

# Snake Woman and Clay Woman: Art, Consumption, and Agency in the Huni Kuin Community

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**Abstract:** This article investigates the psychosocial, cultural, and environmental transformations occurring in the Huni Kuin community of Acre due to the incursion of consumer offerings and the communicative devices of noopolitics directed at consumption. It emphasizes the perspective of the female body-landscape and its relational transitions. The aim is to reveal the friction between the intense processes of reclaiming traditions by this population and the (re)existences arising from conflicts and interactions with the dominant nawá world, referring to non-Indigenous peoples. This research maps emotions during fieldwork conducted in the Kaxinawá neighborhood of Jordão and the Chico Curumim village, alongside interviews with artist Rita Huni Kuin and interpretations of her paintings. These impressions uncover vulnerabilities to colonization by the dominant world as well as the reactive and creative strengths of the forest, women, and Huni Kuin art.

**Keywords:** Consumption; Body-landscape; Friction; Art; Huni Kuin.

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## Introduction in Five Acts

The Huni Kuin, meaning “true people” in Portuguese, also known as Kaxinawá, inhabit territories in both Peru and Brazil, primarily in the state of Acre. They dwell along the banks of rivers such as Tarauacá, Jordão, Breu, Muru, Envira, Humaitá, and Purus. Their language, Hatxa Kuin, stems from the Pano linguistic Family. Their history, as explained by the shaman Dua Busë, unfolds in five periods:

The Time of the Malocas, when they lived naked, before contact with white people. The Time of the Running (Correrias), marked by attacks with firearms, territorial seizure, and the reduction of their population to just over 300 individuals. The Time of Captivity, during which they became slaves to rubber tappers, enduring an enslaving system under barracks that shaped the lives of today’s older Huni Kuin. The Time of Rights, beginning in the 1970s, with anthropologists Terri de Aquino and Marcelo Piedrafita contributing to the creation of cooperatives and territorial demarcation. The New Time, or Xinã Bena, which bridges the transmission of traditions between elders and youth with exchanges involving the contemporary world of the 21st century (Dua Busë, 2017, p. 20).

The violent colonization of Huni Kuin territories and contact with non-Indigenous, called nawás by them, occurred in the late 19th century during the rubber boom. The brutality of occupation led to profound transformations in their body-landscape, defined by unique emotional relationships (Guattari; Rolnik, 1996) intertwining body and environment (Ayres et al., 2023). These associations extend beyond territorial boundaries to involve spiritual contagions that suddenly reshape the world (Burekhardt, 1961, p. 21). From the Time of the Running to the New Time, nawá influences evolved but continued to interact frictionally (Tsing, 2005) with Huni Kuin traditions, interwoven body-landscapes, and solidarities shared among beings and entities of nature and “supernature” (Viveiros de Castro, 2004, p. 234).

Artist Rita Huni Kuin<sup>1</sup> was born on the threshold of the New Time, in the Chico Curumim village, named after her great-grandfather. At nine, she moved to Jordão to pursue education. Her family represents a very important microcosm for the process of cultural recovery, self-esteem of the population, and resistance of Huni Kuin traditions, almost lost during the time of captivity, including their language Hatxa Kuin, which had almost vanished by the 1980s. Her grandfather, Tuin (Romão Sales Kaxinawá), dedicated his life to preserving songs like the Huni Meka, integral to Nixi Pae (ayahuasca) ceremonies, as well as Pakarin initiation, a rite of passage, similar to baptism, and other traditions and customs with the older and “brabos” Huni Kuin, who arrive “from all over to escape the rush (*correrias*), taking shelter in the Jordan River” (Sales Kaxinawá, 2015 apud Mattos, 2015 p. 62).

1 - Direct quotes from Rita Huni Kuin (2022) refer to interviews given by the artist and co-author to the researcher and, therefore, there is no identification of pages for consultation. This is a personal file.

These teachings, transmitted to the following generations, led his father, Ibã (Isaías Sales Kaxinawá), to write *Nixi Pae: the Spirit of the Forest* in 2006, based on the material gathered by Tuin. This work today is a great source of reference on Huni Kuin culture and, mainly, for the Huni Kuin people themselves and their process of recovering traditions. In 2012, Ibã founded MAHKU, the first contemporary Huni Kuin artistic movement, producing canvases inspired by his spiritual life and rituals. Through MAHKU, Rita emerges as an artist and promoter of her culture in exhibitions like *Moquéem\_Surari: Contemporary Indigenous Art*, in collaboration with the 34th São Paulo Biennial in 2021, and in the rituals that she conducts, as a relational performance (Borriaud, 2009), with sacred songs, during the *Nixi Pae* ceremonies.

Huni Kuin art and spirituality are heavily involved in the movement to rescue and affirm their culture and tradition, after the entire period of expropriation, during the rubber cycle. However, in this New Time, *Xinã Bena*, colonization proceeds differently and, in many ways, is more insidious. And this includes the expansion of a hegemonic and globalized culture of consumption, which spreads in contemporary capitalism in a rhizomatic and ramified way (Deleuze, 1992), being able to penetrate all layers of personal and social life and thus infect and control the bodies, from the very conception of thought, that seminal image, which becomes centered on lack and the desire for acquisition rather than imagination or creation of the most diverse dimensions that life can and should have.

