

# Matis Animal Feasts:

## minimal mimesis for social relations weaving

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### Abstract

In this paper, I describe how the Matis animal feasts are important events for the Matis to try establishing relationships with strangers, especially with the *animalumans*, animals that are humans. These rituals are an important *cosmo-socio-logical investment* for the Matis as they are a constituent part of the Matis economy of culture. I also comment on the matis' morphological scientific observation, with its emphasis on the plant's body parts named after animal's organs. I intend to show how the predominant aesthetic in these animal parties is minimalist and mimetically subtle, especially when it concerns the animal clothes, masks and patterns the Matis produce and reproduce when *en-acting* animals and weaving their clothes (bracelets and anklets). I reflect on the sort of mimesis they produce as a valuable way of *weaveestablishing* relations with the foreigners (be they animals, disembodied beings or other foreigners).

**Key words:** Matis; Javari; human-animal relations; performance; ritual; jaguar.

# Festas Animais Matis:

## mimese minimalista para tecer relações sociais

### Resumo

Nesse artigo, descrevo as relações sociais que os indígenas Matis mantém com os animais - aos quais chamarei doravante de "*animalumanos*", animais que são humanos. Procuro mostrar como tais rituais são um importante "*investimento cosmo-socio-lógico*" para os Matis e parte constitutiva da economia de sua cultura. Comento também sobre a nomenclatura derivada da ciência morfológica matis acerca dos seres vivos, com ênfase nas plantas nomeadas como pedaços e órgãos de animais. Mostro como a estética predominante nessa festa é minimalista e mimeticamente sutil, especialmente quando diz respeito às roupas, às máscaras e aos padrões de animais produzidos e reproduzidos pelos Matis quando "*en-acting*" *animalumanos* e ao tecer suas roupas (braceletes e tornozeleiras). Reflito sobre o tipo de mimesis produzida é uma forma valiosa para tentar *estable-tecer* relações sociais com estrangeiros (sejam eles animais, seres desencorporados ou outros estrangeiros).

**Palavras-chave:** Matis; Javari; relações humano-animal; performance; ritual; onça.

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*Tiger, tiger, burning bright  
In the forests of the night,  
What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

William Blake

The Matis are indigenous people that live in the Amazonian forest and have established permanent contact with the Brazilian government between 1976 and 1978. Until then they had had only sporadic relations with non-indigenous outsiders. Matis men and women who told me their memories of their “first encounter” and of the time when they used to live as “isolated Indians” - as the media and the Brazilian government refer to them - are the same ones who now negotiate to perform “Matis feasts” for and with tourists and foreign TV crews, such as the BBC (from the UK) or MBC (from South Korea). Nowadays, the Matis are 334 people living in the second biggest Indigenous Land in Brazil, Terra Indígena Vale do Javari, with 8,5 million hectares close to the triple border shared by Brazil, Peru and Colombia, home to the highest populations of indigenous people considered to be living in isolation (i.e. without contact with the Brazilian society and its government).

In the less than 30 years elapsing since the Matis had their first official contact with the Brazilians, this indigenous population entered at full speed into the whirlpool that comes along with all the usual life transformations brought by this sort of encounter (Arisi 2010). They faced sickness and death (have been reduced to circa 60 people in the 80s), they had some access to new medicines, different food, industrialized objects accessible on a larger scale such as machetes, axes, pans and, on a smaller scale, technological items like 16 mm rifles, outboard engines, solar panels and, more recently, mobile phones and digital cameras. Soon after, filmmakers disembarked to shoot the Matis and many documentaries were made, spreading their images in the world like “imagetic dominoes” (Arisi 2011) and making them famous worldwide. In these dominoes, I shall argue, animal feasts take an important role, as they are the occasion when the relationships with foreigners are tested, when what others usually call “traditional” party or ritual becomes, in fact, also an experiential laboratory (Calavia & Arisi 2013).

In this paper, I describe how the Matis feasts are a good way for the Matis to try establishing relationships with strangers. They are an important *cosmo-socio-logical investment* (Arisi 2011) for the Matis as I present here, a constituent part of the Matis economy. I intend to show how the predominant aesthetic in this party is minimalist and mimetically subtle, especially when it concerns the minimal clothing and masking the Matis produce when enacting the animals and the sort of mimesis<sup>1</sup> they produce as a valuable way of becoming foreigners (be they animals or other outsiders).

