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Serpents of Transformation: Drawings from Indigenous Amazonia

The Gallery section of this edition of PROA brings the entirety of the images and texts of the *Serpents of Transformation: Drawings from Indigenous Amazonia* exhibition, which has been presented at the State University of Campinas' Casa do Lago from 27 October to 10 November, 2016. This exhibition presented a selection of twenty-one drawings made by the Wauja Indians of the Upper Xingu in 1998, 2000 and 2004, all collected by Dr Aristoteles Barcelos Neto, from the Sainsbury Research Unit for the Arts of Africa, Oceania and the Americas at the University of East Anglia, United Kingdom. The exhibition was curated and assembled during Dr Barcelos Neto's academic visit to the State University of Campinas' Department of Anthropology, funded by the FAPESP-Newton Fund bilateral agreement (UK Academies, United Kingdom) as part of the FAPESP Young Researcher Project entitled *Transforming Amerindian Regional Systems: the Upper Xingu case*, coordinated by Prof Antônio Guerreiro. The exhibition design was created by Daniel Dinato and Diogo Cardoso, both graduate students in Social Anthropology at the State University of Campinas. The exhibit received financial support from the Institute of Philosophy and Human Sciences at the same University.

Curation and texts by Aristoteles Barcelos Neto

Drawings by Ajoukumã Wauja, Aruta Wauja, Aulahu Wauja, Itsautaku Wauja, Kamo Wauja, Kaomo Wauja e Yanahim Wauja

Among the twenty-one drawings presented at the exhibition at Casa do Lago, only three – which were exhibited twice – had been previously displayed. First, they were shown at the National Museum of Ethnology in Lisbon, Portugal, between October 2003 and January 2004; afterwards, they were displayed at SESC Vila Mariana in São Paulo between April and May 2004. Rarely have curatorial studies of Amazonian drawings resulted in museum exhibitions or similar initiatives. In addition, few recent initiatives have given visibility to these expressions under a curatorial orientation seeking to emphasize native concepts and the biographies of indigenous artists (Almeida, 2014; Matos and Belaunde, 2014). On the other hand, other recent initiatives showing significant visibility have produced results falling short of the conceptual complexity, creative energy and highly renewing potential of contemporary indigenous art, as argued by Cesarino (2016). The few spaces where a dialogue between contemporary indigenous and Euro-Brazilian arts can potentially take place still hold the former in peripheral positions, often marked by confusing and obscure approaches.

Previous studies on Wauja drawings have been published by Barcelos Neto (2001, 2002 and 2013) and Coelho (1988, 1991, 1991-1992). Theoretical studies in which Wauja drawings are analyzed as comparative examples appear in contributions by Lagrou (2013), Severi (2011), Taylor (2010) and Taylor and Viveiros de Castro (2006). The absence of extensive and detailed catalogues of drawings and paintings by Amazonian Indians is one of the major obstacles to further developing historical and anthropological knowledge about these expressions, and for enabling a greater awareness of their complexity and curatorial potentialities. A lot of organizational and

documentary work remains to be done on these materials, which are dispersed and keep growing larger year after year. The *Serpents of Transformation: Drawings from Indigenous Amazonian* exhibition seeks to contribute to reducing this documentary deficiency, as well as to strengthening curatorial practices guided by indigenous concepts.

Exhibition texts

Introduction

Representing transformation is one of the key philosophical problems in indigenous Amazonian arts. This exhibition presents a selection of twenty-one drawings made by Wauja Indians of the Upper Xingu, dedicated to exploring such an issue through their main characters: the serpents. *Pulu-Pulu*, a tree that transforms into an anaconda-drum; *Arakuni*, an incestuous young man who becomes a serpent covered with drawings; *Kamalu Hai*, a gigantic snake that brings singing ceramic pots to the Wauja; and *Ui Xumã*, a dancing serpent who owns globular flutes, are present at this exhibition in the works of artists Aruta, Kaomo, Kamo, Itsautaku, Ajoukumã, Aulahu and Yanahim. These seven artists carry out a visual translation of Xingu's mythology and cosmology to teach them to non-Indians.