This dominance over thought, mainly through the regulation of memory, results from noopolitics, which, according to Maurizio Lazzarato (2006), operates from control devices over subjectivities. And, as a resulting idea, Frederico Tavares (2020) proposes to reflect on the noopolitics of consumption, due to the centrality of consumption in contemporary capitalism. The noopolitics of consumption, therefore, is engendered in the spaces of deforming and self-deforming moldings of desires and memory, manufactured, regulated or even colonized for consumption. Tavares explains the noopolitics of consumption with the image of “virus ideas”, capable of influencing and producing imaginaries, expressed, mainly, “today, through social control devices that are platforms, gadgets, in short, access devices and connection” (Tavares, 2020, 2’,26”).

Therefore, this article, an excerpt from the doctoral thesis in psychosociology: *Noopolitics of Consumption as a Colonization Device: Resistances and (Re)Existences in Contemporary Indigenous Art*, presented to the Eicos program – UFRJ – in 2023, develops the question about what transformations psychosocial, cultural and environmental problems occur in the Huni Kuin community with contact and even with the invasion of consumer offers and these devices for enunciation of noopolitics of consumption, emphasizing changes in the female body-landscape and its relational transitions. The objective, therefore, is to present some impressions gathered in field research in Jordão and in the Chico Curumim village, which reveal changes and (re)existences in many aspects of the life of this population and the role of the Huni Kuin woman. (Re)existences resulting from friction (Tsing, 2005) between the Huni Kuin and the hegemonic world, or, in other words, from a complex and intermittent oscillation of the relational balance in constant political, cultural, psychosocial, and environmental recomposition, which occurs with

the sharing of the sensitive world (Ranci re, 2009), both in the sense of demarcations, struggles, divergences and resistance, and of a common and shared set.

The perspective of sharing the sensitive, in its opposite and complementary semantics, guides the design of a cartography of affections on the traces of histories and transformations caused by consumption in this community. A scenario, therefore, of “the dismantling of certain worlds — their loss of meaning — and the formation of others: worlds that are created to express contemporary affections” (Rolnik, 2011, p. 23). Affects expressed both in Rita Huni Kuin’s art, as well as in interviews carried out with the artist and also in conversations and observations, during the field in the Kaxinaw  neighborhood of the city of Jord o and in the Chico Curumim village.

With an approach centered on the agency and mediation exercised by art and the artist Rita Huni Kuin, this study uses the idea of abduction of agency from Alfred Gell’s anthropological theory of art (2020), a “gray zone in which semiotic inference (of meanings from signs) merges with hypothetical inferences of a non-semiotic (or non-conventionally semiotic) type” (Gell, 2020, p. 42) to find the freedom to postulate inferences about the works, their agencies, and thus reflect on how these shares and frictions with the dominant culture, of destructive collisions and constructive intertwining (TSING, 2005), can inspire new ideas and conformations for the world and for the woman Huni Kuin.

### **The Snake Woman, Nixi Pae and the Huni Kuin Community**

Rita’s work on a Snake Woman (boa constrictor) (Figure 1), for example, presents a woman (boa constrictor) adorned with necklaces and earrings, a head-dress made of luminous yellow feathers, like a halo, and her entire body drawn, joining at the bottom to the movements of sinuous lines that surround it. In the painting, attention is drawn to the variety of colors, tones, and their movements, closely associated with visions, provided by the ingestion of ayahuasca, the medicine of Nixi Pae. Taking into consideration that colors have no material existence and are perceived only by the action of two elements: light and the eyes, which decipher the luminous flux (Pedrosa, 1982), they compose an allegory about lighting, creation, knowledge or an expanded capacity to think, exacerbating the limitations of perceptible materiality and connecting to a singular thought, the thought of the body (Deleuze, 2002), incorporeal, which discovers access to other worlds, like the world of Yube, the snake or boa constrictor woman.

The ritual of Nixi Pae, of ayahuasca, underpins the spiritual and artistic practices of the Huni Kuin, is configured as the main means of disseminating and resuming their culture and is also established as a source of income and opportunity to access other places, ways of life and consumption.

The Snake Woman canvas and the Huni Kuin artworks as a whole present a relationship with what Deleuze and Guattari (1997) call material-forces, which capture and connect molecular impulses, which overflow the world and challenge its Cartesian perception of knowledge and thinking. “Matters of expression give

way to a material of capture” (Deleuze; Guattari, 1997, p. 137), of forces related to the cosmos or other worlds. As cosmic crafts (Deleuze; Guattari, 1997, p. 137), the Huni Kuin arts apprehend, capture, express, and disseminate these cosmic forces, through the opening of spiritual vision, which, in the paintings, are manifested especially through the Kenes, sacred geometry, also taught by the boa constrictor woman, during the states of visions, provided by Nixi Pae. Rita describes the origin story of the vine and the boa constrictor woman as follows:

The Indian hunter, Duá Buse, who lived in a large maloca with his family, wife, and children, went hunting in the forest in the afternoon. He saw that there was a lot of game eating genipapo and he made a charino straw trap so that no one would notice his presence. When he was waiting, the tapir arrived and, before he could hunt her, he noticed that she took three genipapo seeds, threw them into the lagoon and called someone. From there, a woman with long hair came out, bringing a designed pottery filled with banana porridge to the tapir. Then, while the hunter watched, the two (the tapir and the woman) were dating and made love. In the end, the tapir left, and the snake woman went back into the water.

