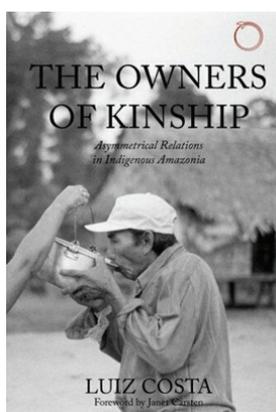


The Owners of Kinship: About Kanamari Sociopolitical Asymmetry

DOI
<http://dx.doi.org/10.11606/2179-0892.ra.2020.178858>

Edwin B. Reesink

Federal University of Pernambuco | Recife, PE, Brasil
edwin.reesink@ufpe.br | ORCID: 0000-6002-5802-7375



COSTA, Luiz. *The Owners of Kinship. Asymmetrical Relations in Indigenous Amazonia*. Chicago: Hau Books. 2016. pp. 304.

I suppose it is uncontroversial to say that the content of *Hau* journal and the books edited by this significant collaborative initiative, which encompasses highly regarded anthropology centers, always consists of contributions of a good or very good level. The thesis reworked and turned into a book by Luiz Costa about the Kanamari from the Itacoaí, in the Javari Valley, is no exception and fulfils the expectation. The book's cover features high praise from some of the most famous anthropologists.

Briefly, for none other than Marilyn Strathern the book constitutes a great

contribution to anthropological theory due to its brilliant ethnographic exegesis, in particular the primary analytical focus on the "feeding relationship". For the late Roy Wagner, another Melanesian expert and prominent theorist, the distinction between sharing and exchanging, i.e., between commensality and feeding, results in a paradigm shift. Anne-Christine Taylor, the eminent scholar of Lowland South America, highlights the condition of the "owner without property", "master without domination", and the brilliant analysis of the owner/master-subject relationship that plays a fundamental role in Amazonian cosmopolitics and in the formation of kinship. A review of this book, one might conclude, tends to be superfluous.

I agree that the book is the result of competent research, being well written, well argued, quite concise and very clear in the presentation of its purpose and in its ethnographic and theoretical demonstration. In other words, it is a very valuable contribution to the Amazonian ethnology of the Lowlands and tends to become a reading to a greater or lesser extent indispensable for certain topics, such as the feeder-nourished relationship, commensality, kinship, the body, the condition of being an “owner”, shamanism, leadership, asymmetry or hierarchy, ethnohistory and the constitution of social groups and their interrelationships.

That said, I suppose the book deserves some more specific considerations, even if not so elaborate as it deserves. It expands the ethnography and presence of the Kanamari in the ethnology of the Lowlands, something that personally gives me great satisfaction for having done research, in the 1980s, among the Kanamari inhabitants of another river and basically originating from other “subgroups”. Note, in this sense, that the author correctly explains that the existing ethnographic knowledge does not yet allow certain conclusions and generalizations about all these “Tukuna” (people in Kanamari language): there are linguistic and sociocultural variations that the Tukuna themselves assess to be of significance. Thus, the author restricts himself to the Kanamari of the Itacoaí, the site of his fieldwork, and, in fact, of the four main Dyapas he tends to privilege the “Bin Dyapa”, a unit of his greatest collaborator (Curassow Dyapa; Dyapa, being a collective unit similar to others in the Juruá-Purus region, conceived of as being autonomous and endogamous). On the other hand, the more intimate knowledge of the Kanamari leads me to point out certain issues for a possible extension of the discussions elaborated by the author in a very skilful and clear way. First, I point out aspects of a minor or even very little importance. If the author, wisely, restricts himself to the Tukuna from the Itacoaí, and greatly limits the comparison with other Kanamari ethnographies, three details need to be mentioned. First, although he warns the reader, more than once, in the text, about this limitation, to a large extent he speaks of “the Kanamari”, which led me to the impression that the reader would tend to forget the delimitation “of the Itacoaí” or to a particular “subgroup”. Also, it seems to me that greater inclusion would have been possible and, perhaps, would have contributed to the discussion, even if the literature does not really allow for the mapping of linguistic and sociocultural variations among the Dyapa that were historically distributed over a region of a considerable extent on the middle Juruá (and some adjacent regions). For an example of a more extreme case, the kinship terminology of the “Katukina” of the Bia (“Pida Dyapa”, Jaguar Dyapa; tributary of the Jutaí but adjacent to the lower middle Juruá) is not as clearly Dravidian as that of the Tukuna of the Itacoaí and Jutaí (note that despite the book having been produced with great care and quality, an important author in this literature, Carvalho (2002), is present in the bibliography, but absent in the index).

