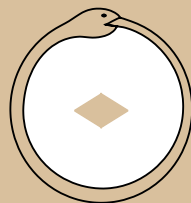
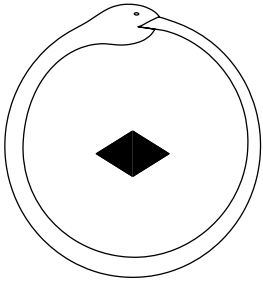


THE ADORNMENT PEOPLE  
AND THE NAKED PERSON  
Els Lagrou



notebook  
SELVAGEM



## THE ADORNMENT PEOPLE AND THE NAKED PERSON

Els Lagrou

Text presented on the Teacher Plants round  
of talks during the Selvagem - Cycle of Studies About Life,  
at Rio de Janeiro's Botanical Garden's Theater,  
on November 14th 2018.

As I thought about this speech, I had conversations with Anna (Dantes) around her work on the book about the **Huni Kuin's** forest medicines, and she mentioned something which I found quite interesting: she said *Pajé* Agostinho told her that the **Huni Kuin** decided to set out to enchantment. Indeed. Since through the vine a person becomes the boa, the one who started this recent process of worldwide rhizomatic expansion weren't the shamans, the youngsters who carry the vine far away, the masters of the chants, the *txanas*<sup>1</sup>; it is the forest itself, the boa, **Yube**, singing through the throats of these messengers to awaken the planet, to bring sight to the blind, and hearing to the deaf. It is the Amazon Rainforest who, through the elixir of its leaves and vines, enters the hearts of the inhabitants of the concrete jungle, who are sick.

The chase for profit at any cost and at all price, the merchandise people that planted their thoughts on the gathering of money, even if for that much bloodshed would be needed, as well as the shed of all the sap of every forest; this merchandise people have short term thought, as the **Yanomami** leader and author Davi Kopenawa already emphasized.

The short term thought of modern capitalism had already been denounced by scientists like Gregory Bateson, who advocated for an ecology of the mind that would walk hand in hand with an ecology able to see and hear the language of non-human beings: the dolphins' singing, the relationship between bee and flower. Bateson commented on the logic of modern scientific thought's overly shortened circuits of cause and effect, a notion which is not assisted by dreams, by visionary experiences or art, which reveal broader connections, those which are not immediately given.

1. Huni Kuins's masters of chants (N.T).

The awareness that everything is connected, and that all actions result in reactions, not only gestures, but also words, images seen and cultivated thoughts, is what underlies the shamanic knowledge. In multiple versions, the myths tell us that in times before the flood (or, in other cases, before the birth of the Sun) all beings spoke the same language, they understood each other, and it had to do with the interchangeability of shapes. When shape fixated itself under the coating of different species, each species saw themselves confined in their own corporeal perspectives. But the fluidity of shapes, the communicability of affections and dispositions of different beings and different species has not been lost, it remains hidden to be revealed for those who know how to see.

If Western faith worships the “naked person” that hides its nudity under garments, the Amerindian ontology understands all beings as “adornment people”. We shall return to this point, about which Ailton Krenak and Luís Luna spoke yesterday.

In order to be able to hear the *Yanomami*'s *xapiri*<sup>2</sup>, and the *Huni Kuin*'s *yuxin*<sup>3</sup> again, we need the Amerindian relational aesthetics taught by the shamans, the masters of chantings and the *kene*<sup>4</sup> drawing specialists. The masters of chant are beings in-between, they are radios, as taught by the *Araweté* to Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro. Being like a radio means having the knowledge to convey the voice of other beings, enter their vibration, and broadcast their messages. That is what the shaman does, and among the *Huni Kuin*, that is what all those who underwent an experience of becoming-boa through the vine do.

Back to 2014, the *Huni Kuin* women involved in a workshop, aimed to transmit the knowledge of the *kene* from the *Purus*' women to the women of *Tarauacá*, told each other that “Back in the day, people were way more stingy about knowledge than today”. This sentence allows different understandings, and one of them echoes Agostinho Muru and

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2. Sacred word the *Yanomami* indigenous people of Brazil & Venezuela use for ‘spirit’, the *Yanomami* shamans contact the *xapiri* for guidance (N.T.).

3. Word that in free translation means spirit (N.T.).

4. Traditional graphics called true paintings, applied on body paintings, weavings, basketry, and ceramics. *Huni Kuin* graphics represent an intrinsic part of their identity, a fundamental element in the beauty of their objects and people with a unique aesthetic that is totally connected to the cosmology and history of their people (N.T.).

Dua Buse's phrases while making the [Una Shubu Hiwea book](#): "This material won't be hidden like it used to... now it is for everyone to see".

If the fearsome Gaia, thought to be passive and dominated as nature, is punishing the United States with floods, fires, and hurricanes, **Yube** and other big keepers of the Amazon Rainforest apply another tactic, still – and for the time being – placing their trust on learning, spreading their tentacles to capture and seduce some allies, revealing the secret in order to increase the number of forest guardians.

