JASO 25/3 (1994): 255–262

WYSINWYG IN AMAZONIA

PETER RIVIÈRE

In writing about Amazonian feather art, Luiz Boglár (1984–85) made a distinction between a system of signs referring to social positions and a system of ideological signs. His words, however, are even more widely applicable as the peoples of lowland South America wear not just feathers but a wide range of decorations and adornments to make statements about both social statuses and social values. Two examples from the Jê peoples illustrate this. With reference to the Kayapó, Terence S. Turner (1969) has shown how different types of decoration and body paint denote social status (see also Vidal (ed.) 1992), while Anthony Seeger (1981) has demonstrated how the importance that the Suya place on speaking and hearing is emphasized by their practice of placing wooden disks in lips and ears. I want here to look at something rather more nebulous, in so far as it is not always visible: that is, how people may be transformed or transform themselves by changing their skin or clothes, and, as an aspect of this, consider the relationship between inside and outside the body as reflections of changing human nature.

This article is a modified version of a paper given at a colloquium of Amazonianists and Melanesianists held at the Satterthwaite Conference Centre of the University of Manchester in 1994. It has since been published in Portuguese in *Revista de Antropologia* (Vol. XXXVIII, no. 1 (1995), pp. 193-205). I am grateful to the editors of *Revista* for permission to publish this version here. The aim of the colloquium was to explore the common ground between the two regions, and, like the colloquium itself, this paper is exploratory and reaches no conclusions. I am grateful to my fellow participants for their invaluable comments, especially to Michael O'Hanlon whose companion paper drawing on Melanesian examples is to appear in a future issue of *JASO*.

The native peoples of Amazonia live in a highly transformational world where What You See Is Not Necessarily What You Get; thus the title of this essay. Appearances are deceptive, in the sense that they may be put on and taken off like clothes that hide the underlying reality. What I intend to do is to look at a few examples concerning the relation between external appearance and inner reality, each of which illustrates different aspects of the matter.

Let me start with two examples drawn from opposite ends of the Amazon. First, that provided by the Carib-speaking Kaxúyana of Pará, of whom Protasio Frikel (1971: 139, n. 16) writes:

> The 'soul', in the thought of the Indian, is the immortal part of the man, but not just the spiritual or immaterial part. The immortal part is...the person or the man himself and which, given the right circumstances, can be seen. The human body is simply a means of manifestation, a type of 'clothing' which he receives at birth and loses at death.

Far to the west, the Matsigenka of Peru state that 'the body serves only as a cover or "dress" for the free soul' (Baer 1992: 81). Numerous other examples of similar ideas could be quoted, but I want to look in rather more depth at a single case. The Trio (Tiriyo) seem to provide a particularly good case of WYSINWYG, and after considering them I will pursue in different contexts some of the themes raised by their case.

Some years ago I commented that for the Piaroa the problem of the Trinity is less of how three can be one than why it might not be (Rivière 1989). The same is true for the Trio. They live in a transformational world of which the Trio regard the caterpillar, which they treat with awe, to be the archetypal symbol. One of the lessons I learnt when trying to obtain exegesis on myths was the futility of trying to find out whether a particular character was a human, animal or spirit. The response to the question, 'Is he a jaguar or a man?', was invariably a degree of perplexity followed by a comment such as, 'It was a man, but he was wearing jaguar's clothes.'

I will turn to some myths in a moment, but it should be stressed here that transformation is not simply something that occurs in mythic space–time. It is part of the everyday world, of which, to some extent, myths are also part. Take, for example, the following incident. An Indian told me that he once went out hunting with a famous and powerful shaman. They shot a spider monkey, which then became jammed in a branch well above the ground. The shaman told the man to go some paces away, face away from the tree and not to look round. The man obeyed, but suddenly he heard the noise of a jaguar behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw a jaguar descending the tree with the monkey in its jaws. He

fled frightened, but had not gone far when he heard the shaman calling for him. He returned and found the shaman at the foot of the tree holding the monkey. For most Trio such a story simply confirms their assumptions about the power of shamans to transform themselves. Equally, whether or not a particular creature is the actual creature they see or a spirit wearing that creature's clothes will depend on the outcome of the encounter, unless one is a shaman and thus able to see through the disguise to the internal reality. The power to see into the invisible world is the Trio shaman's essential qualification: 'seeing is believing', on condition that your sight is good enough.

