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Lucas Carneiro de Carvalho

Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, U.S.A.

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Consuming the Nation-State: Reflections on Makushi Understandings of the Person in a Transnational Context

Lucas Carneiro de Carvalho

Department of Anthropology, University of Virginia, U.S.A.

Abstract

Amerindians constantly and actively fabricate their bodies and the bodies of others. The growing literature on the topic highlights the importance of consuming and sharing substances as well as how social relations are used to construct persons. But how does this logic operate when Amerindians deal with Euro-American concepts such as international borders, passports, political, civil, and social rights? Which of these are bodies and which are bodily substances? Why and how are Euro-American bodies and substances consumed, shared, and circulated? Each substance has its specific properties that affect the building of the body and consequentially the social relatedness of the person. This paper will look at ethnographic data from the Makushi people to reflect on why and how the manipulation of the body – thought of as an amalgam, not as a container – is the preferred way to interact with Euro-American concepts.

Introduction

“If you want me to be Brazilian, I can become Brazilian. If you want me to be Guyanese, I can become Guyanese. If you want me to be Venezuelan, I can become Venezuelan. I can be whatever you want me to be.”

This is what an Amerindian man once told me, while in a border town in Guyana. The statement points us to familiar legal concepts and how we define a border, country, nation, or nationality, as well as how all of these transform constantly. The Amerindian man was a Makushi person, and he spoke of *becoming* Brazilian, Guyanese and Venezuelan. More than that, he said he could become whatever he wanted (or whatever his interlocutor wanted him to be). This paper will explore the logic behind the processes that the Makushi people use to become “other” in the border region of Guyana, Brazil, and Venezuela. In sum, I argue that a controlled exchange and consumption of substances allows one to transform into the other. Substances produce a desired effect in the human body, consequently changing the body’s metaphysical potencies and its position in the realm of social relatedness. Although the paper focuses on the Makushi case, the reflections made here are also part of a much wider discussion which investigates the material and immaterial substances that constitute persons at different stages in their life cycle (Rahman, this issue). This topic builds on the growing literature about the compound nature of Amerindian “artefactual anatomies.” Therefore, in conjunction with the rest of this Special Issue, this paper will provide insight into how Amerindians carefully manipulate objects and substances in their environment in order to constitute and to transform persons.

The notion of an *Alchemical Person* is an interesting and productive way to explore Makushi understandings of bodies, persons, and substances. Makushi people try to control how bodies and persons interact with each other because their skin is porous and interactions result in the inevitable exchange of substances, which, in turn, affect the physical

and metaphysical potencies of each body. The Makushi are not trying to transform lead into gold, they just want to prevent proper persons from developing or acquiring non-social behavior and become *oma'gon*. *Oma'gon* translates to “beast,” a non-social being. They are beasts not for their appearance, but for their lack of control and moderation in their actions. They are too violent, greedy, and hungry. They eat too much, talk too much, and make too much noise. Due to the relationship between physical and metaphysical potencies in their bodies, *Oma'gon* overindulgence and decadence are reflected physically: they become ugly and other-than-human. The idea that alchemy produces an ideal body and person is one that can help us explore the Makushi aesthetics of being and their thoughts on each ingredient of the admixture. This becomes even more interesting when Euro-American bodies and substances are considered in the process.

The paper is divided into six general sections. In *The Makushi* section, the paper provides a brief political, sociological, and economic description of the group today. This helps contextualize the position of the Makushi vis-à-vis other Amerindians in the circum-Roraima region and the tri-border between Brazil, Guyana, and Venezuela. In “The Transformative Person”, the paper focuses on native ideas on creating and transforming the body and the person, to show how these ideas fit into a broader discussion of Anthropology. In this section of the paper, I explore how the exchange of substances is crucial to making the body and I go over some of the processes in which substances are exchanged. In “Taren and Muran”, the paper examines one way in which Makushi people use animals, plants, and words to affect the human body. “The Makushi and the State”, explores what would be the substances of Euro-American institutional bodies, and how the Makushi not only conceptualize but also operate within the notions of national sovereignty, citizenship, and national borders. The section “The Alchemy of Names and Foods” shows the importance of these two categories to understanding group belonging, differentiation, and the aesthetics of being.

