

# *Surviving on Paper: Recent Indigenous Writing in Brazil*

Lynn Mario T. Menezes de Souza

## **QUANDO VOCÊ FOR**

*Edson Ixã Kaxinawa*

Quando você for,  
me chama em voz baixa.  
Daí eu fico contigo.  
Mas a tua voz não chega de verdade.  
Como sentir  
cheiro de flor na boca  
da minha flor?



## **A ORIGEM DA POESIA**

*Isaac Planko Ashenika*

A poesia apareceu junto com a escrita. Ela foi sonhada por uma pessoa. Depois escrita numa carta. Desse sonho foram criados vários versos que foram escritos também em cartas e publicados em livros de poesias.

The revised Brazilian constitution of 1988 represents a sea-change in Brazilian indigenism, by officially recognizing Brazil as a multi-lingual and multi-cultural society. This modified the constitution of national identity and consequently modified the previous tenet of Brazilian official indigenism, which was to acculturate indigenous cultures into a monolingual Portuguese-speaking national culture by eliminating the cultural and linguistic characteristics, which were their marks of difference. What official policy has not modified, however, is the need for tutelage and protection which continues to subjugate the indigenous population to official federal policy, given that this protection and tutelage are seen to be the jurisdiction of the central federal government. A direct product of the new constitution of 1988 was the creation of the Committee for Indigenous Education and the drawing up of the Indigenous Education Policy of 1993 now under the auspices of the national Ministry of Education, and no longer subordinated as indigenous policies previously were, to the Ministry of the Interior - the same ministry responsible for interests in conflict with indigenous interests, such as the "development" and opening up of the interior. The Indigenous Education Policy in turn called for the creation of bilingual indigenous schools with specific and differentiated curricula to attend to the characteristics and demands of each indigenous community, and to be established in cooperation with these communities, though always under the official tutelage of "a multi-disciplinary team consisting of anthropologists, linguists and educators" (Diretrizes p. 13).

This legislation led to the introduction of a new protagonist in Brazilian indigenism, the role of the 'indigenous teacher' ("professor indígena"), who was to be nominated by each community and trained by the mediating agencies in courses regionally organized to receive teachers from various indigenous communities.

Besides teaching, the function of the 'professor indígena' was also to write the materials to be used in indigenous schools, with an emphasis on the contents deriving from indigenous "ethno-knowledge" and oral culture, as part of the official policy to "recuperate" and "rescue" the fast vanishing indigenous languages and cultures. As a result, these teacher-training programs were transformed into events of collective written authorship. The texts produced were then edited by the mediating tutors in book form and circulated among the indigenous schools of that region. On account of the simultaneous existence of several of these indigenous education programs in various parts of the country, the books produced by one group of indigenous authors/teachers tended to be exchanged with those produced by similar groups in other parts of the country. In a fund raising effort, some of these books have also been sent for sale to bookshops in the urban markets where they find their way into the sections of Children's literature.

Curiously, then, the new Indigenous Education Policy has led to the creation of a widespread nation-wide indigenous authorship and readership of written texts and has created a new para-national identity of the Indian. The "whiteman's Indian" of previous Brazilian indigenism has been replaced by the "Indian's Indian" of recent official Brazilian indigenism.

Positive as it may seem, the new indigenism, in maintaining the necessity of tutelage and mediators (albeit now involving several NGO mediators in the process) continues to subjugate the indigenous communities to national Brazilian norms and values, creating as it were a new phenomenon: the whiteman's Indian's Indian.

In this study I focus on how this phenomenon operates in the new written literary poetic of the texts written in Portuguese and Kashinawa as part of these collective teacher/authorship programs mentioned above. These texts are characterized by their profuse use of illustrations, which heralds in a new semiotic and poetic landscape in Kashinawa culture,

and misunderstood by the well-meaning official and NGO mediators responsible for the publication and distribution of these texts to the indigenous readership and the national markets.

In their analysis of multimodal texts, that is texts which include visual and written components, Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) remind us that visual semiotics is culturally and historically specific, and that this specificity is often highly problematic in situations of cross-cultural contact.

As a result, the multimodal texts produced by Kashinawa authors, marked by the profuse use of drawings and multicolored illustrations, are often interpreted by their tutors and mediators as irrelevant doodles or mere figurative decoration of the verbal texts (see Monte 1996).

For Kress and van Leeuwen (1996:159-160):

From the point of view of social semiotics, truth is a construct of semiosis, and as such the truth of a particular social group arises from the values and beliefs of that group. As long as the message forms an apt expression of these beliefs, communication proceeds in an unremarkable, 'felicitous' fashion [...] people not only communicate and affirm as true the values and beliefs of *their* group. They also communicate and accord degrees of truth or untruth to the values and beliefs of other groups.