I now want to look at two Trio myths that contain rather similar incidents (see Koelewijn 1987: 65–70, 114–17). In both of them a young Trio man becomes the son-in-law of a creature, in one case a jaguar, in the other an eagle. In both myths the wife's parents provide the young man with the skills to hunt. In the case of the jaguar the relevant part of the myth goes thus:

> After the young man had been with his jaguar wife for a while, he received his jaguar clothes from his father-in-law. Jaguar had different sizes of clothes. Clothes to catch tapir, clothes to catch peccary, clothes to catch deer, clothes to get agouti. All these clothes were more or less different and they all had claws. The young man put on these clothes and went hunting. (ibid.: 67)

The Jaguar, although the import of this will have to wait, was unusual in so far as he ate his meat cooked and cultivated fields. After a while the young man misses his kin and wants to return home, but his father-in-law wants him to stay and perform brideservice. However, the young man, killing his wife and leaving behind him his jaguar clothes, escapes and reverts to being human.

In the other myth a young man is marooned up a tree while trying to capture an eagle chick. When the chick's mother returns she offers her daughter to the Trio man as his wife, and she also gives him the means by which to hunt. Once again this comes in the form of clothing, in this case eagle clothes. First, he is given clothes with which he is able to catch birds, and later he is given better clothes with which to hunt monkeys. After a time the young man gets fed up with the demands of his parents-in-law, and with the diet—he has to eat 'almost raw meat'. However, despite soliciting the help of various birds, he has some difficulty in getting away. He finally persuades a parakeet to rescue him, and he returns home fully human.

In both these myths the word *po*, the standard Trio term for clothes, is used for the skill that the wife's parents provide in order that their son-in-law may hunt for them. In both cases it is also quite clear that the young men are able to put their clothes on and off. In other words they can shed their respective jaguarness and eagleness and revert to their human nature at will.

I now want to look at another myth (Koelewijn 1987: 118–20) in which the transformation goes far deeper. This concerns two brothers who are expert weavers. These two men wove baskets with jaguar designs that were so realistic

that the baskets became, in a sense, jaguars.[1] The brothers were then able to skin these jaguars, whereupon the baskets became baskets again and the brothers had sets of jaguar clothes. When they put these on they liked to go hunting and were good at it, whereas previously they had not been. In fact, the elder had to warn his younger brother about taking too much game. The younger brother ignored this caution and one day he not only killed an excessive number of peccary, but also licked their raw blood. As a result he could no longer take off his clothes. They stuck to him and he turned into a jaguar, not only in appearance but also in reality. He tried to seize his elder brother, who shot him. Then, in remorse, the latter put on his jaguar clothes, drank blood and became a jaguar in turn.

In this case the transformation from the human to the animal world becomes irreversible. The reason for this is given explicitly in the myth: 'He had completely changed into a jaguar, he was not a Trio any more, because he had licked blood' (ibid.: 120). This contrasts with the first two myths discussed above. In the first, the jaguar and, presumably, the hero ate their food cooked, and the latter had relatively little difficulty in returning home safely. In the second, where the hero complains about the eagles eating their meat 'almost raw', he has much greater difficulty in escaping. These three myths indicate that care should be taken not to practise animal dietary behaviour in case, as in the last myth, there is a permanent transformation and one can no longer take off one's animal clothes. In other words, it is safe to put on animal clothes so long as one does not behave too much like that animal. This, in turn, suggests that there is in humans an essential animality that must be guarded against. Although it is not my intention to discuss human clothes and adornments in this essay, I should propose that these are the visible signs of humanity that hide an unseen animality. This essential aspect of each person may literally surface unless guarded against. I shall, however, return to the notion of a basic animality that is often conceived as lurking in human nature.

I am now going to turn to another myth (Koelewijn 1987: 37–44), a rather complicated one of which many features remain obscure to me. Here there is an old Trio man who had no children. His wife had adopted the young of all sorts of birds and animals, but this had not proved successful. So the old man set a trap with the carcass of a tapir he had shot. It attracted a flock of king vultures and while they were feeding on it the Trio seized one of their chicks and ran home. It then appears that the vulture parents are spirits (presumably wearing king vulture clothes), as the Trio meets them in a shaman's hide. It is agreed that the Trio should keep the child, and the vulture father gives the Trio two items to give to the child. One is his king vulture clothes and the other is a mysterious object variously described as being like a watch and a bit like a man, or perhaps a stone

1. I should note here that weaving in north-east lowland South America is not simply a practical task or skill. Among the Warao of the Orinoco Delta the master weaver is regarded as having powers similar to that of the shaman (Wilbert 1975), and among the Ye'cuana the art of weaving is part of cosmic ordering (Guss 1989).

with a small container in it. It is, the vulture father says, 'the power of my son, his heart'. In some way, possession of this object will help him to be a Trio, and it is clearly contrasted with the clothes, which are connected with his forest nature. It is not at all clear what it is that is being referred to here. Obviously, it is not the physical heart as such, although it is seen as analogous to it. It is hard (metal or stone) and its being like a watch may well refer to the ticking, which presumably is seen as being similar to a heartbeat. At the same time, it has some human features. Although I can only guess, my view is that it is an attempt on the part of the story-teller to represent 'eternal life'. In other words, it is a heart made out of a hard material, stone or metal, the Trio symbols of eternity and immortality. This interpretation is reinforced by a second myth (ibid: 45–6), or perhaps an episode from the same myth since it involves the same characters. This is the Trio version of the widely distributed myth of how people became mortal because they answered when the tree called, rather than when the rock called.