The Makushi

Today, the Makushi people live to the Southeast of Mount Roraima, between the headwaters of the Branco and Rupununi rivers. Approximately two thirds of the Makushi population lives in Brazil and one third in Guyana. There are also some Makushi families in Venezuela near Mount Roraima itself. Makushi residency continues to have an uxorilocal tendency: a new married couple resides at the bride’s family home until they build their own house. The young man still lives and works on his father-in-law’s farm, contributing to the household for some years as part of the bride service provided. The new couple only builds their own house and establishes their own farm when the father-in-law is satisfied that the services and capabilities of his son-in-law demonstrate his capacity to provide for his daughter and their offspring. This social practice creates resident clusters around the father-in-law, who gains and holds status and exerts influence on his sons-in-law (Kaplan 1975; Rivière 1969; 1984). Friction and conflict always occur, especially when the men brought in from the outside start to establish their own bridal service relationships when they marry off their daughters. When tension emerges, families move out of the locality before competition for political authority escalates to the point of physical violence.

In the past, communities would break apart into smaller kinship clusters and move away to avoid conflict when necessary; however, today there is constant pressure to become stationary. Securing land rights and access to public services, such as health care and education, motivate Makushi families to establish a less nomadic lifestyle. The idea of a sedentary lifestyle can be appealing to couples with young children, since they have often just established their farms and built their houses, or else are in the process of doing so. Makushi youth, on the other hand, do not want to stay in their villages of origin. They want to leave to experience the world and make money. Hence, the vast majority leave the village after or even before completing their secondary education. Youths – especially men – between the ages of 18 to 24 are only periodically present in their “home” villages. Many youths return on a more permanent basis once they take a partner and start a family, but in order to build

their houses and establish their own farms, the young men must first fulfill their bridal service obligations.

After working outside, in the cash economy, the incoming residents (once again this is mostly the case with men) bring outside wealth and technology with them. Wealth takes the form of motorcycles, chainsaws, generators, mobile phones, and money itself. The items brought in are valued by the community for their practical utility rather than as status symbols. Moreover, the community as a whole is always in need of skilled laborers such as carpenters, electricians, masons, etc., for the upkeep of the village infrastructure. Villagers quickly solicit the help of newcomers, especially if they have the specialized skills needed to build a house, dig a well, install a solar panel, maintain a water pump, build chairs and desks for the schoolchildren, mill the fallen trees in the bush with a chainsaw, etc. A young man who already has, or gradually brings, resources from elsewhere, proves to his father-in-law that he is capable of providing for his wife and children. He still has to provide bridal service in the form of his own labor, but access to modern tools decreases the time and effort to complete each project.

Nonetheless, the desire for industrialized goods not only forces the Makushi people to look for paying jobs outside their village, but also leads them to charge for services that were previously accounted for by reciprocity. Movement in and out of the village, across savanna and bush, is a constant cycle in the lives of the Makushi. Even with pressure to become more sedentary, men leave their villages for months at a time to try their luck in the gold and diamond mines in the Mazaruni region, or further afield in Suriname and Venezuela. They also travel to the Northwest coastal regions of Guyana to work for Chinese companies logging the rainforest. Further, after the homologation of *Raposa Serra do Sol* Amerindian Territory in Brazil, some rice farmers have moved their enterprises to the Pirará region in Guyana, and these farms are another economic opportunity for the Amerindian population of the Rupununi. Employment as laborers may also be found in the Brazilian cities of Boa Vista and Manaus. Men in particular seek cash-in-hand jobs in distant locations, but women also constitute part of this migratory labor force. Through daily domestic work, young Makushi women commonly enter into indentured servile relationships with non-Amerindians in urban areas. Married women sometimes follow their husbands, and try to find jobs as cooks, domestic workers, or nannies. The insertion of Amerindian women into the marketplace can lead to structural changes, especially those of traditional gender roles in the family (Oliveira and Projeto Kuwai Kîrî 2010; Simonian 2001). Women working outside their homes contribute to the household financially, but many of their partners feel uncomfortable with this situation. Domestic violence may follow or the relationship could be estranged and one or both return to the village. Young women employed as domestic workers are also frequent targets of sexual abuse and have a high rate of underage pregnancy. In the majority of cases, the urban host family sends the Amerindian girl back to her village if she gets pregnant.

Amerindians also visit and stay in other Amerindian villages on either side of the border. These visits are short in length, since the main reason behind their movement today is to work in the cash economy and access public services. A more permanent movement from one village to another occurs with marriage. When going to a different locality, the Makushi rely on a relative who is already settled in that place; this is also true for other indigenous peoples in the region (Rodrigues 2002). The hosts provide shelter, food, and help finding a job for the newcomers. They normally reside in the outskirts of the cities, in areas prone to seasonal flooding and deficient in public services, like public transportation and sewage disposal. The great majority of the fixed and transient residents of the periphery are Amerindians not only from Brazil, but also from Guyana and Venezuela. Even though most speak their own language, in the outskirts of cities the language of choice is Portuguese.

