Figures, patterns, and songs

Traditional knowledge and contemporary art movements in the Amazon

ELS LAGROU

Among the characteristics of Amazonian image systems is their capacity to visualize relational ontologies. Such images stress the potential for transformation and the reversibility of identity and of power relations—a potential for metamorphosis that links all beings and phenomena. Exemplary of this aesthetic is the Huni Kuin complex design system *kene kuin*, with its labyrinthine patterns that cover whole surfaces of bodies and artifacts.[1] These patterns make visible the intricate relational constitution of the world, a place inhabited by animate, sentient, and intelligent beings with whom connections need to be established even as necessary separations, differences, and discontinuities are maintained.

The art of patterning, a female art in western Amazonia, produces complex spatiotemporal maps to be deciphered by eyes prepared to do so (fig. 1). Secrecy and the practice of veiling and unveiling are central to the kind of knowledge encrypted in these forms. Understanding how Amazonian graphic systems engender networks of connected forms requires a synesthetic, pragmatic approach that shows how song, design, ritual action, and myth turn on the same conceptual schemes of relating and separating humans and nonhumans through processes of identification and differentiation. These visual thought processes, being independent from oral or written regimes of enunciation, condense nonverbal information about the proper social and cosmopolitical distances that are alternately maintained and transgressed. Transgressions of these distances are understood to be foundational events in the shaping of the universe as we know it.

I will present a preliminary analysis of the paintings of the artist collective known as MAHKU (Movimento dos Artistas Huni Kuin; fig. 2). The paintings produced by this collective under the guidance of ritual song leader Ibã Isaías Sales Huni Kuin transcend the emic distinction between patterns (*kene*) and figures (*dami*). They constitute a fascinating synesthetic multimedia experiment connecting song, script, and image by means of a complex process of transmutation that eschews any literal transposition or translation. Ibã guides his pupils in the process of generating images based on the ritual songs associated with the consumption of *nixi pae* or *nawa huni*, also called *cipó* in Brazil, *ayahuasca* in Peru, and *yagé* or *caapi* in Colombia. This potent visionary brew is obtained by cooking the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine with *Psychotria viridis* leaves; other ingredients can be mixed with it, such as the bark of the *lupuna* tree (*Ceiba pentandra*), which makes the effects last much longer. The aim of Ibã's artistic project is not to translate the songs into images but rather "to make sense of them" (*colocar no sentido*; Mattos and Ibã 2017, 65–66)—in other words, to make his apprentices understand the verbal images evoked in the songs. In Ibã's words: "This is not a translation: I am showing the meaning [of the songs] for my students and my people to feel and follow these images" (78).[2] This innovation, the result of Ibã's pedagogical project, can be considered an art of memory in the sense that significant words or sentences, and especially the names of certain entities, are figured

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[1] The Huni Kuin (Real People), as they prefer to be called today, are known in the literature as Cashinahua (Bat People), a name attributed to them by their local enemies, other Panoan-speaking people of the region. The Huni Kuin number more than 12,000 and inhabit both sides of the Brazilian-Peruvian border of the western Amazonian rainforest. Between 1989 and 1995, I conducted eighteen months of fieldwork among them in the villages located on the Brazilian side of the Purus River. Since then, I have continued to work with ritual specialists Leôncio Domingos, Sebidua, Txana Xane, Ibã, and Joaquim Maná Huni Kuin.

[2] "Não é tradução, eu estou botando o sentido para os estudantes, o meu povo sentir e acompanhar esses desenhos."

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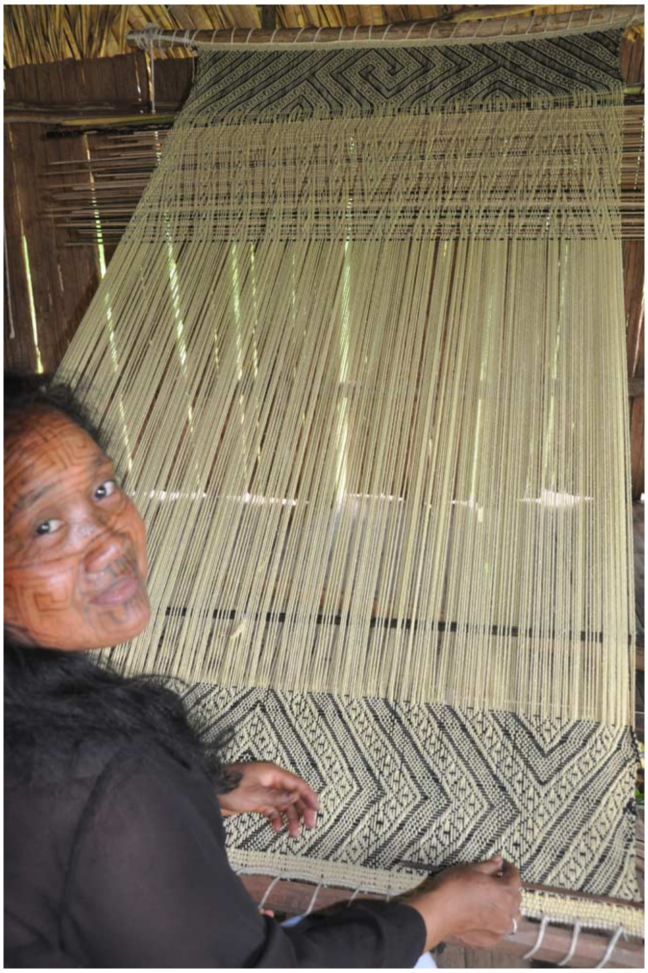

Figure 1. Gloria Bima Sampaio Huni Kuin weaving the pattern of the *lupuna* tree (*xunu kene*), 2014. Rio Purus, Acre, Brazil. Photo: Els Lagrou. See the electronic edition of *Res* for color versions of most images.

and thus put into a specific relation of interaction or transformation relevant for the learning of the song.

In contrast to the pictorial school of the Vegetalistas of the Ucayali River in the Peruvian Amazon, who are influenced by the techniques of academic and visionary landscape painting inaugurated by the mestizo artist Pablo Amaringo in the early 1980s (Luna and Amaringo 1999), the artists of the MAHKU collective do not represent their visions. Instead they produce specific configurations that may be understood as quotations of their songs. In doing so they choose to employ a figurative style that is close to the *kene* graphic style that characterizes their visual environment. Like the graphic style of their female relatives, the *dami* images of MAHKU point toward the connection between different levels of the world and different forms of being that are themselves unstable. Influenced by the organization of the complex patterns engendered by the women in their body painting and weaving, the MAHKU artists, who are primarily male, produce spatiotemporal maps of the processes of other-becoming that are instantiated in song and narrated in myths of origin.[3] These transformations—such as anaconda-becoming, bird-becoming, and vine-becoming—imply connections between the worlds inhabited by water beings, sky beings, and plants.

Pattern is also crucial for the riverine mestizo painters of Peru, especially those familiar with the *kene* patterns produced by the Shipibo-Conibo (figs. 3 and 4). Patterns stylistically similar to those painted on artifacts and embroidered on fabric by women are here employed to convey the landscape of visionary experience. The designs on the surface evoke the altered point of view of the person having the vision under the effect of the ingestion of ayahuasca. From the Ucayali River in Peru to the Purus and Jordão Rivers in Brazil, a person who sees all surfaces covered in designs is one who looks at the world through the eyes of the anaconda, owner of the hallucinogenic brew according to many Panoan peoples of the region, including the Huni Kuin, the Sharahaua, and the Shipibo-Conibo, as well as the Arawak-speaking Piro, who use a graphic style close to their Shipibo-Conibo neighbors and kin (Lagrou 2007, 2011, 2018b; Déléage 2009; Illius 1994; Gebhart-Sayer 1986; Gow 1988, 1999, 2001).

The ways in which pattern and figure interact in the paintings produced by the MAHKU collective and by the Vegetalistas of the Ucayali River, however, are different. The Vegetalistas employ pictographic realism, depicting relatively naturalistic landscapes covered by luminous and colorful designs, enchanting a forest where normally invisible beings make their sudden appearance. By contrast, the paintings of MAHKU are more opaque. No landscapes are evoked; instead, the schematic figures of important beings whose names are mentioned in the corresponding song, sometimes accompanied by inscriptions, are shown in the process of other-becoming.

Because of the close relationship between the learning of ritual songs and the production of the images, MAHKU paintings might be compared with other pictographic writing systems, such as those analyzed by Severi (2007) among the Guna (Kuna) of Panama and by Cesarino (2011) among the Marubo in

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[3] The movement started with Ibã's male students, but several women later joined, producing paintings in which *kene* patterns are even more important than in those of their male counterparts.

