

## **Matis Parties: dancing with animals, gringos and other foreigners**

### **Festas Matis: dançar com animais, gringos e outros estrangeiros**

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Tiger, tiger, burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?  
*William Blake*

The Matis indigenous people established contact with the Brazilian government between 1976 and 1978. Until then they had had sporadic relations with non-indigenous outsiders. Men and women who told me their memories of their “first encounter” and of the time when they used to live as “isolated Indians” - as the media and the Brazilian government refer to them - are the same who now negotiate to perform “Matis parties” with foreign TV crews, like BBC (from the UK) or MBC (from South Korea). The Matis are famous worldwide, one of their films is BBC’s series *Tribe* by Bruce Parry, and twice they were on the cover of *National Geographic* magazine.

In order to introduce you the Matis community recent history in summary, it is enough to mention that, in less than 30 years the Matis made their official contact with the Brazilians and then entered in full speed in the whirlpool that comes with all the usual transformations brought by this sort of event. They faced sickness and death (they have been reduced to circa 60 people in the 80s), they had some access to new medicines, different food, industrialized objects accessible in larger scale such as machetes, axes, pans, and in smaller scale technological items like 16 mm rifles, outboard engines, solar panels and, more recently, mobile phones and digital cameras. Soon after contact, film makers disembarked to shoot the Matis and many documentaries were made, spreading their images in the world like in a “imagic domino” (Arisi 2011).

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<sup>2</sup> Their face tattoos and their other diacritic signs are part of this domino of image and imaginary associations, for example, matis faces are present in so many leaflets, official event posters, internet sites that associate and help to fix their images as “the indigenous image” and proportionate them visibility between those indigenous people that are very easily given the right to estate their native indian identity, very specific situation of status, specially when compared to other people like the Pankararu (Albuquerque 2011) that have to fight to affirm their indigenous identity; other indians are considered “*mestizo*” or mixed; and some like the Guarani maybe are considered too poor to call the attention of Brazilian authorities or international press even when under constant farmers siege, like in Mato Grosso do Sul and Parana nowadays.

Now, the Matis are 331 people living in the second biggest Indigenous Land in Brazil, Terra Indígena Vale do Javari, with 8,5 million hectares close to the triple border of Brazil, Peru and Colombia. In this presentation/paper, I describe how the Matis dance with foreigners as a way to try establishing the bases for relationship with strangers, as a important cosmo-sociological investment, an economy of their culture. The Matis parties are made also to keep updating a long history of circulation of technology, goods and knowledge with outsiders to become a bigger and stronger people. That is not new for them, as they have always being cosmo-global-networking in immense webs of trade. Meanwhile hunting, farming, gathering, making parties, they have always tried to keep on dancing and singing with (and as) animals and other foreigners. They have been afraid to party just for a short period<sup>3</sup>, after the terrible demographic debacle caused by the Brazilian government (ir)responsibility when more than 2/3 of their population was almost decimated by simple diseases such as flu and the Funai (Brazilian Indian Affairs bureau) did not have even an outboard engine to go up or down the river.

I met the Matis for the first time in 2003 and, since 2006, I have worked and learned with them in twelve months of fieldwork. My PhD thesis focus on the Matis economy with gringos, animals and *tsussin* (desincorporated vital forces). It is worth noting that, as in many other Panoan languages, the Matis term *tsussin* (*yuxin* for others) is also employed to refer to pictures and films<sup>4</sup>. In 2009, I could participate in key moments of the Matis' economic relations with TV crews and tourists<sup>5</sup>. In those encounters, most gringos chose to see the blowpipe hunting and the *nëix tanek*, that we can translate using the Matis words when speaking in Portuguese and also to simplify it: the “animal parties”.

During the *nëix tanek* parties, the Matis receive and perform many animals in their *maloca* (the longhouse), or better said, their *malocosmo* (Arisi 2011) as the longhouse is a reproduction of a vertebrate body seen from the inner side and it is also the cosmos<sup>6</sup>. In the animal parties, the Matis enact their myths, they put en-act (*mise en cene*) and revive many

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<sup>3</sup> As Erikson explains the Matis were afraid to play with *xó* – a shamanic power that is related also to sickness (1996).

<sup>4</sup> For more related to the links of *tsussin/yuxin* and camera people, see Deshayes (2000).

<sup>5</sup> To give more detailed account of who were gringos involved and where the encounters took place: the journalists from MBC South Korea shot a documentary inside the Indian territory, in the Matis communities; the three North Americans filmed a pilot for US Animal Planet/Discovery in a Tikuna indigenous community located in Colombia and we also went camping with four German tourists and their guides at the border with Peru, outside Indian territory.

