

Universidade de São Paulo,
São Paulo, São Paulo, Brazil.

SYLVIA CAIUBY NOVAES

ICONOGRAPHY AND ORALITY: ON OBJECTS AND THE PERSON AMONG THE BORORO

ABSTRACT

This article focuses on some sensory modalities – visible, material and sonic – which allow for a greater understanding of the processes through which social beings in indigenous Brazil are created and transformed. David MacDougall has suggested that the study of visible cultural expressions should be considered an aspect of visual anthropology since “the expressive systems of human society... communicate meanings partially or primarily by visual means” (MacDougall 1997, 283). However, I would argue that it is also possible to associate these visible aspects of human communication with other sensorial modalities, such as, for example, sonic effects and even breathing, both of which are essential to any reflection on the transformations taking place in human bodies. In this article, I shall aim to substantiate this argument by recasting the material presented in one of my first publications in the *Revista de Antropologia* and which concerned the role of certain material objects in the celebration of the Bororo funeral (Caiuby Novaes 1981). Along with birth and naming, among the Bororo death and funerals mark one of the most important social transformations that occur over the course of a person’s lifetime and certain material objects play a crucial role in bringing these about. In this reworking of my earlier material, I turn my focus on the sensory modalities – visible, material and sonic

keywords

creation and transformation
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modalities of artefacts; ritual
expression of the person.

- through which it is possible to understand the role played by the manufacture and social relations engendered by these objects in the creation and transformation of social beings among the Bororo. I hope that my analysis of the Bororo case will not only illuminate similar ritual processes elsewhere in indigenous lowland South America, but will contribute to the enrichment of anthropological understanding of these transformations more generally. It should be stressed that what is at stake here is not the understanding of these sensory modalities *per se*, but rather the broad variety of cultural phenomena in which they may be encoded.

This article focuses on some sensory modalities – visible, material and sonic – which allow for a greater understanding of the processes through which social beings in indigenous Brazil are created and transformed.¹ David MacDougall has suggested that the study of visible culture and visual media concerns expressive systems that communicate either partial meanings, or meanings that are of a fundamentally visual nature (MacDougall 1997, 283). However, I think that it is possible to associate these visual aspects with other sensory modes, such as the sonic and even breathing, which are both essential for a proper understanding of how human bodies transform. In order to substantiate this argument, I shall analyse a very specific case, namely, some objects used in the Bororo funeral and the social relations underlying their manufacture.

The naming rituals following birth and the funeral following death are the most important markers of how people are transformed, socially, over their lifetime among the Bororo and an analysis of the sensory modes of ritual expression that celebrate these transformations can greatly enhance our understanding of

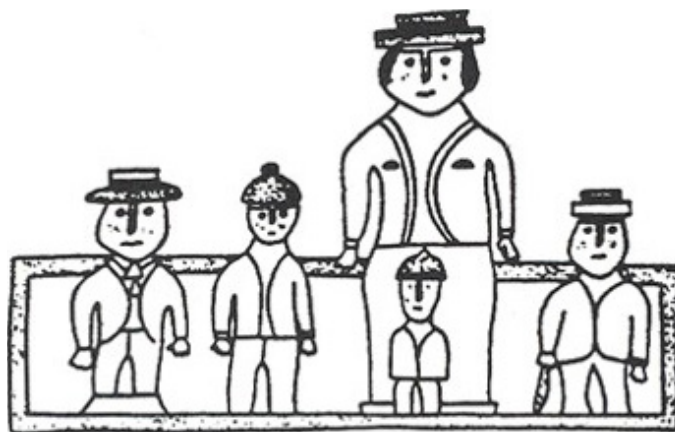
1. I am thankful for the comments and suggestions of Laura Graham, which allowed me to elaborate upon an earlier version of this paper, presented as part of a competition for the professorship at Universidade de São Paulo (USP) in 2010. I am most thankful to Paul Henley who edited the translation in English with many useful comments on the paper. I am also grateful to the investigators of the thematic project, “Experiencing Film in Anthropology” that I coordinated and which was funded by FAPESP (Processo 09/52880-9). This engendered a rich academic dialogue from which this article has greatly benefited. I also thank CNPq, for the personal grant that facilitated certain aspects of this work.

how these processes take place. The perspective that I shall be proposing is that of the anthropology of expressive forms. This is not limited to sensory modalities *per se*, but rather consists of identifying the broad range of cultural phenomena in which modes of sensory expression may be encoded. As Elizabeth Ewart has put it (2008, 507), “The social significance of the senses is as much bound up with an understanding of sociality – that is, the context within which discourse occurs – as it is bound up with sensory experience itself.” As I shall seek to show, there are specific forms of aesthetic and sensory expression that take place in the course of the Bororo funeral which play an active part in the creation and transformation of Bororo persons, and which should be appreciated for the ethical, aesthetic and moral value from which they cannot be separated.

A THEORETICAL RETHINKING

In the course of this article, I shall re-analyse from a different theoretical perspective the material that I first presented in one of my earliest publications in *Revista de Antropologia*, in 1981: *Plaits, gourds and jaguar skins in Bororo funeral - toward an understanding of the Bororo notion of person*. This rethinking was in part inspired by Paolo Fortis (2012) in his analysis of the anthropomorphic wooden sculptures, known as *nuchukana* (sing. *nuchu*) that the Kuna of Panama use in their curing rituals.

Fortis argues that in Amerindian societies material objects are visual manifestations of a much larger and complex set of ideas that manifests itself in a broad variety of forms and contexts. Visual arts, for example, have a central role in mediating relations between humans



Cuna curing figurines
Drawn by Guillermo Hayans (cerca 1948)

figure 1
Drawing of
the *nuchukana*.
Source: Michael
Taussig, *Mimesis
and Alterity*.

and non-humans, identity and alterity, life and death, present and past. He argues that rather than trying to understand material objects in isolation or in terms of what they mean for the people who make them, one should focus instead on the web of significant day-to-day relations within which these objects are designed and made.²

The Kuna started to produce *nuchukana* figurines little more than a hundred years ago and today one can find large quantities of them in their homes. They are not a form of representative or figurative art but rather are crude renderings of the human form, with little attention paid to detail. Their noses are pointed and their gendered traits are highly schematised: male figures wear a hat while females wear a headscarf (Ibid: p. 10).