Without further elaboration here for lack of space, some other points refer

to the factual information available, although they are, in fact, quite irrelevant to the central argument. For example, more is known about the Tsunhuak Dyapa than the information provided. In other cases, it may be possible to consider whether it would be worth discussing the fact that the comparison induces a slightly different emphasis in the analysis, or a slight slippage or supplement to the proposed interpretation. See, for example, a being called “adyaba”, a being similar to people who lives in the forest and who is a danger to the hunter, or to anyone else who ventures to move farther away from the village, and who threatens to kidnap children in order to raise and eat them. The author’s data lead him to characterize the adyaba as “useless”. In his thesis, for example, very briefly, he explores the cosmic place of the adyaba, calling them monstrous, pre-social and with behavior opposite to that of humans should observe (i.e., a kind of inverted carbon copy of how to make relatedness).

The Kanamari of Jutaí are almost all descended of some other Dyapas of the Juruá who lived in a bordering region further downstream from Eirunepé downwards, and in which the Wadyo Paranim, “White Capuchin Monkey” (Carvalho, 2002) tend to predominate. Here, the predicate “adyaba” appears as an attribute of someone, or some animal, characterized by some kind of imperfection, whether physical or mental, which, therefore, frames it as an imperfect person (-being), in the body or in the mind. In this case, it may be possible to think of the classification of being “adyaba” as indicative of an imperfect person, whose apparent physical defects coincide with social defects. In a certain myth, the Adyaba woman hides her face when, at night and in the shadow, she kidnaps small children in order to raise and eat them with her husband, in her lonely and distant home in the woods. It is, it seems, an Imperfect Person, actually a couple, who live far from the productive waterways of the Kanamari dwellings and that do not have a full self-sustainability (stealing children and food from the fields) compared to the Tukuna. The Adyaba would thus be a simulacrum of people and, for the Kanamari, a kind of cannibal (although, according to the myths, the Adyaba do not consider it to be cannibalism to eat Tukuna, as she refuses to eat her own kind). The author analyzes the cannibalism in question, including a certain implicit cannibalism of the kariwa (“whites”), and the rejection of Tukuna of this practice, that puts them in the position of being a victim of this predator, becomes evident. He typifies the Adyaba as a “spoiled being”, which makes sense, but a “spoiled” person can perhaps be subsumed under the notion of an Imperfect Person: a quasi-Tukuna with a body not so very monstrous, a being that is at one degree of distance from the “Tukuna tam”, i.e., a true Tukuna (the author lists several types of Adyaba and here I simplify the discussion, arguing that the “opposite of a true human being” may rather be those imperfect in body and mind and, consequently, deficient, to some degree, compared to the prototype of being “Tukuna itself”).

It should also be taken into account that Costa's book exposes the conception of the Kanamari's historical times and practices an ethnohistory, although without using that term. In fact, there is a great and commendable effort to reconstitute a model of sociocultural territorial occupation of the "first time": the time of Tamakori, the creator of the cosmos and the Tukuna, and who left them the rivers so that they could live according to specific ways of life (before the invasion of the kariwa). This is followed by the Time of Rubber that subverted and mixed everything, causing the end of this paradigm. Something that includes, it is worth noting, the migration to the Itacoaí of some Dyapa originally territorialized on the middle Juruá, in search of tranquillity to live their lives. And a third time, the present time, the Time of Funai; a Time in which all the different segments, from the various rivers and streams, started to feel and experience all sort of different intense experiences.

Costa argues that the fact that in the first Time there is a warah Dyapa, an owner for each Dyapa, at the mouth of a stream, is proof that this is absolutely necessary for the existence of all Dyapa. The Dyapa unit in each Juruá tributary basin, in turn, is conceived of as being incorporated, or subsumed, in an owner-body, a person, a man, which encompasses almost literally the entire Dyapa, constituting an asymmetry between his person and the other people of that Dyapa. There are details, among the Bim Dyapa, about these "trunk" people that raise questions that, perhaps, make for a little divergent discussion. Let's discuss this briefly.