To return to the main myth. To begin with the vulture child retains its bird-like habits and sleeps sitting on a perch. Slowly, however, he takes to sleeping in a hammock and wearing a loincloth, though from a young age he insists on eating his meat rotten. When he is nearly full grown he decides to go and visit his vulture father and puts on his vulture clothes to do so. While he is away his Trio father dies and on his return he remains only briefly before leaving for good. During this time he tries to teach his Trio mother a spirit song that will allow her to retain her soul and thus have immortality. In this myth it is the king vulture spirit, as I think he should be called, possessor of the secret of eternal life, who transforms himself into both bird and man. The point here is that, except for shamans, spirits can only reveal themselves to people by donning human or animal appearance, that is, clothing in Trio terms. This clothing gives the spirit an outward appearance but continues to hide the true nature, which is invisible, hard and eternal. This idea seems quite widespread. For example, in the mythology of the Matsigenka also '"vulture-people" take off their wings and appear as humans or people, and later put on their wings like garments to fly off like birds' (Baer 1992: 92).

I now want to pick up on this theme of hardness. Often symbolized by rock and hard woods, it is widely associated in lowland South America with notions of permanence, eternity and immortality. It is also associated with the spirit world and, by an interesting paradox, with those features of personhood that we would probably regard as the most intangible and ethereal—souls, names etc. Further, in the myth just summarized the 'heart' of the vulture child is described as being of either metal or stone, what might be considered the hard core or vital force of the person, and in this case 'immortal'.

This contrast between hard, endurable, internal and invisible essence and a soft, ephemeral and external appearance is certainly widespread in Amazonia. For example, the Yanomamo version of the myth of the loss of eternal life has just this theme (see Wilbert and Simoneau 1990: 375–6). This particular version was collected among the Sanema subgroup and tells of its origin. The original culture

hero intended to create the Sanema out of *poli* trees. These trees are rare and widely dispersed, have very hard wood and a fine peeling bark. The culture hero told his younger brother to collect this wood but the latter was lazy and brought in *kodalinase* trees, which are common and have very soft wood. It is from the latter that the Sanema were carved, whereas the culture hero had intended anacondas to be made out of this wood so that they would have short lives. He had intended the Sanema to be like the *poli* tree, to live a long time and rejuvenate themselves by shedding their skin as anacondas do. Once again we have the idea of a hard, enduring core with an external covering, which in this case is renewable.

The idea of renewal or rejuvenation associated with skin shedding is also a common theme throughout Amazonia, and not surprisingly it is often associated with snakes, particularly anacondas. The Tukanoans provide a prime example of this imagery, highly elaborated in myth but also enacted through ritual. Menstruation, understood as skin-shedding, is seen as a form of renewal because the menstrual cycle is regarded as the source of women's life-force, which in turn accounts for the fact that they live longer than men and recover from illness more readily. For women, this cycle of menstruation and renewal is natural and involuntary and is matched in the male world by the cultural and voluntary means of a ritual cycle. In these rites various actions can be seen as metaphorical menstruation or skin changing (Christine Hugh-Jones 1979: ch. 5). The He House ritual of the Barasana not only results in a change of skin but also gradually transforms the animality of the newborn child into the spirituality of adult men. A Barasana baby is on the side of animals and nature whereas adult men are on the side of spirits and the He world. In the He ritual there is a return to the non-differentiation of nature and culture that was a characteristic of the ancestral past. This is done partly by introducing nature into the house and partly by re-enacting the basic animality of man through the donning of ritual clothing made from parts of animals and birds (Stephen Hugh-Jones 1979: 141–2).