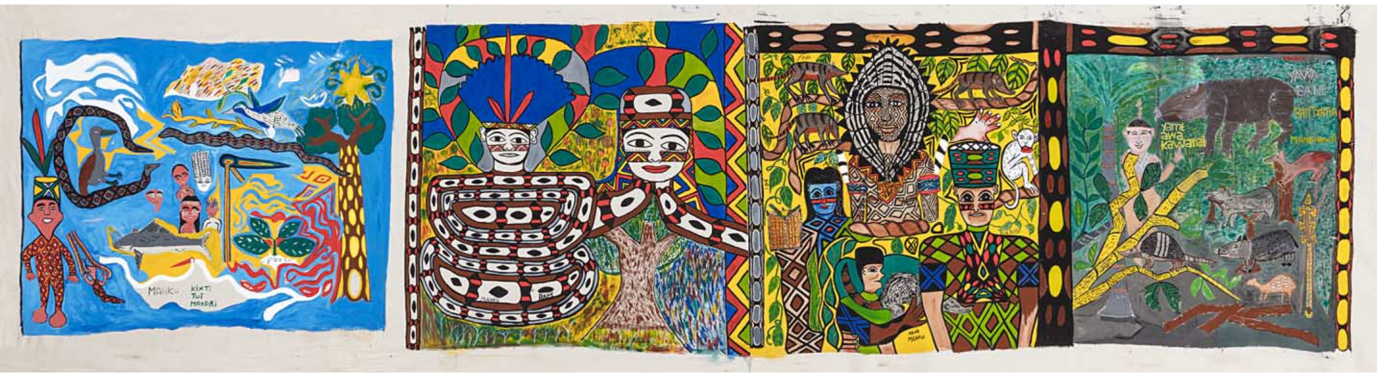

Figure 2. MAHKU collective, canvas painted in 2018 for the exposition *Encontros Amerindios* (Amerindian Encounters), Sesc Vila Mariana, São Paulo, 2021. Acrylic on canvas, 241 x 830 cm. Photo: Everton Ballardin.

the Brazilian Amazon. MAHKU spatial organization, however, is markedly different from those examples. The pictograms analyzed by Severi, for instance, which are produced by shamans' apprentices in the context of writing and memorizing ritual songs, are characterized by the same formulaic rules that guide the ritual enunciation of songs, such as parallelism and the repetition of similar figures, with the introduction of small changes in color or attributes. The spatiotemporal logic of pictures by the MAHKU artists, however, follows the circular movement of encompassing and connection that characterizes Huni Kuin graphic design. The pictures are concentric rather than sequential, synthesizing the defining relational and transformational events of the song; no repetition of figures is noted. They invite exploration from multiple perspectives and entry points into the picture. The figural composition of a MAHKU painting functions therefore as an independent

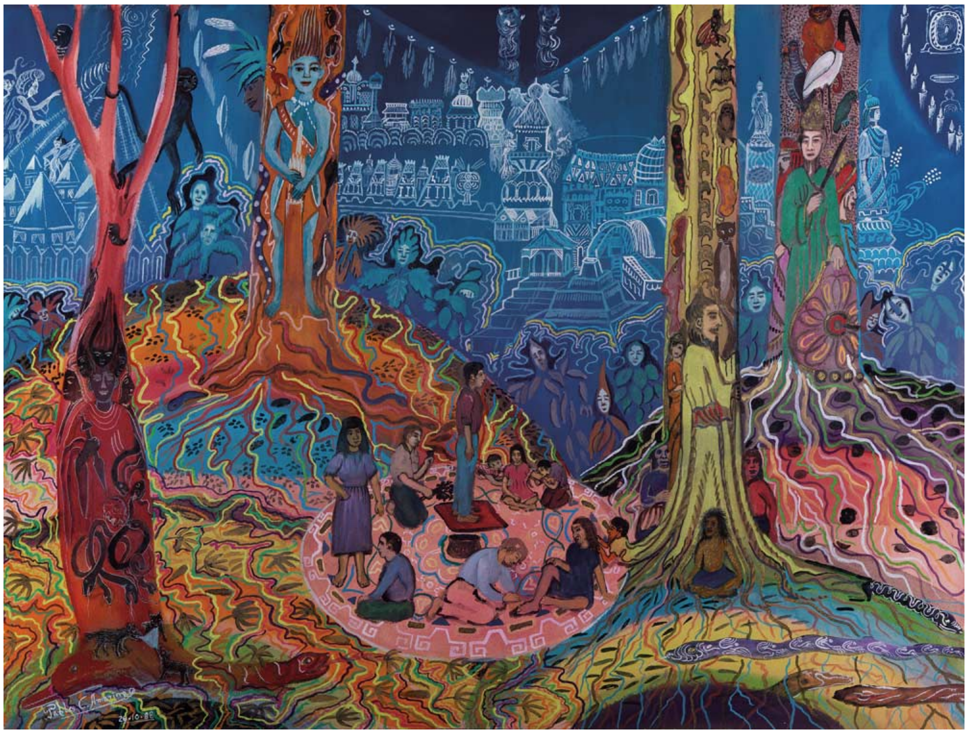

Figure 3. Pablo Amaringo, *Kapukiri*, 1988. Gouache on paper, 18 x 24 inches (45.7 x 61 cm). Collection of Luis Eduardo Luna.

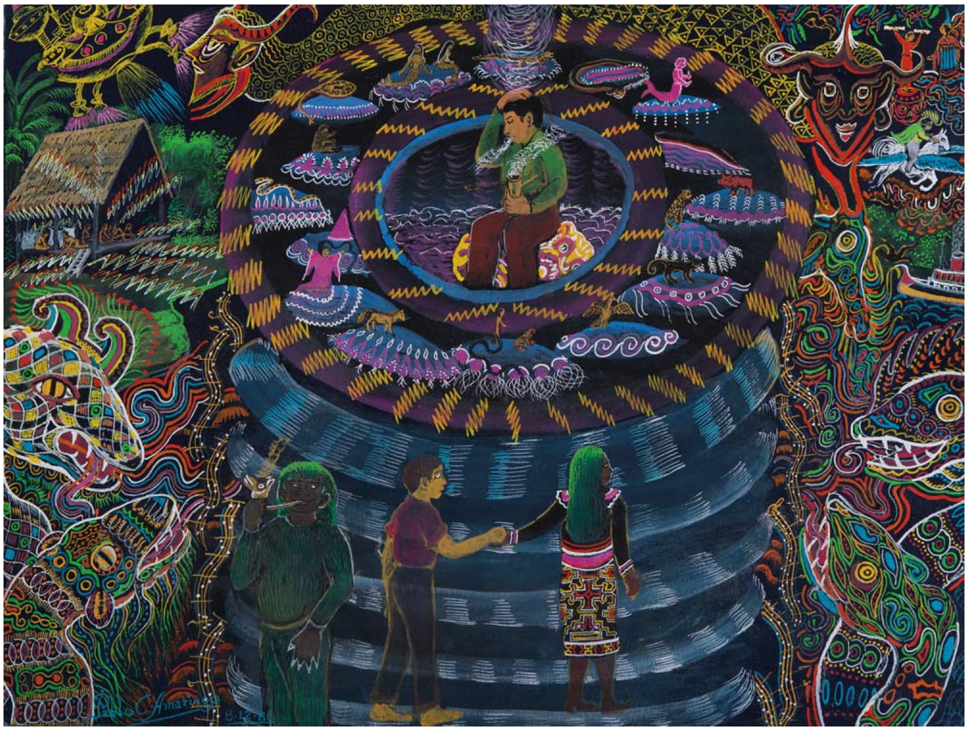

Figure 4. Pablo Amaringo, *Recovering a Young Man Kidnapped by a Yakuruna*, 1986. Gouache on paper, 12 x 16 inches (30.5 x 40.6 cm). Collection of Luis Eduardo Luna.

synthetic and nonverbal statement with a fundamentally visual logic. In this sense their style is closer to the art of basketry practiced by the Yekuana (Guss 1989) and Wayana (Velthem 2003) of the eastern Amazon, with its synthetic and schematic evocation and weaving of "transmutating beings" (Severi 2014) into the fabric of objects of daily and ritual use, than it is to the pictograms invented by Native shamans to accompany the written record of their songs.

Relational forms

Until the rise of indigenous contemporary art, in which figuration dominates, specialists of lowland South America were long puzzled by the apparent lack of interest among indigenous people in depicting human and nonhuman entities. At the time of the arrival of Europeans in lowland South America, the production of figural images was so rare that the first travelers considered the inhabitants of these lowlands as lacking in idolatry, in contrast with those of Mesoamerica and the South American highlands, where images of gods were worshipped and kept in temples. The people of the lowlands did, however, demonstrate a great interest in the production of masks, body painting, and ornament and produced patterns on all kinds of surfaces, from ceramics to basketry and textiles. Images, painted on or woven into the surfaces of artifacts tended to be schematic or geometric. These graphic patterns, ranging from simple motifs to complex design systems, seemed to lack any referent. Scholars, from Boas ([1927] 1955) and Lévi-Strauss (1955) to Gow (1988) and Déléage (2007), have understood the names given to these patterns by the native people to be only mnemonic devices to help people remember and distinguish between them. However, when we recognize the intersemiotic relationship between these patterns and the verbal and sonic register of ritual performance, we begin to understand how they function as a visual system designed to transmit knowledge about the relational constitution of life.

