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## To be Made and to be Drawn: The Twofold Existence of Objects\*\*

**Resumen:** En el proceso globalizado de comunicación con textos escritos por un lado y con imágenes por otro, participan en la actualidad artistas indígenas con sus dibujos. Entre los pueblos indígenas de la cuenca amazónica, la creciente producción de dibujos está amplificando los repertorios de mitos, poesía, pintura corporal, danza, música y cultura material. Como parte de un dibujo se introducen seres humanos, dioses, animales, paisajes y objetos materiales en un nuevo acto de comunicación intercultural: la reflexión sobre imágenes que se abre a nuevos caminos de interpretación. Este artículo enfoca especialmente en artistas indígenas que ponen objetos de uso cotidiano y ritual en el espacio limitado de una hoja de papel y los colocan en los contextos simbólicos de varias escenas de vida vivaces. Las imágenes no reflejan los significados funcionales de los objetos, sino sentidos simbólicos. Tales representaciones de objetos ayudan a cuestionar y verificar si un orden de vida específico y establecido en otro tiempo sigue siendo adecuado bajo condiciones constantemente cambiantes. Dibujar en papel puede entenderse como un intento, de parte del artista, de abrir un diálogo nuevo sobre la producción simbólica indígena en su totalidad, de la que la cultura material es una parte importante. Se comparan, en este artículo, dibujos de artistas de tukano, desâna, mehinako y guaraní, y se analizan las formas de la presentación de los objetos.

**Summary:** In the globalized communication process with written texts on the one hand and images on the other, indigenous artists nowadays participate with their drawings. Among indigenous peoples of the Amazon basin the increasing production of drawings widens the cultural repertoire of myth, poetry, body painting, dance, music, and material culture. As part of a drawing, humans, gods, animals, landscapes, and material objects are then introduced into a new act of intercultural communication: into a reflection on images which opens up new ways

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of interpretation. The focus of this paper is on indigenous artists who arrange items of daily and ritual use on the given space of a paper sheet and place them in the symbolic contexts of various vivid life scenes. The images do not testify to the objects' functional but rather to their symbolic meanings. Such representations of objects help to demand and verify the rightness of a once given specific life order under constantly changing life conditions. Drawing things on paper can be seen as the artists' attempt to open up a new dialogue on the indigenous symbolic production as a whole, of which material culture is an important part. In the article drawings from Tukano, Desâna, Tukuna, Mehinako and Guarani artists are compared and the ways in which objects are presented are analyzed.

Interpreting images is a common practice to western and global communication. Photographs, drawings and paintings are "read" like texts and the iconography and composition of images frequently communicate relevant information. In the process of global communication, consisting on written texts on the one hand and on images on the other, Brazilian indigenous artists today participate with powerful drawings. Drawing on paper is a new technique to many indigenous communities, often stimulated by anthropologists<sup>1</sup> but also exercised in schools on and around indigenous reservations. The artists' work over the years has flown into numerous books on culture, history, myth and art, time and again under indigenous authorship.<sup>2</sup> Such is the case of the art calendar "Brasil 500 Anos" (Gruber 2000), a slide show on video (Lana 1988),<sup>3</sup> brochures with information about methods to manage the environment<sup>4</sup> and the like. Indigenous and non-indigenous audiences are both important parts of these new art processes.

Although European art styles and techniques are common to this new form of artistic expression, the original artwork of indigenous artists are not yet part of a global art market, neither do they play any role in the discourse on art. Indigenous art is ei-

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1 Some examples are: Koch-Grünberg (1905); Schaden (1963); Coelho (1991/92); Fénelon Costa (1988).