Male elders carve these figurines and in the act of carving demonstrate their fertile capabilities, or more precisely, the transformation of the fertility that they possessed when they were young. According to Fortis, the act of carving, and the actual cutting of the tree or branch with which these little figures will be made, involves a discourse that embraces both death and life. On the one hand, the souls of the dead, both physically and metaphysically, travel in a canoe toward the cemetery. In physical and metaphysical terms the canoe is also a means of transport symbolically associated with the maternal uterus. The birth of a child and the death of a person are thus seen, amongst the Kuna, as moments during which the soul is in a state of transition out of an old body and into a new one. This moment of transition is seen as very dangerous for living human beings.

figure 2

The *nuchukana*.
Source: Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity*.



2. These *nuchukana* figures feature in a magisterial article published by the late master, Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Efficacy of Symbols* ([1949] 2008) and are also analysed by Michael Taussig in *Mimesis and Alterity* (1993).

The Kuna are highly skilled carvers and they also have an interest in the figurative, but in carving *nuchukana* they purposefully avoid literal forms of representation, and especially so in their wooden sculptures. Fortis suggests a metonymic relationship between the wooden figure and the ‘image of a person’, that is, his soul. For them, Fortis claims, “figurative art is not the representation of visual exterior forms, but rather is the instantiation of invisible interior forms.” (Fortis 2012, 20). The Kuna’s anthropomorphic figures are thus not representational nor do they represent particular external bodies. What they do is give form to “images of interiority” which belong to the realm of the invisible or transformational. The *nuchu* is temporally home to the soul, but when the wood rots or is eaten by insects, the *nuchu* dies. As such, the Kuna see *nuchu* as a type of loose personal clothing (*mola*), which is temporal and perceivable by others.

The Kuna understand the human body as being manufactured through the ingestion of “real food” and by the development of thought, love and memory of one’s kin. A body is only human when it is healthy and thinks properly. When sculpting a *nuchu* the Kuna say they are transformed – that is, they can give existence to somebody so as to make them seen and known as such by other humans (Ibid., p. 21). By making the invisible visible, positive social relations are thereby enabled and established. On the other hand, these wooden sculptures also help to bring a powerful source of alterity right into the centre of social life. For carving also involves an inversion of time, in which the physical action of cutting a branch is seen as a separation, and the creation of a discontinuity, which is synonymous with death. In this way, sculpting wood is, for the Kuna, a process in which life and death overlap.

Fortis’s analysis of Kuna figures opens up interesting avenues through which to explore the central theme of this article, namely, a rethinking of what Bororo ethnography has to say about certain objects of material culture used during the Bororo funeral. These too are objects that render visible the various processes of transformation that begin upon the death of the person and allow for a better understanding of the Bororo concept of the person.

However, in order to analyse the transformative effect of these objects in the Bororo funeral, I shall also be drawing on the theoretical perspective proposed by Tim Ingold in his book *Lines: A Brief History* (2007) and reiterated in his article “Bringing things to life: creative entanglements in a world of materials” (Ingold

2010). His analysis gives priority to processes of crafting, rather than to the final product; to fluxes and transformations of materials, rather than to the states of matter themselves. Central to his analysis is the idea of life and creation as tessiture (and not text, which is equally something finished), that is, as an open process in which form cannot be imposed upon matter. Just as in alchemy or in culinary practice, this approach involves observing the flux of life, combined and redirected, and anticipating its imminent emergence.

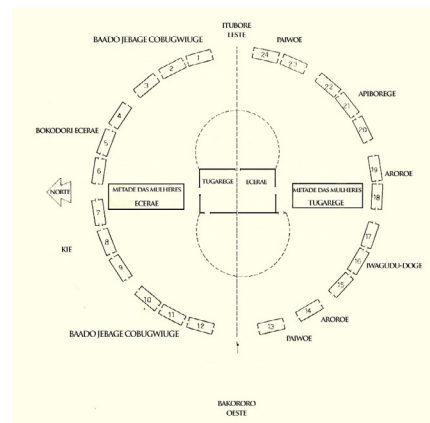
Finally, to complete the sources of inspiration for this article, I would like to underscore, amongst the various Amerindian paradigms, one that is particularly emphasised in Beatriz Perone-Moisés work (2008), *Os Brasis em Lévi-Strauss*. In one of his many interviews, Lévi-Strauss comments:

What delights me ... is that in these [Amerindian] societies, there is not, as there is in [Western] philosophy and as is presumed in natural sciences, a clear distinction between the sensible and the intelligible; on the contrary, for them there is a continuity between the two realms and the significance of the world is manifested directly through the order of the senses.

THE ETHNOGRAPHIC CONTEXT OF THE BORORO FUNERAL

The Bororo are part of the Macro-Gê linguistic group and, like other societies within this linguistic group, their villages - which today are located in non-contiguous territories across the state of Mato Grosso - are circular.

figure 3 and 4
 Córrego Grande village.
 Photograph: Sylvia Caiuby Novaes;
 The Bororo village plan.
 Source: Albisetti & Venturelli, *Enciclopédia Bororo Vol. I*.