<sup>6</sup> *Maloca* as cosmos is a “cosmovision” shared by other Amazonian people like the Uitoto (Candre Kinerai & Echeverri 2008), for example. For Marubo longhouse and its comprehension as the empty place of a body and as a replica of the cosmos, see also Cesarino (2011).

beings from whom they have obtained technologies, as a gift or stolen, when the other was too stingy to share the knowledge. Some of those technologies are crucial to the Matis identity as it is nowadays, like the tattooing that was taught by a monkey. Another fundamental animal that appears in the party is the *tuyuyu* bird that helped a Matis boy that was kidnapped by a vulture and obliged to eat putrefactive food, in order to clean the boy's guts the *tuyuyu* taught him a purgative technique to clean up his body: the *kampok* - a frog secretion vaccination, a powerful neurotoxin that provokes vomit and diarrhea, functions as medicine for food poison and it is a very important empowering substance (used by mothers to strength a considered weak child, for example). The *tuyuyu*, as the myth teaches, also showed the Matis boy how to find and to use the fishing poison. The *jabuti* turtle was not so friendly, not generous at all, so the Matis had to use harsh methods to convince him, they close the *jabuti* anus with tree resin until it had to explain the technology to weave hammocks and the Matis could stop sleeping on the cold ground.

As in any good party, as much as it can be a joyful event, it can be very dangerous. Easily, things can go out of hand, people are drinking manioc beer<sup>7</sup> together and the proximity can make old disputes or hatreds be remembered, as much as it can be a good opportunity for furtive sex , in the *awat tanek* (Matis term for tapir *tanek*), the tapir enters very carefully in the *malocosmo* to avoid the hunting traps that older men built to catch them. One by one each tapir walks along the main corridor, it has to play a kind of game, the older women and men tell the tapir where it has to put its leg, then one arm, another leg, until it can not keep its balance and position and it falls on the ground, captured. A young woman or an old one not skilled enough, like me – the anthropologist, will be then called to butcher the tapir cutting its joints, there is a right place to enter the knife and to section into pieces to fit in the pans to be cooked by women. The *tuyuyu* birds enter as a flock, but even the friendly and not stingy *tuyuyu* will soon be victim of an electric fish and it will fall amidst laugh of the participatory audience meanwhile the lucky ones fly to safety of the longhouse's wood. The dialogues among those animals and the Matis intent to make clear what is their kinship relation. So, one frog asks one by one if they find him or his skin ugly or beautiful; “you are ugly” is the right answer for the affine ones and “your are beautiful”, the correct answer for its relatives. The animals are mythical beings but they are at the same time really kin or affine related to the people in the longhouse. It is enactment, but it is also updating of social relations.

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<sup>7</sup> Matis beer is considered a “near-beer” because it is not so alcoholic as the ones produced and offered by the majority of their neighbours and other Amerindian groups (see Erikson 2004).

The Matis translate *tanekin* as “to invent” and “to mimic”, I use also “to perform” - from the anthropological lexica. To mimic and to invent translate the same verb which means that, for the Matis, invention is not opposite to imitate and to mimesis<sup>8</sup>. As Calavia and I have written recently: “the Matis and other Amazonian people tend via imitation (always related to translation) to create a bridge with these foreigners and, in this move, they invent their relations with them (my translation from Spanish, Calavia & Arisi 2013). We propose that the rituals in the Amazon offer a good place and time to test new relations, not a place of “tradition”, but one for innovation and for testing new possibilities of alliances and exchange. In short, we propose that the performances of those rituals – when “strangers” come to interact with and within Amazonian communities – are special occasion to trial. About the nature of those foreigners or strangers, it does not matter much if they are conquerors of Incan or European empires, or one half of the community enacting an enemy invasion, or a relative dressed/disguised in order to create inside the community the necessary alterity, or if it is someone using animal clothes to have abilities of other bodies, as perspectivist theorists propose (Viveiros de Castro 2009; Stolze de Lima 2005, and many of Viveiros de Castro’s students). The foreigners can be gringos from whom the Matis can get powerful technologies, objects or money that can give access to many transformational goods, like the outboard engine brought by BBC’s Bruce Parry as part of the license-to-film-payment (Arisi 2012). Or they can be *tsussin*, desincorporated beings or vital power, as Lagrou translates the Kaxinawa word *yuxin* (2007). In this case, the Matis have to be very careful as the *tsussin* have ways to make even undesirable deformed babies in the women’s wombs.