2 Some examples are: *Torü Duü'ügü. nosso povo* (1985); Ferreira (1998); Gruber (ed.) (1997) (*O livro das árvores*); Kumu/Kenhiri (1980); Maher (ed.) (1997) (*Aprendendo Português nas escolas da floresta*); Sena/Coube (eds.) (1997) (*Caderno de Alfabetização*); Coelho (1976); Douteil (ed.) (2000); Iglesias/Ochoa (eds.) (1996) (*História Indígena*); Gavazzi/Resende (eds.) (1996) (*Atlas geográfico indígena do Acre*); Sena (ed.) (no date) (*Noke shoviti*); Gruber (ed.) (1992) (*Ngi'a Tanäüthicünaagü: Um manual da escrita*).

3 This slide show is part of the collection of the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro. Parts of the slides were published in 1988 in the name of the author by the Museum für Völkerkunde in Frankfurt (Main), Germany.

4 Examples are: Gavazzi (ed.) (1996) (*Legumes, frutas, bichos e os índios: a ecologia da floresta*); Gavazzi (ed.) (1998) (*Chegou o tempo de plantar as frutas*).

ther tightly kept in the collections of museums of ethnology or hidden in private collections, usually owned by anthropologists. From my own experience in writing papers and giving talks on indigenous drawings, I know that the so-called general public as well as anthropologists without special interest in non-European art usually respond either cautiously or critically to this new art form, which they consider less authentic than so-called traditional art. Specialists in art who I have talked to were open to look at and talk about indigenous drawings but emphasized that they were not to be considered “art”.<sup>5</sup>

Among indigenous peoples whose process of knowledge production and transmission is mainly oral, the increasing elaboration of drawings on paper helps enlarge the cultural repertoire of history, myth, poetry, body painting, dance, music and material culture.<sup>6</sup> In many drawings artists depict objects of their material culture often as part of vivid “sceneries” along with human or mythological beings, or images focusing on the material objects themselves. My thesis is that indigenous graphic representations of objects can be viewed as texts that accompany material culture. These texts, however, ask for translation. Objects may be interpreted as elements of the formal structures of drawings. New meanings of objects might emerge from such interpretations, widening the possibilities for unprecedented and innovative interpretations of material culture. In this paper I compare and analyze how objects are presented in drawings on paper, looking at the work of Tukano, Desâna, Mehinako and Guarani indigenous artists. My starting point is that objects considered of daily use are highly important for indigenous peoples’ cultural identity, memory and communication (Raabe/Suhrbier 2001: 51-66).

To indigenous peoples of the Amazon, objects or what I call things are present in a variety of contexts. Material objects are manufactured, used, traded, donated or received, and in the end discarded or destroyed in rituals. Throughout one’s lifelong trajectory, each individual relates to objects in both physical and emotional ways. Often during rituals, possessions of daily use, like bows and arrows, baskets or cooking pots are not only used or handled but are part of symbolic ritual gestures. The symbolism of most objects can be understood through the analyses of myths. The common thesis of French structuralism and post-structuralism, which posits that world, subject and society are constituted through language, may help anthropologists produce a better understanding of objects if we realize that objects are constituted by language as well. In indigenous myths objects are stripped of their material structure and, as

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5 This holds true for many parts of the world, as Eva Raabe (Raabe 1999: 21) has stated for the Pacific art scene. Similarly, in Oceania and Amazonia there are prejudices against new forms of artistic expression, which are often not judged as good art but rejected as degenerations or copies of European styles (Raabe 1999: 21).

6 See also Ribeiro (1989), Vidal (ed.) (1992), Suhrbier (2003a).

words, they can be interpreted by the special rules of word's art or poetry. Through discourse the symbolic meaning of things is thus constituted. The material structure of man-made objects and the physical presence of things in everyday life are then able to testify to the truth of myths. My point, here, is that handling an object can be seen not only as a practical action but also as a symbolic gesture. As symbols, objects give meaning to performances and performances give meaning to objects (Suhrbier 1998: 169-198). I would even state that handling, as much as manufacturing objects can very well be interpreted as aesthetic acts.