The Kashinawa texts are marked, as mentioned, by their profuse use of images in the form of line drawings and multicolored illustrations, where their use of modality markers (defined by Kress and van Leeuwen's as color saturation, absence of background, lack of pictorial detail, lack of depth, lack of illumination, excessive brightness) leads them to be read by their external mediators as "primitive" or infantile.

These multimodal Kashinawa texts are thus read as having low cultural significance and no literary value. Even when written in Portuguese, these poetic texts with high visual and color content are distanced from the Brazilian national literary canon.

(In contrast, one may compare the texts *transcribed* from the oral tradition and published by renowned anthropologists, narrating similar mythical/fictional events, but this time with no visual component authored by indigenous hands, or only accompanied by photographs taken by the anthropologist/transcriber. Whereas this latter type of publication is perceived as having greater truth-value (though still seen as anonymous "myth" with middling literary value) by non-indigenous interpreters, the indigenous multimodal text is seen as having lower truth-value and almost no literary value.

In her innovative analysis of the classroom diaries of Kashinawa teachers, Monte (1996), an NGO Indigenous Education (*CPI do Acre*) mediator, seems to be taken un-awares by the presence of seemingly misplaced illustrations and drawings permeating the texts. However, Monte interprets the major part of the drawings as principally ornamental and attempts an analysis of one of the drawings, which she sees as more complex and thus possessing a 'metalinguistic' function:

Such a drawing is not only the manifestation of an esthetic and ornamental exercise, with the function of filling the empty spaces of the pages of the exercise-book, as in the case of those we previously mentioned, but is above all, a type of non-alphabetic writing which says something about the school and writing itself. It tells us something about the author's conception of the act of studying and writing,

culturally founded on the new meaning of the Kashinawa word *kene*" (ibid 122-123, my translation).

At the same time as Monte sees no apparent significance in the generalized use of illustrations in the texts of her author/subjects, she draws attention to the fact that the Kashinawa have extended their word *kene*, referring to the geometric graphic illustrations used in weaving, basketry and ceremonial tattooing, to refer to writing in general. As such, for the Kashinawa, writing and decorative graphics fall into the same semantic category of *kene*.

*Kene*, however, does not traditionally refer to non-geometric figurative illustrations, uncommon in Kashinawa culture before the advent of writing; this may explain Monte's interpretation of figurative illustrations in verbal written texts as basically decorative with no greater semiotic significance.

Monte, here, may be read as representing a typical non-indigenous interpreter unable to access certain levels of Kashinawa cultural intertextuality, and thus attributing an interpretation deriving from Brazilian dominant written culture ("naturalistic" in Kress and van Leeuwen's terms) on multimodal Kashinawa texts. This interpretation can be seen to be clearly inscribed within a persisting discourse of Brazilian indigenism and its power relations which in spite of, (or because of) their benevolent stance, have paternalistically considered the Indian as child-like and in need of protection, and therefore inferior: a clear indication of the albeit reluctant persistence of the white-man's Indian in present Brazilian indigenism.

However, a different look at Kashinawa multimodal poetics permits a grouping of these texts into two clear-cut categories:

- abstract and geometric *kene* graphics and
- figurative illustrations.

The figurative illustrations are generally, though not exclusively, characterized by the predominance of circularity in the form of serpentine waves and spirals and curved lines, and have a narrative structure. Unfortunately these characteristics seem to be invisible to non-Kashinawa interpreters, who see them as unmotivated, uncodified and random.

From the point of view of the new Kashinawa written poetics, these texts are indeed intertextually codified and profoundly inscribed the traditional oral poetics and the ideological processes of construction of social identity of Kashinawa culture, where they are being transformed by the introduction of writing into the culture; this sets the scene for interpretive conflict to occur, as indeed it does.

Yet Monte is extremely close to overcoming this interpretive conflict when she points out the use of the word *kene* to refer to writing and when she gives exclusive attention to the only illustration she finds which reproduces the geometric graphics of *kene*.

In her study of graphic art in Kashinawa culture, the anthropologist Lagrou (1996) states that *kene* graphics are the product of a shamanic culture where a hallucinatory concoction, ayahuasca, is ritually ingested almost exclusively by men. Also in this culture, as we have noted, before the advent of writing, *kene* graphics were the exclusive domain of women, forming the basis of the feminine gender identity. *Kene* as symbolic of femininity, has also traditionally been the unceasing object of desire of Kashinawa men. The connection between *kene*, ayahuasca and the feminine is explained in the Kashinawa oral tradition where the anaconda is venerated as the goddess of culture, wisdom and civilization, whose intricate and elaborate geometrical skin patterns seduce men. It is these patterns that inspire

and are imitated by *kene* graphics. The anaconda in its periodic skin shedding, its wavy movements, and its connection to water, symbolizes circularity and cyclical transformation identified with the feminine.