The Matis feasts are made to keep updating a long history of circulation of technology, goods and knowledge with outsiders with its main goal of becoming a bigger and stronger people. That is not new for them, as in their feasts they show that there have always been *cosmos-networking* in immense webs of

<sup>1</sup> Mimesis has a long tradition in philosophy, deriving from Plato and Aristotle. I will employ the term mimesis referring mainly to the ideas of Deleuze and Guattari on “becoming-animal” in *Thousand Plateaus* (2005 [1987]: 264). Finally, I try to present what I learnt from the matis to be a subtle mimesis.

trade (Arisi 2011). While hunting, farming, gathering, partying, they have always tried to keep on dancing and singing with (and as) animals and other foreigners, as I will show below. They have been afraid to party just for a short period, after the terrible demographic debacle, caused by the Brazilian government's (ir)responsibility, when more than 2/3 of their already small population was almost decimated by simple diseases such as flu and the Funai (Brazilian Indian Affairs bureau) did not have even an outboard engine to go up or down the river to bring the sick ones to a hospital to get better medical care.

I met the Matis for the first time in 2003 and, since 2006, I have worked and learned with them and had experienced thirteen months of fieldwork focused in understanding how they create and invent an economy of their culture, establishing transactions with foreigners, be they animals, disembodied beings or vital forces (*tsussin* in Matis language), film makers, researchers or tourists.

## Economy of culture

At a time that many anthropologists started to doubt everything that smells like the essentialization of culture, both indigenous and many other peoples were reifying culture for themselves and claiming it for many reasons and in different ways<sup>2</sup>.

The awareness and manipulation of the idea of culture that is taking place throughout lowland South America mirrors a similar self-conscious display of culture currently going on among indigenous peoples elsewhere in the world, such as in Australia (Myers 1991, 1994), New Zealand (Hanson 1989; Linnekin 1991), Melanesia (Foster 1995; Thomas 1992), and Polynesia (Sahlins 2000), among other places. (Oakdale 2004: 60)

Anthropologists could not tame the creativity of culture (Wagner 1981 [1975]), we could just try to stabilize it, even if only lasts a brief fraction, just a brief ethnographic moment. In Brazil, many researchers are studying indigenous transformations where culture participates in exchange relationships that become more commercialised and intermediated by money (Grünewald 2002; Gordon 2006; Coelho de Souza 2010, 2012; Carneiro da Cunha 2009; Coffaci de Lima 2010; Albuquerque 2011; Arisi 2011; among others). Of course, it doesn't mean negotiations initiated just decades ago, but now the interest in selling and exporting culture as a way of making money had increased (Comaroff & Comaroff 2009) with what Carneiro da Cunha propose to differentiate as "culture between brackets" – relations where "culture" would operate as a sign that circulates in contexts where are at stake different cultural regimes (2009: 67). Between brackets, culture works as an interpretative tool articulated to a context that goes beyond those that use the term, when those relations are established among people that do not share same premises (or, better said – the same "styles of creativity", as Carneiro da Cunha writes, when attributing meaning to the term "culture" (idem: 26 - 27). So, without the brackets, what does the mere word culture refer to? Exactly what the anthropologists are used to do when referring to it, what we invent as culture (cf. Wagner 2010).

Anthropologists have tried to work out native concepts on what the indigenous people consider as part of their *socius*, or better said, as their "social assemblage" (Latour 2005). Influenced by Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism, "the question is how to configure the people as theoretical agent rather than as passive 'subject'" (2004 : 4)? For this case study, I have tried to follow the practices and to understand who were the foreigners present in the Matis animal feasts and with whom and how the Matis associate and transact in those gatherings in order to get the "equivocation under control", alluding to the concept that Viveiros de Castro proposed: controlled equivocation". He suggested that "controlling this translative comparison between anthropologies is precisely what comprises the art of anthropology" (Viveiros de Castro 2004 : 4-5):

<sup>2</sup> Glowczewski (2011) has worked on the same themes with the Warlpiri in Australia.