Also like other Macro-Gê groups, Bororo society is divided into two moieties. In the Bororo case, each moiety is made up of four matrilineal clans. The essential features of this social organisation are literally made visible on the ground. The houses of the four clans of one moiety are ranged around the periphery of one side of the circular village, while the houses of the four clans of the other moiety are ranged around the opposite periphery of the circle, across the other side of a central plaza. All the houses on the periphery are of equal distance from the centre of the village, which is where the men's house is located. Each clan is represented by at least one house on the periphery and the marriage rule dictates that an individual from one moiety should marry someone from the other. In practice, what this means is that a man leaves his mother's house upon marriage and moves over to the other side of the village to live in the house of his wife's mother.

It is not marriage alone, however, that joins the two moieties; all daily social life revolves around exchanges between individuals from the two moieties, which are, at the same time, opposed and complementary to one another. Keeping Ingold's perspective in mind, we can see that there are recurring processes that connect people otherwise divided into their respective moieties. By way of example, one can refer to the Bororo theory of human reproduction. As they see it, it is the joining of a man to a woman from the opposed moiety that leads to the creation of children. The child is gestated in the mother's womb and the growth of the foetus is engendered by the semen that should be deposited there regularly throughout the pregnancy, thereby guaranteeing the presence of *raka*, the vital force that animates human beings and that only dissipates at death.³ Inside the maternal body, flesh grows and becomes strong.

A child is integrated into Bororo society by means of a naming ritual during which he receives a name from its maternal uncle, identifying it as belonging to its mother's clan. In this ritual, the child wears a head ornament called *boe-etao-bu*, made by the women of his mother's clan and bearing her clan's distinctive motifs. It also wears an ornament known as a *kiogwaro*, made by a man from the opposite moiety to that of his mother who will play the role of the child's father. In contrast to the *boe-etao-bu*, the *kiogwaro* bears the motifs of the child's father's clan.

3. As in other societies with oral tradition, in Bororo cosmology there is a close association between birth and death.

figure 5
A child is decorated for the naming ritual. Photograph: Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.



As the sun rises on the appointed day for the ritual, the name-giver, i.e. the child's maternal uncle, takes the decorated child in his arms and declares its name in the centre of the village plaza.

He then blows upon the child several times. Breath is an important sensory aspect of the ritual that testifies to the Bororo the processes of personal creation and transformation. Breath is considered synonymous with the movement of life. It is present in naming rituals, when a child receives its name, which is a necessary condition for the child to be considered a *boe* - how the Bororo self-identify. The absence of breath, as we shall shortly see below, is a sign of imminent death and the absence of life.

figure 6
The maternal uncle announces the names of the child. Photograph: Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.



However, there is perhaps no aspect of Bororo life that engages the two moieties with one another in such a complex and intricate way as the funeral. Death, for the Bororo, is the result of the actions of the *bope*, the vital principle that destroys in order to create (Crocker 1979, 256; Levak 1971, 176). The *bope* is always associated with *rakare*, the vital force that ends at death, which for the Bororo is made evident by the interruption of the flux of the vital elements – such as blood and breath – which are present in living beings. The interruption in breathing and the absence of breath is, for the Bororo, a clear sign of bodily death.

All the dead, on the other hand, are *aroe*, a cosmological principle which Crocker classifies as antithetical to the *bope*, the cause of death. While *bope* is linked to transition and change (such as those changes that occur at puberty or at death), *aroe* is linked to continuity, to the preservation of a state of order and of human wellbeing. The *aroe* incarnate in all those who participate in funeral rites, and they are associated with the ancestral spirits of the various different clans. It is worth remembering, as Crocker (1976) states, that the Bororo clan is a common unit of “logical substance”, not a group of unilineal descent, and one of the most important things that the members of a clan share is a common pool of *aroe* ancestral spirits.

As I have described in greater details elsewhere (Caiuby Novaes 2006), the Bororo funeral is an elaborate event to which a great deal of collective effort is dedicated. Most funerals take place over a period of several weeks and involve two burials. Immediately after a person has died, their body is buried in a shallow grave in the plaza. This is then followed by an extended series of dances, feasts and other collective celebrations, involving all members of the community and even visitors from other villages. During this period, the grave is regularly doused with water laced with palm juice in order to speed up the process of decomposition. Once this has been completed, usually after around six weeks, the skeleton of the deceased is exhumed, dismantled and taken into the men’s house where it is decorated with feathers and annatto, with particular attention being given to the skull. After further chanting, the bones are then placed in a large funerary basket, along with the ceremonial regalia that the deceased wore in life, and taken to a lake at some distance from the village. Here the funerary basket is lowered into a final unmarked grave beneath the water.

Shortly after the death of an individual, the relatives of the deceased nominate someone to be the dead person’s representative throughout the funeral process. This representative is known as the *aroe-maiwu*, literally “new soul”.

figure 7
The *aroe-maiwu*. Garças village, 1986.
Photograph:
Sylvia Caiuby
Novaes.



In the ideal case, the *aroe-maiwu* will be a man from the opposite moiety to that of the deceased, and also someone prestigious and known to be a good hunter. A couple is also appointed to assume responsibility for the deceased's material possessions: the mortuary gourd (*powari-aroe*) and headdress (*pariko*), both made in honour of the recently departed. The *aroe-maiwu* is treated as the ritual child of this couple. Once appointed, the *aroe-maiwu* will become a leading figure in the enactment of all the funeral events.

SENSORY OBJECTS: BEYOND REPRESENTATION THE *ae*, PLAITED HUMAN HAIR

One of the particularly significant objects in the Bororo funeral is the *ae*, a band of plaited human hair.

People close to the deceased – such as their spouse, children, brothers and sisters in-law – pull out their hair as soon as it is clear that a relative has died. From the strands of torn-out hair, the ritual father of the deceased then weaves a plait – the *ae* – taking care not to muddle together the different people’s hair that will form this plait. This braid of plaited hair will be tied around the left arm of the *aroe-maiwu*, the deceased’s representative, whilst he undertakes one of his most important functions: the hunting of a large jaguar to be delivered to the deceased’s relatives “in revenge” for the death. The Bororo say that this plait is a visible momento/remembrance/souvenir/keepsake of the deceased and that it lends the bearer strength and courage when hunting.

figure 8

The *ae*, plait made
of human hair.
Source: Albisetti
& Venturelli,
*Enciclopédia
Bororo Vol. I.*



Æ, cordel fiado com cabelos humanos
(MRDB B51 1422), 1 = 15m000

figure 9
Man with *ae*
and the *boe*
ekeno tadawu nose
ornament. Garças
village, 1986.
Photograph: Sylvia
Caiuby Novaes.