The first anthropologist to work with the Huni Kuin was Ken Kensing, an extremely interesting character because he was an American missionary who arrived in Curanja, Peru, to convert the Huni Kuin but was instead converted by them into an anthropologist. Kensing explains he was afraid of the *dauya*, the medicinal plants specialist, fearing him as a sorcerer and even as a devil's ally, until he discovered that this was the same figure who would change his worldview forever.

The silent conquering of the whole Amazon and the constant harassment by missionary colonizers of all faiths can't be stressed enough. If at the heights of Rio Negro<sup>5</sup>, were the Salesians, and among the *Guarani*, the Jesuits, now there are evangelicals all over, nobody can escape them. The Huni Kuin succeeded in converting Ken, their first missionary, but that doesn't mean the work was over. Nowadays it is with sadness that we watch, as Zezinho Yube tells in his movie *As Voltas do Kene* [The Turns of Kene], how almost all **Purus**, from Peru to their last villages in Brazil, was taken by the evangelicalism. Fortunately the resistance on Jordão and **Tarauacá** rivers remains strong. But also at **Purus** some people resist, like Edvaldo Yukã, the Sebidua, and Txana Shane brothers, who don't allow the church to invade their respective villages, and have built a hut for the studies of **Yube**, where they drink the vine and blow lots of snuff, apply **kambo** (frog poison), and do everything in their power to strengthen body and mind for resistance.

Among the Huni Kuin, there are two kinds of shamans: the **mukaya** or **yuxiã**, who heal directly with the spirits, and the *dauya*, the specialist in medicinal plants. The **mukaya** have a bitter shamanic substance planted in their heart. He knows how to dream and call the **yuxin**.

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5. The largest black water river in the world (N.T.).

This kind of shaman has a tendency of using lots of snuff, specially when he wants to heal, remove something from the patient's body, or search for the lost spirit of the diseased person. This sort of shamanism is the most widespread among the many groups, like the **Huni Kuin** neighboring people **Kulina**, on the Xingu River, and many other groups of the **Tupi** linguistic stems. However, among the **Huni Kuin** there aren't many shamans of such kind. It is said that the great have died or live in hiding.

What does not live in hiding is the **Ayahuasca** knowledge which was never the sole property of a specialist. A specialist is needed for singing and guiding the rituals, but everyone can drink it. **Nixi Pae** is the cure and protection for young hunters. It's where negotiations with hunting doubles and other more or less powerful foreigners take place. It is with the vine that the diagnosis of a disease or problem that afflicts someone is often reached, and once the cause of the disease is known, the **dauya**, who knows the medicines and poisons of the forest, sets out to search for the plants and administer them on the patient, or explains to someone how to find and apply them. The word **dauya** literally means the one who possesses the **dau**. **Dau** means medicine, poison, but also adornment and enchantment. **Dau** is all that, here is where plants and adornments meet in the doing and undoing of bodies.

The West invented the naked person who needs to get dressed from the moment in which it fell into sin, when Eva accepted the apple offered by the serpent, thus disobeying God's command, who didn't want them to discover the secret of knowledge. The naked body became a fetish. People started to feel shame, having to cover themselves, while in Greek art the aesthetic ideal of the naked human was formulated.

In Modernism a whole clash occurred between the classical aesthetic that venerates the representation of the naked man, as created by god, and the taste for adornment and drawing on the body that in the West came from Polynesia as tattooing – although the ancient Scots were also known for their body paintings. The esteem for adornment becomes then associated with the the savage, who lives in the jungle and resists Western civilization. This admiration for adornment, as described by modern art academics such as Loos and Lombroso, was difficult to defeat and it united all minorities: Native Peoples, children, sailors, wo-

men and the mad. What an unlikely association, only the Modernists could have come up with such categorization.

Alfred Gell in turn shows that in fact much is hidden behind this Western aversion to adornment. It is a civilisation that thinks of the person, the individual, as separate from society and the world, separate from nature. This separation between man and nature is at the origin of monotheism, even if the awareness of the connection with plant life did not die out early in Europe. On the pillars of the medieval churches of the 11th century we see the representation of the tree-people, the vital force that unites all living beings.

That is also what the arabesques and geometry in Arab art represent. The kinetic effect of the labyrinth motifs that connect everything and do not allow a separated figure to be perceived on the background, that do not allow you to see one figure without simultaneously seeing the counter-figure; it shows another theory of being: a fractal theory of the relational individual.

Amerindians myths show us that what we have here are worlds inhabited by adornment peoples. As Ailton Krenak mentioned yesterday, “human is the adornment of the world”. The great philosopher Walter Benjamin, on the other hand, came to the conclusion that “adornments are spirit colonies”. In the *Desana* myth fish-people become human-people by adorning themselves with feather, panaches, and necklaces. The Universe’s Grandmother steps out of thought by means of the gathering of multiple adornment-artifacts, as explained yesterday by Luís Luna: the Universe’s Grandmother emerged from the junction of the cigarette holder, the tobacco cigarette itself, the stool, the feather headdress...