Anthropology compares so as to translate, and not to explain, justify, generalize, interpret, contextualize, reveal the unconscious, say what goes without saying, and so forth. I would add that to translate is always to betray, as the Italian saying goes. However, a good translation—and here I am paraphrasing Walter Benjamin (or rather Rudolf Pannwitz via Benjamin)—is one that betrays the destination language, not the source language. A good translation is one that allows the alien concepts to deform and subvert the translator’s conceptual toolbox so that the intention of the original language can be expressed within the new one. [idem]

I engaged in this effort aiming to understand via ethnography how do the Matis trade their (im) material culture with outsiders, specially animals, disembodied beings and other foreigners. I could participate in key moments of the Matis’ economic relations with TV crews and tourists when most of those “gringos” chose to see the blowpipe hunting and the *nëix tanek* - we can translate this native expression as “animal feasts”, using the Matis own translation when they are speaking in Portuguese. So, we can think as translation as part of the cultural “transaction” that takes place when indigenous people negotiate to perform their animal feasts to a group of foreigners. Before the contact with the Brazilians, they use to organise those feasts with and for the animals, with and for the *tsussin* (disembodied forces) and also for their own enjoyment, maybe to some of their neighbour indigenous groups. Now, the animal feasts are performed with and for the same animals, but they had included new foreigners such as the gringos as their audience.

## Transactions

The animal feasts are a space and a way to transact and are an opportunity for the Matis to enact like the foreigners and with the foreigners. To make clear in which sense I intent to use the term transaction, I quote Hirsch and Strathern (2004: vii) that present a debate on intellectual property and compare international laws and indigenous notions of properties and creativity, mainly Melanesian indigenous people. The authors affirm that they had observed transactions in the strong sense of the term:

In an arena of attention to cultural matters, with several inflections given to the ‘cultural’ in cultural property, including questioning what counts as ‘culture’, it seemed important to take issues beyond anthropology’s own kind of cultural analysis. Culture has in any case become an increasing awkward analytic. The contributors’ concerns [*which means, the concerns of this books organisers*] has been with social relations, with people’s dealings with one another, and hence with transactions in a more generalised sense of the term. (Hirsch & Strathern 2004: viii)

The anthropological authors that have entered this field of debate are trying to follow and to show different forms of creativity while in action.

Humanity is not defined by the contingency of creative action (in thought/mental operation) but by the necessity of embodying and acting creatively. Relations established with others create those others and oneself in the work of differentiation. We come to this insight through the contrast with intellectual property rights, which make creativity into a specific resource, its presence contingent upon certain conditions of emergence. The notion of resource implies scarcity, and scarcity is a measure of value. But creativity is not scarce in Reite. Resources for these people lie elsewhere. People themselves are valuable, not what they produce as objects. As Wagner points out, “Westerners” value the objects, the outcomes of creativity: “we keep the ideas, the quotations, the memoirs, the creations and let the people go. Our attics ... [and] museums are full of this kind of culture’ (Wagner 1975: 26). (Leach 2004: 170).

Economies of creativity and economies of culture have become an interesting field to observe economic transactions. One of the fecund thinkers in contemporary anthropology has written:

For almost a century, anthropologists like me have been pointing out that there is something very wrong with this picture. The standard economic-history version has little to do with anything we observe when we examine how economic life is actually conducted, in real communities and marketplaces, almost anywhere one is much more likely to discover everyone in debt to everyone else in a dozen different ways, and that most transactions take place without the use of currency. (Graeber 2011 : 21-22).

The Matis also prefer to invest their time and creativity in inventing their old and new economies (with and without the use of currency) with foreigners as they expect that foreigners can help them to empower themselves in such a way that they can produce more valuable people, in order to become a “bigger people”. The Matis invest in producing more creative people that can, via minimalist and subtle mimesis, become more powerful beings such as the mythical animals enacted in the *tanek*.