For a final example one might look at the Piaroa, who distinguish a 'life of thought' from a 'life of the senses'. Whereas humans possess both these, gods have only the former and animals only the latter. Young children, however, like animals, have only a life of senses, and formal education consists of the mastery of the senses by the knowledge that comes with the life of thought. The life of thought is understood to be contained within the body as 'beads of life' and is represented externally by face paintings and strings of beads, of which the mythical prototypes were made of granite. Joanna Overing (1988) has described these beads as 'the individual's inner clothes'. The beads of life are filled by powers from the gods and, in so far as they are kept in crystal boxes, these powers appear equally to be associated with hardness. In this case we seem to have a much closer relationship between the inside and outside. Overing makes the point that there is a correlation between the number of beads one wears and the amount of knowledge to which claim is laid or granted. One might note in addition that the Piaroa also use the notion of clothing to describe sickness; thus paralysis is seen to result from a loincloth of wild peccary being wrapped round the victim (Overing 1990).

Although it is not my intention here to draw any conclusions from this rather disparate set of randomly chosen cases, of which many more examples might be adduced, there are some general points that are worth making. First, there is the simple point that in Amazonia, much as elsewhere, clothes and coverings provide a means for expressing the varieties and intricacies of human nature, although the way in which this is done is somewhat different. There does seem to be here the belief that human nature has an 'animal' aspect, and that this needs to be socialized, domesticated or civilized either ritually or educationally. If, as in the Trio case, there is a failure to follow the precepts for being human, there is the danger of reverting to animality.

Second, and the point has been made often enough before, the outer covering of the individual mediates between the inner self and society. Terence S. Turner (1969) has claimed that among the Kayapó the skin is the boundary between two aspects of the human personality, one being the presocial drives emanating from the individual's biological constitution and the other the moral conscience and intellectual consciousness based on cultural principles. There is here, I think, a parallel with what I have just said, but there is a complicating factor within the Amazonian context, that is, the highly transformational world in which its native people live. It is never entirely safe to believe the evidence of your own eyes. It is better to wait and see what transpires. Behaviour is a better guide than appearances.

References

Baer, Gerhard 1992. 'The One Intoxicated by Tobacco: Matsigenka Shamanism', in E. Jean Matteson Langdon and Gerhard Baer (eds.), *Portals of Power: Shamanism in South America*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, pp. 79–100.

Boglár, Luiz 1984–5. 'The Indians and the Birds: Amazonian Feather-Art, *Acta Ethnographica* [Budapest], Vol. XXXIII, no. 1, pp. 81–91.

Frikel, Protasio 1971. 'A mitologia solar e a filosofia de vida dos Indios Kaxúyana', *Estudos sôbre línguas e culturas indígenas* (Special issue), Brasilia: Summer Institute of Linguistics, pp. 103–42.

Guss, David M. 1989. *To Weave and Sing: Art, Symbol, and Narrative in the South American Rain Forest*, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Hugh-Jones, Christine 1979. *From the Milk River: Spatial and Temporal Processes in Northwest Amazonia* (Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 26), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Hugh-Jones, Stephen 1979. *The Palm and the Pleiades: Initiation and Cosmology in Northwest Amazonia* (Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 24), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

KOELEWIJN, CEES (with Peter Rivière) 1987. *Oral literature of the Trio Indians of Surinam* (Koninklijk Instituut voor Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde, Caribbean Series 6), Dordrecht: Foris Publications.

OVERING, JOANNA 1988. 'Personal Autonomy and the Domestication of the Self in Piaroa Society', in Gustav Jahoda and I. M. Lewis (eds.), *Acquiring Culture: Cross Cultural Studies in Child Development*, London: Croom Helm, pp. 169–92.

. . . 1990. 'The Shaman as a Maker of Worlds: Nelson Goodman in the Amazon', *Man*, n.s., Vol. XXV, no. 4, pp. 602–19.

RIVIÈRE, PETER 1989. Review of *Wora, la déesse cachée* by Jean Monod (Paris, 1987), *American Ethnologist*, Vol. XVI, no. 2, pp. 397–8.

SEEGER, ANTHONY 1981. *Nature and Society in Central Brazil: The Suya Indians of Mato Grosso* (Harvard Studies in Cultural Anthropology 4), Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

TURNER, TERENCE S. 1969. 'Tchikrin: A Central Brazilian Tribe and its Symbolic Language of Bodily Adornment', *Natural History*, no. 78, pp. 50–59, 70.

VIDAL, LUX (ed.) 1992. *Grafismo Indígena: Estudos de Antropologia Estética*, São Paulo: Livros Studio Nobel.

WILBERT, JOHANNES 1975. *Warao Basketry: Form and Function* (Occasional Papers of the Museum of Cultural History No. 3), Los Angeles: Museum of Cultural History, University of California.

WILBERT, JOHANNES, and KARIN SIMONEAU 1990. *Folk Literature of the Yanomami Indians* (UCLA Latin American Studies / Folk Literature of South American Indians), Los Angeles: UCLA Latin American Center Publications.