

SYDNEY ANTHROPOLOGY SYMPOSIUM SERIES (SASS)

ISSN 2201-4578

VOL 1

**Online proceedings of the symposium
Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds
*edited by Sebastian Job, Linda Connor***

**Department of Anthropology
University of Sydney 2010**

Impressum:

Title: Online Proceedings of the Symposium *Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds*. University of Sydney 25-26 March 2010

Editors: Sebastian Job, Linda Connor

Volume 1 in the Sydney Anthropology Symposium Series (SASS) Vol 1.

ISSN: 2201-4578

Series editor: Department of Anthropology. The University of Sydney 2010

Graphic: Katarina Ferro

Papers from this online publication can be cited as:

[Author] 2010 [title] In: Online proceedings of the symposium 'Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds', edited by Sebastian Job and Linda Connor. Sydney Anthropology Symposium Series Vol 1. Sydney: University of Sydney 25-26 March 2010. <http://anthroendsofworlds.wordpress.com>

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Panel 6

Perilous Indigeneity in South America

(Fri 26/03/2010; 2.30-3.00pm)

‘Anthropokaluptein’: The End as Anthropological Revelation

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*“A people are as healthy and confident as the stories they tell themselves.”
Ben Okri*

Abstract

The Mehinaku Indians believe that the current state of affairs in the area where they live is destroying their lives and that if it continues the world will soon be completely destroyed. This paper will explore this belief and the methodological and philosophical ramifications of taking people seriously. The urgency of the apocalyptic scenario calls on anthropologists to reconfigure their relationships to their subjects. If instead of using theories that distance them from the people they work with, anthropologists in fact ‘believe’ them, that is, accept what people are saying on their terms, I will suggest that we are thus provided by the Mehinaku and others with thousands-of-years-old knowledge of how to best approach the prospect of the ‘end of world’ threats to all of our lives. At this critical time in history such anthropological insights also provide knowledge to other disciplines seeking to deal with the social and environmental crises of our times.

Keywords: indigenous; Amazon; apocalypse; interdisciplinary; environment.

‘Original Things’

The Mehinaku, with whom I do fieldwork, are an Amazonian people who live in the Upper Xingu area of Brazil that constitutes part of what is called the Xingu National Park (*‘Parque Indígena do Xingu’*), a large government-administered indigenous reserve. To the Mehinaku everything in this landscape is made from things called the *yeya*. Not only each human body and creature but every object in their surroundings is a copy or imitation generated from an ‘original’ called a *yeya*.

These *yeya*, or ‘original things’ still exist today at the bottom of waters and in the forest. I was told that there is literally a *yeya* for every kind of thing that exists, including even the things of White people such as cars and watches! There are *yeyas* for the birds and fish, ceramic pots and houses, jaguars and feather headdresses. It was first explained to me that a *yeya* is an exact, true-to-colour miniature version of its copies, from palm-size to forearm length. One of my informants, Arako, told me that his uncle Sepai, who is known as a very powerful shaman of the Yawalapiti community, kept two *yeyas* of an armadillo (*ukalu*) secretly hidden in his house. When they were children, Arako’s cousin showed these to him. Inside Sepai’s shamanic straw mat-roll for tobacco and other shamanic things, Arako saw the *yeya*. It looked exactly like an armadillo, except it was very tiny, the size of his hand, extremely delicate but moving, shivering and alive.

These *yeya* are the immortal, ‘true’ versions of all things that surround human beings in their world. Before the sun first shone, before the first human beings, there existed little people called the *Yerepëhë*. These tiny kindly folk were at home in the dark so with the first sunshine they hid in masks. These masks or ‘First-Forms’ as they might be called, are the *yeya* and are understood to exist now as the true/essential bodily form of spirits.

These *yeya* of the spirits are the archetypal forms from which inferior copies, the things of the world, are issued. The way the Mehinaku express this ‘firstness’ is with the Portuguese word for ‘true’ – *‘verdadeiro’*, as a translation of the Mehinaku *washë*. For example, a fish *yeya* is called *Kupatë-washë*, which means ‘fish-true’, distinct from an ordinary fish, which is called a *Kupatë-ênai*, ‘fish-cape/clothing’. These ‘True-Fish’, the *Kupatëwashë*, live in the deeps of the waters and are the stars where the river shines (*‘o rio fica brilhante’*) in the sky, the Milky Way. They are the ‘chiefs’ (*‘chefes’* – *amunão*) that make regular fish, *Kupatë-ênai*, for people to catch and eat. The latter ‘fish-copies’, the superficial replicas of the ‘first’, or ‘chief’ fish, were explained to me as ‘fish-shirts’ (*‘camisas de peixe’*). They have an ordinary, not particularly satisfying taste and are tougher in texture. On the other hand, on the rare occasion that a ‘True-Fish’ is caught, these are found to be fatter and softer, with a flavour that is extraordinarily delicious. These special fish can only be captured using white peoples’ poison, not with an arrow or hook as they know to avoid these.