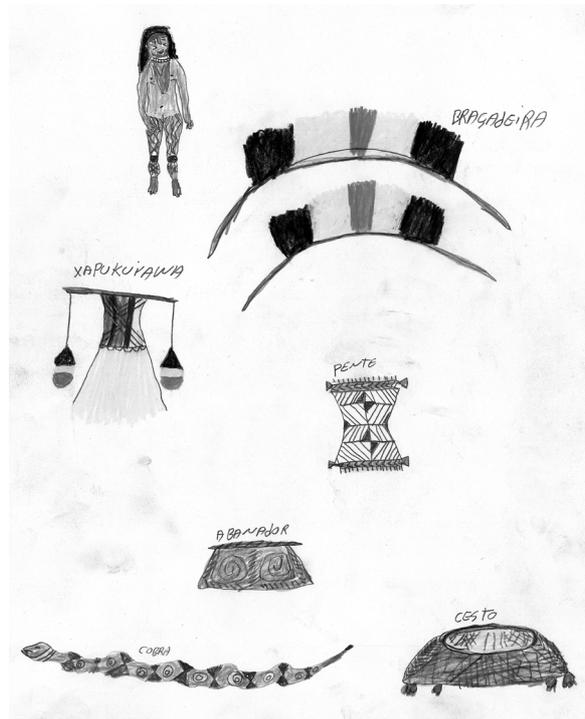
The symbolic meanings of indigenous material culture is generally misunderstood by non-indigenous people, who either reduce objects to their functional roles or strip them of their cultural contexts, subsuming them under global terms as "art craft" (*artesanato* in Portuguese) or simply "art". Amazonian peoples share the common experience that their objects of daily use, which they now produce for trading purposes as well, are leaving their villages to be sold far away under the label of "artesanato". Indigenous peoples have neither knowledge about nor control over what happens to these objects in terms of the contexts in which they become bound thematically. Indigenous artists who create objects graphically on paper usually place them in symbolic contexts of various vivid scenes depicting daily and ritual life. In a way, the artists "repatriate" their material culture by placing it back in its cultural and often ritualized context. As part of a drawing, the object is introduced into this new form of intercultural communication, where reflections about images open up new ways for the interpretation of material culture. Drawing objects on paper can be seen as an attempt to start a new dialogue about contemporary indigenous symbolic production, which material culture is an important part of. Reduced from a three-dimensional existence to two dimensions on paper, indigenous objects are kept vividly alive in the minds of those not used to experiencing such material objects in their daily lives.

### **Objects and the discourse about religion**

Through the medium of art objects are introduced into discourses which indigenous peoples hold with representatives of the broader national society, as well as with international agencies dedicated to indigenous or environmental issues most notably related to the Amazonian rainforest. The discourse about cultural autonomy concerning minorities in a nation-state, is one such issue. Many drawings on religion and ritual, in my opinion, seem to allude to this discourse. They stress the fact that religion and ritual are necessary foundations of individual life, and for the survival of indigenous communities, and their cultural and political independence as nations. As such, visions are presented by the graphic artists as the main sources of artistic inspiration. Because in many cases visions are the sources for the making of objects, artists now express in drawings part of their visions and their knowledge about the mythical sphere.

### Transformation processes

The first drawing I will discuss<sup>7</sup> (Fig. 1) was made by the 30-year-old Mehinako artist Carlinho Eyukate, the oldest son and adviser of the village chief.<sup>8</sup> The artist's verbal explanation of his drawing is a short story about the origin of the basket in the Waurá village, which is also located in the Xingu Indigenous Park:



**Fig. 1:** Carlinho Eyukate Mehinako  
(without title, Museum der Weltkulturen, Frankfurt/Main 2000).

- 7 In my interpretation I combine emic and etic perspectives: Carlinho Eyukate's verbal explanation of the drawing is compared with other versions of the similar text and an interpretation of the drawing's formal order is given. To be able to give a 'dense description' of the image's content and the aim of the artist, I compare the results of the two methods with my knowledge of the symbolic meanings of things stemming from earlier comparisons of various Amazonian indigenous groups (Suhrbier 1998; Suhrbier/Raabe 2001).
- 8 Carlinho Eyukate belongs to a group of Mehinako artists inhabiting a village in the Parque Indígena do Xingu, central Brazil. In 2000 the German anthropologist Ulrike Prinz did fieldwork among the Mehinako and collected drawings for the Museum der Weltkulturen in Frankfurt/Main. Young Mehinako artists did not, in many cases, depict real figures but mythical heroes and the content of the drawings referred to myths.