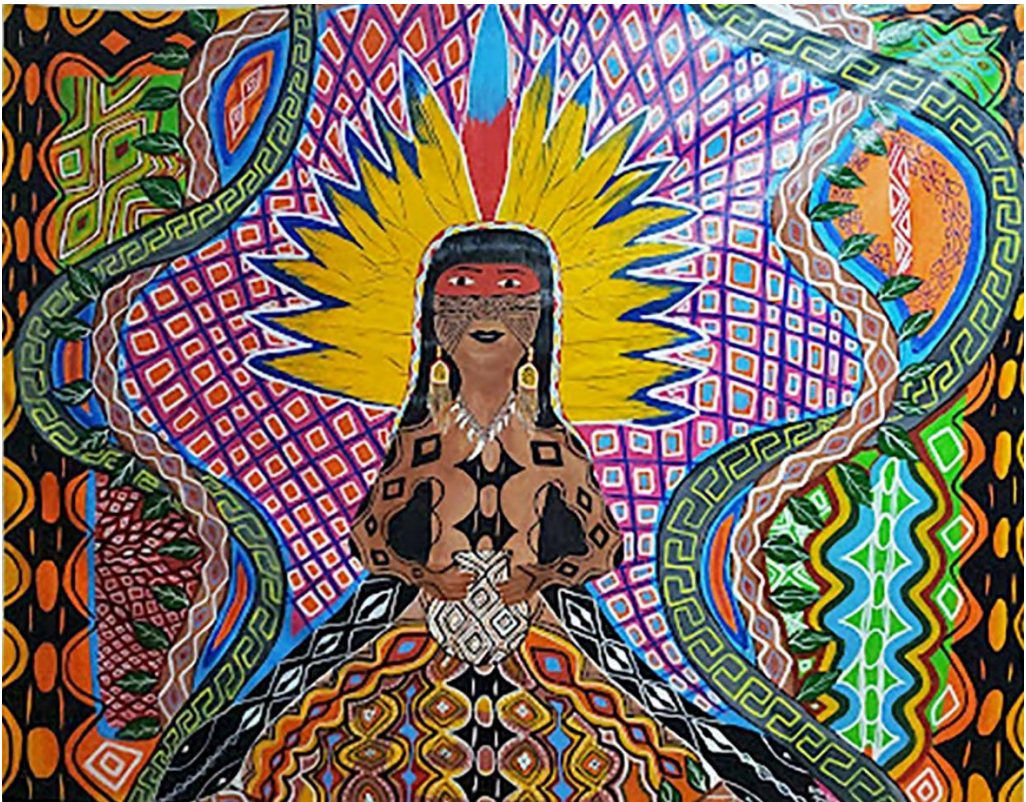
The hunter went to his house and at night he couldn't sleep. The next day, without telling his family, he returned to the place in the morning and repeated everything the tapir had done, but after throwing the genipapo seeds, he hid. When the woman appeared, she asked who had called and he introduced himself. Afterwards, they also made love and, under the spell of this woman, he was taken underwater, where there was also a village, fields, and longhouses and where, with the consent of her family, they got married and had three children.

One day Huã Karu, Duá Busë's father-in-law, who was inside the lake, began to prepare ayahuasca. He took out vines, queen, and went to prepare tea. Duá Buse asked: What is this? It's a healing tea, replied the father-in-law. Huã Karu prepared tea in the afternoon and, at night, while preparing the ritual, he asked his daughter to tell his son-in-law not to drink it. The daughter went to tell her husband that he shouldn't drink the tea, because things could happen that he couldn't handle. But he drank it anyway and in a large dose. A total spiritual vision opened and he discovered that that family was not real humans, it was a snake family and his wife, a boa constrictor woman. He also saw his own future, being killed by his wife and children, because the boa constrictor's family didn't want him to pass on his knowledge to his true people. Ayahuasca was a secret for the Indian hunter.

The next day, Duá Buse tried to escape, then an enchanted fish came

and helped him get out of that lagoon, taking him to the other side, to where his human family was, who protected him from the snakes that were at his search. But there was a day when Duá Buse went out to hunt some animal and the reptile family found him. They tried to swallow him, just like in the vision he had when taking the ayahuasca, but they were unable to swallow him whole. He asked for help and the human family went to save him. After a few days, the part of him that remained in the snake's mouth was rotting, and he decided to tell the people how ayahuasca was made and say that, when he died, they would visit the place where he was after a week, because the Parts of his limbs would transform into the ayahuasca, on one side into the chacrona (amazon plant), the queen, and on the other into the vine. He taught some songs, and said that all the other songs would be learned using the strength of ayahuasca and that he would be the strength of ayahuasca itself. And today we have ayahuasca with this teaching. (Rita Huni Kuin, 2022)

Figure 1 — The Snake Woman by Rita Huni Kuin.