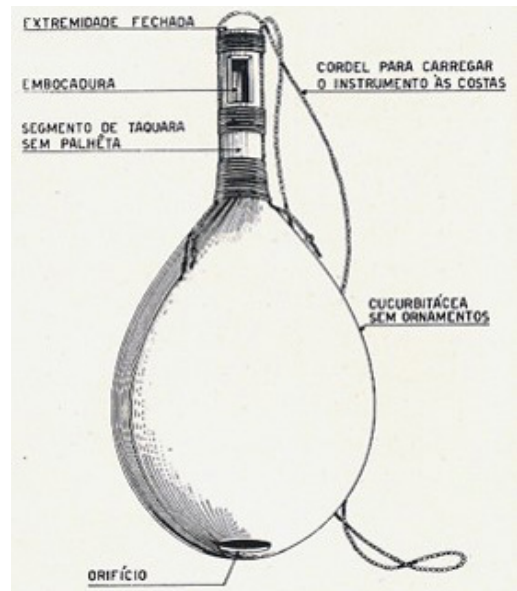
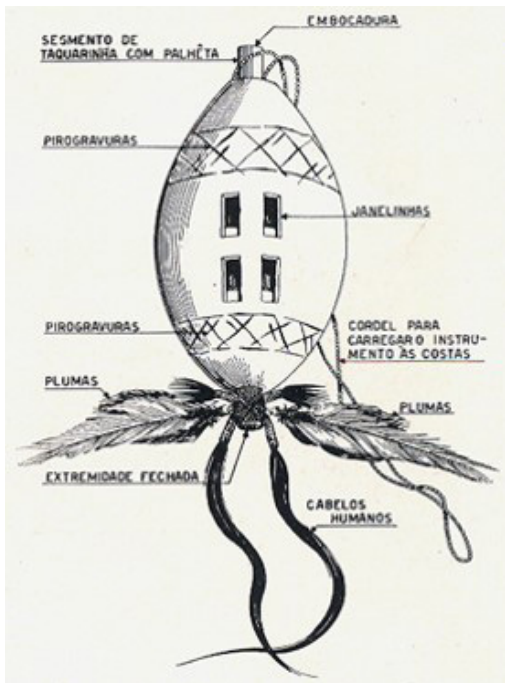
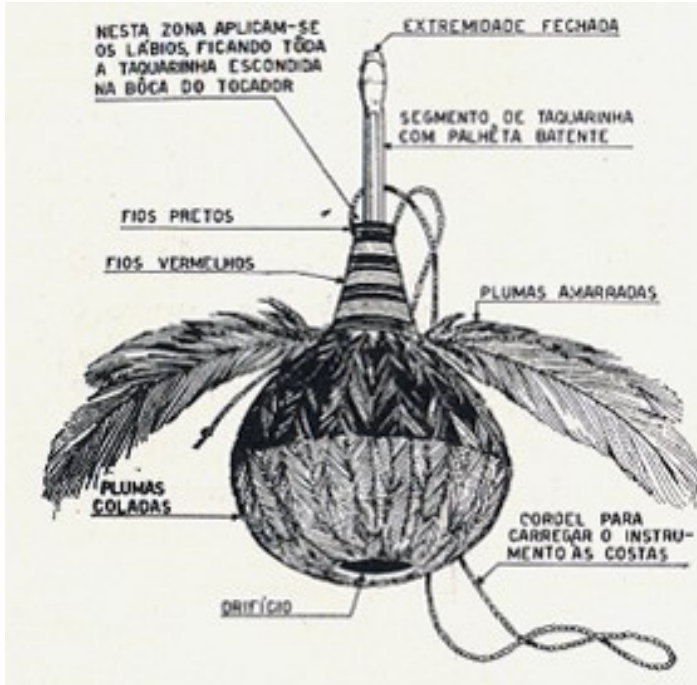
When this representative dies and another man of the opposite moiety is designed as his representative, the plait will be used to tie together the arrows that he has used during his life. When these arrows are given back to the representative, so that he may now dance in the village courtyard, this plait will be worn on his head. Later it will be used to tie together the large funeral basket into which the decorated bones are placed prior to be transported to the lake for secondary burial.

THE *POWARI-AROE*, THE MORTUARY GOURD

An object of perhaps even greater importance in the Bororo funeral is a small gourd known as the *powari-aroe*. This gourd is in fact a musical wind instrument that is made by the ritual father of the deceased and decorated by him with patterns belonging to the deceased's clan. Each gourd should produce a unique sound of its own, thus testifying to the unique individuality of the person who has died. In the ritual named *powari-doge-aroe*, the ritual father of the deceased gives the small mortuary gourd to the *aroe-maiwu*, the deceased's representative and teaches him how to play it. After the funeral ceremony, this gourd will be kept indefinitely by the ritual mother of the deceased and brought out and played every time there is a funeral in the future. In this way, by means of these little gourds, all the past dead are remembered with every subsequent enactment of a funeral.

**figure 10a,
10b and 10c**

The *powari-aroé*.
Source: Albisetti
& Venturelli,
*Enciclopédia
Bororo Vol. I.*



The *powari-aroe* is associated with two sensory characteristics of the person before death: breath and sound. It is always the father – either the ritual or the social father - who is in charge of making ornaments, be they for the naming ceremony or for the funerary rituals, singing as he does so. However, the Bororo say that it is *aroe* itself that prepares and decorates the *powari-aroe*, the dead man's skull (the shapes of each, moreover being similar) and also the child's head ornament used in the naming ritual.