*Diz que um homem namorava com sua irmã. O pai dele bateu nele. Ele foi embora. Ele tentou fazer um cesto, entrou lá e não deu certo. Deu pra sua mulher. Entrou cobra, aí deu certo. Ele transformou.*

(A man was having sex with his sister. The father gave him a beating. He left. He tried to make a basket, went inside but it didn't work out. He gave it to his wife. A snake went inside, then it worked out. He was transformed).<sup>9</sup>

In this short story Carlinho summarizes the central aspects of a longer myth on boys' puberty initiation that circulates among indigenous peoples of the southern part of the Xingu Indigenous Park in central Brazil.<sup>10</sup> After having been discovered by the father, a young man's incestuous relationship with his sister leads to a conflict between father and son. The son leaves his home village and makes his way to the village of the jaguars where he gets married to a jaguar girl. *In his text*, Carlinho Eyukate mentions two objects that induce a transformation: the basket which the young man fabricated and then gave to his wife, and the snake – which is not mentioned explicitly as an object but needs to be identified as such. *In his drawing*, representing three stages of young men's transformation processes from childhood to adult age, the artist depicts mainly objects which he names and explains by their function: basket, fire fan, comb, mask and feather armbands. Beside these objects, there is the snake at the bottom and a female figure at the top of the drawing. We know that amidst the southern Xingu indigenous peoples, most of these objects are connected to the main stages of boys' initiation rites. Three of these objects are usually manufactured by boys during times of seclusion: the basket, the comb and a wooden snake (Raabe/Suhrbier 2001: 60-66).

By organizing the objects within the given space that a piece of paper creates, Carlinho Eyukate crafts an arrangement, a formal order that I here interpret. Starting at the bottom of the drawing I will follow the objects' path to the top and inquire about their meanings and about the meaning of the created sequences. Depicting *basket* and *snake* side by side on the same level, the artist organizes them as a kind of starting point or introduction to the drawing's story. He develops the "setting" for the image's story and in a way puts up for discussion two different transformation processes that are part of initiation rites and that lead to the young man's expulsion from society.<sup>11</sup> A woven

9 In august 2000 Carlinho Eyukate Mehinako explained his drawing in detail in an interview with Ulrike Prinz.

10 The myth is called *Arakuni* among the Mehinako and was collected in two versions by Fénelon Costa (1988: 151-152). In both versions of the myth different objects are mentioned various times and they are arranged - as they are in the drawing - in a certain sequence. Münzel (1973: 203-211) collected a version from the neighboring Kamayurá, titled *Warakuni*.

11 The relation between *Arakuni*, the protagonist of the myth, and a snake is also established in the story collected by Maria H. Fénelon Costa: *Arakuni*, called "the mythic archetype of excessive sexuality" (1988: 121), is transformed into a snake demon and then expelled from human society.

*basket*<sup>12</sup> and a *snake*<sup>13</sup> carved from wood, represent two central objects connected with male initiation rites and especially with processes of transformation undergone during the time of expulsion. In the transition zone between the two objects at the bottom and the comb situated on the third level of the drawing, the artist places a *fire fan*,<sup>14</sup> which is usually made by men for women's use and is the result of a process of transformation as well. As we showed earlier (Raabe/Suhrbier 2001: 96-100),<sup>15</sup> the fire fan originates in the process of "taming" a wild forest demon,<sup>16</sup> who appears in the village in a mask and attends a ritual dance. Made of the palm tree *buriti*, the demon's ears end up causing a big fire in the forest<sup>17</sup> and then transform themselves into a fire fan made of *buriti*, too. The fire fan then becomes associated with cooking fires in the domestic arena. Representing the mythical process of taming a wild forest spirit, the fire fan's position in the drawing is also indicative of the young men's state of nature/wildness and he needs to be tamed in order to be reintegrated into the social order. The basket, wooden snake and fire fan, situated at the lower portion of the paper, reflect processes of transformation located in time outside the social order, inasmuch as the time of male puberty rites is, as well as contacts with supernatural spirits or demons called *papañê* by the Mehinako.

