Peace and Knowledge Politics in the Upper Xingu

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> The battle for *a truth* is something entirely different to the battle *for* truth
> Nietzsche, On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense

The multilingual system known as the *Upper Xingu* is defined as a *pacifist* regime by the Amerindian peoples who inhabit it and their ethnographers when they identify the region's singularities in relation to other Amazonian contexts and peoples. The present work aims to rethink this regional cleavage through an analysis of sorcery, its relation to war and the formative dynamics of the Xinguan multilingual system. By doing so, and based on an ethnography of the Aweti people (Tupi-speakers), this article will also consider the extent to which we can understand this region as functioning through a pacifist regime. We shall thus see that the mechanism that controls violence in the Xinguan context is probably less the result of an applied pacifist ideology – that is, the rejection of war as the *socius*' generative matrix – than the effect of a specific conception of knowledge, one that both reflects and produces the Xinguan world. It is argued that Xinguans might be unfamiliar with extreme forms of violence not by what distances them from other Amazonian peoples, but precisely by what brings them closer together; or rather, the hypothesis presented here is that it is through its refusal of a single truth, not its rejection of war, that their logic is "good to think" through the question of peace. The second part of the article will focus on this knowledge politics.

In the interval between an analysis of Xinguan sorcery and observations about the way in which sorcery (among other things) comes to be known by Xinguans, the article's argument will be cemented by the ethnographic description of a specific case of sorcery, taken from an ethnography of the Aweti; Tupi-speakers who inhabit the Xingu river's headwaters in Northeastern Mato Grosso, on the Brazilian Central Highlands. The Aweti currently number approximately 250 people – a reasonable population size when we

remember that no more than 30 individuals survived the successive chickenpox and mumps epidemics that ravaged the region in the 1950s – and live in four villages on the margins of the Curisevu, Tuatuari and Mirassol rivers. Like their neighbors – Carib-speakers (Kuikuro, Kalapalo, Nahukwá), Arawak-speakers and Trumai-speakers (spoken by isolated peoples) – the Aweti mainly subsist on fishing and manioc derivation, and participate in an intense network of ceremonial and matrimonial exchanges. This network is characterized by shared ethic and aesthetic standards, relational codes and a mythological corpus that describes the simultaneous creation of these different peoples by the mythical twins Sun and Moon, followed by their differentiation through the demiurges' distribution of distinct weapons and artifacts.

1. Sorcery

Amazonianist ethnology generally describes the peoples who live along the Xingu river's headwaters as forming a social system that has important differences to most Amazonian contexts – or, at least, when compared with a certain canonical image of the latter. Two concepts can roughly summarize these differences: hierarchy and pacifism. In relation to the first of these, Upper Xinguans are considered to have a system of linear status transmission that is directly associated with the position of village chief. This is thought to be very different to most other indigenous Amazonian contexts, yet the distinction is primarily an ethnological observation and a topic for debate among ethnologists. However, pacifism, as the second of these concepts, is seemingly used by Xinguans to distinguish themselves from other Amazonian peoples. So, for example, in their accounts about entry into the ritual exchange system that defines boundaries in the Xinguan complex, they emphasize the pacification of newcomers; that is, a transition from a propensity toward war to the adoption of an anti-war ethos, which is associated with participation in the *kwarup* inter-community ritual (see also Basso, 1995; Gregor, data; Heckenberger data etc).

When taken as a set, hierarchy and pacifism seem to definitively exclude the Upper Xingu from Pierre Clastres's image of "forest peoples". At first glance, at least, if Xinguans do not

live *for-war* they also cannot be an example of a society *against-the-State*[1] (Clastres data; Sztutman, data; Viveiros de Castro, data), but then maybe we should take more care with the terms that we use to translate other peoples' ideas. As discussed elsewhere (Vanzolini 2011), the notion of hierarchy, derived from the view that chiefly positions are transmitted through heredity in the Upper Xingu, can obstruct a more refined description of what is really involved in indigenous conceptions of chieftainship, linearity (and kinship), mastery and so on. Furthermore, the concept of hierarchy can lead us to ignore those dynamics, against-the-State *vectors*, or *lines of flight* (if we read Clastres's idea through Deleuze and Guattari, data; Sztutman data) that act counter to political centralization, or to interpret them as mere systemic degradation. As Deleuze and Guattari argue (XXX), the presence of lines of flight in diverse contexts does not imply that all ways of life are the same. Against-the-State vectors occupy a central place in indigenous logic, if not in our own, and can be found in the very idea of chieftainship.

The same type of criticism can be made against the use of the concept of pacifism to describe political life in the Upper Xingu: this term must be ethnographically unpacked so that we can understand what it really involves. Similarly, we must investigate those Xinguan forms of violence and control that are often sidelined in affirmations of indigenous pacifism. In sorcery and, significantly, sorcery accusation, we can once again see the against-the-State vectors that Clastres associated with Amerindian war. An ethnography of the Aweti is our point of departure for this line of inquiry.

The Aweti describe sorcery[2] as a terrible evil that they would like to be rid of and they oppose the sorcerer to the humanity/morality that distinguishes the Upper Xinguan from other

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1 Pierre Clastres had South American indigenous peoples in mind when he developed both concepts, allowing him to define forest societies positively and no longer in relation to a scale of human social development. Rather than understanding those peoples as incapable of reaching an elevated level of political organization, Clastres proposes that we should recognize the absence of the State as an active refusal of coercive power. As such, for Clastres, primitive society is not a stateless society (that is, that still has not acquired a State), but one that is against-the-Sate.

Clastres' hypothesis has been broadly contested by subsequent Americanist ethnology (see, for example, Descola, Santos Granero, Fausto...). However, it is also broadly accepted that he touches on a point that became particularly important for research conducted in Amazonia, especially from the 1990s onwards, on the social productivity of war, relations with alterity and the constitution of the Amerindian *socius*. See, for example, Albert, data, Overing, data, Viveiros de Castro, datas, Fausto, data, Vilaça, data.

