



## Cosmology, environment, and health: Baniwa food myths and rituals

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The Baniwa people, a member of the Aruak group which lives in the northwestern Amazon, has a rich mythic tradition that influences how the political, ethical, and practical dimensions of their social life are expressed and that guides the ancestral knowledge that guarantees the group's survival under adverse environmental conditions. The article analyzes myths and rites built around fish as a food source; these have an intimate relationship with cosmological explanations of the origin of the gods, water bodies, and the micro-ecosystems that foster the reproduction of aquatic fauna. Baniwa mythology draws an association between the reproductive processes of fish and a set of social relations involving human and nonhuman societies. Predation and edibility — notions underlying food rites — are viewed as part of a set of practices meant to produce and maintain kinship alliances, ease the food/prey peril, and maintain the cosmic balance that sustains life.

**KEYWORDS:** ethnology; South American Indians; cosmology; environment; indigenous health.

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This article is the result of a broader research effort<sup>1</sup> underway since 2004 in the Baniwa indigenous area, located in the region of the middle Içana River, municipality of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, state of Amazonas. The research stage addressed here focuses on the symbolism of food (more especially, fish food sources) and its relation with the group's health, environment, cosmology, and living conditions.

The Baniwa people<sup>2</sup> is an Aruak group whose settlements are spread along the Içana and Aiary rivers, branches of the Negro River. Kinship is structured consanguineously into three named phratries (Walipere, Hohodene, and Dzáwinai),<sup>3</sup> which speak the same language and maintain ceremonial and affinal relations. Differing somewhat from other indigenous peoples of the Negro River, the Baniwa do not practice language group exogamy but rather phratric exogamy, although some partners who speak other indigenous Negro River languages can be found in their villages. Patrilineage and patrilocality are common social practices.

Settlement patterns are based on a political and territorial division of consanguineal groups, resulting in the appropriation of distinct micro-ecosystems, which means access to food resources also varies. Members of certain phratries thus have greater access to farmable land, while others control lakes and *igapós*, which are the main source for fish. This unequal supply of the resources needed for the society's material and symbolic reproduction has produced a complex network of exchange between villages, mediated by obligations of reciprocity between consanguineal relatives and matrimonial exchanges among affines (potential or actual brother- or sister-in-laws), generating an age-old relation of interdependence among settlements and guaranteeing the circulation of the means of subsistence.

Within the realm of the Baniwa's complex cosmology, we will confine ourselves in this article to a set of hostile relations between the ancestral family — composed of Iñápirríkuli, the creating god, and his brothers Dzúli and Eeri — and predator spirit-animals like the thunder-monkeys (*Eenunai*) and the great snakes (*Umawali*), whose control over the cosmos kept humanity from prospering. In primordial times, Iñápirríkuli both fought against and sought out wives among hostile affines like piranha-fish and snakes. These attempts to tame an aggressive alterity were often unsuccessful but nonetheless necessary to building life in society, instituted by Iñápirríkuli and other members of his family. This ambivalent relationship with alterity — dangerous albeit indispensable to the reproduction of life — is an essential feature of the way of life of the Baniwa, who seek out and find elements vital to the production and transformation of their existence at the outer limits of their society.

Baniwa cosmology coexists with the historical transformations faced during contact with the non-indigenous world, which has threatened Baniwa subsistence in a variety of ways. These threats include sedentarization of the population and the slow but steady decline in the fish catch, which they blame on population growth and the abandonment of certain facets of their ancestral knowledge. This abandonment shakes younger people's belief in a humanized nature, jeopardizes preservation of a behavior appropriate to interspecies relations, and diminishes the mass of operative knowledge about the environmental surroundings from which the Baniwa guarantee their survival.

Yet this same historical process has boosted the Baniwa capacity to negotiate within a globalized world, through indigenous associations representing them at institutions of the non-indigenous world. Their activities in the ethno-political movement have prompted a number of leaders to recognize that their knowledge of nature can serve as a bargaining tool with environmental groups, facilitate access to merchandise, and help achieve the policies of sustainable development they believe vital to their adopted way of life.

From this perspective, Baniwa villages are displaying an organized revival of the teaching and learning of ancient knowledge about nature. They are also encouraging youth to expand their knowledge of the topic and to develop ways to preserve endangered fish sources. Lastly, there has been renewed interest in the cosmological relations that govern their existence.

### **Theoretical and methodological approach**

In ethnographic terms, this research builds on that of Robin Wright (1993, 1993-1994, 1998) and Jonathan D. Hill (1993, 1984, 1987; Hill, Morán, 1983). Their studies on the Baniwa culture as a whole, and on the rites that the Baniwa call *pudáli* and *kalidzamai* in particular, demonstrate the intimate relation between the group's cosmology, matrimonial exchanges mediated by reciprocal offerings of food between affines, and post-birth rites characterized by shamanic action on the food that is either accessible or denied to the post-birth family. These elements are essential to understanding this society's relation between culture and nature.