The *yeya* of the *apapanye*, both in its form of the ‘first’ or ‘true being’ or as a miniature, is the body from which its copies issue. How the replica-skins actually come forth from the *yeya* is unclear, but there is defi

nately some sense of organic reproduction, with the *apapanye-yeya* understood to relate to its *ėnai*-copies 'as mother to children', with an *apapanye-yeya* often referred to as, for example, 'Mother of the Fish'. In all of this there is a sense of material connection between the *yeya* and their *ėnai*, the latter derived from and thus containing a trace of the former's body, and associated with this, an emotional relationship of the caring parental kind.

Therefore the concept of 'Masters of the Animals' common to much of Amazonia has a particular take in the Mehinaku case wherein these entities constitute archetypes, a conception that in many ways is similar to that of Plato's "Forms"¹. The idea that the 'inhabitants of the forest are created and controlled by their *'donos/dueños'* (owners) and by their *'mães/madres'* (mothers) is, as Viveiros de Castro has said, one of the 'classical themes of Amazonian culture' (1992: 345). The Mehinaku sense that 'the "mother" looks after her species' (Gow 1991: 79) is identical to other groups like the Piro for example. However, the notion that the species are imitations that issue substantially from an archetypal 'mother', appears to be peculiar to the Mehinaku.

White peoples' poison

This sense of the paradigmatic constitution of the Mehinaku world is understood by them to be under threat specifically by the impact on the area where they live from the world beyond it. The progressive changes in the reserve have been of quite a different nature to what has gone on in other parts of South America. Unlike other indigenous peoples of the continent, the Mehinaku and other Xinguano peoples' experiences of contact with the outside world have been largely indirect, through disease epidemics, the use of manufactured goods and interaction with restricted visitors from outside, rather than by direct day-to-day economic and political subjugation. Because of the types of contact they have experienced, and because of the way the communities have responded to successive crises by reconstitution and integration, in many ways the Xinguanos have thus far been able to maintain their lifeways to a far greater degree than most other Amazonian peoples.

Having said that, far from being the protected paradise the Brazilian government purports it to be²,

¹ Where the objects or forms, which humans see around them, are the replicas of 'real forms'. Like the Mehinaku's *apapanye*, compared to humans and their other copies Plato's real forms are more beautiful and perfect than their copies; and like for the Mehinaku, in Plato's conception there is the sense that humans should strive to make and nurture things in the likeness of the superior original archetypes. Also, akin to Plato's description of the realm of forms ('the true earth'), *apapanye* do also inhabit their own world. For more detail see Stang (2009).

² The large government-administered indigenous reserve with its firmly paternalistic protection policy, from its founding quickly gained an international reputation as the showcase for Brazil's treatment of its Indian peoples, "providing an idyllic media image of painted Indians living in a protected wilderness in stark contrast to the conditions of most Brazilian Indians" (Hugh-Jones and Hugh-Jones 1996:13), an idealised image of an authentic "society of nations" of "peaceful peoples", living in a paradise insulated from the outside world (Villas-Boas and Villas-Boas 1970:16). For an extensive history of the Park, see Pires Menezes (2000).

since its founding in 1961, the Xingu National Park has been subjected to continuous invasions and ongoing destruction. These have included rapid deforestation (especially for soya production, as well as logging, corn farming and cattle ranching), pollution of water and contamination of the fish that are the mainstay of the Xinguano diet. The most devastating threat is the Brazilian government's highly contested building and running of hydroelectric dams in the region during the last decade. According to the Xinguano peoples themselves, the situation has now become critical, bringing their leaders together in July 2007 to declare the crisis in an open letter to the Brazilian nation.

This is an overview of the ongoing deterioration of environmental conditions in the Xingu basin. I have described it in Western terms as "environmental degradation", including contamination of clean water with agro-toxins, the chopping down of oxygen-yielding trees, and the threat of the extinction of species. In Mehinaku terms this state of affairs concerns the harm and obliteration of the *yeya*. As discussed the *yeya* archetypes still exist shimmering and alive in the landscape. As the farmers and loggers cut away at the edge of the forest the *yeya* that live in those particular parts of the forest are destroyed or retreat in anger. Likewise the poisoning of the water by 'os Brancos', White people, threaten the *yeya* of the rivers, streams and lakes. As I mentioned above, the *yeya* of fish, which appear as big especially sweet-tasting fish, can only be killed using White peoples' poison. Arako, a Mehinaku man, explained to me that this is in fact why the number of fish are decreasing: that is, White peoples' poison has killed too many 'True Fish' and those that are left angrily cease to make their replica-fish and do not allow themselves to be caught. As the Mehinaku see it, the spirits are getting angry and even annihilated altogether. When the spirits are angry they refuse to issue from their bodies the imitations that are the things of the world. That is, the very 'building blocks' of the world are ceasing to work as they should and in some cases are being completely destroyed. Existence as the Mehinaku know it, is rapidly disintegrating and will eventually cease, as the archetypes of existence stop generating the substance of the world and possibly disappear altogether.