2 The Xinguan sorcerer brings together incorporated skill and acquired techniques, he fabricates both a harmful object and his own body through specific techniques, making it impracticable

human and non-human subjects. However, they also recognize that sorcery is as old and inherent to their way of life as the *kwarup* – the inter-community funerary ritual that constitutes a central axis of ritual exchange on the Xingu and, by doing so, traces the boundaries of Xinguan social life. Since Upper Xinguans regard sorcery as a primary existential problem – the Upper Xingu is a place where all deaths are credited to the action of sorcerers – this is a theme that appears in all of the regional ethnographies. However, anthropologists writing about Upper Xinguan sorcery tend to reproduce the native discourse without giving due attention to the ambiguity that it necessarily evokes and which is particularly evident when we pay greater attention to what actually happens in people's lives.

If asked to identify any sorcerers who might be in the vicinity, a Aweti would probably indicate people from other villages and, even more likely, from another Xinguan linguistic group, such as the *janahukwaryza*, or "the janahukwá people", who are Xinguan Carib-speakers (currently the Kalapalo, Kuikuro and Matipu peoples). They might even identify someone from their own group, but probably someone who lives on the other side of the village, since families naturally tend to build their houses side by side. In the end, Xinguan discourse begins by designating the other as sorcerer – another Xinguan or, when internal to the group, someone who lives beyond the more immediate family circle (cf. Gregor, 1977).

However, in practice this statement is only partly true. Although they also generically affirm that the sorcerer acts from pure malice, the Aweti always seek explanations to justify any specific case of sorcery – a plate of food denied, revenge for suspected adultery, envy of someone else's healthy children or vegetable garden, jealousy over care given to someone else, etc. These speculations make it clear that sorcery is always expected to come from someone that is sufficiently close to the victim to desire his or her suffering. At the same time, in each Xinguan village, and in the Upper Xingu generally, everyone expects to recognize others as kin and it is thus only possible to say that the sorcerer is an *other* from a

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to classify this act as "sorcery" or "witchcraft" in the classic terms proposed by Evans-Pritchard (1937) through the Azande case. Furthermore, every Xinguan body is a technically constructed body, neither more nor less than the body of a sorcerer or shaman (cf. Viveiros de Castro, DATA, Figueiredo 2010, Guerreiro, DATA). As for contributions by Mary Douglas (DATA) and Bruce Kapferer (DATA) on the distinction between sorcery and witchcraft – which point to the association between witchcraft and phenomenon that occur in "low-grid" contexts (Douglas) or within relations of similarity (in Kapferer's re-elaboration), while sorcery is connected to "high-grid" contexts or relations of difference – I believe that Xinguan sorcery undoes any precise distinction between difference and similarity (and on this point I would echo conclusions made by Kapferer in relation to Sri Lankan sorcery, see footnote n. 7).

certain point of view. This is so even while Xinguans recognize the difference between "real" or close kin and those with whom kinship seemingly operates as a relational schema that guides mutual dealings (as in "my father calls his father nephew, so I call him cousin"). The sorcerer will always be an *other Xinguan* always and frequently a very close other, someone who will come to be treated as an other through the very act or suspicion of sorcery. It is therefore only natural that the social distance that separates sorcerer and victim should be affirmed: if he were not other, he would never wish harm on a relative. And, once again, this is only partly true.

It is clear that acts and suspicions of sorcery follow the paths of previous quarrels – such as matrimonial betrayal, followed by separation, leading to the mother-in-law's bewitchment by her ex-son-in-law; or a young man's bewitchment by his father's brother, who was always suspected of envy. In any case, there is a great difference between this modality of internal, or semi-internal, sorcery and contexts in which external aggression is expected.[3] What Xinguan sorcery questions is the possibility of safely distinguishing between insides and outsides. This corresponds to the opposition between war and sorcery that up to a certain point marks the difference between Xinguans and Amazonian warrior peoples for the former and in the ethnological literature.

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In relation to Xinguan pacifism, it is important to note that it is basically directed *inward*: it defines relational morality *between people that recognize each other as part of the same collectivity*, but it does not cover those who are situated beyond it. As Barcelos Neto (data) observes, warrior attacks involving the kidnap of women and children were common among Upper Xinguans and their neighbors until just after the permanent installation of Brazilian

3 A notable example is given by exchanges of sorcery between Xinguans and their indigenous neighbors: while the Aweti tend to accuse other Aweti of sorcery, or at least another Xinguan within their circle of relations, the non-Xinguan peoples with whom they live apparently tend to accuse Xinguans of sorcery. In this way, when a Trumai chief moved into Kayapó land – following a number of misunderstandings in the Xingu Park – it was said that his greatest fear was that he would be executed by his new neighbors, who would certainly accuse him of sorcery as soon as one of them became ill. Following the same logic, a Kamayurá shaman was accused of bewitching a young Kayapó man while he was treating him, by the latter's family (the young man died during the treatment).

government bases in the region in the mid-twentieth century.[4] It is actually very likely that if white people had not arrived and introduced the State's need to establish limits, fix identities, determine territories and give names, the boundaries between the interior and exterior of what we currently recognize as a Xinguan system would have undergone significant changes during the last three-quarters of a century, much as before (a hypothesis offered by Bastos, 1989). If that were the case, our ability to define the territorial and conceptual limits of Xinguan pacifism would probably be much more difficult than it is now.