The ethnological studies of the Northwest Amazon pertinent to our approach include those of Christine Hugh-Jones (1979), who analyzed the correlations between cosmology and the production and consumption of foods in the indigenous Northwest Amazon; Kaj Arhem (2001), who studied Makuna food cycles as part of a network of socio-cosmic relations; Aloisio Cabalzar (2005), who surveyed the Tukano and Tuyuka groups' knowledge of fish;

and Dominique Buchillet (1988), who analyzed correlations between the production of disease and the symbolization of nature by the Desana.

In more general terms, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996, 2002) presents analytical categories that speak to how we treat data collected among the Baniwa. An important contribution by Castro is his concept of perspectivism, which he describes as a native ontology in which both humans and animals are seen as people endowed with intentionality and will. According to Viveiros de Castro (1996), for indigenous Amazon societies there is a spiritual unity between humans and animals, alongside a diversity of coexisting zoomorphic and anthropomorphic corporealities. This notion has important theoretical implications in understanding indigenous Amazon societies' relations with nature.

Authors such as Philippe Descola (1999, 2001) and Carlos Fausto (2002) have adopted the idea of perspectivism — some disagreement about analytical specifics notwithstanding. Both agree that to a large extent South American indigenous cultures embrace the idea that beings of nature are endowed with 'agency' and share a unity of spirit with humanity, alongside a diversity of corporeal manifestations. According to this cosmology, humans and animals enjoy a self-reflective ability and assign themselves the status of subject. For humans, however, animals are seen as both subjects and prey. Animals in turn see humans as predators and, under certain circumstances, as prey also. In their own domains, animals have anthropomorphic abilities and like us lead a dynamic social life where they live. In short, in this kind of network of socio-cosmic interactions, each subject's position is relative to her viewpoint, generating a dynamic perspective in which the definition of the position 'other' is always inverse to the position that the subject recognizes for herself.

This way of comprehending relations between beings harbors no opposition between culture/subject and nature/object; to the contrary, what we have here is an intersubjective field that enfolds humans and animals, even though each of the terms of this relationship has a symmetrical yet inverted perspective in how it comprehends the other. In the native conception, the cosmos is ordered in a socio-centric model, which serves to assign meaning to a set of social and contractual relations that extends beyond the boundaries of human society, interlacing it with other ways of life, nonhuman but organized much as we are (Descola, 1998; Viveiros de Castro, 1996). The authors do point out, however, that the condition of subject is not indiscriminately applied to any animal, but is more specifically assigned to the large predators that can engage in direct relations of competition with their human partners/rivals.

For Descola (1998), from the viewpoint of Amerindian societies, there is a “difference in degree and not nature between men, plants, and animals” (p. 25). The cosmological and sociological systems produced by each indigenous society entwined within this network of social relations account for an understanding of the logic governing relations with nature, according to Descola. He also states that human interaction with animals is often seen as “a relation between affines, characterized by the same network of obligations typical of kinship by alliance” (p. 36).

Fausto (2002) reinterpreted the above-mentioned studies, agreeing with the general premises of perspectivism but interpreting relations between culture and nature as a “socio-cosmic system in which the object in question is the direction of predation and the production of kinship” (p. 11). To this end, he emphasizes analyses of commensality and predation, which he sees as means of producing the inner dynamics of social life. He focuses on food as a device for producing related bodies (p. 8). For him, the crux of the matter is the reproductive capacity exercised by some (predators) over others (the hunted), in situations in which the prey, transformed into food, strengthens the ties between those who eat together, fosters reciprocal obligations and ties of solidarity, and helps reduce differences between group members.

In the Northwest Amazon, Arhem (2001) described the interconnection between humans and nature in an ethnography on the Makuna. The author describes the group’s cosmology in the same totalizing terms used to characterize interactions between human and nonhuman societies, expressed as a system of relations that the author calls ‘eco-cosmological’. Within this system, human beings occupy a central position, where they are represented simultaneously as predators and as prey. At one of the poles of the relation lie man-eating spirits, represented by large predators like jaguars, anacondas, and other threatening beings; at the other end lie beings that are nothing but food, that is, that do not present a predatory threat to humans. There the death of a prey represents both subtraction (life is taken; a constituent element of the system of relations is consumed) and addition (the death of the prey reintroduces its soul into the houses of origin of humans and animals, prompting its rebirth and the repopulation of the world of the living). The hunt contributes to restoring an appropriate balance to the cosmos. The Makuna apply this same reasoning to the death of any prey, animal or human; in the latter case, the predators are usually people-eating spirits.

As in most of the literature available on this topic, Arhem (2001) directs his focus toward game. In a single paragraph, he makes brief reference to the fact that the forms of exchange between humans and fish are different since fish “are the prototype of

animal food for human beings" among the Makuna (p. 228); in other words, the interaction between fish and human people is underpinned by the principle of generalized, imbalanced reciprocity, placing fish at the food end, since they lack the ability to retaliate against the human beings that prey on them.

As we will see later, much of what Arhem (2001) found among the Makuna can also be observed among the Baniwa. There is, however, one essential difference regarding the interaction between humans and fish. Throughout this text, we will try to show that in the Baniwa culture, fish exercise 'agency' and can cause damage in many ways, especially through disease. The Baniwa do not designate fish using a generic classification, as the Makuna do; rather, detailed knowledge of them is joined with precise species identification. Mythic narratives and food blessings provide detailed information on the different snakes believed to be 'father' and 'mother' of specific fish families, demonstrating the direct link between fish and snake-spirits, which, for Arhem, are the sole man-eaters. In his study of the Tuyuca, another indigenous group living on the Brazilian side of the Northwest Amazon, Cabalzar (2005) presented findings similar to ours.