In his groundbreaking book *Art and Agency*, wherein he lays the foundations of a new anthropological approach to the agentive power of images in networks of interpersonal relations, Alfred Gell (1998) dedicates two chapters to the ways in which patterns bring objects to life. Some years before, in his study of the Polynesian art of tattoo, Gell (1993) unpacked the compelling agency of patterns on the skin, from their role as shields and protective devices to their capacity to bind people and artifacts. The apparent agency of these patterns was rooted in the internal relations between the lines in a patterned field. This agency was not tributary to any external referent. Images of this kind, much like the labyrinthine arabesques of Islamic art (Belting 2011), are especially effective in the representation of life itself. As noted by Gell, Western scholars and art collectors alike have paid little attention to these arts of patterning, considering patterned artifacts as mere ornaments belonging to the arts-and-crafts sector, in contrast to "real" art, which is always figurative and produced in the context of religious ritual. Examining the works of Adolf Loos and Cesare Lombroso, Gell shows how the Victorian aesthetic aversion to ornamentation upheld the ideal of the creative individual. Western scholars' disinclination to examine and interpret the logic of pattern continues a long tradition of blindness to a fundamental trait of Amerindian art: the importance of "weaving skins" in the fabrication of the bodies of human and nonhuman beings.

In her study of Polynesian quilting, Küchler has demonstrated how patterns can reveal relations in and of themselves, rather than their outcomes or products: "quilts resonate with 'a genealogical theory of mind' that probes for connections. . . . A Polynesian quilt is an entity with relationships integrally implied in the ways motifs are serially enchained, 'budding' out of one another in a depiction of human life" (2005, 179). In Amazonia, patterns are techniques designed to manipulate the viewer's gaze. The kinetic effect of switching between figure and ground dissolves the opacity of the surface and produces movement and changing levels of depth in perspectival space (Lagrou 2011). The shapes thus seem to approach and recede in an alternating rhythm, a technique also developed in Marajoara, Asurini, and Shipibo-Conibo design, including body painting, ceramics, and textiles (figs. 5 and 6). This technique accords with Amazonian multinaturalism, being not so much a vision that postulates "a variety of natures" as one that considers "variation *as* nature" (Viveiros de Castro 2014, 74). Through the study of form, we can explore how relations constitute persons in western Amazonia. In the case of the Huni Kuin, shamanistic song reveals an aesthetics that emphasizes processes of becoming, transformation, and figure/ground reversal. Since bodily substances and the actions of others affect the thinking body, well-being depends on making visible the relational network that exists inside and outside one's embodied self.

The Huni Kuin, like most Amerindian peoples, consider blood and other bodily substances to be the vehicle of the soul or spirit. When an animal or human being is killed its spirit becomes liberated and can take revenge on the killer. When a person ingests *nawa huni*,

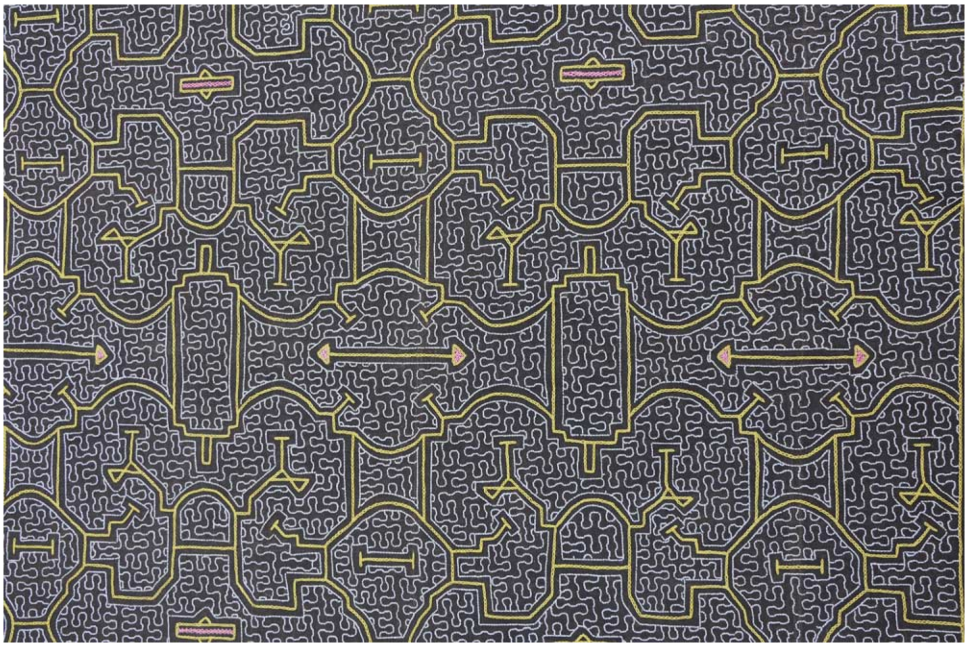

Figure 5. Embroidered cloth by a Shipibo woman of eastern Peru, 2009. Collection of the author. Photo: Els Lagrou.

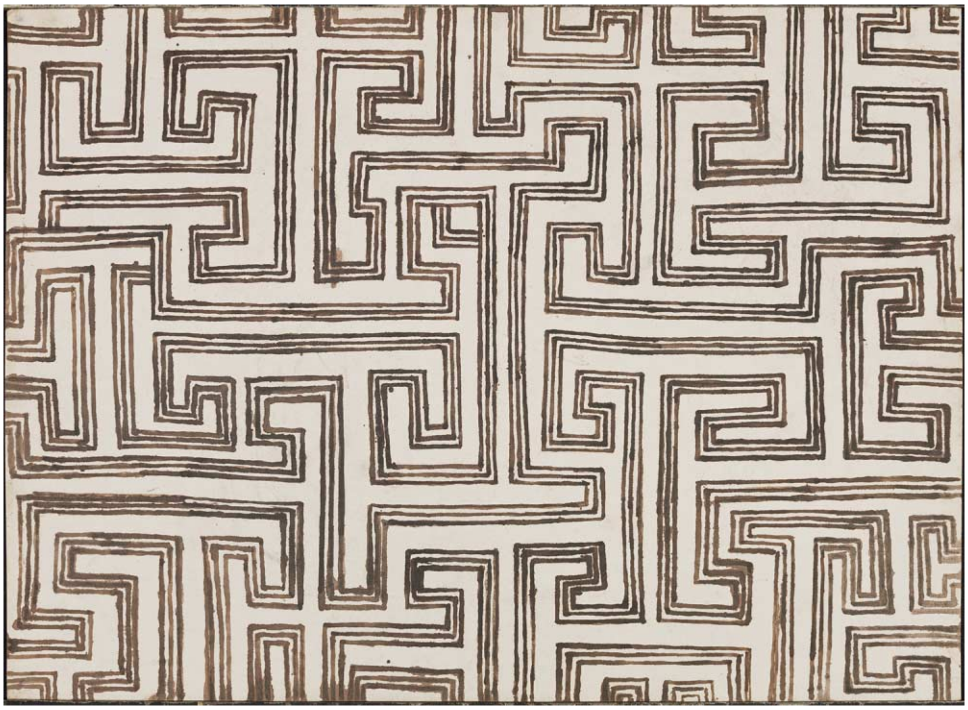

Figure 6. Monterí Asurini, *tayngava* pattern, central Brazil. Genipap on paper, 32.5 x 45 cm. BR MI SPI IC AS 01-82/AS04—Acervo do Museu do Índio/FUNAI—Brasil.

which is believed to be the blood or urine of the anaconda, he enters a process of anaconda-becoming, enabling him to look at the world through the eyes of the anaconda. An aesthetic battlefield unfolds before his eyes, in which the liberated double—that is, the image-being or spirit—of the ingested game is able to invert the predatory relation and envelop the "eye-soul" of the one who ingested it. During the visionary experience, this image-being covers the person's eye-soul with its own patterns and adornments, slowly transforming the envisioning subject into one of them. This setting allows us to address the fractal quality of personhood and the permanent disequilibrium of power relations in Amazonia, where predator becomes prey and vice versa, revealing a specifically Amazonian ontology of images. This case study thus provides an opportunity for some general methodological reflections on the study of Amerindian art and ritual to be proposed in the following section (Lagrou 2018a, 2018b).

Toward a pragmatic, relational, and synesthetic approach

The theme of intersemiotics, and the synesthetic relations between the senses, is not new in western Amazonian ethnography. In dialogue with Reichel-Dolmatoff's (1972) work among the Desana, Langdon (1979) was one of the first scholars to publish on the relation between facial design, yagé-induced visions, and ritual song among the Siona, a Tukanoan-speaking people from the Colombian rainforest. The Siona distinguish between "yagé designs" and "simple designs," the latter of which they consider badly executed and without meaning. The formal rules of composition are mastered only by the shamans who have seen the spirits and their facial designs and are therefore capable of reproducing them faithfully (Langdon 1992, 74–87). We thus find among the Siona an early documented association between song and design, one that would turn out to be constitutive of the thought of people who value design in this region: "after the ingestion [of yagé], the songs of the shaman become visual paths to guide the participants' journeys to the cosmos" (Langdon 2013, 117). Overing (1989) noted a similar phenomenon among the Piaroa, where the songs of the shaman were also seen as paths into virtual visual space.