In passing, nowadays it is war that is no longer an existential alternative for Amazonian peoples. War – at least in its indigenous mode, as announced by Pierre Clastres – is *against-the-State*, and the progressive inclusion of these peoples into the Brazilian government's sphere of influence (resulting, at best, in the demarcation of indigenous lands), could only mean that the warrior philosophy that previously guided indigenous life would become impracticable. Perhaps it is therefore not by choice that most Amazonian peoples are peaceful today (which does not mean pacifist as in the Xinguan case), or that they define their own existential condition through the abdication of violence. What seems to differentiate Xinguans from other Amazonian peoples is therefore less the contemporary or historical presence or absence of war, than the value given to war in different logical regimes. Nowadays Xinguans profess a horror of violence and describe the manner in which they adopted their current way of life as a process of pacification. Meanwhile, other Amazonian peoples have made war into their existential motor by attaching the *socius*' reproduction and the constitution of people to the ability to capture their enemy's potency – objectified in names, an animist force, ritual songs – and to relations with alterity more generally (EVC, Fausto, Taylor, Sztutman, Albert, Vilaça etc). This does not mean that the Xinguan *socius* is simply self-productive, but rather suggests that it turns on controlled figures of enmity (VER CARLOS e PENONI), such as the opposition between various Xinguan peoples in the ritual fight known as *huka-huka*, the *kwarup* funerary ritual's central episode; the lance duel in the *Jawari* inter-community party; marked potential affinity between dance pairs in diverse inter-community rituals that always brings together women and men and from different groups. The problem is that enmity always seems to threaten to break free from control.

4 Thanks to the efforts of the indigenist brothers Orlando, Claudio and Leonardo Villas-Boas, the Xingu National Park was created in 1961 and would later be transformed into the Xingu Indigenous Park. This indigenous area includes the Xingu river's inlets, where the Upper Xinguans live, and also follows the river's course up to the border with Pará State, an area inhabited by the Ikpeng (also known as Txicão), Kajabi, Yudjá (or Juruna) and Kisêdjê (Suyá).

It is therefore important to rethink the contrast between Xinguans and "other Amazonian peoples". In the end (and this must be an universal truism), they all work toward relational harmony *within* a given collectivity. Composed as they are by three different linguistic families (Tupi, Arawak and Carib), as well as an isolated language and a Jê-group, what might distinguish Xinguans from their neighbors is more the cosmopolitan character of their collectivity. If it is true that the ideological value or, more exactly, the creative potency of war varies for different Amerindian peoples, the contrast between them seems to be related less to the presence or absence of open hostility than to the stability of the boundaries that define the group.

Inspired by Max Schmidt's early twentieth century hypothesis, Xinguan cosmopolitanism has recently been interpreted as fruit of a typical Arawakan *ethos*, which probably formed the primary contours of the cultural system that we see today (Schmidt, 1913; Heckenberger DATA). In this view, and in contrast to regimes in which war is a means of appropriating the enemy's subjective qualities (placing him necessarily at the centre of anthropophagic rituals, head-shrinking, song acquisition, etc.), among the Arawak war is mobilized by an incorporative and hierarchical *ethos*. Schmidt associates this with the need to conquer territories, labor and primary resources for the confection of agricultural instruments – a theory that, while it does not presume the ecological determination of a socioeconomic regime, still has a certain materialist streak. Though substantially transformed, the idea of a typically Arawakan regime of relations to alterity also appears in Heckenberger's work (see also Hill and Santos Granero DATA). In his view, rather than appropriating others' potency, Arawakan cultures tend to transform others into the selfsame. In other words, the Arawak enslave rather than cannibalize [ver SANTOS GRANERO!!].

My aim here is not to discuss the merits of this thesis – something which would require a very broad comparative study – but simply to point to those Xinguan dynamics that complexify this description. Presuming that we should indeed take the Upper Xingu as an example of this "cultural matrix", I believe that this exercise might provide another reading of Arawakan singularity in the Amazonian setting. As we have seen, a pacifist ideology and cosmopolitanism do not guarantee the absence of violence in the Xinguan case. Indeed, it might even favor its irruption *in a specific form*, as sorcery; violence that comes from within, from another Xinguan and, very frequently, from a relative or someone that lives alongside

the victim. Contrary to war, which captures names and generative potency or conquers territories, and is therefore a fundamental means to construct kinship in Amerindian contexts, Xinguan sorcery undoes kinship ties. Perhaps Xinguan cosmopolitanism implies a propensity toward the incorporation of the other as the selfsame, *but sorcery makes the selfsame into the other*. It is violence among allies – or even potential enemies – and can therefore be understood as an inherently cosmopolitan form of violence.

However, it seems impossible to affirm any radical separation between sorcery and war, even when the boundaries that delimit the Xinguan moral world tend toward stabilization following their incorporation into a Nation-State regime, as probably happened to all indigenous peoples in Brazil and beyond. Instead, it seems more likely that in the past sorcery led to war and vice-versa, articulating a constant shift between relations of friendship and enmity among neighboring groups, a common dynamic among most Amazonian peoples (Albert, Chaumeil, etc etc). Rather than being the result of the progressive annexation of one group by another (a process that is concomitant with an expansionist cultural model), Xinguan cosmopolitanism could thus be thought as the mutating effect of group inclusions and exclusions into an allied set – an unstable collectivity that configures an *us-relatives* or, as is commonly expressed in an Amazonian vocabulary, *us-humans*.

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The relation between war and sorcery is a recurrent theme among researchers working in the Xinguan context because, as many ethnologists have observed, the abdication of open hostility among Xinguans has never led to the disappearance of violence. So, for example, in his analysis of the connection between these two forms of aggression, Gregor argues that the fear of the accusation of sorcery leads Xinguans to always act morally and, thus, that sorcery has a positive role in the affirmation of a Xinguan anti-bellicose morality (see also Dole 1964, 1976 and Zarur 1975). However, this common thesis is problematic for a number of reasons. First, because it could only be true if there were some type of consensus relative to the identity of Xinguan sorcerers, something that is not even confirmed in Gregor's ethnography. It is, after all, always difficult to define *according to whom* one should act morally. As the author notes in his own monograph about the Mehinaku Arawak: "Every Mehinaku man was regarded as a witch by at least one informant, and two men were named as witches by every informant" (1977: 207). Furthermore, if the fear of accusation were

indeed an efficient means to effect moral control in the Upper Xingu, we would expect to find few cases of bewitchment in that region, when in fact the opposite is true. The hypothesis that the threat of sorcery accusations have a pacifying effect in that relational universe is disproved by the fact that the accusations themselves tend to be understood as disruptive and anti-social actions (see below). It therefore seems implausible that, as Gregor argues, sorcery is an operational characteristic of a Xinguan pacifist morality, a collectivity marked by the elimination of war from within.