The above literature has made data on the hunt central in its analysis of relations between humans and nature. Part of our fieldwork endeavors to understand interactions with land animals, but we feel the nature of the information we have gathered among the Baniwa permits us to analyze their interaction with aquatic animals and fish using the same theoretical framework developed for the hunt in other studies of South American Amerindian groups.

### **Presentation and discussion of data**

In Baniwa cosmology, the ancestral family, comprising Iñápirrikuli, his two brothers, and his son Kuwái, was responsible for creating the world and establishing rites of passage, marriage rules, and kinship relations; Iñápirrikuli was also responsible for the plants that people raise (food and medicinal), for techniques used to make houses, and for fishing and other crafts. The Baniwa preserve the epopee about the creation and organization of social life through a set of coherent, interlocking mythic narratives that form a long, interconnected account. When taken as a whole, it helps understand the ties between the origin and primordial organization of the world and the activities of ordinary, everyday life, providing general guidelines that may be reinterpreted depending upon the context in which they appear (Lévi-Strauss, 1993). Relations with nature, for the Makuna, constitute a "cosmology converted into ecology," to borrow Arhem's words (2001, p. 232).

An extensive set of narratives concerning the origin of rivers, lakes, *igapós*, and other fishing places, as well as the appearance of the various species of aquatic animals, with their own specific forms of social life (seen as analogous to the human way of life), serve to illustrate our discussion. According to these myths, creation of the Içana River came as the result of a clash between Iñápirríkuli and the bird Keerao; although the bird was the hero's friend, Keerao had sexual relations with his friend's spouse while Iñápirríkuli was out searching for the night, which did not exist yet. The upset creator failed in his attempt to try to kill Keerao using shamanic magic. In retribution, the bird produced a deluge that was supposed to kill his rival, but though this magic flooded the whole world, the bird also failed to achieve its goal. Bit by bit, the water made room for itself, forming rivers (the longest, biggest stretch was the Içana) and, where the water settled, lakes.

Iñápirríkuli primitive world was small; only later, thanks to Kuwái's sacred flutes, did it expand to its current size. The Içana River followed the same fate: it was at first short and narrow. In order to expand fishing and dwelling places for future humans, Dzúli, brother to Iñápirríkuli, called forth the magic powers both of the *málikai* chants (which the narrators translate into Portuguese as '*benzimentos*', or 'blessings') and of tobacco. He blew cigarette smoke towards the river, thus widening its course. According to the narrators, this is also the origin of the river's many curves, which reflect the twisted path of the wind-borne smoke.

When the waters dropped, Iñápirríkuli decided to create life to populate them. He created fish from pieces of wood and gave them life by blowing tobacco smoke and through *málikai* chants. The creator took the colors with which he painted the fishes' bodies from the sun and assigned distinct identities to each species. But the first fish were soft because they did not have bones and thus lacked agility. Unable to swim long distances, they would not leave the port of their ancestral village, making it impossible to colonize the waterways. Iñápirríkuli called forth magic powers from the four directions of the firmament, channeled them into his cigarette smoke, and blew it over the fish, creating the bones they have today. Boasting stronger bones, migrating fish could now cover long distances to their spawning places. In another episode, Dzúli blessed the fish, named them, taught them to dance and build longhouses, and established matrimonial rules, forms of reproduction, and the spawning places for each species.

These events had contradictory repercussions. According to some phratic versions, the fish created by Iñápirríkuli grew and multiplied. In some cases, this growth in both size and magical power transformed the fish into great snakes (*Umawali*), endowed

with the power to create new fish; these became the ‘fathers’ and ‘mothers’ of the fish. As the Baniwa classify animals, fish and large anacondas belong to one same taxonomic niche, that is, they are kin. In other versions, narrators claim the great snakes always existed and were already the fathers and mothers of some kinds of fish, different from the ones created by Iñápirríkuli.

There are a number of mythic versions about the origin of fish. The common thread is that they see the great snakes—and their descendants, the fish—as dangerous enemies of humanity (*walimanai*), which depends upon them for food. The threat represented by the fish is not uniformly distributed: species with teeth and stingers, or whose morphology resembles that of snakes, are felt to represent the greatest potential threat to humans.

Some narratives on settlement of the lakes clearly show the tension between Iñápirríkuli (and his allies) and the anacondas, which dominated the large lakes and make it impossible for humans to establish settlements nearby, since the snakes prey on them. In one of these narratives, Iñápirríkuli and his kin made war against the snakes, killing them or expelling them from the lakes to make space to be occupied by future humans. Defeating the snakes was vital if humans were to have access to the fishing sources essential to their survival. Once the struggle ended, humanity could more easily enjoy abundant fishing, but as a further consequence, when the hostile snake disappeared so did the fish’s ability to reproduce mightily.