The object on the next level, the *comb*, represents the end of the taming process. Combs are usually made by young men during the period of puberty seclusion as gifts for their future brides. The comb marks the end of seclusion, a period marked by en-

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12 The artist might have chosen the basket to symbolize a boy's time in seclusion. He verbally identifies the basket as a means for transformation when he stresses the possibility of transforming oneself while staying in a basket, but in the given case without the expected success. In myths baskets serve as secure spaces for weak persons to hide from monsters or for persons in transition periods as during youths' initiation, for parents after childbirth or apprentices of shamanism. The *basket* which boys fabricate during seclusion and which I explained in an earlier paper as a symbol for seclusion (Raabe/Suhrbier 2001: 55-60), serves, as the artist explains, only as an intermediate state. After seclusion it is common among the Upper Xingu groups that the young man passes his fabricated basket to a woman – who might in that case be his future wife (Carlinho Eyukate: "Deu pra sua mulher").

13 In the version of the myth collected by Fénelon Costa (1988: 150) the young man *Arakuni* is said to *make* a big snake after he was expelled from his home village. Among the neighboring Kamayurá wooden snakes are associated with the village chief or with members of his family (Münzel 1973: 18, note 10). The other object on the same level with the basket depicting a *wooden* snake might refer to the time when boys carved wooden snakes during seclusion. "Entrou cobra, aí deu certo. Ele transformou" (Carlinho Eyukate). The artist, son of the village chief, might articulate here that for a future village chief the snake is the proper object for transformation.

14 I do not know if the fire fan is also fabricated as part of seclusion craftsmanship.

15 Here, I analyzed two myths of the neighboring Kamayurá (Münzel 1973: 217-218, 220-222).

16 The demon is called *Anhang'ú* by the Kamayurá and *Yuêkuitxumá* by the Mehinako (Fénelon Costa 1988: 42).

17 See the representation of *Añanu* with his big ears published by Fénelon Costa (1988: 86, fig. 38).

counters with transcendent beings in dreams and in visions, as well as by social expulsion. The comb appears as the anticipation of a more stable stage of life found in marriage. Marriage usually helps tone down the young man's opposition or revolt against the authority of the father after the long period spent away in seclusion from the familiar social life.

By arranging objects on paper in a highly structured way, Carlinho Eyukate is able to summarize a long and complicated myth in a condensed representation of reality, as he also did in his short oral version of the myth presented above. From the more socially engaged perspective of an adult and a father of two sons, the artist is no longer personally involved in the transcendental processes and states reflected in his drawing. He already knows that at the end of the long, complicated and exhausting time of puberty rites there is a future characterized by the union of a man and a woman in marriage and in family life. It seems as if the arrangement of objects leads to the female figure at the top of the drawing, to which the comb is already pointing. The female figure at the vanishing point of the story opens up the view to the initiated young man's future, now characterized by his participation in rituals and therefore in a sphere shared with other male villagers and characterized by mask dances and the use of specific bodily feather ornaments.<sup>18</sup> The other sphere is characterized by men's social position in marriage, represented by the female figure in the drawing.