Source: Rita Huni Kuin collection

It is worth highlighting, with this narrative, that the family of reptiles fears and avoids passing on their sacred knowledge to the “true people” of Duá Buse, even while the Indian hunter still communicates and is living a becoming snake with his new family throughout the entire world. Power of otherness of thought, indicated by the idea of perspectivism: he is thinking like the other, and, at that moment, he transforms and is the other (Viveiros de Castro, 2007 apud Sztutman, 2007). The boa constrictor woman and her relatives were people, but not the real people of Duá Buse, the Huni Kuin.

Rita experiences the Nixi pae ritual for the first time in 2013, during an Indigenous people festival in the Lago Lindo village, together with her sister Yaka, who has a transformative vision for their lives and which results in the creation of the Kayatibu group:

We called on all the indigenous relatives who lived in the city, who came in search of study, displaced from the villages, to form a group with everyone, women and men, to start working with music, dance, to research and create ancestral materials that were not are more used, such as the stone axe, fire without a lighter, which is what we use today, all of which were lost (Rita Huni Kuin, 2022).

The proposal covers preserving local culture, but also, during rehearsals, exchanging experiences and ideas about how to live in the city without having problems with other residents and also “how not to be influenced by the bad ways of white people, alcoholic drinks, parties, drugs and such”, says Rita (2022). The problem of alcohol consumption affects the Huni Kuin and, according to the artist, the creation of Kayatibu has helped the younger population against addiction, while older people resist and do not trust the group’s seriousness:

When we started the group, the consumption of these substances among younger people greatly decreased. The older ones are more difficult, we gave talks and everything, some left, but others continued. The important thing is that we do not let the younger people evolve (Rita Huni Kuin, 2022).

The group rehearses on weekends, creating their own instruments, and studying sacred songs and traditional dances. Young people are also beginning to introduce ayahuasca in ceremonies held in backyards in the Kaxinawá neighborhood and, as a result, are the target of complaints from the neighborhood. Therefore, in 2016, Rita and Yaka presented a Kayatibu proposal, selected by Rumos Itaú Cultural, which contributed to the construction of the group’s headquarters and other research and artistic activities. “We built that cultural point, we bought the motorized boat, some instruments, the basics to start”, remembers Rita (2022).

With the inspiration of the boa constrictor woman, two young women create the Kayatibu space, which becomes the first and only point of culture in



Jordão and a reference not only for all the Huni Kuin in the Kaxinawá neighborhood and villages in the region, but also for people from outside, interested in their culture and the ayahuasca experience. Rita and her sister Yaka are the first Huni Kuin women to travel, like men, through exhibitions, events, ceremonies, and other contemporary indigenous art projects.

### **The Snake's Body: Rituals, Market and the Domestication of Nixi Pae**

Following this path with determination, the boa constrictor is also the theme of the installation of a 15-meter pouf (Figure 2), which Rita creates for the Museum of Indigenous Cultures – opened in June 2022. The artist brings the boa constrictor, its power of attraction and healing to the educational space of the museum, as a reference for knowledge that underpins Huni Kuin wisdom.

**Figure 2 — *Snake's Pouf* by Rita Huni Kuin.**



Source: Museum of Indigenous Cultures – São Paulo, SP

The boa constrictor is transported to an urban center and takes museum visitors to the forest. It transforms with its magnetism and wisdom and is transformed by the actions and responses of the people who are there, exchanging knowledge. The actions of sitting, lying down or snuggling in the comfort of this installation also change its shape, its structure and, therefore, manifest, as a metaphor, all the changes that the boa constrictor's own body and that of the Huni Kuin people have been going through, after



the contact with the Nawás, including regarding the use of vines and the preparation of Nixi Pae medicine. In addition to employment among the Huni Kuin themselves, which, according to Rita, is much more routine than in the past, the frequency of rituals performed with the Nawás in different parts of Brazil and the world has grown a lot in the last decade. Thus, it becomes a relevant source of income for the population, due to the opportunity to sell their arts, weavings and ornaments, since, for the ritual, there is only a contribution to cover travel costs. However, with the dissemination of medicine, a cultural appropriation of ayahuasca began, and not through its use or the conduct of ceremonies among the Nawá, but through the way it has been produced and sold on an almost industrial and, therefore, disrespectful scale:

Nawá can perform a ceremony, but as long as it does not take over. Because there are people with bad intentions who only do it to make money, as a form of capitalism. Ayahuasca is sacred in the way it is prepared. We don't use a sugarcane grinder, or, to use snuff, we won't do it in a blender to make it quick. There is a spirituality, a whole prayer to do (Rita Huni Kuin, 2022).

Rita also explains that, as there are many people exploring, “we don't find native plants so easily, so they are often planted” (2022). So, currently, there is already a domestication of this species, as a consequence of the incalculable expansion of the commercialization of ayahuasca, sold in microdose bottles or in liters, for between R\$300 and R\$3,000, depending on the concentration and potency of the tea.