Afterwards, Iñápirríkuli summoned forth the powerful jaguar-shamans, ancestors of the current Dzáwinai phratry,<sup>4</sup> which re-created the ‘fathers’ and ‘mothers’ of the fish to repopulate the lakes where humans would fish. With amazing geographical precision, this narrative describes an epic journey down the Içana River, during which shamans sculpt snakes out of logs, drawing pictures on their surfaces to lend each distinct features. They next give life to the new beings through chants and tobacco smoke. Then they find appropriate living places for each ‘fish mother’ created. To do this, the shamans go into a trance and dive to the bottom of each lake to get to know the characteristics of each and to evaluate the compatibility between each being and its habitat.

In common language, the lakes can be generically called *kophé kooyanali* (house of fish), but they receive specific names during blessings, known only to specialists; these are the names given by the Wakaweni (‘slaves’ of Iñápirríkuli) during rituals to create mothers of fish. The names of the lakes and the snakes that began living in them are recited sequentially during post-birth rituals (*kalidzamai*), part of the important rituals for protecting young humans from the dangers of the food they will eat throughout their lives.



Through songs, dance, and tobacco smoke, Iñápirríkuli's allies repopulate the lakes with snakes created by the power of the ancestral family. Even though these snakes essentially remain dangerous predators, shamanic (re)creation fosters a certain degree of 'familiarization'<sup>5</sup> of the great snakes, rendering relative coexistence with humans feasible. The naming and repopulating of lakes also plays the role of influencing the delimitation of phratric territories (i.e., it outlines boundaries within human groupings), which overlap with the territories occupied by societies of fish-snakes and other spirit-animals still living in conflict.

In Baniwa cosmology, fish and the ancestors of humans enjoy relations of affinity, whereas birds usually appear in stories as close allies or kin. Iñápirríkuli had several wives, most from the families of predator fish. In one myth on how pepper came to be, for example, Iñápirríkuli marries the daughter of the piranha-fish, in an episode that narrates the hero's visit to his father-in-law's house in the company of various birds. The story underscores Iñápirríkuli's ambiguous position, since he feeds off his wife's and father-in-law's kin. The story not only tells how pepper came to be (created by Iñápirríkuli to 'cook' the raw fish which his father-in-law was going to use to kill him, thereby neutralizing its poison), but also explains the appearance of an illness (*whiókali*, Port. transcription) associated with eating raw or undercooked fish, whose secretions can destroy the victim's internal organs. A number of murder attempts occur while the hero is at his father-in-law's house, but Iñápirríkuli manages to escape thanks to his ingenuity and shamanic power. The permanent byproducts of this episode are pepper and the *whiókali* illness (Garnelo, Wright, 2001).

Other narratives present fishing as the product of erotic games between fish-women and mythical or human fishers. Among the Baniwa, fishing is basically a male activity, imbued with strong sexual connotations; it requires performance of propitiatory rites meant to make fishing traps efficacious and to increase a fisherman's success. These rites in turn demand the performance of blessings, the use of seduction plants (*monotsi*), and sexual and food abstinence. Taken as a whole, the procedures are meant to enhance the fisherman's power of attraction and the efficiency of his fishing. This is an exchange system where the successful courting of fish-women means the fisherman must renounce pleasures in everyday life. An analysis of the characteristics of fishing allow us to understand it as a broad set of practices and concepts ordered within a network of interactions that favor the fisherman.

Sexual intercourse between members of human and nonhuman societies is addressed in a number of mythic accounts. In one that is especially important in the group's cosmology, the great snake *Uliamali* has sexual relations with one of Iñápirríkuli's wives and

gets her pregnant. This is a rivalry over the production of descendants—human or fish—who will inherit control of the world. In the end, the adulterous snake and its descendants are killed, guaranteeing the current order in which fish are the prey of humans. Daily fishing is seen as an inverse actualization of this mythic event, since the losers of the battle—in which continuation of the human species was nearly thwarted—are now assigned the role of sustaining Baniwa offspring.

Among the different versions on the origin of fish, the villagers are particularly fond of one myth. Almost everyone knows the story of Hiwidamitti (*'cabeça de moqueado,'* or head of smoked fish), a young fisherman who disobeys his older brother and, unable to resist the enticing smell of smoked fish, eats the fish offered by the *Inyaimé*, or shadows of the dead. Some time later, parts of Hiwidamitti's body gain autonomous life, transforming into different kinds of fish; the only human part left is his head, which leaps upon his brother's shoulder. There it acts voraciously, grabbing any food given the older brother, who begins to die of starvation.

The story of Hiwidamitti addresses a theme recurrent in Amerindian societies: the question of commensality with the dead, which has been analyzed by a number of authors, among them Fausto (2002). When Hiwidamitti eats the food of the dead, he crosses a boundary that removes him definitively from human society, making him a traveler between two irreconcilable realities. Reduced to a head, unable to control his impulses, he is relegated to the status of a parasite, until he is killed by his kin, who thus close a dangerous door of communication with irreducible, menacing alterity. This same trajectory is repeated in other narratives, demonstrating at one and the same time the danger and renewal represented by realms of existence outside Baniwa society.

Another mythic episode also takes up the topic of crossing the boundary between human society and the domain of primordial snakes. Poperiana, a lake with one of the most abundant supplies of fish along the middle Içana, was the living place of a large anaconda (Umawali), who raised different types of fish there, sculpting them in wood and giving them life by casting them into the water. Although the lake was a rich source of fish, it was so dangerous that humans could not cross it. Travelers were forced to get out of their canoes and continue on foot through forest trails; they would only return to the river once they had passed the lake's borders.