Each tributary of the Juruá was occupied by a specific Dyapa and this tributary was seen as a trunk for its tributary streams. The igarapés seemed to be have been conceived of as members of a body, as branches of the river-trunk, that is, as derivatives of the river, and not, as for us, the river being seen as a result of the water input from its tributaries. Now, the owners of the whole Dyapa are remembered as being the oldest (today, it is worth noting, only known by oral tradition), even as the oldest people of their time, therefore, a kind of paiko, i.e., a "grandfather", an "ancestor".

Thus, for the Tukuna, this fact also implies conceiving him as a person who already exhibits an important decrease in his vital force, a much smaller productive contribution compared to an adult in his fully productive capacity. These people conceived of, in fact or symbolically, as being the eldest, could perhaps be thought of, therefore, as a trunk from which the other Tukuna people metonymically would derive (limbs, branches, descendants). So, this condition could perhaps also be the recognition of a derivation arising, simply, from its temporal precedence, from constituting a source of origin, and should not be considered, by definition, as an asymmetrical hierarchy. Looking at the indications of the age and seniority of the two cases mentioned in the book, this asymmetry remains doubtful.

The place of dwelling of the "eldest" was the center of the Dyapa, the site of the only true and general maloca of the Dyapa, and its privileged ritual space (the people slept in smaller dwellings outside this maloca). The Dyapa hence claim to

have been led by a paiko owner-body at the river mouth, close to the Juruá, the axis of the origin of the cosmos and the creation of the Tukuna themselves. Certainly, therefore, a place with significant cosmological implications. The Juruá constituted, after all, the space of the mythological creation of the cosmos and the axis of origin of the provenance of the Tukuna, the primeval trunk from which the tributary rivers derive.

This means that the primordial mythological transformative current comes from the Juruá, which is the source and the origin of the tributaries of the Tukuna. The mouth of a tributary, it is understood, represented the origin site of these rivers and the passage into the interior of the transformative flow that had created them (at first there was no running water on earth and the Juruá was the first river created; Tamakori's river trip is the main narrative of the transformation of the state of a single component, or of a very few, to a differentiation of components and beings and, therefore, of the proliferation of the "one to the multiple"). The Juruá is older and, therefore, appears as a temporally preceding ancestor from which the metamorphosis of the world took place. The transformative flow, coming from the original trunk of the Juruá, ascending the river-trunk of each Dyapa and giving rise to the fixation of the older person at this point of entry, with the central maloca and its ritual importance (including the recreation of the cosmos), perhaps makes sense from the perspective of the logic of ancestry, origin and temporal precedence.

In this sense, it remains to be seen whether this logic justifies the attribution of asymmetry and hierarchy to this relationship between the single and older body-center, with the multiple generated-bodies, the younger descendants. Seniority, of course, is likely to imply a certain hierarchical difference, but, on the other hand, if the information that this owner-body is the most senior person is correct, there would not be a fixed, regular continuous relationship (as, for example, on the upper Rio Negro). Pure seniority due simply to greater age may indicate the possibility of being an issue of a source-origin-passage of the transformative flow rather than of asymmetry and hierarchy. At least it looks like a temporary hierarchy that, in personal terms, lasts as long as the Person in question is alive (it's worth noting that the author gives us all the clues for this argument).

The mouth of each tributary river represents, with the presence of that Person-Dyapa's maloca, a fixed, central and permanent point associated with the ancestors of the Dyapa (land-rituals-food). The transformative flow coming from the Juruá started to ascend the tributaries and seems to renew itself in ritual events, uniting the entire Dyapa. It's as if this fluidity ran through these rivers and needed to crystallize into villages of daily occupation as a result of the action of the multiple body-owners of the igarapés. Each of these villages would have had a leader, a body-owner who would concentrate the local village in himself. This body-owner, however, has been described in the accounts of the oral tradition with certain

notable differences from Dyapa's body-owner. This is a person, once again a man, who is said to have been a person of initiative, strength, very capable, generous and very productive (in providing the daily reproduction of the people in their village and by being the master of the cosmological reproductive ritual). Today, this leader of the past is conceived of as a person with full practical productive capacity and cosmological (ritual) reproductive ability, but, above all, as a physically large person (fat and tall; attributes, by the way, that even today, on the Jutaí, are appreciated and desired by all). In this case, what is noticeable is that this person is, ideally, representing a Tukuna human being in its fullness, at the height of human capacities, and as a result, aggregates people and manages to "stabilize the flow" in the plurality of descendant-branch collectivities centered on a full-grown Tukuna-Person. It is as if the transformative flow of the origin passed through a fixed center of the uniqueness of one Dyapa composed of "distant relatives", to the full realization of the transformative and human potentiality in multiple collectivities of "true relatives". The author, who provides these elements, also suggests that these villages would exist much more as the result of less fixed arrangements in which people could settle and move with relatively ease. In other words, reformulating a possible interpretative proposal a little, it would be a matter of a certain fluidity, resulting, in principle, from the action of the owner-body who is a prototype of the human being.