Moreover, it is not the person who is physically there who is doing the singing. Rather, the song chanted whilst making this ornament is the song of the voice of the ancestral soul. The sound of singing is thus central both to the process of turning a newly born child into a full Bororo person through naming, and to the process of turning a newly-dead person into an *aroe*.

The Bororo *powari-aroe* - in a manner analogous to the effect of the Kuna *nuchukana* as described by Fortis – serves to bring dead *aroe*, ancestral souls, into the land of the living. The *powari-aroe* has a shape very similar to that of a skull, and they are similarly decorated (far from sight of women and children) with the clan's designs.

figure 11

The *powari-aroe*
and an
ornamented
skull. Source:
Albisetti &
Venturelli,
*Enciclopédia
Bororo Vol. I.*

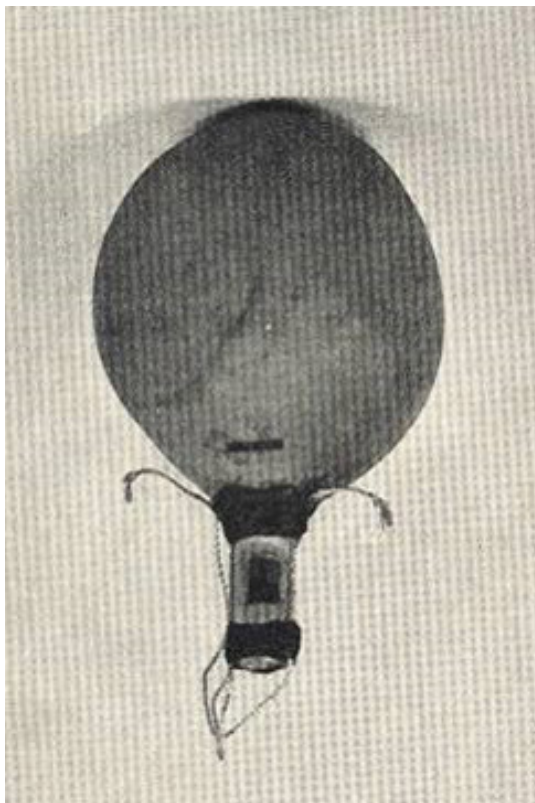


figure 12

A man with many mortuary gourds.

Source: Albisetti & Venturelli, *Enciclopédia Bororo Vol. I.*



The *aroe-maiwu* reinstates the breath, which the deceased by definition has lost, relocating it in the gourd. This ritual action makes present that which is invisible and transformational, and at the same time, it reconfigures relations between the living, namely between the *aroe-maiwu* and the ritual parents of the deceased, through the obligation to exchange food. As the ritual comes to an end, the gourd is given back to the ritual father, who in turn gives this to his wife for safekeeping at home, where it will remain until the next ceremony. Alfred Gell states that the power of the object “stems from the technical processes they objectively embody: *the technology of enchantment* is founded on the *enchantment of technology*” (Gell 1999, 163).

figure 13

Kogenawo with many mortuary gourds.

Tadarimana village, 1985. Photograph: Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.



THE ADUGO-BIRI, JAGUAR'S SKIN

The third and final category of object of crucial importance to the Bororo funeral that I shall consider here is the jaguar skin. It is one of the principal responsibilities of the *aroe-maiwu* to hunt a large jaguar whose skin should then be given to the deceased's relatives in vengeance (*mori*) for their death. The skin is first given to the oldest man in the deceased's clan who will then pass it onto other male clan members so that they too can spend a few nights sleeping on it. Being of the same social category as the deceased, these men were contaminated by the death of this individual and they scarified their own bodies as a result. In effect, following the outpouring of grief, a marginal state associated with the rupturing of the skin of the relatives of the deceased, equilibrium is restored by means of the *mori*, the skin of the jaguar.

By way of reward for hunting the large jaguar, the *aroe-maiwu* receives a bow, arrows, decorations and a *powari-mori* gourd from the deceased's relatives. If the *aroe-maiwu* has danced in the village plaza with weapons that belonged to the deceased, he will now also receive new weapons. The Bororo say that it is not the hunter who receives these gifts, but rather the soul of the deceased. The latter will thus have weapons to hunt in the realm of the souls. In a similar fashion, the jaguar skin, decorated with patterns of the deceased's clan and handed over to his relatives, will serve to shelter the soul from the elements (Albisetti and Venturelli 1962, 235).

Carlo Severi has argued that in a ritual context, artefacts can talk and become announcers. In an article published in *Revista de Antropologia*, he returns to some of Bronislaw Malinowski's statements in his classic work, *Coral Gardens* (1971, originally published in 1935), where he proposes: "the meaning of a word is the effect that it produces in the ritual context" (Severi 2009a, 460). When the *aroe-maiwu* plays the *powari-aroe*, he becomes the voice of the *aroe*. In effect, in semiological terms there is a shift of the *powari-aroe* from being an iconic representation to being a direct index of the *aroe*. Similarly, the meaning of an artefact is more than merely representational since ritual objects of the kind that I have described among the Bororo do more than merely represent a spirit or supernatural being. Rather these objects act upon the world on behalf of supernatural beings. When a supernatural being acts, or speaks up, the object operates on its behalf, reinstating its presence.

figure 14
Men
ornamenting
a jaguar skin.
Córrego Grande
village, 1985.
Photograph:
Sylvia Caiuby
Novaes.