Once, someone who was crossing the lake in a canoe with his son was attacked by the snake that lived there. The man escaped but his child disappeared. At first the father thought his son had died, but he was told by a freshwater dolphin that the youth was

alive and dwelling in the anaconda's longhouse at the bottom of the lake. As the story unfolds, the father then journeys to the subaquatic longhouse, kills the male anaconda, and saves his son. This ending reiterates the ongoing dispute over dominion of the waters by humans and snakes.

In some versions, the narrative goes on to tell of the father's consternation over the changes in his rescued son's behavior; the boy is unable to resume his ordinary life in his paternal home, lingering in the water, always reluctant to stop bathing. The father, unable to control his son while he witnesses the boy's progressive transformation into an animal, finally agrees that he can live part of the time in an aquatic environment. Once his metamorphosis is complete, the child turns into a chelonian and becomes 'father' of shelled-creatures, hybrids of aquatic and land animals. This transformation gives the snake the ultimate victory over the human that killed him, since the rescued child fails to overcome his resemblance to aquatic animals (because of his stay in the snakes' longhouse) and detaches himself from humanity once and for all. Yet the metamorphosis also brings changes in the aquatic world, since there the boy establishes marriage rules and teaches specific chanting and dancing abilities to different types of chelonian.

The deaths of anacondas in these myths are marked by ambiguity; on the one hand, these deaths allow fishermen access to fish; yet on the other, they represent the loss of the reproductive potential of fish. Within this context, men are restricted to the role of predators/consumers of aquatic animals, bereft of any ability to reproduce fish, which becomes a talent monopolized by snakes. The Baniwa experience of the aquatic world around them today is one of progressive decrease in the fish population and the imminent loss of their food sources. They attribute these changes to death or to other forms of distancing from the sources of power—that is, the great snakes—that are supposed to guarantee the replenishment of fish.

Fish habits are also the object of symbolic construction. Myths and rites tell of life in society governed by matrimonial and kinship obligations, akin to those of the Baniwa themselves. Spawning runs are compared to the human *pudáli*. It is believed that during these festivities, fish swim up waterways in search of the homes of ancestral snakes. Once they arrive, they sing, dance, engage in food-exchange ceremonies, drink *caxiri*, and then procreate. The social life of fish also involves abduction of women, adultery, envy, greed, and, at times, forced or consensual sex with human females. Various mythical passages have to do with the appearance of disease, dietetic restrictions adopted during rites of passage, strategies for healing illness or caring for the sick, and shamanic training and practice.

The symbolic production that affords parameters for interactions among the Baniwa themselves and with nature also finds expression through rituals. In this realm, two important rites have been studied by Wright (1993) and Hill (1987, 1993). In research undertaken in the 1980s among members of the Dzáwinai phratry in Venezuela, Hill (1993) characterized *málikai* as a set of songs, chants, and orations performed in post-birth rituals, male and female puberty initiation, and curing. Hill considers the performance of *málikai* a type of poetic-musical mediation that can tie the mythical accounts on the origin and order of the world to the shared experience of humans during their social life and their interaction with nature.

Wright (1993) studied the ritual language of *kalidzamai* chants of the Hohodene and Walipere phratries in Brazil, which he considered to be a variation of the tradition, contrasting them with data analyzed by Hill among the Dzáwinai. Wright views *kalidzamai* chants as part of a broader set of shamanic activities called *iapakana* by the Hohodene, or *ñapakana* by the Walipere. According to Wright, common to *iapakana* is the recitation of certain ritual formulas 'blown out' along with tobacco smoke, which is meant to potentialize the power contained within the words. These formulas can be used to achieve success in daily cropping activities, to promote good health and cure sickness, to guarantee success in hunting and fishing, and so on.

Wright (1993) identifies gradients of power and complexity among these recited formulas and suggests that the *kalidzamai* rite, which joins chants and recitations, is one of the most complex and important kinds of *iapakana*. In his research, the author conducted an in-depth study of the *kalidzamai* performed in post-birth rituals. Since these are of particular interest in analyzing our own data on food, we will summarize his findings on this ritual. For like reasons, we will also make a brief reference to similar work by Hill (1993), carried out in Venezuela.

According to Wright (1993), post-birth *kalidzamai* are meant not only to protect the child and its family from the aggressive action of spirits of the forest, water, and underground world but also to ensure the safety of the food that will be eaten by the natal couple when the post-birth period of food restrictions reaches its end. The ritualistic acts that bring routine food back into the parents' and newborn's diet encompass a session of recitations to protect the paternal body and spirit prior to the father's hunt, while he is still under food restrictions. Transforming prey into safe food requires that recitations continue to be performed over both the hunted animal and the pepper used to season it as well (Hill, 1993; Wright, 1993). Wright (1993) asserts that the systematic naming of spirit-beings, performed at blessings, is intended to prevent any

potential aggression (especially sickness) that these beings could inflict upon the family in everyday situations. Pronouncing recitations over food has a similar purpose; in this procedure, the chant-owner names all edible species, which are cooked with pepper to protect the parents and child from the danger intrinsic to the very act of eating.