An alternative analysis can by found in Coelho de Souza's (2001) proposal that sorcery is the means by which the Xinguan context becomes outwardly open. According to this author, as groups that were once initially strangers are integrated into an Upper-Xinguan network of political and ritual relations, their alterity will be perceived as a threat of sorcery – a latent enmity among Xinguans – and no longer as a threat of war, which is proper to open enmity between Xinguans and non-Xinguans. Thus, for Coelho de Souza, sorcery represents the negative and dangerous character of the introjection of others into a relational network that presumes identity, but which also requires the maintenance of a coefficient of difference as the condition of possibility for ceremonial and matrimonial exchange. In the end, sorcery us understood as a type of residue of the necessarily incomplete process of becoming Xinguan.

This analysis is consistent with many Upper Xinguan accounts of sorcery: as previously described, in generic comments Xinguans always point to others as sorcerers, even when they are other Xinguans. It is thus understandable that groups that have been recently integrated into the peaceful exchange regime that defines belonging in the Xinguan universe should be made responsible for those deaths associated with sorcery. However, as we have also seen, if Xinguan sorcery is triggered by the kinship process itself in the everyday interactions through which people define themselves as kin or not, it is likewise associated with the constant internal production of enmity and not only with the internalization of the enemy over time. Although it is not a false statement, it thus does not seem sufficient to say that sorcery is war by other means, war disguised by the operation of a pacifist morality. It is more an irruption of violence that *begins at the centre of social life*, a type of war that is continuously produced by the very dynamics of kinship. In any case, Coelho de Souza highlights a crucial point: the role of sorcery in the unstable distinction between insides and outsides, us and others. That Xinguan sorcery no longer slips into open warfare can be seen as a consequence of the freeze

imposed on group boundaries following *contact*, a word that reverberates as euphemism here.[5]

As a force of indeterminacy[6], sorcery seems to be intrinsically connected to the way in which it is known – or, rather, unknowable – in the Xinguan world and, more broadly, to a Xinguan knowledge regime; their conception of what can be known and how. That is what I seek to describe in the second part of this article. However, before that a case of sorcery that I followed in the field provides ethnographic weight for the transition from the sociopolitical dynamics of violence to Xinguan knowledge practices.

2. A case of amorous sorcery

Xinguans know a special type of sorcery that the Aweti designate with the specific and apparently pan-Xinguan term of *kuriti*, as well as with the generic Aweti term *tupiat*, which in its strictest sense refers to the minuscule arrows that sorcerers surreptitiously shoot at their victims or tie to corporeal residues, food or stolen belongings. However, *kuriti* does not involve tiny arrows but a potion made with urucum and a vegetable substance that none could identify to me (revealing knowledge of this formula would be equivalent to admitting "ownership" of the spell and, thus, of being a sorcerer). The potion is said to have the appearance of normal urucum paste and must be rubbed onto the victim's arm, most commonly it is a woman bewitched by a man and the effect is that she will fall head over heels in love with the sorcerer. At first glance, *kuriti* appears to be a typical form of affinal sorcery that transforms potential spouses, close or distant crossed cousins, into actual lovers.

However, the first case of *kuriti* that I observed during fieldwork did not seem to fit with this generic description, which was given to me by the Aweti dozens of times. It began when we

5 It should be observed that this hypothesis is in line with Bastos's intuition, as much as it is inversely related to Heckenberger's own. The latter suggests that colonization led to the disorganization of a more stable political system that tended towards centralization. I suspect that the effect was, rather, to stabilize a system that might have always been characterized by unstable boundaries, even when it operated in a much larger population.

6 Kapferer's (1997) analysis of sorcery in Sri Lanka points in the same direction: in using a conceptual image borrowed from Deleuze and Guattari, Kapferer talks about Sinhalese sorcery as the creation of a "smooth space", the moment in which the sociopolitical distinctions of a "striated space" are temporarily undone, and must be reformed through a disenchantment ritual.

received the news of a young woman's disappearance one afternoon. She had left her own village to visit her sister in a neighboring Aweti village and had never arrived. A number of hypotheses emerged about what could have happened, while various search parties were formed and sent to look for her in the forest, and while various shamans smoked their long cigars to try to see where her soul was located and to identify whether there were any spells against her in the surrounding area. People said that she had run away because her father had hit her when she refused to help her sister in the vegetable garden. They said that she had most likely been eaten by a jaguar on her way to the other village. And that, if she were not dead, she could only be with the spirits (*kat*), eating fruit in the forest without any chance of returning home.

At a certain point, the theory that her cousin (mother's sister's son, MZS) was the culprit began to circulate, since everybody knew that he was the girl's lover and had been so for many years, and so people began to say that he had "placed *kuriti* for her". As they were first-degree parallel cousins the young man was not a suitable companion for her[7] and the relationship between them had been harshly condemned by everyone. Some people suggested that she had runaway when her mother had chastised her for her forbidden love.

Some days later, a shaman found a *kuriti* close to where the missing young woman normally slept, in the external part of the straw roof that covered the family home. According to what I was told – as it all happened far from the village where I lived at the time – the spell consisted of a small anthropomorphic effigy made of wax and wood, a "human image" (*mo´at a´ang*). It was also said that a similar *kuriti* had been found somewhere along the path between the new and the old village, having been placed there to attract the girl, making her leave the path and go into the forest. No matter what the technique, the *kuriti*'s expected effect is to make the person lose her judgment.