Unable to ingest ayahuasca, the principal means of spiritual experience available to Kashinawa women are contemplatory (meditations on existing *kene* graphics during basketmaking, weaving and tattooing), or through dreams which also appear in geometric patterns. It is considered dangerous for women to dream or contemplate entities from higher realms in figurative or human form.

The anaconda is seen as ambivalent, and after terrifying men, seduces them into submission by transforming into a beautiful woman and permits them access to higher realms of consciousness and knowledge. The hallucinatory process of ayahuasca consists of two stages: an initial stage of physical discomfort (or terror) where the vision of psychedelic geometric patterns predominates (seen as the establishing of contact with the anaconda); the discomfort and terror of this stage have to be overcome to attain the second stage, which is characterized by a vision, where the entities of the higher realms take human or animal physical forms, and where action occurs in a seemingly sequential narrative fashion.

In these encounters with entities of nature in human form, men become transformed into entities of nature themselves, and therefore have access to the knowledge and wisdom of these entities.

The occurrence of these two stages should not however be read in a linear sequential fashion. In hallucinatory visions time is suspended and one enters into a plane of simultaneity where "the figurative phenomena of the second phase is superimposed on the geometric designs of the first phase" (Lagrou 1996: 211. My translation).

The principal means of masculine spiritual *experience* is therefore mediated by the ayahuasca vision. The principal means of spiritual *expression* accessible to males, and the basis of masculine identity, is the visionary song or chant during the ayahuasca ritual narrating desired or actual encounters with entities of the higher realms and the consequent transformations.

According to Lagrou (*ibid*), in Kashinawa shamanism, the *representation* of an object or entity in a vision becomes the unmediated *presentation* of that object or entity itself; therefore the songs or chants are seen to substantiate in visual form actual encounters with entities rather than the safer, feminine, mediated encounters represented through the use of *kene* graphics.

Gender identities for the Kashinawa are thus constructed on their discursive shamanic relations with the world, and their transformative capacities, based on an internal/external dualism (Lagrou *ibid*:206). In this view, women transform what is **external** into what is **internal** (the raw into the cooked, the raw fiber into the dyed fiber, seeds into tinctures etc.).

Kashinawa men on the other hand, penetrate deeper into **external** alterity, the world of the other, where, isolated from the security of their place of origin, they themselves become transformed into an other. They move freely between the **internal** and the **external** not only changing the external, but also themselves suffering the consequences of change.

Consequently, whereas women in their weaving, cooking and their formulation of *kene* graphics represent a specific one-way relationship with nature and the world of transformation (they are the subjects or agents of these transformations), men, in their ayahuasca visions and encounters see nature and its entities transformed into human form, and are themselves transformed into nature.

Besides expending the effort to survive the transformation they undergo, the knowledge and wisdom they acquire from their transformation into an **other** has then to be

brought home for the benefit of the community. The masculine identity therefore is constructed on the complex dialogic tripartite concept of being the *initiator and agent* of transformation (when contact is established with the other), the *object* of transformation (when he is transformed by the knowledge acquired from the other), and once again the *agent* of transformation (when the newly acquired knowledge is brought back to the community).

Read against the grain of these shamanic cultural intertexts, the production of multimodal texts by Kashinawa authors, almost exclusively male, may therefore be seen to be representing on one hand, the two stages of the masculine shamanic experience (*kene* and figurative narratives), and on the other hand, the dialogic concept of transformation and identity construction.

The advent of writing has thus played a major role in the transformation of traditional gender identities, now permitting masculine access to *kene* graphics, but also dialogically transforming *kene* itself from a feminine means of internal, mediated spiritual experience into a masculine means of direct unmediated contact with the external world; unmediated in the sense that it is through the new poetics of writing/ *kene* that they seek to liberate themselves from the mediation of the white man.

Besides being a feminine mode of experience, *kene*, as we have seen, is also the first stage of masculine visionary experience, heralding contact with the anaconda spirit and anticipating entry into the higher realms. The appearance of *kene* graphic illustrations in the poetics of the intermodal texts may be seen to also herald or frame a contact with the knowledge contained in the verbal sections of the intermodal text, functioning therefore as a mark pointing to a potential experience of acquisition of knowledge, and therefore of transformation, to be accessed via the reading of the verbal text. In this sense, the verbal text acquires the characteristic of the second stage of the visionary experience, assuming greater salience, and is to be read as the core of the experience of the acquisition of transformative knowledge.

The figurative illustrations, on the other hand, do not function as mere illustrations of verbal texts, but function as texts themselves containing transformative narratives. In many cases, in the new poetics, it is the written text (*kene*) which assumes the anticipatory quality characteristic of traditional *kene* graphics and functions as a pointer to the figurative visual text to be read as the core (as in a second visionary phase).