In order to better visualize the domains that shamans report having visited in dreams and visions, many ethnologists have asked some of them to draw pictures to accompany their explanations. These inquiries have provided us with archives rich in figurations of otherwise invisible beings, as well as complex cosmograms that evoke the mental schemes behind verbal images. Others have collected pictographic sequences that appeared in the context of alphabetic writing of ritual chants. In his analysis of these documents, Severi (2007) calls attention to the fact that the verbal and visual codes do not operate in the same way and that the images that accompany the texts do not attempt to represent or repeat the words. Through a visual logic of condensation the images instead punctuate moments of change in the songs or give supplementary information; in this way they function as mnemonic techniques producing salience in the process of memorization. The relationship between pictograms and ritual song is therefore of a different nature than that between script and illustration.

Some Amazonian people see a direct link between the foundational myths of their universe and the graphic patterns they produce in basketry. This is the case for the closely related Yekuana (Guss 1989) and Wayana-Apalai (Velthem 2003). In their iconography, the baskets woven by men during their initiation in myth-telling and ritual song present condensations of indigenous discourse on the emergence of different beings and the transformational relations between them. In other cases, as Stépanoff (2013) showed in his article on the shaman's drum of the Siberian Cacasse, interpreting the meaning of images is not the best way to approach the way of thinking of those who use those images. In this case, the figures on the drum indicate to the shaman how he should move his body and situate himself in space. Here the ontology of images points more toward a praxeology than an iconology.

Specialists in Amerindian image systems are well aware that visual forms possess an internal or external agentive dynamic. We need only recall the widespread myth of the revolt of the objects, as narrated in the *Popul Vuh* and depicted on Moche ceramics (Allen 2014, 28; Neurath 2020), to realize how artifacts participate in the animated universe. Baskets and other objects are often imbued with the agency of their prototype. The tipiti, used by the Wayana to squeeze manioc tubers and extract their toxic juice, is modeled on the body of the boa constrictor, with its capacity to squeeze the victim before swallowing it. To prevent these artifacts from acquiring an independent life of their own, the Wayana produce them as "incomplete animals": the tipiti manioc press is therefore a boa constrictor without head or tail (Velthem 2003).

Regarding the intersemiotic aspect of the Amazonian artistic and ritual universe, Barcelos Neto (2013, 182) notes:

> What makes indigenous Amazonia particular is the fact that the internal dynamic not only connects the visual elements to each other, but also connects them to the aural elements. The issue becomes even more complex when verbal, visual, and aural forms act in chains of semiotic transformation (Menezes Bastos 1990), where the pivotal transformation is music, the ritual being its field of realization. Although originally identified and described for the upper Xingu, this theory is relevant on an Amazonian scale (Menezes Bastos 1996), with dimensions that might be equivalent to that of perspectivism. Like perspectivism, the inter-semiotic chain of ritual has its variations and accents. In the upper Rio Negro, the emphasis is placed on myth, in the upper Xingu, on music, and in the Andes, on dance.

In western Amazonia, the emphasis seems to be placed not so much on one of the expressive modes as on their complex sensory relations and implications. The fact that the graphic system operates independently of regimes of enunciation is crucial to the meaning and agency of design. The occurrence of synesthetic phenomena has been noted in many studies of mental visualization and shamanistic song in the northwestern Amazon, where substances are commonly ingested to induce visions. The transmutation of sound and words, but also smell and touch, into visions (and vice versa) has been reported among the Piaroa (Overing 1989), the Siona (Langdon 1979, 2013), the Desana (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1972), the Barasana (Hugh-Jones 1979), the Vegetalistas (Luna 1986, 1992), and the *taita* (shamans) of the Colombian rainforest (Taussig 2011, 2016).

Huni Kuin design

In a recent article (Lagrou 2022) I elaborated on the relation between song and design in western Amazonia, comparing the art of the Shipibo, Piro, and Huni Kuin. In the same article I explored the resonance between several Huni Kuin myths of the origin of design, which speak of the importance of keeping proper distances between humans and nonhumans and the distances to be kept between the lines in the patterns produced by women in their weaving and painting (Lagrou 2021, 2022). Here I will focus on those patterns that relate humans to nonhumans and that play an important role in the visionary experience with *nixi pae*. I will then consider how a selection of paintings produced by members of the MAHKU collective explore the relation between specific traditional patterns and the figures that appear in ritual song.

The Huni Kuin apply design to almost all of the surfaces that cover their world, through weaving,

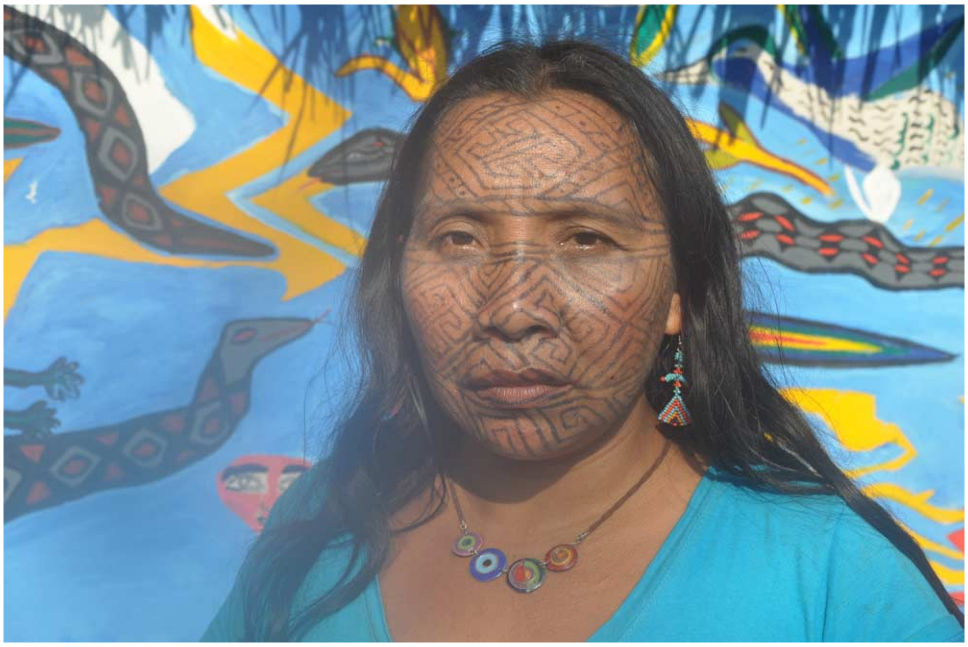

Figure 7. Huni Kuin woman with *xamantin kene* face painting in genipap paint, 2018. Rio Jordão, Acre, Brazil. Photo: Els Lagrou.

basketry, ceramics, beadwork, and face and body painting. For the Huni Kuin, the primordial boa/anaconda is the origin of all designs as well as the owner of the potent ayahuasca brew, which is considered to be his blood. The face of a person taking *nixi pae* is painted with a red line of achiote paint, which links the eyes to the ears. This indicates the transformation of perception, the process of "becoming anaconda."[4] During the visionary experiences induced by the brew, *yuxin* beings "throw" or project images and designs onto the eye-soul of humans who enter their realm. The ritual singer responds through powerful songs that become lines of vision to be followed by the eye-souls of the envisioning subject. Design thus plays an important role in this (mostly male) visionary experience, and it is through the exegesis of ritual song, and the myths of origin that those songs evoke, that we have access to the meaning of (mostly female) design. The role of pattern reveals the complexity of gender relations in this region, where identity and alterity are always conceived in relational terms, never in absolute static terms. Whereas the flutes of the Tukano and Arawak-speaking people are said to have belonged to women in mythic times but are now hidden from their view, some versions of the Huni Kuin myth of the origin of design say that it belonged originally to men before it became a female specialty. These myths of origin demonstrate the imbrication of gender in the generation of new bodies, the transformation of ancestors into nonhuman beings, and the spatiotemporal topographies to be traversed by every human on its path between life and death.

The primordial boa or anaconda, called Yube, is an androgynous being that originated during the great deluge when a man and woman lay down in a hammock with design. This hammock turned into the skin of the anaconda, which is said to contain all possible patterns, figures, and forms of life (Lagrou 2021, 2022). Through the introduction of small differences, patterns can engender new patterns and evoke different referents. A pattern composed of rectangular meanders, for instance, is given different names depending on the relational network in which it is inserted. It may be called *bawe kene*, meaning the "pattern of the *bawe* leaf" (drops from which are squeezed onto the eyes to change perception and dream with design);[5] *xamantin kene*, or "pattern that stays in the middle" (fig. 7); *xantima kene*, or "pattern with the lines touching each other" (referring to sexual union); or *nawan kene*, "pattern of the enemy-stranger."