The Transformative Person

During my time in Guyana, I did not encounter any adult Amerindians who had not been to or lived in Brazil for some period in their life. Only a few children and adolescents had not

been to Brazil, but they were eager to learn Portuguese so they could find a job when they did go to Boa Vista or Manaus. The adults had been back and forth across the border for work, medical treatment, to visit relatives, buy equipment, or just “to see the place.” One young Makushi man told me he had worked for years in the Brazilian city of Boa Vista as a construction worker, as well as tending watermelon crop on a ranch. I asked about the legal aspects of working in Brazil, that is, how he, as a Guyanese man, managed to obtain the right documentation. He told me that there is no problem in moving between countries, since they (the Makushi and other Amerindians from the region) can transform themselves into Brazilians in order to work on the other side of the border. According to him, the transformation process to become Brazilian involves the abandonment of one’s village, leaving behind one’s family and friends. Once on the Brazilian side, one must destroy any reminder of the previous life in Guyana (documents, pictures, etc.) and live on the streets, begging for money and food. After some time, the police pick the person up from the streets, and the police must be informed of the loss of one’s documents and money, which makes it impossible to return home. The police will then send the person to FUNAI (*Fundação Nacional do Índio* – National Indian Foundation), which will in turn issue them new documents. This, according to the informant, is the process of *becoming* Brazilian.

It is important to stress that this is not an elaborate plan to defraud the Brazilian government, but rather a deeply-rooted belief that allows the person to access metaphysical capabilities (in this case, the legal right to work in Brazil granted by citizenship) through a series of deliberate and controlled physical and social transformations. Once again, this is at the forefront of the processes through which a body is manipulated and a person is fabricated. Even as an adult, the process of fabrication is never complete, because persons can engage with others (humans and other-than-humans alike), and that interaction produces the exchange of substances that adds to the ever-changing body conglomerate (Santos-Granero 2011). Per the example above, in order to become Brazilian, one needs to abandon the social life of the village to dwell alone in public spaces of the urban center, forgo home-cooked meals and the intimacy of family for leftover foods cooked and given by foreigners. One must exclude themselves from the intricate and appropriate rights and obligations of being around one’s kin to beg for the sympathy of strangers. These processes amount to a radical social death that is necessary in order to give up being Guyanese and to be transformed into a Brazilian person. This process can be seen as a rite of passage with clear definitions of liminal and non-liminal positions (van Gennep 1960); however, it is also an experiential event with distinct relations between substances. It is the change in both the substances and the context of their exchange that creates the new category of person (Seeger, Da Matta, and Viveiros de Castro 1979). For this specific transformation to be successful, the person needs to respect a set of food prescriptions and social avoidances. The avoidance of familiar foods and social relations is done to create or stress a transitory moment that enables the social fabric to be cut and re-sewn in the context of accepting foods and interactions that were previously considered unfamiliar, improper, and even dangerous. In transforming oneself from one category of person into another (in this case the transformation from Guyanese to Brazilian), the person is not only accepting his/her insertion into a new realm of social relatedness, he/she is also reconfiguring the category of person previously occupied as unfamiliar, improper, and even dangerous. This process temporarily fixes the body in a specific configuration, since the body is not conceived as a natural, given container that holds spiritual vitalities. The body is conceptualized as an assemblage that is affected by what it eats, how it moves, how it communicates, where it lives, etc. (Mentore 2005). The body is constantly submitted to a process of fabrication, by mixing and exchanging substances from other bodies – either human or other-than-human (Crocker 1985; Viveiros de Castro 1987). Fixing the body in a specific configuration is relevant because metaphysical potencies are not qualities of the mind, but are located in the body (Viveiros de Castro 1992). Moreover, there is a morality and an aesthetic that influences the aforementioned processes of making a proper body and proper person (Londoño Sulkin 2012).

Exchange and interaction amongst the Makushi are taken seriously because they can be deeply affected by the kinds of substances being exchanged (I use substance as an overarching concept – see Carsten 2002). The difference between self and other is created in

this process of exchange and mixing. Moreover, human life can only exist through a delicate and constant process of mixing substances (rigidity, fluidity, form, content, vitality, intent, etc.), and these substances do not necessarily belong to man, forcing mankind to interact with other powerful non-human beings (Overing and Passes 2000). Once human persons are constructed, they become subjects and objects of a constant surveillance of their form and content, because if the mixing gets out of proportion, their position in the realm of social relatedness changes. It is important to point out that the Makushi also conceive of the possibility of extreme change, by which the human body changes into an animal body. Nonetheless, this is a very dangerous transformation, and its only purpose is to kill another human body. Only *kanaimas* can perform such an extreme transformation. *Kainaimas* are people specially trained to terrorize and kill others (Butt Colson 2001; Im Thurn 1883; Kenswil 1946; Whitehead 2002) simply for the sake and the thrill of killing.