In the upper part of the drawing, the mask, feather armband and woman are grouped together to represent the spheres of adult male life, namely the transformation of a boy into a man who is now allowed to wear certain adornments and to actively participate in certain mask dances. The arrangements at the bottom and upper part of the paper focus on the same spiritual resources, that is, on processes of social transformation. The basket, fire fan and comb are objects that lead a man on his way to marriage and connect him with women.<sup>19</sup> The wooden snake, mask and feather armbands lead a man toward his active role in ritual life and associate him with other men and spiritual beings.<sup>20</sup>

As a relatively new medium of expression and creation of the world, drawings describe new well known objects in new ways. Well known things – and here we focus on objects – are introduced or “translated” into fine art. In this new context, supported

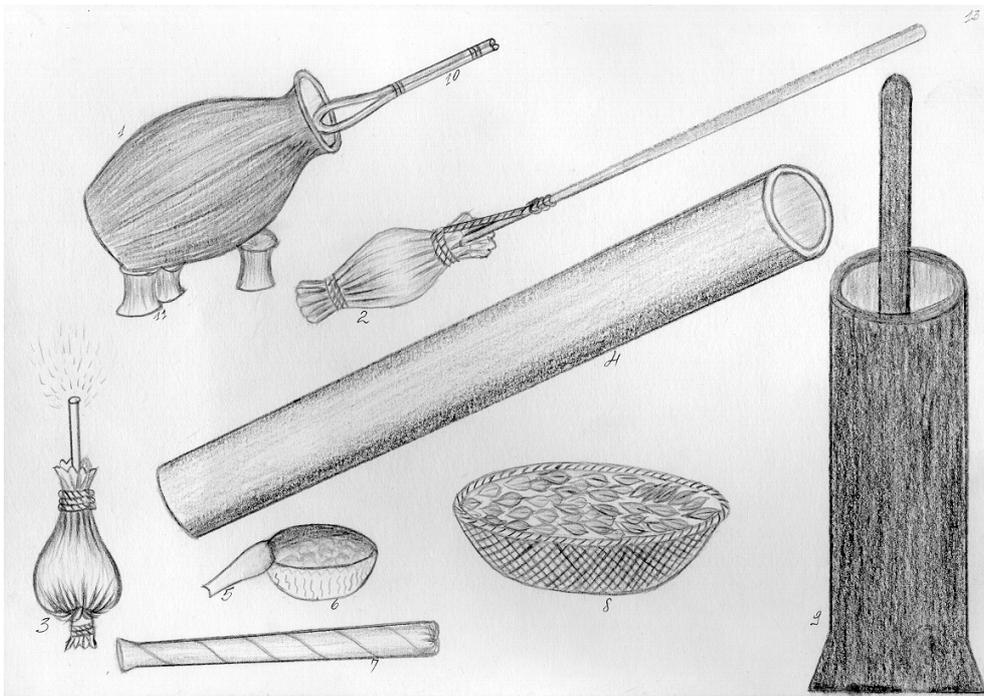
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18 Two objects arranged in the upper level, the *Xapukuyawa*-mask's pendants made of black, yellow, and red tukan feathers, and the two armbands for men made of these feathers as well, characterize a certain time in men's life. The mask represents the spirit of the *Buriti* palm tree (*Mauritia sp.*). It is usually worn with a skirt made of *Buriti* straw to attend the feast of the *Buriti* tree.

19 For relevant aspects of kinship and family life among the Upper Xingu groups see also Galvão (1953).

20 Many other drawings, especially from young initiated boys who are going to wear men's adornments for the first time, have a plain meaning: Since mythical times boys and young men are dressed up for rituals with feather armbands, and many other feather adornments.

by a highly structured order, it is possible to see things from another perspective and describe them anew. Drawing on paper thus opens up new possibilities for the interpretation of the meaning of things or material culture, as anthropologists call it. The symbolic arrangements depicted in the drawings refer at one time to the literal, at others to the figurative sense of objects. The effect we get seems to evoke the many existences of things at one single moment in time – recollecting the process of manufacture and use, as well as the presence of things in mythical events where they belong to culture heroes or supernatural spirits. The symbolic arrangements point out the fact that objects are part of the symbolic gestures of men and women in ritual. Objects introduce their own, as well as various foreign meanings into the drawings' contents. At the same time, the contexts created by the drawings may give new meanings to things.