**figure 14a; 14b;
14c e 14d**
Adugo-biri, the
ornamented
jaguar skin.
Source: Albisetti
& Venturelli,
*Enciclopédia
Bororo Vol. I.*

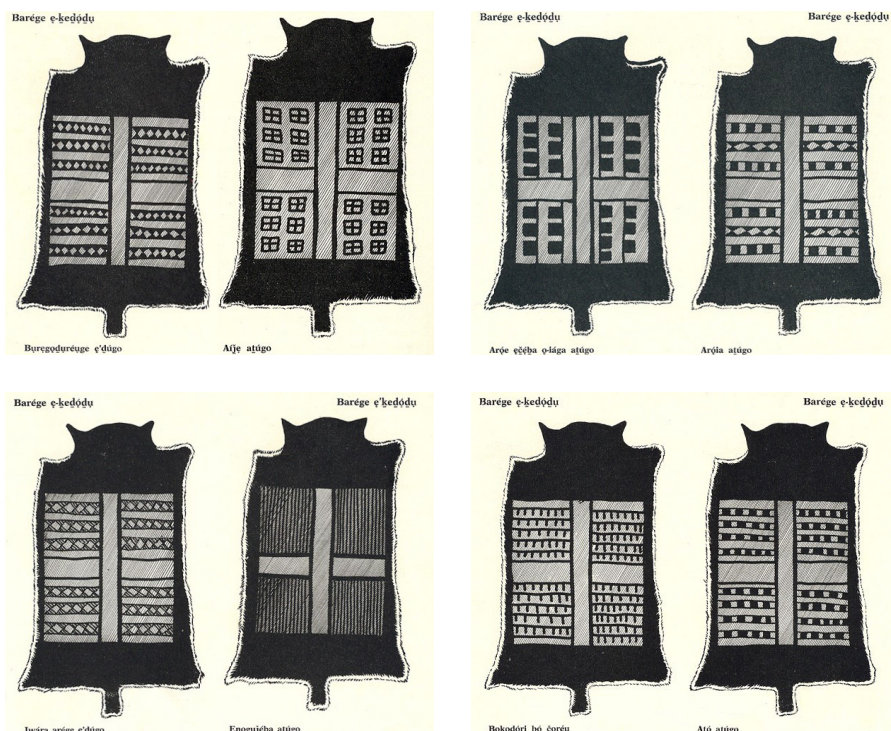


figure 14e
Kadagare takes
the ornamented
jaguar skin to
the deceased's
relatives.
Córrego Grande
village, 1975.
Photograph:
Sylvia Caiuby
Novaes.



This is exactly what the Bororo told me when they explained that the chant intoned by the maker of ornaments is actually the song of souls. In the context of funerals, souls, in this case those of the ancestral spirits, recreate Bororo society by repeating the actions that gave rise to society in mythic times. Death instigates a situation of chaos and the onus to restore order falls upon these mythic heroes. In this context, the object shifts from being an iconic representation to being indexically descriptive, and this implicates a double shifting of perspectives, concerned as much with the status of visual representation as with the intoned word. As we can see, it is the study of the pragmatic conditions of utterance that should be considered to analyse the social construction of the identity of the speaker.

The Bororo funeral is a context similar to that which Gregory Bateson (1981, 178) called 'play'. In these contexts, extra linguistic modes of communication are present: "The act and the image play a crucial role, since it is only through their use that the game of 'transforming identity' comes to underscore the behaviour of the participants" proposes Severi (2009a, 467), resuming Bateson. In the case of ritual action, such as that which occurs during the Bororo funeral, sensory information, visual and sonorous, do not play a merely superficial role: they allow for seeing/showing/making vocal the complex identity of the speakers, giving meaning to ritual action. As Severi reminds us, in daily life the identity of a speaker is defined in *normative* terms (those typical of the daily verbal exchanges); in the ritual context, the definition is *constitutive*. In effect, it is thanks to the iconographic power of these objects and their actions, that a man can assume the role of "father" - of either the deceased or of a child who is about to receive a name - and the mythic heroes become present.

RITUAL OBJECTS IN PROCESSES OF TRANSFORMATION AND ENTANGLEMENT

These processes of transformation among the Bororo - of a man who becomes the representative of the deceased or a new soul (*aroe-maiwu*) - and the creation of ritual objects that act as a substitute for the dead person, are only possible thanks to ritual devices of contiguity and identification. Thus when he dances in the central plaza of the village, the *aroe-maiwu* carries an object conventionally associated with the deceased: arrows in the case of a man, a basket or a woven palm-leaf tray in the case of a woman, or in the case of a child, a toy.

figure 15
The man holding a straw tray will be the *aroe-maiwu* of a woman. Tadarimana village, 1985. Photograph: Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.



This contiguous relationship – of the object with their former owner and of contact between the representative and through the object, the person whom he represents – is sufficient to link together the long chain of transformations that death establishes. If death triggers a disfigurement, in the literal sense of the word, and is a process that the Bororo monitor and control while performing their various rituals - right up until the dead flesh decomposes and its bones can be properly ornamented - the funeral also allows for re-figuration or remasking, to use Taussig's term (1999).

The moment of *defacement*, to use another of Taussig's (1999) concepts, is always a matter of secrecy. Disfiguration is a process in which one, gradually disappearing figure, transforms into another. In the Bororo funeral, this disfiguration corresponds to two intimately related processes: the transformation of a man into the deceased's representative as a new soul (*aroe-maiwu*), and the transformation of the deceased themselves into an *aroe*, an ancestor spirit. Isolated from the gaze of women and children, the entire body of the *aroe-maiwu* is covered. His skin, painted with annatto, is then covered with a thin layer of duck down; his whole body, from feet to shoulders, is hidden by a kind of skirt made from strips of straw known as *toro*. But it is his head that receives special attention: in addition to the annatto covering the face, a large visor, with a yellow hue, prevents his face from being seen, and a large headdress with macaw and hawk feathers is placed on his head.

figure 16
The ornamented
aroe-maiwu.
Córrego Grande
village, 1973.
Photograph:
Sylvia Caiuby
Novaes.