Because there is always a fear and suspicion of *kanaimas*, who fall into the category of the dark shamans (Mentore 2004), the Makushi people are always suspicious of outsiders, people they do not know, and people with whom they do not interact frequently. Those who fall into these categories are more likely to be *kanaimas*, thus peoples' preference to interact and be close to those they already know (e.g. the extended family and others living in the same household). If someone lives nearby, but belongs to a different household cluster, interactions with that person entail some level of caution. Those living in a household may also treat their in-law co-residents with caution. An in-law is always marked with the ambivalent position of being from the inside and from the outside (Mentore 2004; 2005). This caution is needed because social interactions result in inevitable exchanges of substances, affecting not only one's body but also the body of others. Since the conglomerate that constitutes the body is fluid, it is only through the careful and appropriate consumption of foods and conditioning/caring for of one's body that the ideal aesthetics of the Makushi person are constructed.

The individual becomes a proper Makushi when they are distinct from all the other sorts of people that dwell in and populate the world, by a careful and constant process of caring for oneself and others. They "become of a kind," distinct from other kinds of people (Overing 1993). Although the family will share food with those who are married in, they frequently have some small but significant differences in food preferences that is distinct from their co-residents. Neighbors and villagers can bring forward the outside-ness of those married in when there are cases of sickness and death in the village. The argument is that although the people who married-in now live in the same village, they come from different communities (especially when the communities are not predominantly Makushi) and they feel jealous about the health and happiness of others. This feeling of jealousy and envy is the motivation for the out-siders to "spoil" people. It is presumed that they might use *muran* and *taren²* to do harm to others and even kill them in order to feel happy. When sickness and death occur, in-laws from other villages are the first to be blamed as they always remain "strangers" in some sense.

I met a young couple in a Makushi village where the wife had been born and raised, but her husband was an outsider from a Wapishana village. They had been together for about five years, they had four children, and lived in the wife's village, which was a predominantly Makushi community of about 100 people. All the villagers considered the woman's children to be Makushi, they saw the husband as a full member of the community too. He participated in all of the village activities and duties, while engaging in the appropriate kinship relations with the other villagers. Nonetheless, his fellow Makushi co-residents did not forget his *Wapishaneness*. The villagers would say that because he grew up in a Wapishana village, he was Wapishana. However, when the young man visited his own mother in his "home" village, she was suspicious of him. The mother was not sure if he was still a "good person," because now not only did he live far away from her, but he lived in a Makushi village. Just as his mother's womb and breast milk once protected and nurtured him, his wife's cooking and her parents' house did the same for him now. By eating what the mother thought of as strange foods, and interacting with strangers (in-laws), her son had slowly and gradually become a stranger too. The cause for suspicion was not so much a change in appearance, but rather the morality and the appropriateness of interacting with each other. Because the son was constantly exchanging substances with Makushi people in the village

where he now lived, the feelings and the way in which mother and son perceived each other had changed. Different substances had nurtured their bodies, thus placing them in different realms of social relatedness. The son told me that both he and his mother felt awkward towards each other at the beginning of every visit. The more he stayed at his mother's house, the less awkward they would feel towards one another. If he stayed there for a month or two, he no longer felt like a stranger. Now he had his own family and farm, so he could not stay with his mother that long. The longer he stayed with his mother, the harder it was to go back to his wife's village. Although he missed the company of his wife, he said people "do things differently" in her village. He had to adjust once again when going home, and that caused him discomfort.