Awitsiri, the beautiful way

According to the Mehinaku, White people are destroying the world unwittingly. Principally because they lack knowledge of how to properly be and act, most importantly what the Mehinaku cultivate as a kind of consciousness. This way of being is called *awitsiri* or 'beautiful way' and is mostly marked by its quality of 'care'³. This is the 'state of mind' that nurtures all things towards which its attention is turned. This careful way of thinking/doing is evident in the manner in which people generally strive to conduct themselves. Some individuals are seen to be particularly successful at achieving this active state, and after a while it was apparent even to me, the calm and painstaking way certain people attended to even the smallest task.

An important part of this 'care' is the quality of attention given. Once, a young man, Maiawai, sought to teach me the importance of this way of doing things when in a hurry I was frustratedly pulling a zip that seemed completely stuck. He stopped me and motioned for me to watch as he sat and with slow, calm

³ Reminiscent of Heidegger's 'sorge'.

deliberation attended to the task. He knew I was time-pressed and still he instructed me, 'devagar, Carla, sempre devagar', '...slowly Carla, always slowly'. The careful nurturing concentration is a form of the principle of child-rearing (*paparitsa*) that is extended to all matters in the world. It is the very opposite of the destructive effects of uncontrolled and thus rampant desire, since in *awitsiri*-consciousness, one's desires are restrained into the ultimate caring form. For example, the desire to open the zip is not allowed to go out of control as it was near to doing in me (that probably would have resulted in breaking the zip). Careful loving attentiveness to the task preserves the integrity of the thing (Maiawai closing the bag, all parts of it still intact). The importance of this intensive kind of 'paying attention' in fact has the tone of a 'spiritual' injunction wherein *Kamē*, the Sun, chastises a lack of concentration by giving the negligent person an injury. I found this out one day when Arako chided me for my scratched hands, cut from grating manioc, asking me whether I had been thinking about something else while I was working and laughingly scolding me that *Kamē* had punished me for this with those injuries.

One of the nurturing aspects of this 'caring' consciousness is a certain 'lightness'. In Mehinaku child-rearing, children are cared for in a comparatively less controlling manner than in the West. They are allowed to go and do what they want from the time they are old enough to wander off, only casually telling their mother or other caretakers where they are going. They work from a young age but only if they choose to. Literally, when they are young they are only held with the lightest touch and as they get older, from the time they can walk properly, they are hardly touched at all. There is an expansion of this delicate conduct into the quality of consciousness. There is a sense that, as in the treatment of children, to be too attached, to grip too strongly may be damaging, that this might be the case not only for the selves of children, but also that overly strong attachment in consciousness may also be destructive to the integrity of any entity one relates to, as well as the relations between entities.

Another aspect of the *awitsiri* consciousness is that the careful attention involved intertwines one utterly with all aspects of the worlds around⁴. To at every moment devote complete attention to the things and creatures one encounters is to be joined in strong relationship to all those entities.

White people, the Mehinaku say, do not live in an *awitsiri* way. They do not attend to the world around them with careful, light, nurturing attention that preserves the forms of things. They are not caring or attentive to the forces they share their world with; they are exploitative in their unrestrained desire, thus neglecting or utterly destroying relationships with other kinds of entities and often the things themselves. As we have seen in cases such as that of White man's poison killing the True Fish, the 'things' being destroyed are the 'First Things', the *yeya*, and when these are offended or damaged and destroyed it threatens the continuity of the aspects of existence of which they are the source; that is the threat of the end of the world according to the Mehinaku.

⁴ As will be touched upon later, the Mehinaku understand there to exist a number of worlds or realities arranged in different configurations and in some places superimposed(see Stang 2009).

These are only a few aspects to the Mehinaku sense of their world ending. I will briefly mention one other. The Mehinaku have a sense of consensus realities, of how groups of the same soul kind with their collective perceiving uphold a certain manifestation of reality; how the Mehinaku and neighbouring Xinguanogroups are similarly human in perspective and thus manifest a reality of peaceful continuity of the world in its proper form⁵. Groups of souls of a wild kind such as other Indian groups and White people manifest realities of unrestrained desire that cause disintegration of the world and ultimately chaos. The invasion of other destructive realities can be in the form of the invasion of spirits, particularly at the time of eclipses, when the unnatural darkness causes dissolution of the forms of the world. The other way this happens is by the descent of the rainbow snake to earth where he wreaks havoc. Like the collapse of the circle of the arc of the rainbow to earth, the encroachment of White people is also perceived in terms of circles; as the collapse of the concentric boundaries of the worlds on the ground. The outermost ring – the wildness of White people – is penetrating inwards and if this continues there will be a complete implosion, the world of forms dissolving leaving a world of chaos, a return to the primordial darkness of spirits without form, desire utterly unrestrained.