The *tsussin* also come to party with the Matis in the *malocosmo*. Though they do not drink ayahuasca like most of their neighbours<sup>9</sup>, the Matis prepare a vine beverage called *tatxik*. It has not made its way to the urban centers new age rituals like the *kampok* - the frog vaccination the Katukina Pano, the Huni Kuin/Kaxinawa and the Yawanawa made popular (see Cofacci de Lima 2005; Oliveira 2012) or like the global famous ayahuasca, drunk in ceremonies all around the world, in Australia, the Netherlands and South Africa. As Calavia Saez have pointed out it is a rare case of “inverse mission” that goes in the direction of urban centers from the forest and the Indians – “for centuries perceived as objects of the christian mission” (2008). During nocturnal *tatxik* drinking occasions, while singing or listening jaguar (*kamun*) songs, the Matis adverted me that the longhouse was being visited by the *tsussin* (*yuxin*, desincorporated beings) and also by

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<sup>8</sup> See for other ideas on mimesis as creativity, see Taussig (1993).

<sup>9</sup> Like, the Marubo, also Panoan, and the Kanamari, Katukina speaking group just to mention two people that live in the Vale do Javari Indigenous land.

one man that was physically away from the community, his *tsussin* was wandering among us or even sitting beside us. The *tsussin* visits are invisible to some people, but visible to others. Being or not being visible at one's own wish is a powerful accomplishment. Powerful like an animal that can be so beautifully mimetic that it can be visible or invisible while in the forest, like a jaguar. The Matis also explained me that beauty is one of the most powerful weapon that can be used in encounters with foreigners, animals, gringos or *tsussin*.

Animals have designs that are beautiful, worth to be painted in the body, mimesis clothes, or to be dressed like the jaguar patterns woven by women to be worn in the ankles and pulses of every Matis (see Arisi 2011: 211-212). The animals had technologies that after being given, shared or stolen made Matis lives easier and transformed like cooking fire, frog vaccination, other technologies made them more powerful like the face tattoos. The animals were great foreigners to exchange with. Of course, good opportunities are always a bit risky, so you better do it in a controlled and experienced way, try them in your terms. The Matis parties are great for experimenting new or updating old relations, via exchange, bargain or stealing, good for checking who is stingy and who is not, who are the best ones to become allied with and who are not worth to be in debt with. So, now it has been time for dancing with gringos like South Koreans, Germans, US and UK people, as well as with Colombian student that come to forest lodge Hotel Palmari, among many others. The parties are a place for exchanging with gringos, maybe they keep on bringing the Matis their technologies to make the Matis become stronger and bigger in numbers. The foreigners come with their cameras to see, to admire, to capture images (*tsussin*) of the Matis beauty. As once a Matis man said to me: “Istá, mundo inteiro, índio bēra kimon” (“Look, whole world, beautiful/nice Indians [we are]”). A not well measured beauty can kill, as I have learned from Txema, a Matis elder (Arisi 2011). Like the symmetry of the jaguar lines, the distinct mark of the Matis tattoos signs in their faces their power in this world, including the power to attract so many gringos to film them, to pay them, to stay with them and to admire their beauty, the power of their beauty.

***After word:***

At the same time that many anthropologists started to doubt of everything that smells like the essentialization of culture, both indigenous and many other peoples were reifying culture for themselves and to claim it for many reasons and in different ways. Glowczeski have worked the same themes with the Warlpiri (2011). As Oakdale (2004: 60) noted:

“The awareness and manipulation of the idea of culture that is taking place throughout lowland South America mirrors a similar self-conscious display of culture currently going on among indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world, such as in Australia (Myers 1991, 1994), New Zealand (Hanson 1989; Linnekin 1991), Melanesia (Foster 1995; Thomas 1992), and Polynesia (Sahlins 2000), among other places.”

Anthropologists could not tame the creativity of culture (Wagner 1975), we could just try to stabilize it, even if it last a brief fraction, an ethnographic moment. In Brazil, many researchers are studying indigenous transformations where culture participates in exchange relationships that become more commercial and intermediated by money (Gordon 2006; Coelho de Souza 2008; Carneiro da Cunha 2009, Coffacci de Lima 2011; among others). I engaged in this effort aiming to follow, via ethnography, and to understand how the Matis create an economy of their culture, how they are created by their own material, cosmopolitical, and creative culture, and how they trade their (im)material culture and “culture” (Carneiro da Cunha 2009) with outsiders.

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