Another rite of major importance in understanding relations between the social and natural worlds are the *pudáli* ceremonial exchanges practiced by the Baniwa and studied by Hill (1987) among the Dzáwinai. According to Hill, this tradition, which involves the exchange of food-gifts between groups of affines, serves the clear purposes of redistributing surpluses and establishing matrimonial exchanges, but its main purpose is to dissolve differences between kin and affine, between men and women, and between humans and nonhumans through ceremonial means. Hill's study presents an in-depth ethnography of *pudáli*, from which we will draw only a few points, relevant to our research goals.

According to Hill (1987), in order to hold a *pudáli*, there must be surplus fish that can be offered to affine living in another settlement. Upon their arrival, visitors place the offered food in the village's outside plaza, but do not enter (nor are they invited into) the host-recipients' house. Then begins the first set of dance-music, performed solely by the visitors.

According to Hill's description (1987), the ritual is divided into three stages. In the first, the visitors play a variety of wind instruments and perform an elaborate set of dances, in which ordered pairs of men and women circle about the food. These performances are said to be a stylized imitation of the reproductive behavior of the *aracu*, a species of *Leporinus* fish. In the second stage, based on imitation of the eating and mating behavior of *déetu*, or coconut palm weevils, the hosts accept the food and then invite the visitors into their house. This moment marks the beginning of a social interaction where food and drink are shared and all perform together inside the house. At the same time, some male guests remain outside, playing long *déetu* flutes, with their ends pointing into the eaves of the house. This performance symbolizes the overcoming of the society's inner and outer boundaries. Lastly, in the third stage, after hosts and guests have engaged in reciprocal exchanges of food and drink, in an atmosphere of familiarity and informality they perform improvised songs and chants—which also represent the behavior of fish and other animals—eradicating any distinction between guest and host.

For Hill (1987), these three stages symbolize a process of deconstruction and transcendence of the boundaries recognized by human cultures. The first phase of the rite, marked by the expression of wonder and mistrust due an affine, is followed by

the moment when stigmas distinguishing relatives from affine are done away with. The second stage moves towards the close of the rite; it is the point at which the very barriers between the two sexes and those separating humans and nonhumans are temporarily abolished, instigating an atmosphere of closeness and familiarity between the various socialized spaces making up the Baniwa cosmos.

Not just extraordinary moments call for ritualizations that express the ties between human life and the cosmic order. Just as with the art of fishing, the daily preparation and consumption of food present ritual characteristics that also exemplify Baniwa ways of interacting with nature.

Handling fish demands special care on the part of fishermen, so they do not accidentally eat raw fish or fish secretions, especially the smell (*heewe*) of the fish, source of numerous illnesses. The origin of this animal attribute is the object of a detailed mythic tale in which the fish, at first lacking any smell, incorporated as part of their physical characteristics the transmuted semen of the great snake Uliamali, the one killed by Iñápirríkuli. The aggressive potential of this huge snake, forever present in fish, must be combated daily through careful cooking of food and special care in handling it. Accidental eating of semen-smell can cause a consumptive disease (*whiókali*), which afflicts the victim with diarrhea, weight loss, paleness, and asthenia; it can kill a person if the diagnosis is not made soon enough for treatment. One of the major ways of preventing *whiókali* is the correct performance of a birth *kalidzamai* and slow cooking of fish with much pepper.

The Baniwa have a number of ways of classifying fish, according to morphological features, preferred habitats, and eating and reproductive habits. But one of the most important forms of classification has to do with how dangerous the animal is, especially its ability to cause sickness and death, which is directly proportional to the presence and size of its means of aggression, like teeth and spurs. The Baniwa recognize that to varying degrees, fish share the snake's ability to bite, release venomous substances, sting, and so on. These characteristics require the performance of procedures to neutralize their aggressive power, such as the *kalidzamai* rituals performed post-birth, at puberty, and during recovery from serious illness. Following the reasoning of Fausto (2002), we can state that food blessings propose to remove the prey from its condition of subject; through this de-subjectivation, they intend to transform it into a pure object—that is, merely food, devoid of any agency.

Because of the characteristics of food sources, any food offered to the sick and to people in borderline situations must be restricted. Moderation in eating is an important value in the Baniwa ethos, recommended for both the healthy and the ill. However, in the

case of the ailing, moderation is not a question of choice, and the subject's diet will be more or less restricted depending upon the seriousness of his or her illness and how much the fish resembles the great predators. Those who are sick, and especially those who have been bitten by snakes or poisoned by *manhene*,<sup>6</sup> are prohibited from eating fish that can bite or sting, as well as any fish whose physical characteristics resemble those of snakes (e.g., smooth, viscous, without scales, venomous). If an illness hangs on or worsens, greater restrictions are placed on the consumption of game and fish,<sup>7</sup> especially large specimens. Similar prohibitions apply to youth during puberty and to the parents of newborns.