This is an interesting case because it illustrates how conviviality (Illich 1973; Overing and Passes 2000) can mark the category of person one occupies (Carsten 2002; Lukes 1985; Mauss 1979; Strathern 1988). It is the everyday praxis in the village and the experiential knowledge it produces that allow the Makushi, Wapishana, and Amerindians in general, to not only interact with each other and with alterities, but also to define an appropriate code of conduct (Schneider 1968), an aesthetic of what it is to be human (Gow 1991; Mentore 2005; Santos-Granero 1991). The importance of the body for Makushi ontology becomes clearer when we realize that one knows through the body because one feels through the body. The verb stem "to know" and "to feel" are the same in Makushi – *etabi*. This is similar to other Amerindian groups where it is the body that knows (Lagrou 1998; McCallum 1996). For the Makushi, there is also no distinction between mind and body, and when that separation is attempted, they say "it makes people crazy." For them, this is frequently the case of people who go to universities. I have heard this argument in many different ways and once someone told me "They (i.e. students and researchers) read, read, and read again. They live in their books and don't go outside. They only do things in their heads, and then they go crazy." In opposition to the development and cultivation of the Hegelian spirit, the Makushi have a more holistic approach. They understand that knowledge comes from feelings, and from the phenomenological experience of being in the world (Cf. Micarelli, this issue). Although one person could be seen as the vector of knowledge, that knowledge does not belong to him/her. Knowledge exists in the world and it can be accessed in many different ways, but it cannot be owned. Once the body accesses a particular branch of knowledge, it retains its content through repetition, creating a sort of muscle memory of knowledge in the body.

Taren and Muran

The fabrication of human bodies also involves the utilization of other-than-human substances and knowledge. The use of this kind of knowledge in a person, object, plant, or animal is called *taren*, or "blow". People use *taren* in their daily lives to make their children grow fat, to help cassava to be plentiful, to ensure that a hunter's arrows hit the target, to attract and enchant animals and potential lovers, as well as for many other pursuits. *Taren* transfers particular qualities into a body, plant, or object when certain words are uttered and blown into the latter. In general, the words uttered comprise a whole or partial narrative of a *panton* – a particular story of mythological times or ancient past. In other words, *panton* is one story, incident, or myth from the Makushi narration of events that happened to, or were caused by, the inhabitants of the world during mythological times. The Makushi *pantone* is a collection of stories which are all interconnected; they recount the creation of the current state of affairs in the world, as perceived in the present. *Pantoni* not only explains how the world was in the past, but it is a resource that helps to deal with the malice and social conflicts of the present. By recounting some effects of the mythical time, the *taren* creates the potency for specific effects to come into existence in the current state of affairs. This also means that blowing is dangerous, since if not done properly one can accidentally invoke different effects than initially desired.

A *taren* also has a *sui generis* quality, and once used, it gains an agency that is independent from the person who brought it forward. *Taren* is a common and widespread practice, as every adult person in the village has some knowledge of it. However, there are also the

“blowpeople,” who are specialized in all sorts of *taren*. The underlining danger in blowing and the particular ability to memorize a repertoire of *taren* are the reasons behind specialization. Brabec de Mori’s discussion on sonic substance (this issue) resonates with some of Makushi practices, especially the work of the *pia’san* – the shaman. A Makushi *pia’san* can use audible and inaudible melodies, songs, and words to pierce someone’s body and insert uttered or unuttered sonic substance. Although *taren* could be perceived as a sonic substance, once a *taren* is blown it is released into the world and it will affect the world with a level of autonomy from the person who brought it forward. In that way, I think of *taren* as catalysts for particular effects, which if used in the wrong context can produce unanticipated results.

People commonly use *taren* in conjunction with *muran*. *Muran* represents the knowledge of adding/changing one’s own substantiality through the introduction of substances belonging to beings that are other-than-human – especially plants. In other words, *muran* is the use of a specific plant, with an accompanying technique, that has the capacity to add other metaphysical potencies to the human body. For example, there is a kind of grass used to produce a *muran* to allow people to run fast and far. This *muran* is called *paramian*. One needs to collect and burn the seeds of a particular kind of savanna grass and apply the pulverized ashes (and carbonized seeds) to three superficial cuts made specifically for this purpose. All cuts are of about one inch, and made at the ankles and on the side of each thigh right above the knee joints. The admixture is rubbed into the scored skin and the process is repeated twice more, at three-day intervals. Just a few days after the first application, even before the whole process is completed, the person already starts to feel different. They start to feel light, dreaming that they are running and feeling an urge to run. These dreams are transferred into the waking state, where they feel light, full of life, and want to run. They will not get tired, hungry, or thirsty when they run. To ensure the proper application of these effects, specific food avoidances must also be followed. The runner needs to avoid eating duck, turtle, and piranha. Ducks are birds that fly slowly and turtles walk slowly, their meat could slow down the runner. The piranha bites and this is the same pain one feels when his or her muscles are fatigued, cramped, or throbbing. Thus, to maintain their bodies as runners, persons made into runners by *paramian* have to keep their distance from fatty and delicious piranha meat. The use of *muran* resembles, in function, the Emberá’s body painting practices – see Kondo (this issue). One particular difference is that amongst the Makushi, the use of *muran* and *taren* does not create any idiosyncratic marks on the skin. Moreover, the ideal situation is the one in which those with whom you interact are unaware of the *muran* and *taren* used on your body.