Conclusion

The very real possibility of global catastrophe by ecological devastation begs the question: ‘who would have a good answer to all of this?’⁶ The way that I see it is that if we are looking for more fruitful ways of living in the world we do not need to start scratching around making rudimentary things up. Anthropologists encounter a myriad of such lived cosmologies, and these are not skeletal outlines but elaborate thousands-of-years-old, tried-and-tested lived forms of knowledge; it is only a matter of attending to them, of taking them seriously. If the bankruptcy of the hegemonic Western worldview has brought us teetering to the edge, it is anthropology’s special disciplinary position that I suggest may offer the alternatives.

In a sense the positive aspect of the apocalypse has already begun, that aspect which is the literal meaning of the word from the Greek apokalupsis, to uncover, reveal (from apokaluptein, apo- ‘un-’ + kaluptein ‘to cover’). What has perhaps been uncovered at this time is the barrenness of the dominant worldviews, the rampant greed and heedless destruction of consumer capitalisms. In our anthropology there exists the tendency for taking a distance from peoples’ experiences and simply using them as a spring board to elaborate preexisting Western theorisation. Peoples’ lives, wherever they are from or of whatever character they are, simply become grist for the theoretical mill, interpreted through Western models that are based on other Western models, in a continuing fetishisation of Western conceptions. We are thus kept in a loop talking to ourselves, getting ever further away from the experiences of the people we started with.

⁵ This is somewhat different to the idea of ‘perspectivism’ written about by Viveiros de Castro (1992; 1998) and others.

⁶ Michael Taussig posed this question in his keynote lecture for the Anthropology and the Ends of Worlds symposium on March 25, 2010.

The alternative is to stay with the experiences, “returning to the stream of life whence all the meaning of the words and theories came from,” as William James (1947:106) put it. Instead of breaking up the details of people’s existence and putting them to the service of extrinsic explanations, one may attempt the opposite: to take Western language and its categories (the explanatory media mostly at hand) and make them the grist for the analytical mill, mixing and shaping them in order to construct a description of people’s experience. This is basically the phenomenological method in its simplest terms and what I have sought to do in the first part of the article.

Let us return to the question, ‘who would have a good answer to all of this?’ I suggest that making such painstaking renderings of different cultural experiences as described above allows people to explore other worldviews. It is then possible to see how these world views might be taken on as offering fruitful ways of being and healing the world at a time when the more dominant ways are poisoning it. For example, what if we anthropologists attempt to suspend disbelief and entertain in our own minds the possibility that for example, the Mehinaku are right and that there are in fact *yeya*, the mostly invisible archetypal presences? What if there might in fact be aspects of the world that we are not aware of and in our ignorance are neglecting and even harming, and thus damaging the landscape in as yet untold ways? After all, how many cultures have versions of these ideas, that there exist spirits or other such entities? The answer is: most cultural understandings in the world except for Western ones, where the dominance of spirits has disappeared only recently. And having taken people seriously on this point of the possible existence of unseen forces, people such as the Mehinaku provide us with thorough knowledge of how to best live with such forces, in what I have described as the *awitsiri* way, with keen awareness of the environment, lightly and with great care. In fact the Mehinaku have an entire system of creating relationships with the *yeya*, of not only not destroying but nurturing the essential and generative aspects of their landscape.

At this critical time in history these anthropological insights could also provide knowledge to other disciplines seeking to deal with the environmental and social crises of our times. Ecologists create models of the interconnectivity of thriving ecological systems. Famous scientists devise theories about how the planet might be more than what it has seemed to us since the so-called Age of Reason, describing the planet as having a sense of being, of spirit – for example Lovelock’s idea (2000) of the planet Gaia, a living being. And yet such theorists do not have to start from scratch. If they look over the disciplinary fence as scientists such as Newton did in the past, they will find anthropology’s riches containing wondrously elaborate versions of such ideas. Similarly, social psychologists might have a lot to gain by attending to anthropological material. They could learn from the Mehinaku sense of different groups of perspectives, manifesting different realities in the most material way, and thus the great care humans need to devote to the quality of our perspectives. They could consider the possibility that the Mehinaku are right about White People, whose unrestrained rampant desires may cause the End of the World to truly be nigh.

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