Table etiquette is also part of the measures intended to reduce food dangers and strengthen ties of solidarity and mutual respect. For the set of Baniwa phratries from which we gathered information, sharing food is among the most highly valued social behaviors. Appropriate receiving of visitors requires the offering of food, whose quality can vary according to availability and the importance assigned the visitor. So mere transients—or during a time of scarcity—may be offered nothing more than *chibé*, a cooling drink of manioc flour, water, and sugar; in the case of members of *sibs* (groups of kin forming a phratry) and phratries of recognized importance on the Baniwa social scale, however, the reception should ideally be accompanied by a meal of fish or game.

In areas dominated by the Walipere and Dzáwinai phratries, especially among evangelicals, the rules surrounding the obligation to share food, avoid gastronomic exaggeration, and place value on commensality are strict, especially because sharing food is attributed the power to 'please' and 'calm' strangers. Sharing is not simply an act that reaffirms ties of commitment and solidarity; it is also an effective demonstration of trust between commensals. It negates the possibility of poisoning (*manhene*), which, for the Baniwa, represents one of the main forms of aggression and death found in social life. Sharing food reaffirms commitment to attitudes befitting a human being and wards off cannibalistic and anti-social behavior, deemed characteristics of aggressive alterity. It is, in short, a political activity to reduce differences.

Those who refuse any offered food or who are greedy in sharing food are looked at with reservation by the others and tend to be categorized as abnormal. They may be suspected of being 'owners of poison' (*manhene iminali*) and blamed for cases of death caused by witchcraft; this is not usually made explicit publicly but imputed by village gossip. In short, the refusal to eat together is an anti-social act par excellence and a dangerous behavior that can rend the social fabric.

One of the most important public spaces in a Baniwa village is the 'community hall' (*makadapana*), where members of the different

families gather daily for collective meals. This is also where decisions are made on joint work to be undertaken, where people catch up on gossip, and where political power is exercised. The sharing of food underpins the mosaic of events that take place there. Each family is generally expected to take some of the food available in their house to each collective meal. Early in the morning, a bell announces the first trip to the hall. Then begins the procession of women, sometimes helped by the men of the family when their contribution to the community meal is in heavy pots. On ordinary days, food containers are lined up on a large central table, and those present sit on benches, which may be placed in rows along both sides of the room or, in smaller villages, against the building's walls. With men sitting on one side and women on the other, the participants wait while the young—assigned this task by the village head (captain)—put the food on their plates. This daily practice improves young people's ability to divide food in precise portions so that everyone present can have a small amount of each available food. Similar procedures apply to serving the beverages that accompany the meal. The same sequence of events is usually repeated at the evening meal.

Sharing food and drink is a moral obligation, reaffirming in the hall every day the generosity and good intents of the participants and dispelling the shadow of anti-social behavior, particularly the use of *manhene*, disseminated primarily through food.

In objective terms, no one is really forced to go to the hall or take a contribution of food, but doing so lavishly earns much prestige. Refusing to participate places the transgressor in the position of enemy and makes him the target of veiled disapproval, producing such an atmosphere of moral censure that it is practically impossible for him to live in the village. This is a way of fostering 'relatedness' and combating the centrifugal lines of force generated in the minor clashes and disputes of daily life that constantly threaten social cohesion. It is a strategy for strengthening the 'familiarization' of those present and for controlling the potential eruption of predatory relations among members of the local group (Fausto, 2002).

Gluttony and greed were responsible for the drama of Hiwidamitti, who accepted the food of the dead and thus started down the road to nonhuman society. Eventually he was left only with his head, witness to his condition as someone lost and unable to live with his kinsfolk. In his new life, Hiwidamitti is no longer able to eat *with* his brother; he eats *for* him; he becomes incapable of fulfilling the social obligations that characterize a human being. His new life makes him doubly undesirable: by condemning his kin to permanent hunger and perpetrating slow fratricide and by divesting him of the means to contribute to the production of food



and of relatives, making him solely a consumer of work done by others.

The rules for preparing food to be served in the hall are influenced by the origin of the women preparing them. Given the rules of marriage among the Baniwa, wives who live in the villages come from phratries of affines. This means that the lives of married women are an ongoing process of 'familiarization', carried out by their husbands' kin. In the village setting, we find a gradient that ranges from the oldest women, who have lived in their husband's village for many years, to the young wives, who are making the hard transition from their lives in their home villages to their new situation as a wife subject to a mother-in-law, who is herself a stranger to this place. The female condition, moving between the outer and inner boundaries of phratric relations, demands strict compliance with the rules on bodily cleanliness applicable to those who produce and who prepare food, in order to guarantee neutralization of the inherent danger of both.

As a prerequisite to food preparation, cleaning of the female body includes bathing, use of scented resins, thorough genital hygiene, and the elimination of body odor; during menstruation, women should ideally abstain from handling food. Similar procedures are adopted in preparing fish, whose viscera, secretions, and odors must be likewise subdued. Woman's bodily pollution is seen as one form of expression of the aggressive powers of the spirit-animals; they threaten not only the woman but the whole group of co-residents. Various types of ailments, especially digestive trouble, are blamed on contamination of food by female body pollution (Garnelo, 2003).