The Makushi and the State

All the examples so far corroborate the perspectival theory that metaphysical potencies are achieved through experiential knowledge that fabricates and marks the human body. However, if following the perspectival logic *vis-à-vis* a different set of alterities (the nation-state and its apparatus for example), what would be the necessary transformations and how could bodies be fabricated to achieve the metaphysical capabilities that we like to call civil, political, and social rights? These are metaphysical capabilities (or rights) that we like to think of as bestowed upon us (Marshall 1964) by a non-human monster (Hobbes 1651) called “the State.” There is nothing intrinsic that makes a Makushi a Makushi, as witnessed in the example of the Wapishana husband who becomes a stranger to his own mother. The Makushi have to become and maintain themselves a Makushi. The daily practices of caring, commensality, and being in the presence of one another create a shared aesthetic of being and belonging. To the same extent, from a Makushi point of view, there is nothing intrinsic or natural that establishes someone as Brazilian, Venezuelan, or Guyanese. Nonetheless, the Makushi people identify metaphysical characteristics that are specific to each sort of person. One characteristic of a Brazilian person is the ability to receive sums of money from the Brazilian government in the form of state benefits and social programs (e.g. *bolsa família*, *bolsa escola*, *aposentadoria rural*, etc.). Receiving money in the form of social welfare is thought of as a successful interaction with a powerful other-than-human entity, the Brazilian

government. The Makushi are experts at dealing with other-than-human beings and have specific *taren* and *muran* to engage with national governments and bureaucracies. Their shamans also intervene in relationships with the nation-state and government at times.

A few days before the scheduled court case at the STF (*Superior Tribunal Federal* – Brazilian Supreme Court) regarding *Raposa Serra do Sol's* land homologation, CIR (*Conselho Indígena de Roraima* – Roraima State Indigenous Council) paid three shamans to travel from Boa Vista to Brasília. One of them recounted to me how they did shamanic work prior to and during the final ruling and said that the favorable decision was only possible because they worked non-stop beating leaves and drinking tobacco-infused water. While in Brasília, the shamans had to leave their bodies and go into the spiritual world to interact with other-than-human entities at play. For them, the court ruling was a result of both the legal work of lawyers, NGOs, and supporters of the indigenous cause, as well as successful agency of the shamans with the government in the spirit world. During my time in the region, I also attended several meetings where Amerindian village leaders from Brazil, Guyana, and Venezuela were present. Brazilian NGOs organized most of these meetings and sent out invitations to Amerindian leaders from villages in Guyana and Venezuela contiguous to the Brazilian borders. The agenda was set by the Amerindian organizations themselves, but representatives of FUNAI actively participated in all meetings. They gave talks and organized workshops, but their concerns were focused on border crossing, civil documentation, and rights to access FUNAI's services. The meeting had broad themes like human rights and the implications of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Convention 169 regarding indigenous peoples. It was clear to see how FUNAI's agenda fitted, especially within the scope of the ILO convention. FUNAI stressed that having a Brazilian-issued identification document (ID) did not make the bearer of the document a Brazilian citizen. FUNAI employees went over the legal requirements for naturalization in Brazil, always emphasizing that this was the only way for a foreigner to become Brazilian. Getting a state-issued ID without a certificate of naturalization is a civil crime of misrepresentation (*falsidade ideológica*) – punishable by law. FUNAI representatives declared that many *toshaos* (village leaders) in Brazil issued false statements of village birth. With these statements, people were seeking help from FUNAI and requesting official civil registration via the RANI (*Registro Administrativo de Nascimento de Indígena* – Indigenous Birth Administrative Registry). FUNAI employees firmly stated that the *toshao* was also committing a crime whenever he/she issued a false statement of birth. At these meetings, FUNAI always pointed out the discrepancies in the civil documentation of the local Amerindians. They called attention to the fact that many Amerindians had documents issued by Guyana and/or Venezuela with discrepant information compared to the Brazilian-issued documents: their given and family names did not match, the place and day of birth were not the same, the names of their parents were different, etc. To FUNAI representatives, this point was unequivocal evidence that the Amerindians were doing something deliberately wrong and illicit. On the other hand, having documents from Brazil, Guyana, and Venezuela is what the local Amerindian population calls having “complete documentation,” or “*documentação completa*.” FUNAI calls it criminal misrepresentation.