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[4] In Ibã's telling of the origin myth of the brew, he describes the use of this paint as conveying a frightening metamorphosis: "with this achiote she [the hero's underwater wife] already became anaconda" (Ibã, interview, 2019).

[5] The first human to live with the anaconda people perceived the inhabitants of the underwater world as human because of the drops

Many patterns are based on the diamond motif known as *txede bedu*, or "parrot's eye." This is the first pattern to be executed by a girl when she learns how to weave designs. Its name refers to the white-eyed parakeet, which according to myth gained its namesake features when it stole the cooking fire from the cannibal Inka. For the Huni Kuin, *txede bedu* represents the eye-soul liberated from the limitations of bodily vision. During the ritual intake of ayahuasca, this pattern is invoked in song so that the envisioning subject is able to acquire the power of clairvoyance. Women, in turn, invoke the pattern in ritual song in the process of learning to weave, in order to be able to visualize complex patterns. As a design unit, the diamond gives rise to several patterns (Lagrou 2021, 2022), such as *inu tae txede bedu*, or "jaguar's paw with parrot's eye" (figs. 8*a* and 8*b*); *xapu buxe*, meaning "cotton knit" (fig. 8*c*); and *dunu kate*, meaning "boa's back" (fig. 8*d*).

Instead of design units or specific patterns differentiating social groups and moieties, as we have for the Ge-speaking and some Panoan-speaking peoples such as the Matis and Matses (Erikson 1997), or differentiating humans and nonhumans as among the Wayana (Velthem 2003), Huni Kuin women say that all the patterns are part of a single, overarching design composed of many pathways, or patterns within a pattern (Lagrou 2021). It is therefore evident that the patterns Huni Kuin women produce are not intended to mark differences between beings but are instead meant to show the multiple iterations of a single being.

The most important characteristic of Huni Kuin pattern is the kinetic instability of the relation between figure and counterfigure, which makes visible the relativity of perspective; to see and to be looked at are interrelated processes (Lagrou 2022). This characteristic is also present in the structure of the ritual songs that accompany visual experience, which convey an oscillating dualism that exemplifies the in-betweenness of all being and the potential for transformation (Lagrou 2018a, 2018b, 2021, 2022). Shamanistic song and graphic patterns thus express the same processes of inversion and metamorphosis—of other-becoming. We find this same logic at work in the paintings produced by the MAHKU collective.

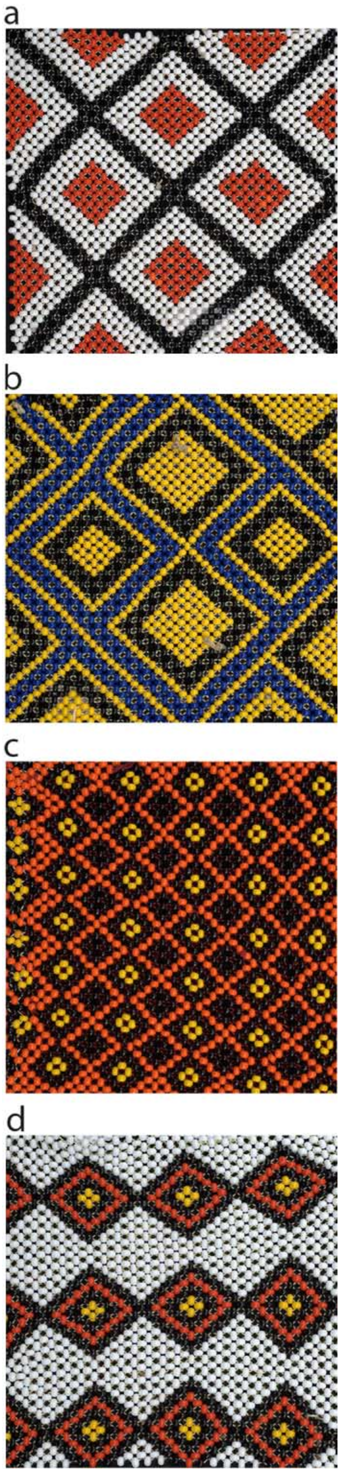

Figure 8. Beadwork with the patterns (*a*, *b*) *inu tae txede bedu*, (*c*) *xapu buxe*, and (*d*) *dunu kate*. Photos: Els Lagrou.

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from the *bawe* leaf that his anaconda wife squeezed into his eyes before he jumped into the lake.

Becoming other: The MAHKU collective

The remarkable success and international visibility of the MAHKU illustrates the potential for dialogue between indigenous artists and other artistic traditions and media. The collective was founded by Ibã Isaías Sales Huni Kuin, a master of *huni meka* or ayahuasca chants. In the early 1990s, in the context of a research project sponsored by the Pro-Indian Commission of Acre, Ibã recorded the songs of his elder relatives and interviewed them about their meaning. In 2006 the songs and commentary were published under the title *Nixi pae: O espírito da floresta* (Ibã 2006). This publication has been of utmost importance for the revival of *nixi pae* rituals in the native language in the Huni Kuin regions that had been severely affected by the rubber industry. As Ibã explains, "Our wisdom, our spirit is from the spirit of the forest. We have the spirit of the forest translated by *nixi pae*. Everything is alive, everything is looking, everything is listening" (Mattos and Ibã 2017, 74).[6]

Beginning in 2009, Ibã started to work with his students on transposing the words of the songs into images. Collaborating with Amilton Mattos on a research project based at the Campus Floresta (forest campus) of the Federal University of Acre in Cruzeiro de Sul, they organized a workshop for students from several villages along the Jordão River, during which the first collective canvases were produced with Ibã's guidance. Most of the *dami* (figurative) paintings of the MAHKU collective refer to *huni meka* songs, taught by Ibã to his pupils, who paint them under his supervision:

> We don't invent these figures, the figures are explained in the song, the image emerges from song. . . . The *txai*s want to know: where does it come from? Who is singing? . . . Thus, I feel I should answer these questions, and the best way to explain is through design. . . . I thought like this: for the people who don't know this brew of our tradition, for them to better understand this reality of enchanted beings who talk to us, I started to work with painting with my students: I started to make them paint. The first were Bane Cleiber, my son, and Tuin Acelino Sales, my cousin. (Ibã, interview, 2019)

From this quote it becomes clear how the project to produce images in the context of teaching songs to his Huni Kuin students, to help them understand, was quickly extended to a broader public of nonindigenous people also interested in learning about *nawa huni*. The success of the MAHKU collective, which has participated in several exhibitions and collaborations with contemporary artists (Lagrou 2018a, 22; 2020), exemplifies recent changes in the contemporary Brazilian art world as well as the potential of the Huni Kuin artists for creativity and dialogue through visual art.

The pictorial production of the MAHKU collective is huge, but the number of songs they have painted is limited to those mastered and chosen by Ibã. Each image refers to a verbal formula in the song. Many paintings can be made based on a single song, because the meaning of the formulas and of the relations between them is dense. The song is an open work, with images referring to other images, offering a path to enter a world visible only to those who were taught to see. The cosmopolitical agency of *nixi pae* resides in its capacity to reveal connections invisible to the eye of everyday vision. The songs of *nixi pae* speak of the participation of the human spirit in "this expansive spirit that connects all beings, plants and animals, of the forest, the sky and the waters" (Ibã, interview, 2019). Ibã explains that "the words of *nixi pae* are very ancient—from the time when we called the animals *txain* [brothers-in-law]. It is the old language of these forest beings" (interview, 2019). *Txai* is an important relational concept for establishing alliances with others: with animals who were once human and with outsiders who were enemies. This is why the Huni Kuin teach the people from the big cities who they befriend to call them *txai*(*n*).

Exemplary of the artistic practice of the MAHKU artists is the canvas shown in the exhibition *Encontros Amerindios* (Amerindian Encounters), held in São Paulo in 2021–22 (see fig. 2). The painting combines representations of four songs belonging to the three different categories of songs needed to guide a ceremony: those that open the ritual, called *pae txanima*; those that summon the visions, *dauti buya*; and finally the *kayatibu*, which send away the *nawa huni* (literally "other people"), the ritual name of *nixi pae*.[7]

The first two pictures on the canvas represent *pae txanima* songs (strongly inebriating) that serve "to call

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[6] "Nossa sabedoria, nosso espírito é do espírito da floresta; a gente tem espírito da floresta traduzido pelo nixi pae; é tudo vivo, tudo fica olhando, tudo escutando."

[7] I was responsible for the Huni Kuin section of the exhibition, which was held at Sesc in Vila Mariana, São Paulo, and curated by Aristóteles Barcelos Neto. In preparation for the exhibition we made an expedition to the territory of the Huni Kuin on the Jordão River in September 2018 and filmed the production of the canvas analyzed in this text. The artists involved were Ibã Huni Kuin/Isaías Sales, Bane Huni Kuin/Cleiber Pinheiro Sales, Mana Huni Kuin/Pedro Macário, Tuin Huni Kuin/Acelino Sales, Bane Huni Kuin/Iran Pinheiro, Tuin Huni Kuin/Romão Sales, and Kixtin Huni Kuin/João Sereno. See Ibã and Lagrou (2021).

