-Jones, Dimitri Karadimas, Cristiane Lasmar, George Lau, and Laura Rival. I also thank Luiz Antonio Lino da Costa for translating the first Portuguese draft into English. Funds for the initial research were provided by the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research.

ii See Rabben (1998).

- iii The event illustrates a facet of the remarkable prominence of these objects in all domains of indigenous life: kinship, economy, politics and ritual. In an unexpected turn, Western objects have the status of a “total social fact” in contemporary Kayapó society.
- iv But see S. Hugh-Jones (1992), Bruce Albert (1993), Overing (1992), Turner (1992, 2009), Fisher (2000) and Howard (2002) for important discussions on this topic.
- v The reader will recognize in this particular point my debt to the work of Sahlins (1985, 1988, 2000).
- vi Although the terms “Kayapó” and “Mebengokre” are used indifferently in the regional literature, for clarity I will use the second term to refer to all the groups that speak the same language and that are thought to have a common origin (which includes the many communities of Xikrin and Kayapó). This term indicates that although each village constitutes a relatively autonomous political universe, they all share a profound connection of every order (political, sociological, historical, cultural), which stressed the need to consider them a wide-ranging Mebengokre relational regime. I reserve the first term (Kayapó) to refer to the non-Xikrin Mebengokre, such as the Gorotire and the Mekranoti.
- vii The end of the dealings with illegal lumberjacks was not a spontaneous Xikrin initiative, but rather the result of the intervention of anthropologists and indigenists who were concerned with both the illegal nature of the enterprise and the social and environmental impacts that they represented.
- viii According to Lea (1986:162), a couple could, on average, carry out two naming ceremonies for their children throughout their life.
- ix Some authors, such as Turner (1984:358) and Verswijver (1992:79), tend to minimize the importance of this difference, both in the ritual context and beyond. In a previous work (Gordon 2006:329-333), I showed that the distinction between beautiful and common people has ramifications in political life, being strictly associated with agency (social capacity). The same social relations that compete in the constitution of beautiful people compete in the maintenance of prominent political positions and, eventually, in chieftaincy.

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