7 The Aweti, and the Xinguans more generally, distinguish between parallel and crossed relatives following a dravidian scheme, crossed over with a distance gradient, as described by Viveiros de Castro (1993): when they are genealogically and geographically close, parallel relatives from the same generation are "consanguines" (or un-marriable), becoming affinizable when these distances increase. In any case, whatever the kinship tie, whether close or distant, it must be constantly reaffirmed through the performance of certain attitudes that are expected from a specific relational mode. In other words, it is necessary to act as a brother and, above all, to call another "brother", for it to be true.

The young woman reappeared some days later. Some said that, after spending many days lost in the forest, she had appeared alone, very thin and injured in the middle of the night at the Funai[8] outpost, knocking on a relative's door. Another version said that a Kamayurá woman had seen her in perfect health during the day at the Funai outpost and that she had really been in her unapproved lover's house the whole time, as he also lived at the outpost. However, both versions concurred that the young woman now had a certain lost look about her – "she doesn't look" (doesn't fix her regard), they said. And even the version that claimed that she had spent the entire time hidden in her lover's house saw her as a victim: *kuriti* had made her lose her head. In the end, someone who has a brother as a lover is as lost as someone gone astray in the forest.

In my opinion, this case summarizes some of the fundamental elements of sorcery in the Upper Xingu. Even though the *kuriti* is a special modality of sorcery in the Xinguan context, the story exemplifies a recurrent process in that region: the accusation of sorcery between people who are reasonably close and, at the same time, opposed in terms of amorous or conjugal interests, so to speak. As we have seen, this case does not involve sorcery between affines but rather "affinizing" sorcery, made to transform a classificatory sister (first degree MZD) into a girlfriend. However, given that these young people were already lovers – and everyone seemed to agree on this point – we could say that the accusation itself was directed at an affine or a type of affine. The *kuriti* and the accusation reveal that difference was found where identity was expected: those that should be behaving as brothers were behaving as spouses.

The story also reveals that a spell can involve diverse mediations, for the human effigy could have worked as much to attract forest spirits and divert the young woman from her path, as to make her lose her mind and go live with her lover. Even when there is no certainty regarding the presence or absence of sorcery in a misfortune it is likely that the people will react as if there were and thus, sooner or later, accusations begin to surface and lead to open conflicts. In any case, people never know exactly what happened and will continue to offer hypothetical explanations that they characterize as "attempts." As the Aweti explained to me many times when I asked about what they thought had *actually* happened, "we are just

8 *Fundação Nacional do Índio* or National Indian Foundation, a body of the Brazilian Federal Government.

searching [for the truth]."[9] This is the point that I would like to underline here: *the very form of the conversations that take place around sorcery seem to take into consideration that an accusation is always provisional*. This is so even when the accusation is founded on a shamanic vision, for the Aweti do not discount the idea that shamans can sometimes get it wrong or might not be able to see what is happening. This does not mean that the accusations do not have the force of truth, but more that they can be understood as transitory truth acts.

3 . Knowledge as politics

Sorcery is a highly secretive phenomenon in the Upper Xingu – nobody would ever admit to being a sorcerer and in the past a recognized sorcerer was often executed by the victim's relatives, once they had formed a big enough group for an ambush. However, even in those cases, it was rare for the verdict to correspond to collective opinion: the family of an executed man, or even one that has only been repeatedly accused of sorcery today, would certainly defend his innocence and counter-accuse the accusers of aggression, gossip and of being bad people. There is no universal mechanism for verifying guilt and even revenge by execution is a family affair.[10] So for an outsider, like the ethnographer, it is virtually impossible to determine who is and is not a sorcerer, something that would require choosing a side and knowing what group one belongs to. Indeed, from the outside sorcery presents itself as a matter of perspective, for what some might call sorcery others perceive as revenge against an unjust accusation of sorcery, or even simply as the attack of a pathogenic spirit. However, for those directly involved it is, literally, vital to determine what is actually happening.

Much of the anthropological literature on sorcery deals with accusations rather than with sorcery itself as a technique or act of bewitchment, an analytical conundrum that can have one or both of two possible explanations. First, there is the ethnographic material itself – in contexts where sorcery can never be observed because there are no self-professed sorcerers (as in the Upper Xingu), the ethnographer will only have accounts of sorcery, mostly in the form of accusations, at her disposal. The second possibility speaks to the ethnographer's preconceptions when she describes foreign worlds: starting with the assumption that sorcery does not exist and that it can only be understood as a false explanation of an underlying social

9 Azojkat'ikaju tene

10 My observations counter what Menget (data) writes, with regard to the execution of sorcery as an attribute of chieftainship in the Upper Xingu.

reality, the anthropologist deals only with the accounts and their social effects. From this perspective, the *accusations* have an effect on intimate relations, not sorcery itself.

Sorcery and accusations of sorcery also appear to be conflated in some of the considerations offered below, something that is certainly an effect of the fact that my material on sorcery among the Aweti is based on *what is said* about it, basically in the form of accusations. In the ethnography the impossibility of safely determining the identity of a sorcerer often required me to employ language tricks that underline the fact that the sorcerer is only considered to be so only from some peoples' point of view. This strategy reflects tricks commonly used by the Aweti in their accounts, in which care is always taken to maintain uncertainty around accusations, making it possible to recant on whatever was previously said.

When openly spoken in the center of the village sorcery accusations are expected to dissuade the sorcerer from any wrongdoing and, thus, can be ideally regarded as pacifying mechanisms. However, in practice they are also thought to be as damaging as sorcery itself. It is thus considered normal to accuse one's neighbors in tragic situations – such as the death of a relative or a serious illness – but the accusation should also never be indefinitely prolonged. In due time, the accused should also forgive the accusers as long as the latter have acted with certain restraint.