Consumption intensifies through advertisements and publications of ways of being spiritually elevated and connected to nature. On the internet, with the tag #txai, there are comments and recordings from young people, mainly, who adhere to, literally, a very diverse kit of subjectivities (Vargas; Tavares, 2018), which mixes yoga, Buddhism, varied mysticisms, in addition to of indigenous medicine.

Therefore, the need to cultivate vines is not surprising, considering all this demand and publicity multiplied by different media. However, as Anna Tsing (2015) explains, human nature is a relationship between species, a web of interdependencies, and, in this way, domestication becomes a process of mutual affection, and the Huni Kuin body, like the vine, Nixi Pae, transforms and becomes partially sedentary.

Domestication is generally understood as human control over other species. That such relationships can also transform humans is something often ignored. Furthermore, we tend to think of domestication as a dividing line: you are either on the human side or on the wild side (Tsing, 2015, p. 184).

### Overcoming Prejudices: Women and Medicine

With all this, the new forms of use and ritual of medicine transgress paradigms regarding the lives and responsibilities of Huni Kuin women, who, untamed, confront what Rita understands as the patriarchal culture of her people. The artist perceives the influence of white colonization on relationships between men and women, but only as a transformation of traditional forms of dominance over women's field of action and decision-making power.

As for the ayahuasca ritual, only recently have women begun to conduct the ceremonies, facing opposition from some male leaders and older shamans, such as Gilberto Kaxinawá (2016 *apud* Lopes, 2016), who argues: "Women cannot handle the power of tea [...] They don't know how to perform our ritual the right way, everything they do is an imitation." Rita radically disagrees with this position and believes that "many women have more potential than men. I recognize the strength of men, but women can be more" (2022).

Women also play an important role in the preparation of other medicines and healing knowledge of herbs and plants, as is the case of Francisca, Buni, Rita's mother, chief and faith healer, who has already followed the Muká diet (the most sacred plant in the forest) and is knowledgeable about medicinal herbs, however, it is still not common for them to occupy the position of shamans. In the village Chico Curumim, for example, the doctor Nāke, Dr. Carminha, as she is presented, is highly regarded for her work and knowledge of medicinal plants, which she learned from her father during her life, but she does not exercise the care and healing of the spirit, which are the responsibilities of shaman Miguel in important rituals and traditional Huni Kuin festivals.

Nāke researches and cultivates more than 300 types of species on site for different health problems or disease prevention. Plants that also act to strengthen the body and spirit and even aid in better performance in day-to-day activities, such as the substance in Sananga eye drops, which sharpens perception for hunting, in addition to treating conjunctivitis and other eye diseases. With all the herbal knowledge and the creation of the medicinal garden, the village leaders invested in the Erva Perfumosa Ni Batani project, under the guidance of Dr. Carminha and Carlos Sales, a health agent and her husband, for the distillation of herbs, creation of essences and medicinal oils for sale.

Many Huni Kuin stories and mythologies have women as the main characters and founders of their world, starting with the boa constrictor woman. Even so, Rita believes that colonization and the patriarchal roots of the Huni Kuin social organization delimit the space for women to act, who, in turn, strive to cross these divides by occupying traditionally masculine roles or transforming tradition, even though in their conventional spaces of activity, corroborating the finding of D'Ávila Neto and Jardim (2015), when observing patriarchal authority in Brazil: "Latin American women have become modern without abandoning tradition" (2015, p.160) and this implies the "reinvention of their knowledge, practices and arts"

(D'Ávila Neto; Jardim, 2015), which function in this way as tactics of cultural resistance and social recognition.

### **The Woman of Clay: Between the Ideal, the Real and the Transitory**

Arts and weaving are some of these spaces, characterized by female work being reinvented in the Huni Kuin community and can be glimpsed through the Clay Woman painting (Figure 3). Inspired by an artisan who works with clay and makes jars and jugs, designed with human figures and Kenes, the sacred geometry, the story tells that the artist lives with a very lonely nephew who, one day, passing by one of the works, he says: gee, aunt, how beautiful your clays are, if they were a real woman I would marry them. The aunt regrets that they are just objects and the day goes on. Night comes and an unknown woman approaches the boy, saying that he liked her and that's why she came to stay with him. But he says he doesn't know her, and she replies, saying yes, that she is the woman from the clay and, as she heard what he said, she transformed herself to marry him. And so, quickly, they began to live together, hunting and fishing very carefully, because, as the woman did not go into the fire before transforming, she could fall apart upon contact with water. One day, they were hunting, and it started to rain, they ran to seek shelter or to look for something to protect the woman, but she got wet and thus fell apart (Rita Huni Kuin, 2022).

Rita's canvas exposes elements of this story about marriage, choices, art, everyday tasks, and, also, in an allegorical interpretation, about a woman, created by another woman, who transforms or what is expected of her to be and do throughout her life, shaped by a defined and limited form. Or, alternatively, the creator of the clay artifact herself, while handling the clay, dreams and enchants, with her the cosmic craftsmanship (Deleuze; Guattari, 1997) and with the strength of the kenés, an independent woman to be the wife of her lonely nephew, who loves, works and makes her own choices. The artisan imprints such an urgent force that everything happens impetuously and her creation cannot maintain that appearance for long. And so, it becomes earth again, ready to become new.