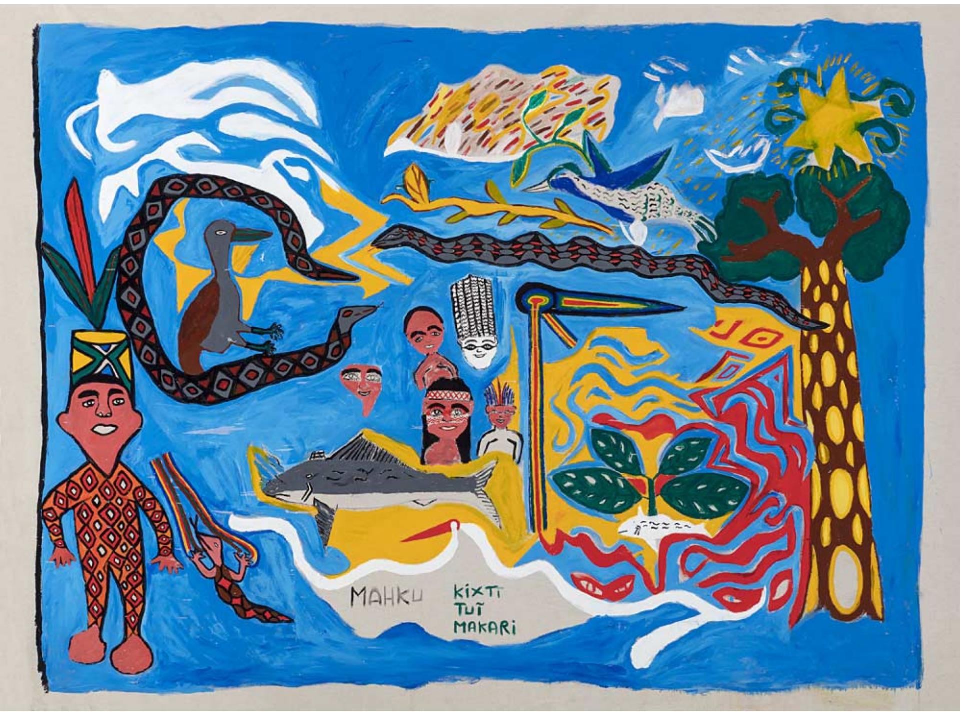

Figure 9. MAHKU collective, depiction of the song *Nai mãpu yubekã* (detail of fig. 2). Photo: Everton Ballardin.

the force and colors of vision." The first song, depicted at the left end of the canvas, is called *Nai mãpu yubekã* (the *nambu* bird from the sky becoming Yube; fig. 9). This song, which is depicted in many MAHKU paintings, is the first one Ibã learned from his father, Tuin, who in turn learned it from his father, Tene. According to Ibã, it tells of "the singing *nambu* bird that comes from far away, from the sky, and is already transformed into anaconda. The meaning of this image is that this enchanted bird comes from above, from far away, and becomes transformed into light, colors, and figures. It is a strong song that brings the visions" (pers. comm., 2019). Ibã explains further:

> There is the bird and the fish linked to the medicinal plant, to call the force. It comes linked to tapir, linked with deer, deer linked with peccary, peccary linked with armadillo, armadillo linked with anaconda, anaconda linked with water, water linked with sky, sky with land . . . every little piece is linked: *nai* is the sky, *mãpu* is the *nambu* bird, Yube is the anaconda. Thus one says *nai mãpu yubekã*, all three of them connected, linked to each other, *emendado*, as we say; thus, our song has several animals of the forest that talk to us from within this song. (Ibã, pers. comm., October 2018)

The translation proposed below is only provisional and is intended to illuminate the complex process of transduction between image, native exegesis, and ritual song.

> Nai mãpu yubekã aa ee aa ee! ya[8]
> Nai mãpu yubekã aa ee aa ee! ya
> Mĩ Yube txanimatãki aa ee aa ee! ya
> Yuxĩ hũtu yubekã aa ee aa ee! ya
> Mibe Yube txanimatãki aa ee aa ee
> Rau tunũ mushawẽ aa ee aa ee! ya
> Dau kene mushawẽ aa ee aa ee!
> Nai txatximãta maneke aa ee aa ee! ya
> Bake beru nambuã aa ee aa ee! ya
> Bake beru nambuã aa ee aa ee! ya
> Nai mane shumushwe aa ee aa ee! ya
> Nai txatxi manikẽ aa ee aa ee! ya
> Hushu yumẽ txikeũ aa ee aa ee! ya
> Hushu yumẽ txikeũ aa ee aa ee! ya
> Haux haux haux

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[8] I have here attempted to reproduce the variation in the onomatopoeias that punctuate each musical phrase to give the reader a sense of the performative aspect of the song.

[The *nambu* bird from the sky becoming Yube aa ee aa ee! ya
The *nambu* bird from the sky becoming Yube aa ee aa ee! ya
You are calling Yube aa ee aa ee! ya
The incomplete spirit becoming Yube aa ee aa ee! ya
With you he is calling Yube aa ee aa ee
With the spine of the *tunu* medicine aa ee aa ee! ya
With the spine of the medicine with design aa ee aa ee!
Piercing the sky with the metal aa ee aa ee! ya
The grown-up boy *nambuã* aa ee aa ee! ya
The grown-up boy *nambuã* aa ee aa ee! ya
Piercing with the metal of the sky aa ee aa ee! ya
The golden needle of the sky aa ee aa ee! ya
Stitch the white thread aa ee aa ee! ya
Stitch the white thread aa ee aa ee! ya
Haux haux haux]

The painting (see fig. 9) presents the principal characters of the song. Ibã explains: "What comes from the sky is in the process of becoming transformed" (pers. comm., 2018). The bird is represented twice, in its heavenly and earthly forms, which face each other. The heavenly form of the bird, colored blue and white, flies above a horizontally oriented anaconda, while its earthly counterpart, colored brown and gray, is surrounded by another anaconda with skin bearing the *txede bedu* (parrot's eye) pattern. This same pattern, multiplied to become a "cotton knit" pattern, *xapu buxe*, covers the body of the "incomplete" spirit in the lower left corner. Next to this spirit we see a small snakelike figure with arms and hands, from which stream colored strings resembling a rainbow. The tree at the right end of the composition, apparently a *lupuna* tree, is covered in *dunu kate*, and from the tree extends the sky boa. Just above the inscription (which gives the names of the collective and the painters) we see a red needle with a white thread. This is doubled farther above by a multicolor needle with multicolor threads, which stitches the sky to the earth. Next to the tree is the medicine plant surrounded by wavy lines of red and yellow rising toward the sky.

The second song depicted is called *Yube Nawa Ainbu*, which is the name of the female chief of the anaconda people (fig. 10). This song evokes the myth of origin (*xenipabu miyui*, ancestor story) of *nixi pae*, in which the ancestor of the Huni Kuin, called Yube Inu (or Dua Busen, depending on the version), encounters Yube Xanu, the anaconda woman. After watching her encounter with a tapir man, the ancestor is taken by desire and decides to call her in the same way the tapir did. Thus, he throws three genipa fruits in the lake, as he saw the tapir do. But instead of showing himself to her and talking to her, as the tapir did, he tries to take her from behind, wrapping his arms around her waist. In reaction, the anaconda woman transforms herself fully into an anaconda and wraps herself around his body, which is the scene presented here. She later takes him into the lake where she lives with her people, who teach him how to take *nixi pae*.

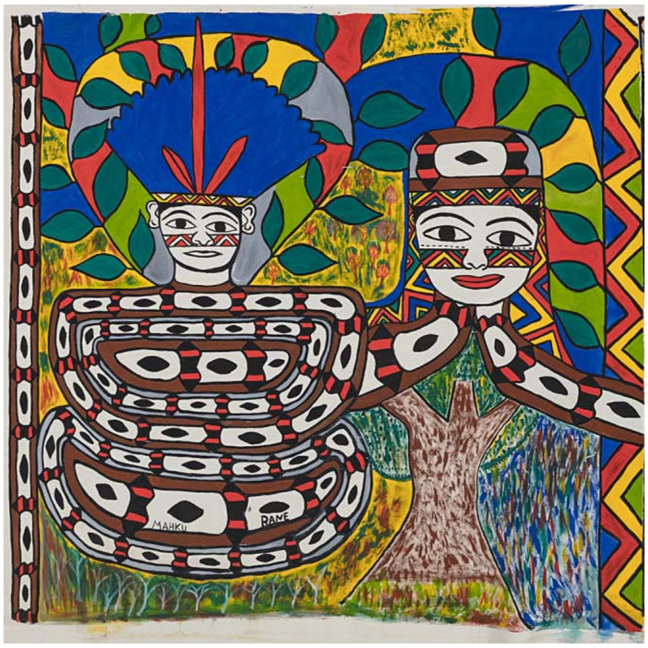

Figure 10. MAHKU collective, depiction of the song *Yube Nawa Ainbu* (detail of fig. 2). Photo: Everton Ballardin.