About the artists

Aruta, Kaomo and Itsautaku are survivors of the great measles epidemic that killed half of the Wauja population in the early 1950s, while they were living in the Tsariwapoho village on the middle Batovi river, one of the headwaters of the Xingu river. Kamo and Aulahu were born in the 1960s, and Yanahim and Ajoukumã were born in the 1970s. The four of them were born in the Piyulaga village, where most Wauja people live today.

Aruta, Kaomo, Kamo, Itsautaku and Ajoukumã are shamans, each with their distinct levels of initiation and specialties. Aruta and Kaomo are musician shamans. Aruta and Kaomo are masters of soul-searching songs. The former is also a master of the songs pertaining to the *Kaumai* and *Yawari* mortuary rituals; the latter is a master of the instrumental songs of all types of Xingu aerophones, especially the *Kawoká* flute. Itsautaku, Kamo and Ajoukumã are visionary-divinatory shamans, whose knowledge of the *apapaatai* (nonhuman beings who are at the origin of most diseases) is crucial to healing the sick. Aulahu and Yanahim are highly knowledgeable about Wauja mythology, and they are the only ones among the seven artists who have had formal schooling experience. Yanahim is a nursing technician, and Aulahu actively promotes Wauja arts among non-Indians.

Historical context of the drawings

From the 1970s onwards, several indigenous peoples of the world started to actively participate in the global contemporary art scene, especially in Australia, Canada, the United States, and New Zealand. The 1980s and 1990s have seen they expand into the international art market. In Brazil, although later than in these countries, the

emergence of contemporary indigenous arts is a phenomenon that has been sparking the interest of several academic and non-academic actors.

Conceptually approaching what was once considered only an ethnographic or exemplary object of material culture as a work of art allowed to release an extraordinary amount of creative energy and, subsequently, to reach new audiences and institutional spaces. The creative energy seen in contemporary indigenous arts in the last three decades has brought new dynamics to the global arts scene. This important renewal came as much from a dialogical relationship between indigenous art systems and the Western world, as from the reclaiming and safeguarding of indigenous intangible cultural heritage in a wider sense.

The only two existing collections Wauja drawings were made between 1978 and 1983 by the archaeologist Vera Penteadó Coelho, and between 1998 and 2004 by the museologist and anthropologist Aristoteles Barcelos Neto. Given their systematic character, documentary consistency, anthropological contextualization and material quality, these collections are among the most important sets of Amazonian works of art situated in the early stage of the emergence of what is being recognized as contemporary Amazon indigenous art in recent years. Only drawings from the second collection are part of this exhibition.

Drawing 1

Title: *Ataga*

Author: Yanahim

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The mythical tree full of fish and other animals that came to inhabit the rivers, lakes and banks of the Upper Xingu. In the foreground, we see the *bicuda grande* fish; in the second and third planes, the electric fish, the stingray and several other animals appear.

Drawing 2

Title: *Sejupi*

Author: Kamo

Year: 2004

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 30x21cm

Description: The *bicuda grande* fish, having left the fish tree, is presented with its body transformed into a bullroarer, a musical instrument played in the *pequi* festival.

Drawing 3

Title: *Yuma*

Author: Kamo

Year: 2004

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 30x21cm

Description: The *pirarara* fish, having left the

fish tree, is presented with its body transformed into a bullroarer, a musical instrument played in the *pequi* festival.

Drawing 4

Title: *Mutukutãi iyapu*

Author: Ajoukumã

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: A male stingray is presented with its body transformed into a globular flute.

Drawing 5

Title: *Mutukutãi iyapu*

Author: Ajoukumã

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: A female stingray is presented with its body transformed into a globular flute.

Drawing 6

Title: *Ui Xumã*

Author: Ajoukumã

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The anaconda, owner of the globular flutes, dances at its own festival.

Drawing 7

Title: *Talapi*

Author: Ajoukumã

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: A duck-fish is presented with its body transformed into a free reed clarinet called *talapi* in Wauja. The *talapi* clarinet lives inside the anaconda-drum.