It is worth noting that after death and the performance of a farewell ritual for the dead, the dead become anonymous ancestors who join those dead who provided the fertility of the land, such as the palm trees planted in earlier times. Therefore, Costa associates the older man with the ancestors and their heritage in the land in general, particularly that located near the maloca. In this sense, the body-owner seems to be exactly the link with this "source", a temporary "owner" who, due to his seniority, is at the peak of "becoming" an Ancestral Person. And then it makes sense that it should be the "Person of generational continuity", a maximum "redistributor" of the entire Dyapa, the nexus or primordial duct through which the flows of the "one" pass. This "Person to become Ancestral" focuses on the center and his "capacity" resides on another plane: the original mythological generation transformed into recursive sociocultural regeneration of generational continuity.

The notion of the Tukuna Person evokes the Nambikwara Person elaborated by David Price. The Nambikwara Person (male) in the figure of the leader is also "large" in size, generous, highly capable and productive, redistributing, and caring for his neighbors (and in that sense, resembles an "owner"). A big man tends to be becoming a *great man*, in accordance with the model of an older brother who takes care of the younger ones, including feeding them, being the maximum expression of notion of the Person. Luiz Costa shows how prototypicality is part of the Tukuna's logical thinking and perhaps it is possible to extend his analysis. Prototypicality, by definition, marks a center, the full expression of an ideal value. The Ancestral-Becoming-Person

has reached the end of his reproductive life, as the author himself clearly shows and, according to his model, other people would work in the production of the food that he redistributed in rituals. It is a fact that the Kanamari, certainly, would not ignore this and it implies that this “leader” was literally a collective production in the eyes of those who, by means of him, represented the unity of their own Dyapa. In this way, the “master-owner-unit” differs significantly from the character of the “master-owner-village”: the former seems to be the living prototype of the Ancestral Person (a “Paiko”, grandfather-ancestral), an embodiment of the collectivity by the collectivity; the second would be an exemplary Person with full human capacity, a “big man”, a prototypical Person. If many other “feeding relationships” shown by Costa in fact lead to “owner-body asymmetry”, in which the feeded depend a lot on the feeder, the village’s “owner-body” does not dominate the “fed” in the same way. This is because they would be Persons perhaps less prototypical but certainly not strongly dependent on the central Person: only Persons with a lesser degree of prototypicality. In the Nambikwara case, ethnographers argue that the Person-group relationship does not show asymmetry in favor of the former. In the Tukuna case, the author argues for an asymmetry: in the case of the Dyapa Paiko, I suppose it is a much more symbolic asymmetry; the village owner, on the other hand, stands out for his personal qualities in relation to less typical People, and the author concludes that this would justify an asymmetric relationship. However, in the Tukuna case this is an ethnohistorical reconstruction, and, to me, there does not seem to have been obtained a solid knowledge about its practice. Therefore, the analogous case Nambikwara raises the question of to what extent the model presented was effectively expressed in everyday practices. Does contemporary Itacoaí-based ethnography provide sufficient support for the ethnohistorical model?

In sum, together with the Adyaba, as the prototype of the Imperfect Person, and the People who are “embodied” by the village-owner, People who are removed to some degree from the ideal Tukuna Person (the other relatives in the village), we would have, added to the two positions just outlined, four basic positions for the Kanamari conception of the Person within a kind of cognitive scheme pointed out by the author as being of great importance (ternary, if we consider one of the positions as being derived from the ideal, and possible of being translated into a cartographic scheme). A provisional design, it is worth remembering, based on the fascinating discussions held in the book.

In short, as this is a study of notable quality, Luiz Costa’s discussions and arguments make us think about, and rethink, the very interesting questions that he raises with delicacy and depth.