**Figure 3 —** *The Clay Woman* by Rita Huni Kuin.



Source: Rita Huni Kuin collection

Therefore, it is a story and canvas that insinuate a woman undergoing transformation, moving through spaces that are not traditionally hers, as has been happening in contemporary times among Huni Kuin women. Rita herself is a reference on this transition as a woman, and, probably, her experience between worlds is substantial in this process. Circulating with her art, Rita finds a perspective to criticize and seek changes in the patriarchal aspect of her culture, and also to understand that she and other women are the continuity of her ancestry, but in a different way:

It's good for us to stay in the village, but in the times we are living in, with all this global change, I think it's important for Indigenous women

to recognize who they are. In the sense of having the opportunity to study, to seek more knowledge. Because in the village, when you are born, you grow up and live within the village, whether you like it or not, you are submissive to your parents, and, when you get married, to your husbands. In the community where I live, the culture is very patriarchal, so women have little opportunity (Rita Huni Kuin, 2022).

In her personal life, as the transgressive clay woman, Rita chooses who she will marry, despite the discontent this causes her family. According to tradition, still commonly adopted, marriages are arranged by parents, who choose the qualities of a good husband: worker, good hunter, and others, regardless of the interests of the future wife. In the case of Rita and Abraão, Shane, cell phone technology is the means by which the couple radically revolutionizes marriage tradition:

I met Abraão on the internet, and we moved in together, and we are here living our lives, different from the culture. We never stop practicing culture. The language, the art, the dance, but the way of living, as a Kuaiampi relative says: I can be everything you are without ceasing to be what I am (Rita Huni Kuin, 2022).

In the city of Jordão, the entire Huni Kuin population uses cell phones, and, as throughout the world, young people especially. In the villages, for now, there is still no signal capture, but, according to Bane, Rita's brother, in the Chico Curumim village, it will soon be possible to access this technology, undoubtedly transforming the Huni Kuin body-landscape, the rituals everyday life and the refuge that Rita finds in the forest:

People say: oh you live in the forest, you have to live in the *maloca*, but we are in 2022, in the 21st century. If you send me to the forest, I'll come from the forest, as it should be, but here I am, as it should be. I like being in the woods or in the city. In village life, we don't have stress from work, technology, we don't even care, we don't even care who is or isn't sending messages. Take a bath in the river, go to the forest, sleep, wake up [...] in the city, sometimes it's just stress (Rita Huni Kuin, 2022).

And Rita and Shane's life in the city, despite being small and quiet, is really busy. Connecting to the phone and computer is essential for the work they have been developing together or, often, separated by long trips. Rita and Shane have been living together for a few years, they have a three-year-old daughter, called Yanai, but they will only get married in December 2022, in a traditional Huni Kuin ceremony, with the presence of both their families and with the detail of being registered in a recording for a documentary about indigenous weddings, produced by a digital broadcast platform. Therefore, personal and professional life, tradition and technology, and even the relationships between man and woman merge into an open and timeless work, transforming the constituent matters of a secular marriage custom.

A change brought about not only by the personal and emotional ambitions and

choices of a young couple, especially a woman, who feels the urgency of overcoming conditions considered patriarchal among her people, but also through the consumption of communication technologies, which unites the couple, upon meeting, and which also, in a way, encourages them to celebrate the wedding to record and publicize the traditional ceremony in the mass media. Changes that may seem like mere submission to Nawá ways of life, especially in relation to media culture and all its necessary exposure, which Mbembe (2021) considers a return to animism, with the cult of oneself instead of the expression of ancestral cults, but which also highlight the intentional transformations of ancestry, which create passages and spaces for women and for the dissemination of Rita's artistic works about Huni Kuin traditions and cosmovision.

Paradoxical aspects inherent to the inevitable changes of times and life, which, however, do not necessarily create subordinate situations, but scenarios vulnerable to dominant thinking and ways of being in the world. Like the susceptible clay woman, not yet fired in the oven, Huni Kuin men and, especially, women "earthexist" with the union of leaves, straws, and fibers, shaping resistances and (re)existences into a strong adobe.

### **The Woman in the Village: the Art and Resistance of Subtle Eating**

However, all this new female sculpture, represented by the clay woman and manifested in Rita's own life, does not occur without questioning among the women of the community, who, at times, challenge the artist, who takes a stand regarding the importance of each in their spaces of action and life, as follows:

The fact that I'm an artist, that I study and have a degree doesn't make me better than anyone else. Do you know why? Because each person has their gift and their work. You are very beautiful and wise within the forest and this is your area. Each one is divided to do a different job. I'm leaving, looking for other things and you are the guardian of the forest, with our medicine, our crafts, our songs, our voice, occupying this space that is also important. It's important for you to be here (Rita Huni Kuin, 2022).