After a FUNAI employee pointed a finger at the indigenous communities along the border, one of the village leaders stood up and spoke. He said that he lived on the Brazilian side of the Ireng/Mau River. Many people in his village had relatives in Guyana, many of the older people in the village were even born in Guyana. A villager once came and asked him to write a document stating that his older brother was born there. Both brothers were born in Guyana, but they lived in Brazil for several years. The older brother decided to move back to Guyana about 20 years ago, but now that he was 65 and wanted to collect a Brazilian pension. The older brother did not obtain his Brazilian ID in the 25 years that he lived in the country. He said he did not need it then. The *toshao* said that he remembered the older brother, but he did not know him that well, since the *toshao* himself was still young when the brother had left. The village leader's answer to the request was for the older brother to come to the village and establish a farm, plant and pull cassava, parch *farine*, plant corn, and when the plants in his farm were “this high” (indicating a point just about his own height), only then he would write and sign a statement of birth. The village leader used this example to point out to the government representative that they were not doing anything wrong. They

were not issuing statements to just anyone, only to those who managed to make themselves part of the community.

The Alchemy of Names and Foods

Although the Makushi live in a border area where distinct ideas of national and legal institutions are at stake, it is the everyday praxis in the village and the experiential knowledge produced by conviviality that allow the Makushi people to think of themselves as people and determine how they relate to themselves and to others. Although villages today are also political units belonging to state-run surveying and welfare programs, the agglutination of consanguine and affine relations, as a traditional mode of political life, is still the praxis. This means that the local kinship configuration is constantly changing due to migration and marriage alliances, producing a variation in the demographic setup and spatial occupation that challenges the state administrators in their dealings with village dwellers. In addition, the constant shifts in the sociality of political life in the village work against the vertical hierarchy evinced in the national policies and services' focus and towards indigenous peoples.

The social relations created among those with whom a person interacts are important because they create the position of social relatedness. In the case of Guyanese Amerindians in Brazil, this involves changing their names. It does not make sense for them to speak in Portuguese and have an English name. They say they need Brazilian names, so that others will remember and interact with them appropriately. The changing of one's name takes time, as does learning the local Portuguese vernacular. To them, learning Portuguese properly involves not eating Guyanese foods and only eating Brazilian foods. Learning the Portuguese language is crucial in the process of becoming Brazilian.

Language acquisition can start in Guyana itself. I have met a few Amerindians who learned Portuguese working in the gold mines with Brazilians. Others learned Portuguese when doing their Brazilian Military Service. Military Service in Brazil is compulsory for men, and many Amerindians who were born in Brazil, but who were living in Guyana at the age of 18 decided to go to Brazil to enlist in the service. Some know little or no Portuguese when they start their military service.

As stated earlier, when people move to Brazil seeking cash jobs, they often stay with their extended kin. This new kin group, which was initially perceived as distant kin, becomes the immediate kin group. Uncles and aunts take the role of parents, and cousins become brothers and sisters. The newcomer is brought in and is supposed to understand and obey his/her obligations and rights in this new kinship configuration. Different foods that people eat also mark this new configuration. Cassava *farine* is still a staple for the Makushi people, but they say that no *farine* is the same as another because each household and village prepares the cassava mill slightly but noticeably differently from any other. The kind of cassava used, the soil in which it was planted, the time of year when it was grown and when it was harvested all influence the physical characteristics and the flavor profile of the final product. Moreover, each village prepares and eats fish in a different manner from one another. The varieties of hot pepper used and how they are used to season dishes also varies significantly. Such subtle differences in foods are important because the use of hot pepper not only influences a Makushi person's aptitude for physical labor, but also influences people's moods and their disposition for violence. The right amount of pepper produces a body willing and able to engage in hard physical labor. Not enough pepper produces a lethargic body and does not season a tasteful meal. Too much pepper produces a body that cannot focus on one activity, never completing a specific task. Pepper in excess also produces persons prone to violence and conflict, since they become hot like the pepper they eat. Different sorts of hot peppers are also used by shamans and blowpersons as remedies for certain maladies. They are further used by parents when their children do not want to wake up early in the morning. One of the parents breaks a freshly-picked hot pepper and rubs it on the inside of the child's elbows and knees. A child who is curled into the fetal position will straighten his or her arms and legs and get up. Another use is on men when they are feeling too lazy to go to the farm or play in a football match. They mash the hot pepper into a paste and put a little of the paste under the little finger nail. The finger nail is used to make a small cut inside the

men's rectums. In both examples, peppers are used as a stimulant, to "make the body hot" as they say. These uses cannot be frequent because the heat takes some time to wear off, and if a body is too hot, it becomes prone to violence.