**Fig. 2:** Alfredo Fontes, Tukano: “A cultura” / “Culture” Nr. 5  
(Museum der Weltkulturen, Frankfurt/Main 1999).

The Tukano artist Alfredo Fontes, too, summarizes transformation processes in his drawing (Fig. 2; Suhrbier 2003b).<sup>21</sup> He depicts the objects used to produce the hallucinogenic substance *ipadu*, the Amazonian Coca (*Erythroxylum coca* var. *ipadu*), whose transformation from plant to drug form enables the formation of a highly spiritual substance. Fontes “uses the paper in order to abstract from the insignificant and to concentrate on the essential” (Münzel 1988: 204) aspects of the complex process of *ipadu* production by resorting exclusively to objects in his drawings. Every new object inaugurates a new context, inviting the viewer to move from one symbolic context to another. Like the young man in Carlinho Eyukate’s drawing, here, too, the *ipadu* is transformed as it is processed in containers and materials used by the Tukano people. The coming into being of the substance, which represents the immortal body of a mythical ancestor, is mediated by the many symbolic meanings of the objects and materials used for its refinement.

### Ritual

Various artists with different indigenous affiliations represent rituals in their work. To an outside viewer, a drawing’s special arrangement of objects says more about the importance and symbolic qualities of things than the time-consuming practice of observing daily life and rituals. A graphic representation of a ritual, depicting certain objects in certain places, is not accidental. Rather, the arrangement of the objects is intentional. It is the task of the anthropology of art to interpret such orders created by the artists. Objects in peoples’ hands in the context of rituals are very often musical instruments, as shown in the drawings of Feliciano Lana,<sup>22</sup> Silvio Karai,<sup>23</sup> and Makaulaka Mehinako (Fig. 3-5).<sup>24</sup> Invisible phenomena like sounds and melodies coming from musical instruments are often identified with the voices of spirits or

21 When Alfredo Fontes and I met in São Paulo in 1999, he stated his wish to buy a photographic camera. He hoped one day he would be able to show me photographs of some *bichos*, fantastic animals or humanlike forest inhabitants, who are the masters of sacred places on Tukano land. When I asked him what the monsters looked like, he started drawing them – a series of different demons living in the forest, rivers or lakes. When he finished the series on *bichos* he started another one depicting Tukano “culture” as he called it. Various objects play an important part in these drawings.

22 Feliciano Lana, a well known Desâna artist, presented his version of the Desâna origin myth in 99 drawings accompanied by texts, which were later organized as a slide show and depicted in a video. The slide show and video are said to be part of the collection of the Museu de Arte Moderna in Rio de Janeiro.

23 Silvio Karai, a young Guarani artist, lives in an indigenous village on the coast of the state of São Paulo, southern Brazil. He was one of the young artists who collaborated with Mariana Ferreira and me in the late 1990s (Suhrbier/Ferreira 2000; Ferreira/Suhrbier 2002). According to our interpretation, drawings of the Guarani artists were strongly concerned with transcendence to the Land without Evil, the Guarani mythic paradise characterized by abundance and the absence of work.

24 For the Mehinako artist Makaulaka see footnote 8 in this text.

demons. Portraits of fully adorned people playing musical instruments are indicative of the religious sphere, revealing that people have the knowledge to communicate with the supernatural world through objects.



Fig. 3: Feliciano Lana: *Desâna* (without title 1971, from Lana 1988).

Graphic representations are obviously not a pure facsimile of the world but they have the potential for creating a new relationship man and world. Each and every drawing formulates an individual perspective or presents an individual interpretation. The artistic effort has the tendency to reflect the actual situation indigenous peoples live in today. Representing a symbolically mediated order, indigenous drawings follow an “idealistic” tradition of thinking. The artists do not present material culture as part of a utilitarian worldview but as part of a comprehensive order where the handling of resources, the conception of man, and the idea of a good life are of utmost importance. An object is not only material resource but an idea as well. By showing objects in people’s hands and presenting them as vivid parts of rituals and dances, the artists remind the audience of “the performative nature of the production of identity and meaning” (Bhabha 1997: 219).<sup>25</sup>

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25 See also Turner (1989).