Women in the village are responsible, for example, for food at practically all stages. The daily choreography and the time spent eating are not marked "solely by the body gestures that transform the ingredients into stews" (D' Ávila Neto; Jardim, 2015, p. 164) to the rhythm of the wood burning stoves. The movements are multiple, simultaneous, before and after the act of eating. The meal itself is shared with the family in the following way (Figure 4): women and children gathered in one space or *maloca* (thus, women simultaneously feed and take care of their children) and men in another place or house, eating the meal, sitting on the floor, in a circular formation, and with a lot of socializing.

**Figure 4 — Women, children and wood stove. Morning meal at Ayani and Bane's house.**



Source: personal collection

At some point during the day, women go to the river to wash the pots and dishes, which, it is worth highlighting, are no longer made of handmade ceramics, but of aluminum, plastic, or other industrialized materials, acquired in the city, as well as sponges and soap for cleaning. As a result, the role of the clay artisan is disappearing nowadays and necessarily shaping another woman's body-landscape, as an effect of the consumption of these products. It is also possible to observe the possible imminence of an environmental issue, which one day the Huni Kuin may need to address, related to the chemistry of detergent or soap, even if biodegradable, thrown directly into the Jordan River, which is home to more than 20 villages in population growth.

In the Chico Curumim village, each family has their own small field, which is initially prepared by man for planting the various species that make up the Huni Kuin diet: cassava, banana, papaya, watermelon, sugar cane, peanuts, beans, açaí, peach palm, potatoes, yam and other plants, sown in fields of dry land (Bai Ku In) or on river beaches (maxi bai) (Kaxinawá, 2015). But it is the women who monitor the fields and work during the harvest.

They are always accompanied by each other, never alone, sometimes helped by a man, because it is very hard work and requires exceptional strength. Women carry and balance around 30 kilos on steep terrain in a bag, which has a longer central strap to rest on the forehead and thus share the weight.

Cassava is very present in basic, everyday food, both in cooked food and



in the flour used in a type of banana *farofa*. In the city, one buys processed foods and meats. In villages, are also consumed industrialized products, but in much smaller quantities. There, in addition to the fields, some animals are raised and fishing using the *tinguê* technique, widely used to fish for surubim, pirapitinga, and other species in the region. With the circulation of money and product supply, communities also buy fish from a fishmonger who occasionally passes by boat.

Regarding hunting, nowadays, there is a lack of larger animals in the forest and close to the villages, as a result of the illegal action of loggers and hunters in the region (Figure 5). The wood trade prohibited and even the trucks that pass through the city carry stickers that warn about this illegality, but the illicit and violent scheme also finds its means and, in addition to scaring away the animals, according to the general chief (*cacique*) of Jordão, Siã Huni Kuin, José Osair Sales (2011), also alienates and oppresses the so-called “brabos”, a Huni Kuin population that still avoids contact.

To be consumed little by little, hunting meat is the only sensibly salty food in the Huni Kuin diet, because salt preserves the product, replacing the traditionally used smoking. Furthermore, the taste is very subtle in terms of both salt and sweet. In the field, in the village of Chico Curumim, a papaya, which, for me, was perfect for consumption, was considered already spoiled by the women of the village. Plantain is also consumed green, from this perspective, along with cassava flour, while the one used to prepare the fruit’s porridge is sweeter.

Figure 5 — Logs in the Jordan River waiting for the rains to be transported by the river.



Source: personal collection

Another food with a more pronounced flavor, between the sweetness of sugarcane *garapa* and a sour taste from fermentation, is Mabesh Muka, a type of beer, as it was called, very tasty and made with cassava.

The subtlety of the flavor, the planting, and the hunting of the food itself are connected to a delicacy of the body-landscape and the Huni Kuin art-life, which prevails over the intoxication and poisoning of the body, offered by industrialized foods. The way of eating and the subtle taste still resist the influences of Nawá eating habits, since the colonization of the rubber cycle and life in captivity, until today, given the frequent coexistence with the Nawás in the city of Jordão and, equally, during work trips. In festivals and rites of passage and healing, such as the Muká diet, or body preparation for ingesting ayahuasca, and also the two-week diet for performing Nixpu Pima (baptism), the limitation of the regime, the prayers used during cooking and the restriction on the taste of savory or sweet foods make the relationship between moderation or control of the consumption of some foods and the strengthening and refinement of the sensitivity of the spirit are evident.

A recipe rich in vital energy and “the ability to tune in with the multiple living species that inhabit the universe” (Mbembe, 2021, p. 105), which Huni Kuin women follow to the letter, making it possible to develop bodily intelligence, the thinking of the body (Deleuze, 2002) and sensitivity to singular magnitudes that circulate in the environment, in the world, and in the cosmos. And yet, thus, also resisting the capture, the modeling of the consumer being of capital and its toxic traces, including food, which contribute to a process called brutalism, “which so much targets the bodies, the nerves, the blood and the brain of humans as the bowels of time and the earth” (Mbembe, 2021, p. 11).

I also have in mind the molecular and chemical dimension of this process. Isn't toxicity, that is, the multiplication of chemical products and hazardous waste, already a structural dimension of the present? Such substances and waste (including electronics) not only attack nature and the environment (air, soil, water, food chains), but also bodies (Mbembe, 2021, p. 10).