Yet frequently the accusers don't just not forget sorcery, they take revenge on whoever they think has attacked them or, at least, that will be the interpretation given by the accused when someone becomes sick in their family: "they're taking revenge, unjustly, for a murder that we did not commit". Indeed, the accused often resolve to speak up and accuse his accusers. The logic that reigns in these counter-accusations seems to be "since you are saying that we are sorcerers, then we'll kill you and be done with it!", or the accused will remind the accusers that "if we were really sorcerers, you would all be dead a long time ago!". Thus, what we can observe is the exchange of accusations, where the accused turn to accuse their past accusers as if they were victims taking revenge by bewitching their aggressors or their enemies. This exchange involves an intricate game of overlapping assumptions in which the problem is always what the other side imagines about what is imagined about them. In short, in the Xinguan view, sorcery and sorcery accusation are different modes of the same problem and are distinguishable, notably, as forms of gendered aggression: only men make spells and

women are the sorcery accusers par excellence. However, I will keep my thoughts on this last point for another occasion.

Whilst observing heated conversations about polemical topics during fieldwork, my knowledge of Aweti was sufficient only to understand a few sentences here and there, no more, so afterwards I often found myself asking someone what so-and-so meant with such-and-such a statement. My linguistic incompetence was perhaps only surpassed by the fact that the discussions were also often about people who I did not know or referred to people that I did know using incomprehensible allusions, such as "the one that's in that place". It took me a while to note a certain embarrassment among my friends when I asked them to name the people mentioned in sorcery accusations. The fact that these people were only ever identified through allusions was important, for tapping into a source of shared knowledge meant that it was unnecessary to be more specific. The less said the easier it is to return to a situation where things were unsaid because interpretations about a fact can always change depending on the course of events and relations.

Now, this dynamic does not differ much from how the Aweti tend to deal with their myths, which are a primary source of knowledge for them, as we shall see. Accusations basically circulate through gossip – that is, unless they explode in the middle of the village, which is a gesture of desperation that cannot be taken as rule. However, gossip is not a discursive object with a defined nature, the term "gossip" (*tüi popy'i*, literally: "well-disposed chin") basically designates the propensity to talk too much. Talking little and taking care with what one says are signs of nobility in the Upper Xingu, the principal characteristics expected from a chief. In fact, not only speaking but also *listening* little is admired, as it means taking no note of what is being said about one's family. "Gossip", then, is a category of accusation – nobody would say "I speak too much", a term used to disqualify stories told by others. From the speaker's point of view he simply retells a "story", *tomowkap*, a term that also designates what we call myth – at times, though not necessarily, specified as "the elders' story" (*mote mo'aza etomowkap*). As *stories* are qualified only by the listener's point of view, there is no qualitative difference between myth and gossip. This has a profound implication, pointing to the intimate connection between the political effects of sorcery and a Xinguan epistemological regime that, at once, reflects and constitutes the Xinguan world.

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The Aweti identify myths as a fundamental source of esoteric knowledge. For example, when asked about the celestial geography, such as where the village of the dead is located, they will use the well-known story of a man that followed his dead friend to the sky and came back to tell. As a shaman once told me when I asked him about the subject, "I have never been there, I don't know how it is," and immediately went on to recount the same myth (that I had already heard from other sources, always in slightly different versions that emphasized one or other aspect of the story). By listening to myths told by elders on a daily basis (normally by a grandparent, parent or even a parent-in-law), people can learn things about the world we live in – which as everybody knows goes far beyond what is visible to the undiscerning eye – or about how it came to be. This process of configurating contemporary reality takes place not only through the origin saga, in which the demiurge twins Sun and Moon are central characters, but also through the numerous myths that tell about the acquisition of cultural attributes (such as certain rituals or cultivated plants). It also operates through myths that explain how certain powers were lost, such as the ability to produce immense quantities of manioc starch with a minimal amount of manioc.

When the Aweti use a myth to describe the birds' village or to explain how the dead live, why we should not urinate in the vegetable garden or why we should treat our mothers-in-law well, they are making assertions about the meaning of these stories in their lives. When analyzing the mythological narrative context among the Piro, Gow (DATA) argues that they are never told for a specific reason, such as to explain a situation or counsel the young, but from the pure pleasure of narrating. It is possible to make a similar observation about the Aweti, but the fact that the myths are not explicitly told *to* instruct or explain does not mean that they do not have explicative potential, or that they do not operate in this way.

Indeed, the Aweti term that I translate as *myth* indicates this function: the word *tomowkap*, which the Aweti commonly translate as 'story', is formed by the root of the verb 'to guide' – *mowka* – along with the instrumentalizing suffix – *p*. The Aweti use the term *tomowkap* to designate those stories transmitted through the generations in which unknown elders are the protagonists, but the term is also used to identify narratives about something that might have happened ten minutes previously (and which any listener can interpret as gossip). A man that has information about an event and an expert myth teller are each a 'story owner' (*tomowkap*

itat) – a temporary position in the first case and, in the latter, a position that becomes progressively fixed.

The notion -*mowkatu*, or 'guidance', can refer to the speech that a chief is expected to give in the center of the village on a daily basis, to a father advising his son and to one person's account of what happened during a fishing trip. The instructive character that the Aweti associate with their myths befits the moralist effects that some stories can have, such as when we are reminded that terrible cosmological troubles were the result of bad behavior among kin in times immemorial. The fact that myths somehow substantiate the world's current condition and rules of behavior also emerged during my fieldwork, such as when a man insisted, 'It isn't a lie, it is story!', temo'em e'ym, tomowkap!, about his father's explanations of certain alimentary restrictions associated with the pequi (souari nut) and corn harvests.