Makushi people living in and around Boa Vista try to eat the same things as their relatives in the village: *farine*, cassava bread, *kumasi*,² fresh fish, bush meat, and fresh fruits. They believe the diet they had while in the village not only tasted better, but was also healthier. One Makushi man once told me, "We (Amerindians) take poison and make it into food. You (non-Amerindians) take food and make it into poison." He was alluding to cassava processing techniques, versus the non-Amerindian's longing for processed food filled with chemicals. Many Amerindians told me that their bodies looked good and healthy because of the traditional foods they ate. Non-Amerindian bodies looked ugly and sickly for lack of eating *farine*, fish, bush meat, cassava bread, and many of the traditional Amerindian foods. The Makushi are also keen on identifying the change in their diet as the cause of current health problems like diabetes, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure. Moreover, the transient male population in the village creates challenges for families who depend on the surplus of their crops and hunting. However, living in an urban region without access to traditional farms, they depend on their monetary ability to purchase industrialized goods, as well as to purchase goods brought in from the villages. The change in diet differentiates these Makushi people from their relatives and friends who are still in the village. However, the same unhealthy and less enjoyable city diet is essential in creating new capabilities fostered internally to deal with non-indigenous Brazilian populations and the Brazilian government. Since there is no duality or mind-body distinction, it is said that eating rice and beans every day is what makes someone learn the Portuguese language with dexterity. It also helps in forging a more amicable relationship with Brazilians in general. Many Guyanese Makushi who were living in Brazil told me they could no longer speak English because they were not eating Guyanese food; even though they were still eating cassava bread and *farine*, they said that these were of a "different quality." The new circles of commensality and what is now being consumed helps the newcomer transform the configuration of his/her own substantiality, thus becoming more like those around him/her. This is a slow and gradual process, which can be physically and emotionally traumatic. The results change the category of person, and the metaphysical capabilities of the body. It does not mean that this transformation is final or irreversible. A position in a realm of social relatedness cannot be stagnant, since the body is in a never-ending process of fabrication and transformation.

Conclusion

In the process of becoming a Brazilian, there are two divergent logics at play: the Brazilian government's idea of citizenship and the Makushi idea of personhood. The state logic operates from the notion of the individual, which is seen as a unique, singular, non-replicable unit not to be mistaken with others. This is why each individual needs a unique identity. Even when individuals have two or more nationalities, his or her identity has to be the same in every country. In such a way, while the individual can negotiate his or her rights of citizenship with different nation-states, they are always the same individual: unique, singular, and non-replicable. Makushi people, on the other hand, deal with the nation-state, their government institutions, and the rest of human and other-than-human beings that dwell in the world within their specific logic of personhood. The person is not an irreducible atom, but an amalgamation, an alchemical being that is constituted of different substances from other beings in the realm of social relatedness. What we view as rights granted by the State are sometimes thought of as substances and/or potentialities of the person by the Makushi people. There are many easier ways to gain access to Brazilian resources, but all accounts I have heard pointed to something more than utilitarian. There is always the intent to share oneself with a different group, with a different community, and to truly relate to them. However, this is so far beyond the comprehension of the state bureaucrats of FUNAI, who base their interactions with Amerindians on the side of the international border where they were born. They forget that such boundary lines are imaginary, and that they were conceived in partial disregard for the indigenous peoples they were "dividing." The

problem of the border and what the nation may mean to its citizens (and non-citizens) is a problem government bureaucrats impose on the Amerindian population (within and outside of the boundaries of the nation). This paper demonstrates that indigenous peoples in the border regions of northern South America deal with this “problem” with much more proficiency than Brazilian bureaucrats do, since their logic of personhood imbues them with a more malleable understanding of their own being. The solution the Amerindians employ is to change their categories of person by transforming themselves into the other.

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Notes

1. The definitions of *muran* and *taren* are discussed later in the article.
2. *Kumasi* is a cassava processing byproduct made by reducing cassava water. It is a thick, black, sweet and sour syrup that is used in the preparation of foods. In Guyana, the use of *kumasi* is widespread and it is known as *cassareep*. In Brazil, this cassava byproduct is also used in the Amazon region and it is known as *tucupi preto*. Some of the names used in the Spanish are *tucupi*, *aji negro*, and *casaramano*.

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