Among the different ways of preparing and consuming fish, *quinhãpira*—fish cooked with much green pepper (*attimapa*)—is considered the safest and tastiest dish. Cold or slightly warmed-over food is rejected, since its properties are believed to make people fall ill or promote contact with worlds inhabited by animals and beings invisible to ordinary life.<sup>8</sup> Ideally, all food should be boiled or smoked until there is no sign of any blood or of the raw food (Lévi-Strauss, 1968). Although transgression of this ideal rule does occur, and is in fact relatively common, everyone sees noncompliance as inappropriate and something to be avoided. When symptoms of an illness appear, they are interpreted as a warning that carelessness has gone too far, and this usually occasions a return to the food discipline necessary to protect or recover good health.

In the case of victims of snakebites or those poisoned by *manhene*, obedience of dietary restrictions must be absolutely rigorous, not only on the part of the victims but also his or her closest kin and spouse. The poison flowing through these people's blood presents

the serious threat of triggering transmutation into an animal; therefore, their human condition and their kinship ties must be reaffirmed through bodily discipline that reinforces their ability to control their impulses and also through reaffirmation of their social bonds with their fellow human creatures.

### **Conclusion**

The data analyzed in this article reaffirm the characteristics of Amerindian ontologies, in which fish and other animals are endowed with intentionality and assume the condition of subjects entwined in a network of social relations with human beings, where they negotiate, make war, and interact sexually. Men capture and consume fish, but they can also be hunted, attacked, made sick, or be devoured by aquatic animals that sustain the reproduction of man's kinship group. Baniwa thought fully acknowledges the subjectivity of fish, snakes, and other aquatic animals and their ability to exercise agency. The interactions expressed in mythic narratives can also be observed in daily fishing activities and food preparation, as well as in the precautions taken to protect health and cure sickness.

Although the literature available on this topic has focused on game, the Baniwa's characteristic ways of life allow us to arrive at a detailed understanding of the aquatic habitat and the beings that dwell therein. The material analyzed has shown that the Baniwa's interactions with these animals follow a logic similar to that guiding relations with the land beings populating the surrounding natural space, as studied among other indigenous peoples. It has also let us link the production of this knowledge with the ways of ordering the system of healing and health care developed by the group.

Commensality and predation are actions that organize a sociocosmic network, built around a fundamental opposition between kin and non-kin. They make possible the measures needed to link these terms, which is indispensable to the management of identities and alterities. Eating practices guarantee the production of new relatives through the material and symbolic appropriation of the vital power of non-relatives. This dynamic fosters the production of knowledge about the local ecology, puncture techniques, and culinary preparation; it also guides a set of behaviors considered necessary to the exercise of predation, understood as a complex system of prestations and counter-prestations between enemies that ideally will be transformed into commensals, thus guaranteeing preservation of the inner workings of social life (Fausto, 1999).

Moving between the boundaries of humanity and the domain of alterity is a way of renewing and enriching society, but it is likewise the source of death, sickness, and chaos. It demands the establishment of procedures that make this movement less risky, as observed in analyses of *pudáli* and *kalidzamai* (Wright, 1993; Hill, 1987). The renewal of social life by consuming the 'other' in the form of food and by stripping him of his volitional-cognitive condition can be accomplished more safely through the age-old strategies created within this culture. Nevertheless, this demands that prey offer their own privation and suffering in counterpart, thus to a certain extent restoring the unstable cosmic balance, perpetually threatened by voracity and other anti-social behavior.

## NOTES

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<sup>2</sup> According to Wright (1993), 'Baniwa' is not a term of self-designation; rather, during the process of colonization, it was incorporated by indigenous people and became a sign of self-reference. Wright states that the same group is called Wakuenai in Venezuela and Curripaco in Colombia. In the middle Içana, Brazil, where I gathered my field data, as a rule members of this group do not use any generic term to describe themselves as a people. In the collective, they refer to themselves by the name of their phratry of origin; in contact with other ethnic groups of the Negro River region or with non-indigenous peoples, they usually refer to themselves as Baniwa.

<sup>3</sup> The region where this research was conducted also has Curripaco settlements; this group uses a dialectal variant of the Baniwa language and for practical purposes functions as a phratry, even engaging in matrimonial exchanges with its closest neighbors, the Walipere and Hohodene.

<sup>4</sup> In other versions, those entrusted with this task were called *Wakaweni*, described by the narrators as the 'slaves' of Iñápirrikuli.

<sup>5</sup> The term 'familiarization' is used here as proposed by Fausto (2002): to make familiar, to reduce difference, and to draw a member of alterity closer to the plane of consanguinity.

<sup>6</sup> *Manhene* is a term used to designate both a disease and its instrument of causality. It is characterized by the introduction of poisonous substances into the victim's body through food or drink. The Baniwa believe it is the principal and most dangerous illness that can afflict them. The practice of poisoning is viewed as a type of witchcraft, and the poisoner is considered an anti-social being par excellence (Garnelo, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Analysis of the Baniwa's relation with land animals and winged animals is likewise important but lies outside the scope of this paper, which we have restricted to the study of their interaction with aquatic animals.

<sup>8</sup> A number of myths tell of voyages by people to subaquatic settlements of fish, where fish take human form and live much as we do. In some of these accounts, a common human being manages to transport himself to these places by eating cold, spoiled food, which opens communication with worlds to which only shamans usually have access, through voyages made possible by *paricá*.

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