Brutalism, as a process of capitalism, for Mbembe (2021), dialectically, destructively creates beings and permeates psychosocial and environmental processes with its unhealthy and pathological effects. Intoxicated and synthetic bodies-landscapes develop, including due to their technological extensions, which they no longer sense, which do not defend themselves and become vulnerable to diseases as physical as they are psychological and social, as is observed today, in a striking way, in Brazil, in relation to the surrender of part of the population to a manufactured and parallel, disconnected and incoherent reality, disseminated mainly on social networks and in the preaching of some churches, such as: the flat earth, the desire for democracy through the military dictatorship and denialism in its most diverse aspects, resulting in collective disasters, such as poor people defending the right of the rich to exploit themselves, poor people, black people holding racist flags, women with misogynistic speeches, even Indigenous people against original people and so on, in a kinetic succession of self-flagellation.

## Final Considerations

The food of the Huni Kuin people, in this way, also integrates the elements of resistance to the colonization of the dominant culture, together with the material strengths of their art, the Snake Woman and the Clay Woman, and with the power of tradition and the forest. With this, the agencies developed based on the art of Rita Huni Kuin, in addition to her own ideas and contributions, manifest both the decisive and fruitful action of the Huni Kuin people towards the resumption of their ancestral knowledge, culture, and practices, as well as the transformations resulting of a New Time of exchanges with another world. A dominant and capitalist world, focused on greater control and dominance over subjectivities, especially through the media devices of noopolitics and noopolitics of consumption, and reinforced by brutalism, which creates susceptibilities to bodies-landscapes, including this population, which, thus, has been (re)existing in friction, conflicts, adjustments and permeabilities with the Nawá consumer society.

But the great transformation in the Huni Kuin world, caused by the consumption, from the period of colonization until today, as Rita's sister, Yaka, Edilene Sales Kaxinawá, also a talented artist, observes in an informal conversation, is that its people lose the ability to communicate with other animals and entities of nature, through contact with the Nawás, using clothing, various products, and processed foods. And this communication is the foundation of all Huni Kuin wisdom and cosmogony. It was they, the animals, the enchanted ones, and the forest, who taught how to sing, how to plant, how to use the strength of the sacred geometries of the Kenes, how to know the properties of medicinal plants, the making of Nixi Pae and much more. Some of this knowledge was lost in the times of rush and captivity, but many others prevailed through oral transmission, also through the written and recorded records that have been produced, in addition to the dissemination of the Huni Kuin arts and medicines themselves. One of these skills, very special with regard to the female responsibilities of this community and the economic prosperity of families, is weaving. And the spider was the one who taught it, but that's another story and another painting.

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# Mulher Jiboia e Mulher de Barro:Arte, Consumo e Agenciamentos na Comunidade Huni Kuin

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Frederico Tavares Junior  
Celso Sánchez Pereira

**Resumo:** Este artigo indaga sobre as transformações psicossociais, culturais e ambientais, que ocorrem na comunidade Huni Kuin do Acre, com o incurso das ofertas de consumo e de dispositivos comunicativos da noopolítica dirigida ao consumo, especialmente sob a perspectiva do corpo-paisagem feminino e suas transições relacionais. O objetivo é expor o cenário de fricção entre a resistência dos intensos processos de retomada das tradições dessa população e as (re) existências decorrentes dos conflitos e interações com o mundo dominante dos nawás, os não indígenas. A pesquisa traça uma cartografia de afetos, durante o campo no bairro Kaxinawá do Jordão e na aldeia Chico Curumim, associada também a entrevistas com a artista Rita Huni Kuin e às inferências sobre suas pinturas. Esse conjunto de impressões revela tanto vulnerabilidades às formas de colonização do mundo dominante quanto forças reativas e criativas da floresta, das mulheres e da arte Huni Kuin.

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**Palavras-chave:** Consumo; corpo-paisagem; Fricção; Arte; Huni Kuin



# Mujer Serpiente y Mujer de Barro: Arte, Consumo y Agencia en la Comunidad Huni Kuin

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**Resumen:** Este artículo investiga las transformaciones psicosociales, culturales y ambientales que ocurren en la comunidad Huni Kuin de Acre, con la introducción de ofertas de consumo y dispositivos comunicativos de noopolítica dirigidos al consumo, especialmente desde la perspectiva del cuerpo-paisaje femenino y sus transiciones relacionales. El objetivo es exponer el escenario de fricción entre las resistencias de los intensos procesos de retoma de las tradiciones de esta población y las (re) existencias resultantes de conflictos e interacciones con el mundo dominante de los nawá, los no indígenas. La investigación traza una cartografía de los afectos, durante el campo en el barrio Kaxinawá do Jordão y en la aldea Chico Curumim, asociada también a entrevistas con la artista Rita Huni Kuin e inferencias sobre sus pinturas. Este conjunto de impresiones revela tanto las vulnerabilidades a las formas de colonización mundial dominantes como las fuerzas reactivas y creativas del bosque, las mujeres y el arte Huni Kuin.

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