The principal author of this painting, the one who traced the black lines of the figures, is Bane, Ibã's son. Ibã then painted the first red details of the snake's skin while singing. This image is a clear example of the importance of *kene*, the pattern, in the framing of *dami*, the figures. The pattern on the body of the anaconda woman also constitutes the frame at the left side of the picture. The frame at the right side is occupied by a zigzag containing triangles (or half diamonds), a pattern known as *baxu xaka*, meaning the scales of the *baxu* fish (*tambuatá* in Portuguese, a type of catfish). This pattern is also used for the face painting of both Yube Xanu, the anaconda woman, and Yube Inu, the man, making visible the link that attracts them.[9] Yube Inu wears a headdress of blue feathers, referring to his position as chief (*xane*), while Yube Xanu wears a headdress made of anaconda skin, referring once more to her belonging to the water world where the huge white anaconda, her father, is the chief ("as powerful as the president," as I was told by my friend Antonio Pinheiro Huni Kuin on the Purus River in the early nineties).

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[9] The painting thus reproduces in visual terms a connection between the characters that the myth expresses through their names. In the version narrated by Ibã, the anaconda woman recognizes her human lover by the fact that both of their names contain "Yube."

In the upper part of the picture (fig. 10) we see how the blue color connects the figures to the sky world. Between the pattern of the snakeskin and the blue of the sky we see the leaves of the *kawa* plant, used in the preparation of ayahuasca and responsible for the reversal of perspective, making possible the connection between worlds normally invisible to each other.

The painting follows the words of the song in its depiction of Yube Xanu above the *lupuna* tree:

> Yube nawa ainbu iiii e iiii e iiii e
> Yube nawa ainbu iiii e iiii e iiii e
> Hushu budu namaki iiii e iiii e iiii e
> Pae huu amanã iiii e iiii e iiii e
>
> [The woman of the anaconda people iiii e iiii e iiii e
> The woman of the anaconda people iiii e iiii e iiii e
> On top of the trunk of the white [*lupuna*] tree iiii e iiii e iiii e
> The female voice of the vine calling iiii e iiii e iiii e]

The composition, however, conveys much more information than what is given in the song. The song announces the beginning of the visionary effects of *nixi pae* through the image of the woman of the anaconda people, whose arrival is made evident by the vision of her brilliantly painted skin and the simultaneous sound of rushing wind. In the painting, however, we see her in a split representation, simultaneously beside and wrapping herself around the body of her hunter/victim, who in turn is already undergoing the process of becoming other, becoming anaconda, paralleling the visionary experience with the brew. The design thus shows a process that is not described in the song.

The third painting corresponds with the subsequent stage of the ritual intake of *nixi pae* (fig. 11). It represents a *dauti buya* song: one that "brings the vision." The principal painter, who drew the contours of the figures in black, was Acelino, who along with Bane was among the first of Ibã's students to learn how to paint. The name of the song, *Txain punke duaken*, translates to "the striped and luminous brother-in-law," a reference to the coati, an animal distinguished by its striped tail.

> Txain punke duaken hai en hai a
> Txain punke duaken hai en hai a
> Punke dua wawani hai en hai a
> Yuxibuki tsauni haí en haï a
> Xinã besuaketã haí en haï a
> Xinã kainkirãpe haí en haï a
> Neu xenki nisa nisa xaki batabu hai e hai a

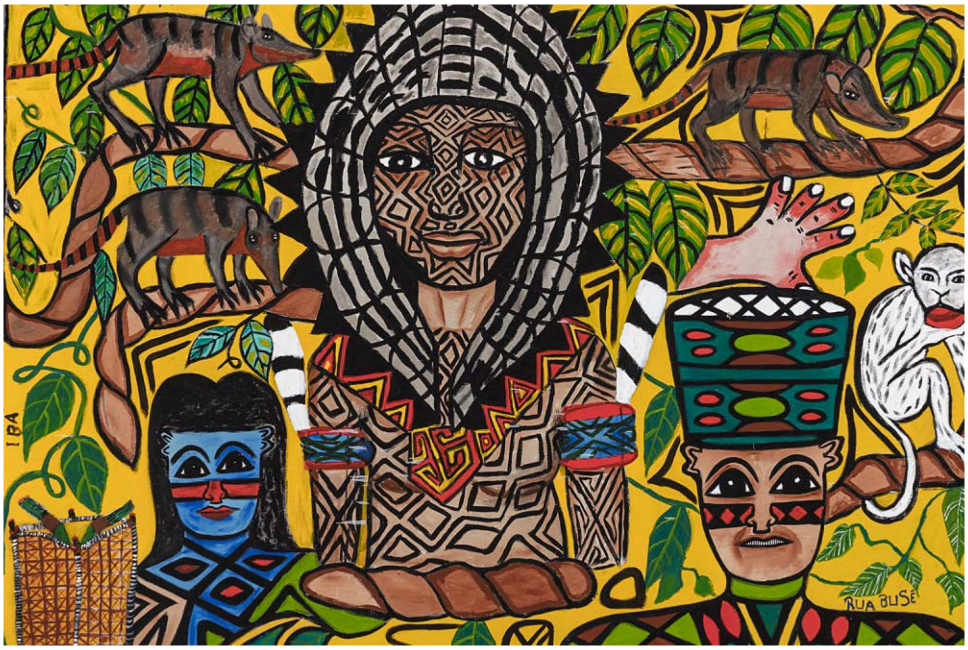

Figure 11. MAHKU collective, depiction of the song *Txain punke duaken* (detail of fig. 2). Photo: Everton Ballardin.

Huxu xinu mistini hai e hai a
Tetxu penã beimen hai e hai a
Kaxka iki dakatã hai e hai
Mi meken debuki hai e hai a
Himi nue daketã hai e hai a
Min tae debuki hai e hai a
Tae debua tunbi hai e hai a
Himi nuë daketã hai e hai a
Txain punke duaken hai e hai a
Haux

[The striped and luminous brother-in-law hai en hai a
The striped and luminous brother-in-law hai en hai a
The luminous stripes producing waves hai en hai a
The *yuxibu* spirit sitting haí en haï a
Thinking while looking haí en haï a
Thinking and listening haí en haï a
The sound of corn grating hai e hai a
Eating with the white monkey hai e hai a
Looking at all the visions hai e hai a
Opening the mouth hai e hai
At your fingertips hai e hai a
Blood sticking to your toes hai e hai a
Your fingertips hai e hai a
From the tip of the toe going up your body hai e hai a
Blood sticking to your toes hai e hai a
The striped and luminous brother-in-law hai e hai a
Haux]

Ibã explains:

> The striped fur of the coati produc[es] a movement of waves, lines that move toward the sky, connecting the earth and the sky, healing plants and the animals and fish to which they belong. The song also shows how the spirit of *nixi pae* enters at the tips of the person's toes, paints the fingers red, and passes through the body of the person, going up, until it leaves. . . . This is a *dauti buya* [to call the vision]. *Punke* comes already from the work of the women [in their weaving], but at the same time *punke dua* is the spirit of animals. *Xixi* is the [everyday] name of the coati. This is what is put into relation in the song *Txain punke dua*. My father learned this [interpretation] from Pedro Sereno and passed it on to me afterward, and now I am singing these songs while explaining them. They didn't forget the meaning of this expression *txain punke dua*. Some people interpret the formula differently, but each time I try to learn more about the meaning to explain the elements present in the songs. (Ibã, pers. comm., 2019)

Ibã therefore learned the meaning of the figure with stripes on its skin from his father, who had learned it from another master of song. The metaphor is a formula, and its meaning can become lost because other striped beings exist who could lend their body or name to the interpretation of the song.

It is revealing to consider Ibã's exegesis of this image in relation to a ritual action I witnessed in the field on the Purus River in 2014, which was recently explained in a text by Joaquim Mana, written (in the native language Hantxa Kuin) in preparation of our project on *kene*.[10] When a coati has been hunted, it is taken to the village and, before the women cut it into pieces, they will hold its paw and scrape the hand of young prepubescent girls with the nails of the animal for them to acquire a good memory for the learning of design. This is a clear example of the logic that associates *keneya* beings, beings with "painted" skins, with the knowledge of producing pattern and transforming shape in visionary experience.

Another important Huni Kuin concept, *txai* (brother-in-law), receives further attention from Ibã in his explanation of this song.

> [*Txai*] is a word in the oldest language the Huni Kuin have learned: the language of the spotted jaguar, the boa constrictor, the turtle, the armadillo, the agouti, the *nambu* bird. They spoke to us by calling us *txai*. Today we often say *txai*. You shouldn't say Manoel, João, etc. Better to call them *txai*. It's a stronger language, more ancient, the language of spirits that are called *txain*.[11] This is why this chant is called *Txain punke duake*. This comes from way before we were born, it has been for a long time in the music. (Mattos and Ibã 2017, 79)

Txai is the relational term par excellence for the Huni Kuin, referring to the encompassing logic of "virtual affinity" (Viveiros de Castro 2001) that connects beings belonging to different species, places, and times.