**Fig. 4:** Sílvia Karai: “Dançar e cantar na aldeia Guarani” / “Singing and dancing in the Guarani village” (Museum der Weltkulturen Frankfurt/Main, 1999/2000).



**Fig. 5:** Makaulaka Mehinako: “Festa Uruá” / “Uruá feast”

(Museum der Weltkulturen, Frankfurt/Main 2000).

It is not easy for anthropologists conducting ethnographic fieldwork to observe the extent to which objects are made useful and to decide about their importance in certain situations. To an outsider, objects seem to be randomly scattered in and around the houses, the central plaza, and the village's surroundings. When walking through a village one might bump into things without fully becoming aware of them. How to deal with the overwhelming presence of objects? How to identify the importance of the numerous objects? During rituals, for instance, many objects are put to a wider use: they are transported, given and taken, worn on the body or otherwise displayed, discarded, put aside, and so on. How about the cooking pot placed at the far east or west side of the village plaza, facing the men's seats at the opposite end (Fig. 6)? Were the objects placed there consciously or have they just been left there and forgotten about? Among the many objects used during a certain ritual or feast cycle, or a certain period of the planting season – which are central? When does the handling of an object become a symbolic act?



**Fig. 6:** Kanayu Mehinako (without title, Museum der Weltkulturen, Frankfurt/Main 2000).

From what I have said, here are some important questions to consider: While living in a world replete with western products and things – tractors, bicycles, radios, sun glasses, rifles, knives, fabric, metal pans and pots, and so on – most indigenous artists

of various ethnic affiliations focus, instead, on the landscape, the people, and their own material culture. Western or modern technologies and lifestyles, or what we call the “achievements of modern industrialism,” are not an integral aspect of recent indigenous artistic work albeit they are part of the villagers’ daily lives. Does indigenous art express the rejection of a “development” model following industrialized societies? The artists lay emphasis on their own objects and local technologies as expressions of a symbolic order that is necessarily geared toward the physical and cultural survival of indigenous peoples. Can the graphic idealization of indigenous ways of life be interpreted as a critique of the negative impact of western lifestyles and technologies? Do the artists reject the idea of becoming dependent upon industrialized goods, creating a situation they are not able to control? Isn’t Carlinho Eyukate explaining in drawing that indigenous knowledge is socially grounded and produced independent of formal schooling? Doesn’t the artist indicate that western lifestyles and schooling offer considerably fewer possibilities for leading an autonomous way of life than the existence made possible through the transformations shown in Eyukate’s drawing?

A final note: Alfred Gell, the British anthropologist deceased a few years ago, has formulated an appealing idea concerning the meaning of art in the modern West that might have very well been conceived by contemporary indigenous artists (Gell 1992: 41-42).<sup>26</sup> Although Gell’s characterization of art is tinged with sarcasm and is meant, certainly, as a critique of the contemporary (western) art scene, I would like to take up his idea in a ‘no-nonsense’ mood: as much as religion is a cornerstone of numerous social orders, so is art fundamental to modern western societies. For some time now indigenous peoples of the Amazon embrace what is called the religion of art, elaborating and refining its techniques and styles. Their graphic representations of myths, deeply permeated in religion, may be interpreted as an attempt to translate one religion into another. What is the result of this new disposition? Under the appearances of art, the contents of one’s own religion get in touch with another, broader public. The public, however, is split in two camps: one says “Yeah, that’s art!” – and thus, accordingly, it is religion, too; while the other declares “Oh no, that isn’t art!” – meaning it is not religion, either. At any rate, the art of the Other is controversially discussed, and there are those believers in art who appreciate and acknowledge indigenous religion when it is dressed up as art.

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26 Hans Voges recommended Alfred Gell’s article to me.

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