Drawing 8

Title: *Pulu-Pulu* from Tsariwapoho village made from the *ataga* tree

Author:

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The anaconda-drum from the ancient village of Tsariwapoho, which the Wauja left around 1951. The drawing shows four consecutive events occurring in the mid-1940s: the *Pulu-Pulu* being accommodated within the *kuwakuho* (the men's house) by five men who pull it with a rope; the spirits of four fish descending from the sky in the form of the *Yakui* mask, associated with the *Kawoká* flute; the electric-fish-trumpet and the stingray-flute being put inside the *Pulu-Pulu*; and finally, a pair of rattles being placed on its tail.

Drawing 9

Title: *Pulu-Pulu*

Author: Aruta

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The anaconda-drum that appears in Itsautaku's dream. He is dragged by seven *yerupoho*, people of humanoid aspect that showed up before humans, and that currently inhabit the depths of waters and the earth. In the upper right corner, we see the *Sakalupi* snake. As one of the shamanic guardian spirits of Itsautaku, it leads the group. The electric fish and the stingray, who show up right after

the group of *yerupoho*, later become musical instruments and move on to live inside the *Pulu-Pulu*, whose great festival is celebrated in the village of the *Sakalupi* snakes.

Drawing 10

Title: *Pulu-Pulu*

Author: Itsautaku

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The myth about the young *Arakuni* tells that after committing incest with his sister, he is humiliated by his mother and decides to dress like a serpent "to disappear forever". By weaving the serpent with the leaves of a plant called *taquarinha* (*Chusquea meyeriana*), *Arakuni* invents all the graphic motifs the Wauja use to decorate the artifacts today. *Arakuni* is also one of the prototypes of Wauja musical shamanism, so he appears dancing with a rattle in his hand.

Drawing 11

Title: *Arakuni*

Author: Aulahu

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: In this version, *Arakuni* is already fully transformed into a snake. He is presented as he prepares to submerge from a pond. His skin is covered with several graphic motifs that decorate the body of the Wauja and their artifacts.

Drawing 12

Title: *Arakuni*

Author: Kaomo

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: In this version, *Arakuni* is presented in the form of two serpents. The image is a metaphor for the existence of endless graphic motifs: "Arakuni's drawings never end", the Wauja say.

Drawing 13

Title: Kamo

Author: *Muluku kumã*

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The drawing shows a monstrous serpent dancing with its body covered with graphic motifs.

Drawing 14

Title: *Talu kumã*

Author: Kamo

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The drawing shows a monstrous serpent dancing with its body covered with graphic motifs.

Drawing 15

Title: *Masiyxa kumã*

Author: Kamo

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The drawing shows a monstrous serpent dancing with its body covered with graphic motifs.

Drawing 16

Title: *Kamalu Hai*

Author: Kaomo

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The great mythical snake that brought the ceramic pots to the Wauja. The pots arrived singing on the back of *Kamalu Hai*. The large pots sing in low pitched tones, and the small ones sing in high pitched tones.

Drawing 17

Title: *Kamalu Hai*

Author: Itsautaku

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 30x21cm

Description: Ceramic pots spread on the floor

after descending from the back of the great snake. Free to wander around the world, some pots established their villages in the forest, where they became monsters.

Drawing 18

Title: *Nukãi Kumã*

Author: Itsautaku

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: A ceramic pot transformed into a monster. It is said to devour people who get lost in the forest.

Drawing 19

Title: *Itsakumalu*

Author: Ajoukumã

Year: 1998

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: A giant snake transformed into a canoe. It is said to devour people in the ponds and rivers of the Upper Xingu.

Drawing 20

Title: The young Aulahu transforming into an anaconda

Author: Aulahu

Year: 2000

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

Description: The young Aulahu transforming into an anaconda. The drawing shows the transformative effects of anaconda spells on the body of Aulahu, according to the narrative of the shamans who took care of him during a serious illness from which he suffered in 1995.