The term tomowkap is suggestive of the fact that stories are not just accounts of what once happened but also guides for future actions. This corresponds to Viveiros de Castro's (DATA) expansion of Lévi-Strauss's definition of myth in his analysis of Davi Yanomami's shamanic discourse. In this view, myth is a discourse about a remote past that can never be overcome and that can always be actualized in the present with the restitution of communication between humans and animals as humans, a reversal of the moment of speciation described by so many narratives.

Evidently not everything that happens to someone and that can be told as a story implies the introduction of a new world order; however, the difference between cosmogonic stories and all other stories seems to lie in the degree of the characters' potency. This distinction is neither negligible nor absolute and appears to correspond to both the acknowledged importance of narrated events and a high degree of formal codification in stories about the elders – a triangulation that makes these stories worth telling through the generations.

Even so, if it is true to say that a story from the Aweti's grandparents' time – which is a recent story in comparison to ancient times – do not determine their way of life in the same way that a story about the demiurge twins, they still carry a warning: this could happen again. The numerous stories about men attacked by jaguar in paths surrounding the village are an example. *Tomowkapwan ekozoko*, or "you will become a story", is a typical phrase told by one protagonist to another when a narrative ends: the protagonist of a mythic event will

become a model for "future people", *amyñeza*. This affirmation seems to remind the audience that every agent in an extraordinary event can "become a story" or "remain in a story", becoming the origin and prototype that configures a future world. We shall now consider another central aspect of myth as a source of Aweti knowledge – that which makes it into a true statement about the world.

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For the Aweti, the stories that we identify as myths are speech-acts transmitted through the generations, whose narrative form should be kept intact; this is basically what differentiates them from common stories about recent events. However, mythic narratives are also always the object of variation, and often of uncertainty and criticism. This became evident during my fieldwork when I began to hear comments about the narratives that I registered in the Aweti village, during my visits to different families. When playing back recordings in different houses, I would often hear statements such as "it's a lie", "he doesn't know", "that's not the Aweti story, that's the Kamayurá (other Tupi-xinguans) story." At first, I imagined that these comments emerged from a type of short-circuit that I created by changing the way in which the stories usually circulated. However, little by little I noticed that that was not the case. Aside from being recounted by older men to their sons and grandsons at home and at nightfall, myths are also frequently remembered in the village's central square by men from different households or in a casual conversation among neighbors. These versions are very frequently criticized when the listener recounts them at home and it is common for someone to say, "so-and-so just told me that story, I don't know where he got that from" or "so-and-so was telling such-and-such a story in the center, he thinks he knows everything". It is also notable that these criticisms are often softened by a type of relativism, with reflections such as "that's *his* story, the story that his father used to tell"; "the story that I learnt from my father-in-law is different, the story he tells is from the Mehinaku people (Arawak-Xinguans), told him by his grandfather."

During fieldwork I sometimes observed people questioning the existence of an entire sequence of actions in a mythic narrative about a specific event, or even of a whole myth – a feeling expressed through statements such as "I've never heard that before, I don't know what that story is about." This was the case, for instance, of a story about the Bat (Tati'a) told to me by one narrator as part of the Sun and Moon twin saga, while another story teller claimed that he had never heard the sequence that way. When the audience characterize a

narrative as a 'lie' they almost always refer to the incomplete or inappropriate execution of its formal elements, such as the characters' names, the exact sequence of events, how a song is remembered of forgotten, etc.

The term used by the Aweti for 'lie', *mo'em*, can designate both a deliberately deceptive account and an unintentional mistake or bad representation of something, such as a poorly executed pattern of body paint or a half-told myth. In contrast, there is no term that we might translate as 'truth' or 'true.' *Na ytoto*, which translates as 'himself' or 'the very same,' is used by the Aweti to indicate veracity, but as *ytoto* also means 'a lot' it is possible to suggest that 'the very same/true' is only a more complete version of false – a distinction that is itself a matter of degree rather than an absolute opposition between what is and is not. Indeed, it is clear that like pacifism and hierarchy – which say little about Xinguan sociopolitics – truth and lies are quite unreliable notions when dealing with this way of conceiving knowledge.

As such, the term *mo'em* does not emphasize any moral aspect of 'lying,' for a drawing or discourse might be 'false' not from any intention to conceal the 'truth' but as a result of the creator's inaptitude. 'Falsity' thus points to the lack of correspondence between a model and its reproduction. However, in the case of myths and body patterns correspondence is expected between past and present designs, or between narratives told by ancestors and those heard today, *not between the facts of a 'real' story and the narrative that recalls them, or a 'real' ant path and a body pattern with the same name*. As such, when a Aweti person says that the narration of a myth is lying it means that it was not reproduced perfectly, as in the past, which is the way that it should be told today. In this case, lying relates to the perception of an interruption in knowledge transmission, which is presumed by the myth learning regime. A myth that 'lies' is a myth that does not present the form, including the richness of detail, which a listener hopes to find. Knowing through stories, then, is always about knowing someone else's knowledge, and not about knowing the world and its story as it is. We thus find the necessary use of the evidential *ti*, "*diz-que*" (they say), in mythic narratives: a myth is always a story that "they-say" happened in such and such a way, but who knows?

Even though certain mythic narratives are considered to be bad or false they are admissible as 'others' stories', and are sometimes taken on board with a certain cumulative spirit, following the premise that it is beneficial and even important to know new versions. For, of course, Aweti myth narrators and listeners are not always motivated by political disputes, envy and

innuendo, and often there is a genuine interest in simply knowing more about how others think (including white people). The fact that a myth is understood as a reproduction of someone else's account, even when it is ideally transmitted in a fixed form, contributes towards the perception that it is interesting to learn the greatest number of versions possible.