All these decorations conform to well-known patterns employed by the clan of the deceased and as such, they are easily recognised by the whole society. In this sense, what is acknowledged - and indeed highlighted - is not the specific identity of the deceased or their representative, but rather membership of a clan or lineage. Nothing belonging to the dead should remain in the land of the living. All of his / her worldly possessions are given to the representative *aroe-maiwu*, who, on a specific day during the funeral proceedings, incinerates them in a large bonfire. One day, Canajó, one of my most important interlocutors, said to me: “a dead son, husband, sister-in-law – the Bororo don’t want to have anything to do with them. Burn everything, throw it in the river, bury it. A portrait, a photo, nothing can remain.” Even the bones of someone who died far from the village must be collected and disposed of, albeit in the appropriate manner. One woman travelled with her mother’s bones in a basket; people thought that she was carrying clothes, but she was not, Canajó told me. They were bones that were then ornamented and buried properly.

The deceased’s large mortuary basket must house their bones, ornamented with their specific clan pattern; it must also house the small gourds used by the deceased during life in his function as *aroe-maiwu*; the plaited hair – *ae* – that the deceased received when acting as an *aroe-maiwu* and the large feather headdress must also all be placed in the basket. This large basket should also contain the feathers that covered the deceased’s *aroe-maiwu* as

well as the shells and pieces of glass that were used to scarify the mourners. If the deceased also received a jaguar skin when acting as an *aroe-maiwu*, then this will cover the mortuary basket and the hair braid will secure its place on top of the basket. After the ritual the mortuary basket must “rest” for a few days in the house of the ritual parents of the deceased, before being taken to a lake where it will be sunken.

Each of the objects present in the large funerary basket thus refers to a specific aspect of Bororo personhood. The Bororo have the same haircut for men, women and children, regardless of which clan they belong to. The haircut is a visible element that identifies all those who share the same *Boe* humanity. The plaited hair of the bereaved, thus serves to establish the identity of the dead and the relatives who “are like him”, in that they share the same vital principal. The plait “speaks” about the dead by way of a metonymic process – it is the hair of all those who are equal to the deceased and as such it reminds the hunter of his function in avenging the death by killing a large game animal whose skin is given to this group of relatives. The *ae* is a reflection of the physical dimension of the Bororo person, which is continually renewed according to life’s cycle, and in which the living come to replace the dead.

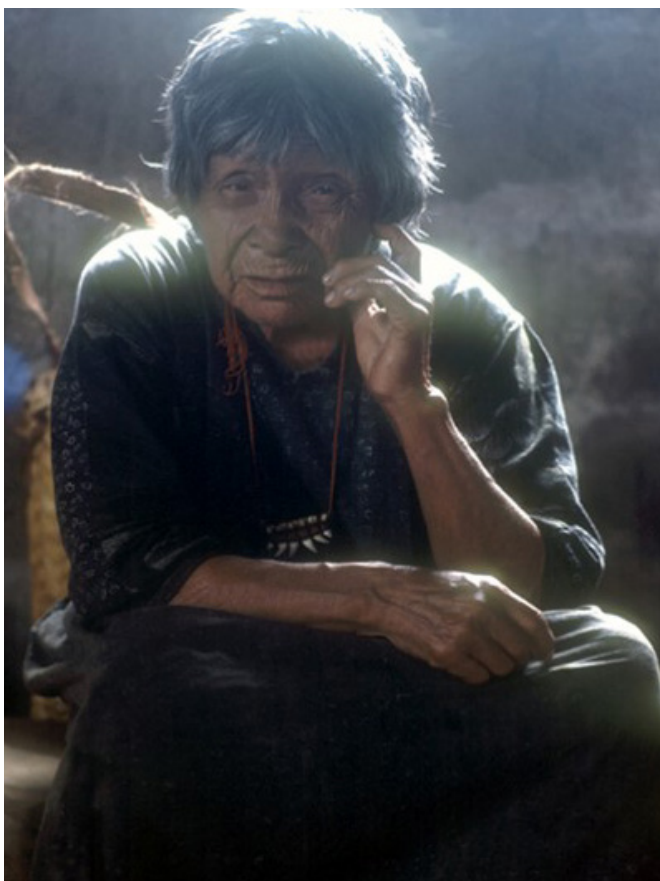
figure 17
The mortuary baskets are taken to the lake. Tadarimana village, 1985. Photograph: Sylvia Caiuby Novaes.



figure 18a
Mario and his
grandson with
typical Bororo
haircut. Meruri
village, 1982.
Photograph:
Sylvia Caiuby
Novaes.



figure 18b
An old woman
with the
typical Bororo
haircut. Meruri
village, 1982.
Photograph:
Sylvia Caiuby
Novaes.



The *powari-aroë*, the mortuary gourd, on the other hand, is related to a specific social category, the *iedaga*, as it is called by Renate Viertler in *A Refeição das Almas* (1991). The *iedaga* is the deceased's clan and the mortuary gourd prepared for the deceased will be decorated with patterns that belong exclusively to that clan. They are made by a man who does not belong to that clan, but who is married to a woman who does. In the same way in which a Bororo man produces children who belong to this wife's clan, it is matrilineal descent that defines clan identity.

The *powari-aroë* is a metaphor for the deceased, and its making renders explicit the complex mechanisms that cause a person to reproduce processes of opposition and complementarity that organise relations between individuals: people of the two moieties, men and women, the living and the dead. The small gourd is a clear sign of the importance and need for the other for the emergence of the social self, and at the same time, the expression of transformation and transcendence of the self.

The *powari-aroë* refers to a person in all their idiosyncrasies. Each individual has unique peculiarities and as such, each gourd produces its own, unique sound. Just as with people, the gourds must be made by a man (the ritual father of the deceased) and are guarded by a woman (the ritual mother of the deceased). However, this gourd only appears publicly through another person – the *aroë-maiwu* – the social representative of the deceased, who should play the gourd during funerals. By playing this instrument, that is by blowing through it, is a way to restore that which death has removed.