Drawing 21

Title: The young Aulahu transforming into an anaconda

Author: Aulahu

Year: 2000

Technique: pencil crayon on paper

Dimensions: 63x42cm

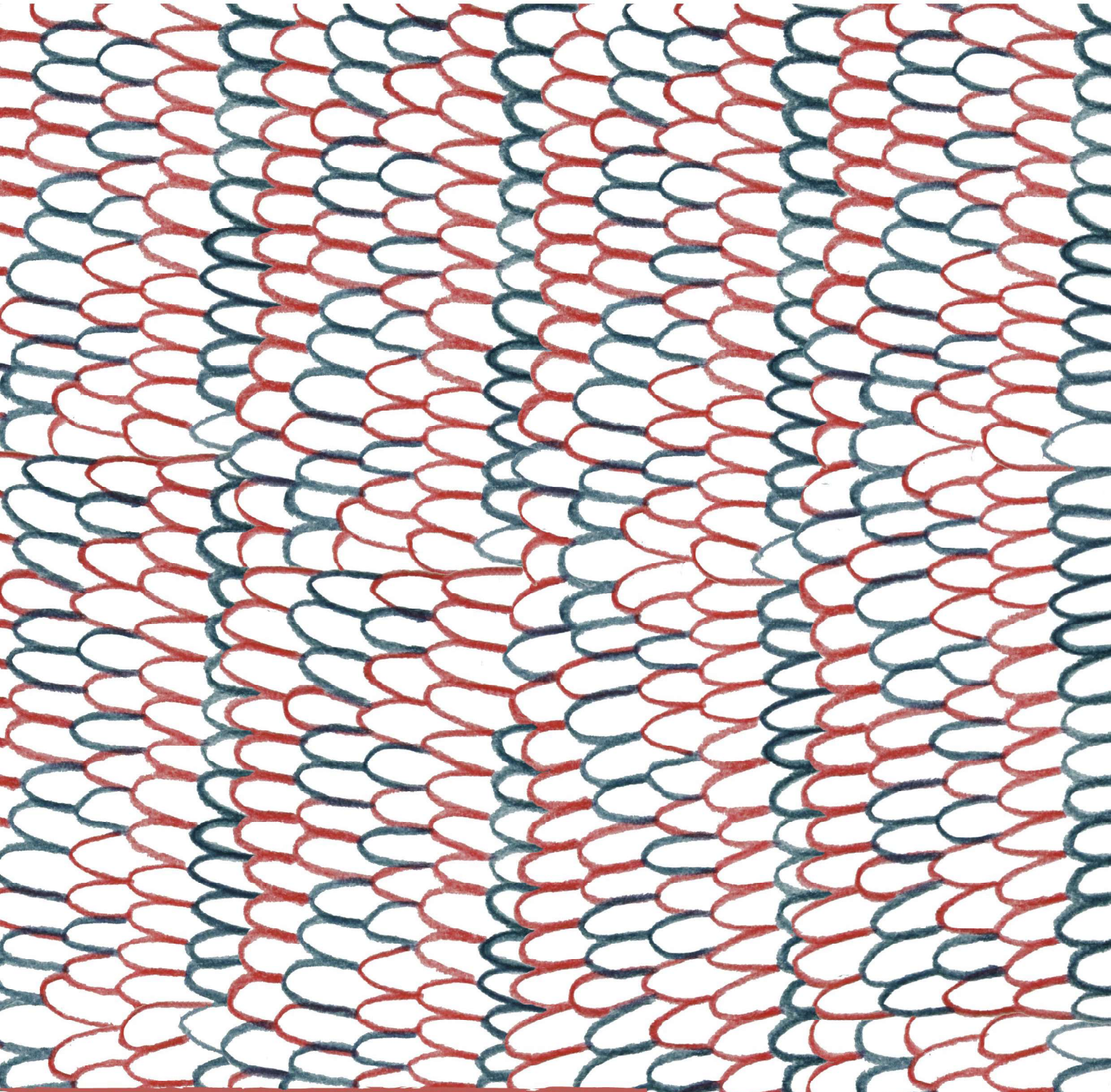
Description: The drawing shows Aulahu almost completely transformed into an anaconda. Only the head remains human.

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