In this case, the use of the terms 'pointer', 'pointing', 'preceding' and 'anticipatory' should not be read in a linear, temporal fashion, but in the simultaneous ideogrammatic sense where the reading of two figurative elements in a composition is simultaneous and dialogic, occurring within what Derrida calls an 'economy of the supplement'(1976) (cf. Derrida's discussion of Chinese ideogrammatic poetry where he claims that to understand and translate Chinese poetry into an alphabetic western language, one must protect oneself from the copula and the temporal and spatial linearity of western grammars.)

The serpentine circularity predominant in the figurative visual texts reinforces this concept of non-linear writing and reading among the Kashinawa, where the laws of composition do not follow the western semiotic of given/new, ideal/real, margin/center (Kress and van Leeuwen 1996). As Kress and van Leeuwen rightly point out, "in the Western visual semiotic, then, the syntagmatic is the realm of the process of semiosis (ibid:198)".

What becomes apparent in the new poetics of Kashinawa multimodal texts is the conflicting simultaneity of the syntagmatic and paradigmatic axes of representation that generates meaning, both, *within* a visual text and *between* the visual and the verbal

components in the composition of a multimodal text.

Moreover, from the shamanic perspective of representation as presentation, as mentioned above, the alphabetic script within a previously oral Kashinawa culture, has to represent and therefore transubstantiate the spoken word on paper and its intricate connections with the shamanic semiotic. The profuse use of geometric and figurative illustrations in verbal written texts therefore indicates the resistance of Kashinawa writers to the temporal and spatial linearity and the limitations of the alphabetic script.

True also to the masculine discursive identity based on the capacity to transform, be transformed, and transform again what is external, the new Kashinawa poetics produced by male Kashinawa writers once again displays this discursive characteristic. By learning to read and write, the Kashinawa male authors initiated a process of contact with alterity and hence became agents of the transformation of the previous status quo; by learning an alphabetic script totally foreign to their shamanic semiotic and their oral poetics, they themselves had to undergo transformation of which they were patient objects; however, once they dominated the alphabetic script, they recuperated their agency, appropriated it into their own, now also transformed, semiotic and transformed writing into the multimodal medium as it presently exists in their culture, founding a new written Kashinawa poetics.

In conclusion then, the incapacity or reluctance to apprehend the complexity of this new Kashinawa poetics, besides representing a restricted view of literacy as independent and unaffected by the ideology of the culture into which it is imported, also represents a restricted view of literariness and coherence as a property of a text and not a property which interpreters impose on a text.

More significantly, however, this reluctance on the part of non-indigenous mediators is evidence of the persistence of traditional Brazilian indigenism and as such a persisting ideological attempt of control over indigenous culture and the circulation of texts in national Brazilian society. This underlying ideological desire for control contradicts, therefore, the expressed desire by these same mediators to applaud the end of traditional indigenism and tutelage.

This contradiction in turn may be seen to be inscribed in a deep-seated Brazilian national fear in the face of indigenous alterity. The new Kashinawa poetics, on the other hand, is inscribed in the equally deep-seated need for alterity, characteristic of several Amazon indigenous cultures.

It is thanks to the non-linearity of the new Kashinawa multimodal poetics, and the strangeness of its visual appearance, that the indigenous voices now on paper once again refuse to be silenced in yet another newer strategy of cultural resistance unperceived by the white-man, demonstrating yet again the indigenous capacity to survive through constant transformation and contact with alterity.

## Works Cited

1. *Diretrizes Para a Política Nacional de Educação Escolar Indígena, Cadernos Educação Básica*. Série Institucional, vol. 2, Brasília: Secretaria de Ensino Fundamental, Ministério da Educação e do Desporto, 1994.
2. Derrida, J. *Of Grammatology*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976.
3. Fairclough, N. *Discourse and Social Change*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992.
4. Finnegan, R. *Orality and Literacy: Some Problems of Definition and Research* (unpublished MS), 1981.
5. Kress, G. and van Leeuwen, T. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design*. London: Routledge, 1996.
6. Lagrou, E.M. "Xamanismo e Representação entre os Kaxinawá", in Langdon 1996.
7. Langdon, E.J.M. (ed.) *Xamanismo no Brasil: Novas Perspectivas*. Florianópolis: Editora da UFSC, 1996.

8. Monte, N. *Escolas da Floresta: entre o passado oral e o presente letrado*. Rio de Janeiro: Multiletra, 1996.
9. Monte, N. \_\_\_\_ *Quem são os Kaxinawá?*, in Shenipabu Miyui: história dos antigos, Comissão Pró Índio do Acre, Rio Branco.
10. Street, B.V. *Literacy in theory and practice*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