However, to characterize this type of attitude as 'relativist' can be quite deceptive, for when the social context does not allow free exchange flows – of knowledge, food and goods – truth is singular: it is my relatives' version that counts. If this is true for mythic narratives in some contexts – as in a dispute about who could give the ethnographer the best version – it is certainly more dramatic for those discourses that are directly related to the actual lives of people and that, as we saw, are not essentially distinguished from what we call myths. So no-one would say that a sorcery accusation against a relative is only "so-and-so's version of things"; at best, one would say that it is unfounded gossip.

For the Aweti, myths have the character of discourses about the contemporary world, its story and latent potentialities; however, a false myth is not one that does not perfectly reproduce the world, but one that does not correspond to the form expected by the listener. It is someone else's myth and corresponds to another perspective. *What is in question in this image of knowledge, then, is not the reproduction of an original truth, but the perfect realization of a specific version of this world, the version that coincides with the version already known by the listener.*

While they also express the possibility of false myths being 'others' stories', I believe that what the Aweti reveal when they complain about false or badly told myths is that if knowledge cannot be definitive, the need to guarantee whether it perfectly expresses the world that it describes is not really a problem. Or rather, maybe it is a problem, in the end a badly told myth is a 'lie', but the question only really becomes relevant when it implies important relations – choosing one or other version of a story is tantamount to choosing a side in a controversy, that is, choosing one version of a gossip. In the end, it is about knowing who is killing my relative with sorcery. For the Aweti, the question of mythic representation is linked less to the representational relation between a narrative and the world as it is, than to the political representation that a myth expresses: it is not the truth *about something*, but *someone's truth*. In a similar observation, Basso (DATA) argues that, in Upper Xinguan narrative contexts, truth is always a "social truth"; that is, it is defined in the interaction

between narrator and listener as an act of agreement rather than related to something 'out there'. I believe that the author does not fully explore the consequences of this observation.

For myth is also more than a mode of knowing, it configures the world as it is. If myths say something about the world, they never present it as a given essence but rather as a product of particular stories, which are always prone to reformulation: we know that the village of the dead is thus because so-and-so went there and told us, and not because it is an intrinsic truth, an essence. In my view, this does not contradict Lévi-Strauss's (DATA) observation that myths function to obliterate history. Perhaps this is really the inherent paradox to mythical logic. At the same time as it postulates the permanence of ways of life – as myth changes to create the illusion of continuity in the world, a world always thought of as if it had always been there – myth also seems to escape the problem of essence: it conceives the imminence of the new as a constant possibility. In this sense, mythical logic is radically historical and not a-historical or cyclic, but its historicism is neither dialectical nor linear, not marked by the idea of history as progression, and even less as a necessary development that begins with some causal principle.

Although it would be a stretch to say that for the Aweti each story potentially determines the configuration of a new cosmic or social order, we could say that this knowledge regime is indissociable from the world's intrinsic openness. If nothing can be definitively known, it is because nothing is definitively given. In indigenous terms, myth or history not only enunciate the world's variation but constantly creates this variation by multiplying in versions. It creates the world as variation.

Mythic variation is obviously not the Aweti's privilege, Lévi-Strauss constructed a masterly comparison of numerous indigenous stories from North and South America to show that variations do not occur by chance but rather obey a strict logic of transformation (Gow 2001 offers a particularly interesting example of the use of the Lévi-Straussian method in association with ethnography in Peruvian Amazonia; see also Calávia Saez 2002 and Pierri 2014 for considerations of the theme). What I learned from the Aweti is that these variations are not just an object of interest for anthropological analysis but can also constitute a topic for debate among myth narrators and listeners. In this sense, they not only reveal transformational logics and a specific form of historicity, as Lévi-Strauss argues (DATAS),

but also a specific knowledge regime, or epistemology, that is intrinsically related to an image of the world, or ontology, as I argue here.

4. The fight for one truth.

In science truths are also constantly changing and although scientists may have a complex idea of their practices of discovering/producing reality (see Latour DATA, Stengers DATA), these truths tend to be treated – if only by common sense – as definitive truths. To be more precise, we could say that the scientific horizon includes the possibility of a definitive truth, which always encourages it to move forward. So even though scientists are well-versed in the relative character of each discovery, this relativity is only recognized in the name of some *idea of truth* still to be reached: we don't precisely know the origin of the universe *yet*, we don't precisely know the origin of life *yet*. Now there is no novelty in pointing to the relation between the ideal of a monolithic truth and the ethnocentrism that permitted the domination of indigenous America to take place and to continue even today: the struggle *for truth*, be it religious or in the form of modern science, has justified/legitimated the genocide and ethnocide of indigenous peoples.

In the Aweti's world, truth seems to take a different path – if indeed the term makes any sense at all. It would be absurd to say that the Aweti do not really care about knowing the identity of the sorcerer that actually kills their relative, or even that what so-and-so said about someone else is of little interest. On the contrary, this is almost everything that is worth knowing and the Aweti spend a considerable amount of time speculating about what other people think (much as we do, perhaps). Nevertheless, we are faced with a world that has not invented instances of fact verification and, above all, a world where the absolute physical and metaphysical determination of things and events is not a problem that holds much attention. In practice, as we saw in the case of the girl bewitched with *kuriti*, stories always have a multiplicity of versions that people transit with ease. What seemed to be true five minutes ago no longer makes sense, and this movement does not carry any logical scandal. We might consider whether this way of thinking, which seemed like proof of so-called primitive irrationality in the past, might not actually constitute the strength of indigenous logic.

I cannot “scientifically” determine the political effects of this knowledge politics, but we can observe the fact that Xinguans – and in this case there is no reason to differentiate them, in principle, from other Amazonian peoples – never produced violence on a scale comparable to the West. Here, the limit of violence seems to be given by the social limits of truth as something that is never absolute and public, that can never be the State’s truth or the privilege of one or other group. It is worth remembering that the execution of sorcerers in the Upper Xingu is not a matter of consensus or a public decision, it is about convincing a restricted group of men to carry out the task in the name of the family whose relative was killed by sorcery: a group of people fighting for *a truth*.