In the corresponding painting (fig. 11) we encounter again the framing of the composition with patterns referring to the skin of the boa, a different pattern at each side. The figures themselves (*dami*) are equally covered in *kene*, principally *txede bedu* (parrot's eye), creating a universe of skins animated by eye patterns. The striped coatis that gave their name to the song appear in the upper region of the picture, walking over the vine used in *nixi pae*.

The fourth painting, appearing at the right end of the canvas, represents the song *Yame awa kawanai* (The tapir walking around at night; fig. 12).[12] This is a healing

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[10] From January 2020 to January 2023, I participated in a project to register the *kene* of the Huni Kuin as material and immaterial patrimony. The project was funded by the Brazilian state (Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional) and coordinated by Joaquim Mana Huni Kuin.

[11] The noun *txai* is nasalized as *txain* when used as a vocative.

[12] The composition includes inscriptions that provide the names of the song, the MAHKU collective, and the individual painters.

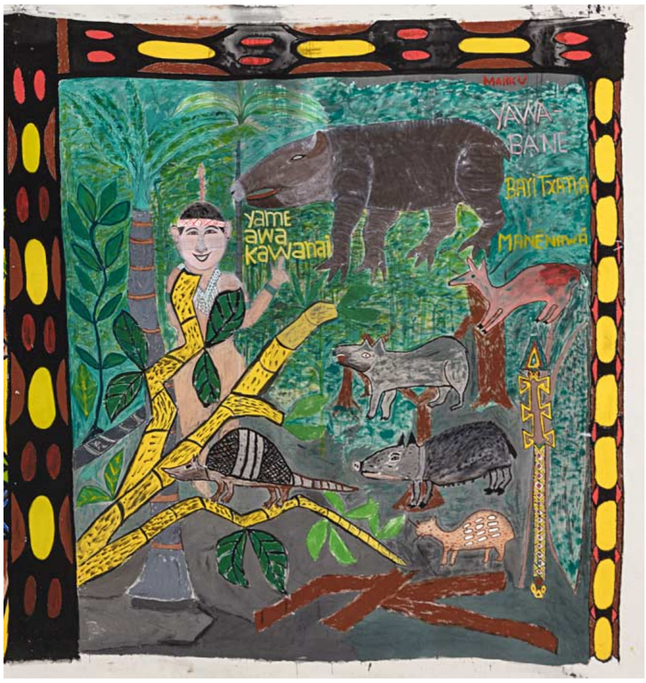

Figure 12. MAHKU collective, depiction of the song *Yame awa kawanai* (detail of fig. 2). Photo: Everton Ballardin.

song, a *kayatibu*, sung to diminish the force of the effect of *nixi pae* and send it away.

Yame awa kawanai naki natun nena
Yame awa kawanai naki natun nena
Kawanai yanuri naki natun nena
Tiri tiri kawanai naki natun nena
Yame awa pitã naki natun
Pia nate duake naki natun nena
Yame txaxu kawanai naki natun nena
Yame txaxu petã naki natun nena
Pia nati duake naki natun nena
Yame yawa kawanai naki natun nena
Kawanai yanuri naki natun nena
Yame yaix kawanai naki natun nena
Busu busu kawanai naki natun nena
Yame yaix pita naki natun nena
Pia nati duaken naki natun nena
Yame mari kawanai naki natun nena
Kawanai yanuri naki natun nena

[Tapir walking around at night, over there, nearby, here
Tapir walking around at night, over there, nearby, here
Walking and walking over there, nearby, here
Making the noise *tiri tiri* over there, nearby, here
Making the noise *tiri tiri* over there, nearby, here
Tapir will eat you at night, over there, nearby, here
He will not eat me, over there, nearby, here
Deer walking around at night, over there, nearby, here
Deer walking around at night, over there, nearby, here
He will not eat me, over there, nearby, here
Peccary walking around at night, over there, nearby, here
Walking and walking over there, nearby, here
Armadillo walking around at night, over there, nearby, here
Making the noise *busu busu*, walking over there, nearby, here
Armadillo will eat you at night, over there, nearby, here
He will not eat me, over there, nearby, here
Agouti walking around at night, over there, nearby, here
Walking and walking over there, nearby, here]

Ibã explains that "the song evokes the animals that move around and are hunted at night: the tapir, deer, peccary, armadillo. We hear the sounds they make. 'The tapir is going to eat you,' says the song. 'No,' answers the song, 'it's me who is going to eat you!'" (pers. comm., 2019). Thus we see how the song sends away the fear of being eaten by the doubles (the spirits) of the animals hunted by the one who took the brew. They come in the vision to take revenge and send their *nisun*, a dizziness and headache that, if not thwarted, will cause illness and death. According to Ibã, "nisun é kupia." He therefore associates this illness with *kupia*, a word encountered in several Pano languages in the region, which can be translated into Portuguese as *vingar*, to take revenge, or as *dar o troco*, the translation preferred by Ibã.[13] He explains that animals react this way, sending disease to humans who hunt them, especially if the animals are male, because humans and animals are made of the same blood. According to one myth, an old lady of ancient times named Yuxan Kudu used bamboo to store the blood of hunted animals of various species. One day the bamboo exploded, engendering a new generation of human beings. The ancestors belonging to the older generation transformed themselves into medicinal plants, to be used by the new humans to cure themselves of the illnesses sent by the doubles of the animals they eat (see also Muru and Quinet 2014, 36–45). Yuxan Kudu, however, continued to treat her recently engendered kin as if they were her food, poisoning them to kill and eat them. When she was discovered she was killed and burned, and from her body grew the most toxic poisons known by the Huni Kuin.

In the painting (fig. 12), an anaconda pattern again frames the nocturnal scene, alluding to the fact that the one who sees and sings during the *nixi pae* session is the ancestor who became transformed into one of the anaconda people and therefore looks through the eyes and sings with the voice of the anaconda for the duration of the ritual. In this painting we see the enunciator of the song, a human, pointing at the tapir named in the song. A *yuxin* being—the owner of *nixi pae*—is hidden behind the vine and the *kawa* leaf in the foreground. It is this being who, in the song, says: "the animal will eat you." The human answers: "no, it is I who will kill and eat you." This is how the song heals *nisun*, the illness sent by the doubles of hunted game.

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[13] Abreu ([1914] 1941, 539) translates *kupi-* as "pagar" (to pay for); Montag (1981, 204) translates it into Spanish as "hacer algo en pago; vengarse."

* * *

The figures (*dami*) and patterns (*kene*) produced by Huni Kuin men and women on a great variety of surfaces follow the same relational logic of connectivity and transformation manifested in ritual song and recounted in myth. A close reading of Ibã's explanations of the figures painted on the canvases in conjunction with the corresponding ritual songs of transformation indicates that what interests him when he explains the spatial organization of paintings or guides his pupils in their composition is the dynamic relation between the figures, who are linked to each other through processes of becoming. The revelation of these relations permits the pupils to understand the formulas and figures expressed by ritual song. The compositions tend to be enclosed by patterns that refer to the skin of Yube, the anaconda, and follow the easily recognizable style of Huni Kuin *kene* patterns. These patterns, which are traditionally produced by women, refer to the connection and attraction between men and women and between inhabitants of different domains that normally do not enter into communication.

Some Huni Kuin men say that men were the original owners of design. This affirmation is the result of the interpretation of two myths of origin of design that differ from the versions I collected on the Purus River. According to one myth, told on the Jordão River, a male anaconda taught design to a woman by wrapping his body around hers and whispering in her ears. When her jealous husband discovered the affair, he killed both his wife and the anaconda man. The second myth was told to me by Dona Teresa, an elderly and highly respected master of design, on the Purus River in 1989. It tells the story of a lady who learned the art of weaving with design from a boa constrictor woman, whom she used to meet every day at dawn. When she had learned all the patterns known by the boa woman, the boa disappeared. Living alone with her only child, a son, she taught him the art of weaving and making baskets with design. When his mother died, the son, called Napu Ainbu, went to look for his kin living far away. When he arrived in their village, men and women alike took him at first sight for a woman. Men fell in love with him and women wanted to learn his art.

Another version of this myth, recovered by Joaquim Mana from a version told by the renown storyteller and village leader Pudicho on the Curanja River in Peru in the 1950s, omits the part where the knowledge of design is transmitted from mother to son; instead we have a myth in which this knowledge originates with a male character who teaches the art of weaving with design to the women of the village he visits. These myths of the origin of design are symmetrical inversions of the myth of the origin of *nixi pae*, in which a woman of the anaconda people seduces and teaches a human man. As we saw, in this myth the anaconda wraps her body around the human visitor, this time not to teach him but to threaten him, to make him realize how easily he could become her prey, while he thought he could take her without revealing himself, as if she were his prey.

Figures, patterns, and songs express the instability of the relation between prey and predator and demonstrate how relations with beings from outside the known human world need to be established if one is to acquire traditional as well as contemporary knowledge. This is why, even when they are shown in a contemporary art gallery, the meanings and interpretations of figures, patterns, and songs must be kept at least partially secret—only hinted at, never fully revealed.

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