Finally, it is the jaguar skin that marks the end of the funerary cycle in that this is the object that marks the outpouring of grief, a marginal state for society.

figure 19

Canajó sings
in front of a
jaguar skin.
Córrego Grande
village, 1973.
Photograph:
Sylvia Caiuby
Novaes.



The relation of these objects both to one another and the social processes in which they are implicated can be summarized in the following diagram:

figure 20
Diagram

<i>AE</i>	<i>POWARI-AROE</i>	<i>ADUGO-BIRI</i>
plait of human hair	mortuary gourd	jaguar skin
<i>obe</i>	<i>iedaga</i>	<i>bai/eda</i>
human body	social category	"place in the world" (residence)
transformation	stability	transience

As we have seen, the *ae* is associated with a person's body and their relatives, with whom they share a substantial identity; the *powari-aroë* corresponds to their clan, that is, the social category that defines being in the world. The jaguar skin, in turn, is symbolically associated with a third element: the house. According to Viertler (1991) three basic reference points mark the life of a man: the house of his mother, the house of his wife and the men's house in the village centre. Of all the physical traces that testify to an individual's existence, the house is the last to be destroyed, usually long after the funeral.

The relationship between the house and jaguar skin can be established at various levels. Both the house and the jaguar skin are related to the *bope*, the principal agent of natural transformations. These transformations mostly occur within the house. Within the house people procreate and die, and it is there that foods are transformed through culinary activities. In effect, both the house and the jaguar skin define people's spaces. If the house is a shelter for the living, it is within the skin of a large jaguar that the soul of the dead is protected and housed as it travels to the land of the dead.

As in other dialectical societies, such as the Gê, to whom the Bororo are closely related, a person can only exist in and through the other. The man that will make my clan's ornaments, who will incorporate my clan's ancestral souls in his ritual performances, and who, through a complex marriage system, allows for the physical and social reproduction of my clan, is always from a clan different from my own. The ancestral souls or mythic

heroes of each clan established these very specific relations in mythical times, and in the funeral they return to reinstate order in a world threatened by the *bope*, when it caused someone to die.

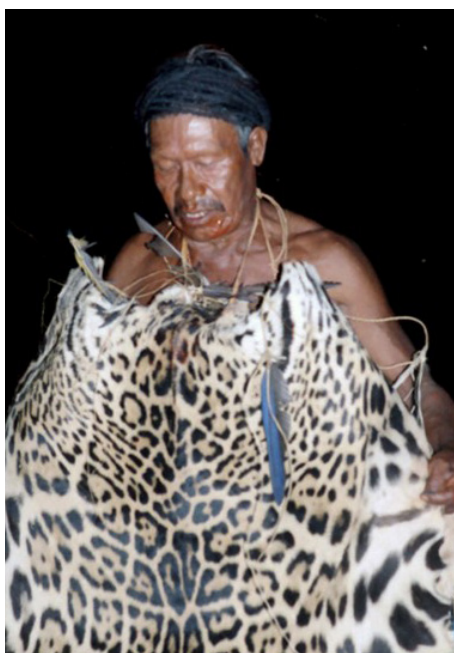
“To announce man”, to this need image and writing provide an answer, says Etienne Samain (1995, 27). In societies with an oral tradition, ritual contexts demonstrate that objects with a very specific iconography also supply an answer to this necessity and can serve to describe the human condition: people speak for themselves and make their ancestral spirits speak *through* these objects, at the same time evoking the social processes upon which their society is founded, and the associated concept of the person in that society. A creative entanglement thus exists behind the life processes of creation and transformation that simultaneously involves both people and objects in their various sensory aspects. Just as Ingold’s lines are intertwined and always pointing towards transformational processes, the Bororo case appears to demonstrate the extent to which life and death intertwine with one another in order to recreate - just as Fortis suggests for the Kuna - a continuity behind the discontinuity of bodies: the living and dead, ritual objects and people; animals, souls and ancestral beings. In the course of the Bororo funeral, all these discontinuities are bridged through sensory qualities evoked or produced by a series of highly material objects.

translation
Elizabeth Rahman
text received
08.16.2015



figure 21

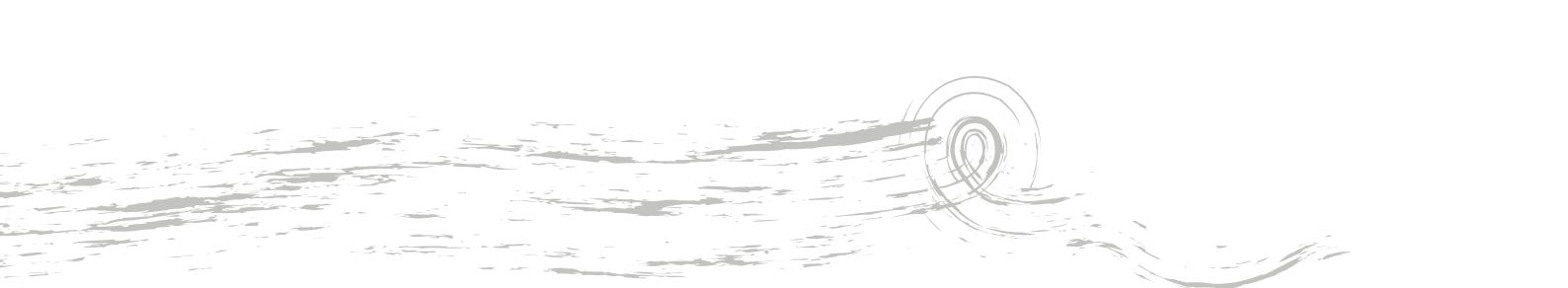
Kadagare sings
with *ae* and
adugo biri.
Córrego Grande
village, 1986.
Photograph:
Sylvia Caiuby
Novaes.



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