The *Huni Kuin* universe is also populated by adornment-people. That is the reason why the vine chantings draw a true aesthetic battlefield to see who will put on their necklaces, their embellishments, their drawings, their capes, or their skin over the loose eye’s spirit that travels through the world of the image-beings, the *yuxin*. Adornments bond, change view points, transform; drawings connect, trace paths, capture.

*Dau* is leaf, leaf of the bush that can be medicine or poison, but *dau* is also adornment. It’s enchantment because it was once a person that went through transformation and by being transformed never ceased to

virtually be a person. As we discussed yesterday, it takes us a long time to understand another language that hides or reveals another way of being, seeing, perceiving.

We need to study the founding myths, both our own Western ones that are in the Bible, in Greece, with Descartes, with Kant and other great shamans of Modernism, and the founding myths of other ontologies. Myths are not illusions, they reveal to us the structural foundations that frame the world we live in. Myths reveal the structuring relations and oppositions of thought.

Searching for the same nature/culture opposition that Modernism has consolidated with Descartes in other ontologies is therefore asking the wrong questions to receive equally unsuitable answers. We have two ways of exploring unknown worlds and they are both necessary, and should be examined with a lot of awareness of this relational structure; the first one seeks to find similarities and analogies, extending concepts to new realities. Both original concepts and new phenomena will be affected by the approximation. As Jeremy Narby's example presented yesterday, about how to shed new light on the double DNA helix, placing it in resonance with the Amazonian boa.

Lévi-Strauss demonstrated how aesthetic sensibility operates through the logic of similarities, be it in the smell of very different things or as colors and shapes. This manner of grouping diverse things is a means of knowledge, and thus chemistry will suddenly come upon what things which smell like camphor have in common: their chemical composition. Because man is made of the same material as other beings in the world, Lévi-Strauss believed that in time aesthetics and science would coincide, like mathematics and music.

The second way of studying other knowledge systems follows the complimentary path: it is fine tuned by suspecting excessively easy similarities. In this way, saying that the *Ayahuasca* remits to the collective unconscious brings closer, but it may also conceal much more interesting and revolutionary truths.

As stated by Roy Wagner, when in Melanesia it is said that in exchange for a woman the gift of many pigs is needed, does that mean that Melanesian women are commodities? If you live in a mercantilist world

perhaps, but not in Melanesia, where, on the contrary, all life revolved around the fabrication of people and the maintenance of the delicate balance of exchange relationships. Karl Marx showed how capitalism replaced relations between people with relations of value between things. In Melanesia and Amazonia things mean, instead, the value of relationships between peoples, be they human or not.

This technique that takes the differences in consideration has been criticized by some for opposing us and others, as it happens in Lévi-Strauss' societies with and without writing, and in those for and against the State from Clastres, but a defense and understanding of its theoretical and political values is necessary. It concerns a Copernican inversion of perspective. It is not the others, turned into minorities with their anti-capitalistic ontologies who revolve around us, the West, that – like the new president – wants to give “everyone the same rights”, to land for example, which would mean taking away land from indigenous peoples. It is us who spin around all these peoples, living a relational model to the world that has been showing itself unsustainable.

The right to equality is only valid if it predicts the right to difference. And there resides the distinction. Amerindian ontologies are interested in multiplicity, microvariations, and difference. “Each people has its own culture” is what they taught us. Like the *Huni Kuin*, *Ashaninka*, *Krenak*, *Guarani*, *Yanomami*, *Desana*. Thus each species has their own adornment to fabricate specific bodies and affections, ways of experimenting and living in a variety of worlds. Hence the importance of taking seriously the insight captured by Viveiros de Castro of the concept of perspectivism and its view of nature as variation.

If the biblical myth of the Babel Tower narrates the advent of the incomprehensibility of human languages, the Amerindian myths narrate the advent of speciation as a process in which each people/species, by through adopting another adornment, gain another body and another perspective. Each one begins to live within its own nature, without forgetting that the world is populated by multiple other worlds.

Anthropology is that science which is offspring of Modernism, that goes after knowledge of other worlds – but a lot of time and humility is needed. When the new indigenous researchers, who are now finally



entering graduate studies, say that “anthropologists know nothing”, they are right; but in the sense of the philosopher who said that it takes a lot of study and reflection to know that we know nothing. Faced with this realisation, it is urgent and necessary to change our assertive way of speaking and of daring to expose doubt.

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The editorial production work of the *Selvagem* Notebooks is carried out collectively with the *Selvagem* community.

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This notebook features the special participation of Natália Amari-nho, Katlen Rodrigues and Samia Rios in the Portuguese version. The editorial coordinator of English translations is Daniel Grimoni. Design is by Isabelle Passos and editorial coordination in Portuguese is by Victoria Mouawad.

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SELVAGEM Notebooks  
digital publication by  
Dantes Editora  
Biosphere, 2022