### Animals and mimesis

During the *nëix tanek* feasts, the Matis receive and perform many animals in their *maloca* (the longhouse), or better said, their *malocosmo*<sup>3</sup> (Arisi 2011) as the longhouse is a space for community life (cooking, drinking and talking, etc), it is a hollow space thought of as a vertebrate body seen from the inner side and it is also explained and experience as being the cosmos itself. In the animal feasts, the Matis enact their myths, they en-act (*mise en scene*) and revive many mythical beings from whom they have obtained technologies, given as a gift or stolen, when the other was too stingy to share the knowledge. Some of those technologies are crucial to the Matis identity as it is nowadays, like the tattooing that was taught by a monkey. Another fundamental animal present in the acquiring technologies myths that appears in the party is the *tuyuyu* bird that helped a Matis boy that was once kidnapped by a vulture and obliged to eat putrefied food; in order to clean the boy’s guts the *tuyuyu* taught him a purgative technique to clean up his body: the *kampok* - a frog secretion vaccination, a powerful neurotoxin that provokes vomiting and diarrhoea, functions as medicine for food poison and it is a very important empowering substance (used by mothers to strength a considered weak child, for example). The *tuyuyu*, as the myth teaches and is enacted during the ritual party, also has shown the Matis boy how to find and to use fishing poison. Not all the animals are very friendly and generous. For example, the *jabuti* turtle was not so nice, it was a very stingy person, so the Matis had to use harsh methods to convince it, they close the *jabuti* anus with tree resin until it was suffering so much that it decided to explain the technology to weave hammocks and the Matis could stop sleeping on the cold ground.

As in any good Matis animal party, as much as it can be a joyful event, it can be very dangerous; easily, things can go out of hand, people are drinking manioc beer together and the proximity can make old disputes or hatreds be remembered, as much as it can be a good opportunity for furtive sex. In the *awat tanek* (Matis term for tapir *tanek*), the tapir enters very carefully in the longhouse’s corridor to avoid the hunting traps that older men built to catch them. The tapir cloth is minimal, only one banana leaf covering the man’s back, the leaf’s petiole is carried by the man with one hand, it is a mimesis of the smooth back of the animal, the midrib of the vegetal resembles the back of the tapir. One by one the Matis impersonating a tapir walks along the main corridor, it has to play a kind of game, the older women and men tell the tapir where it has to put its leg, then one arm, another leg, until it can not keep its balance and position

<sup>3</sup> Play on Portuguese words mixing *maloca* (longhouse) and *cosmos*.

and it falls on the ground, captured. A young woman or an old one not skilled enough, like me – the anthropologist, will be then called to butcher the tapir cutting its joints. There is a right place to enter the knife and to section into pieces to fit in the pans to be cooked by women. The *tuyuyu* birds enter as a flock, but even the friendly and non-stingy *tuyuyu* will soon be victim of an electric fish and it will fall amidst laughter of the participatory audience while the lucky ones fly to safety, jumping to some higher logs inside of the longhouse. The *tuyuyu* cloth is also very subtle, just one branch carried in front of the nose. That is enough to be a mask, a minimal mask. The dialogues among those animals and the Matis intend to make clear what is their kinship. So, one frog asks one by one if they find him or his skin ugly or beautiful; “you are ugly” is the right answer for the affine ones and “you are beautiful”, the correct answer for its relatives. The animals are mythical beings but they are at the same time really considered as kin or affine to the audience members, related as kin or as affine to the people in the longhouse. It is enactment, but it is also updating of social relations.

The Matis translate *tanekin* as “to invent” and “to mimic”, I use also “to perform” - from the anthropological lexicon<sup>4</sup>. To mimic and to invent translate the same verb which means that, for the Matis, invention is not opposite to imitate and to mimesis. As Calavia and I have written elsewhere: “the Matis and other Amazonian people tend via imitation (always related to translation and transformation) to create a bridge with these foreigners and, in this move, they invent their relations with them” (Calavia & Arisi 2013, my translation). We propose that the rituals in the Amazon offer a good place and a special time to test new relations, not a place of “tradition”, but one for innovation and for testing new possibilities of alliances and exchange. In short, we propose that the performances of those rituals – when “strangers” come to interact with and within Amazonian communities – are special occasion to trial. About the nature of those foreigners or strangers, it does not matter much if they are conquerors of Incan or European empires, or one half of the community enacting an enemy invasion, or a relative dressed/disguised in order to create inside the community the necessary alterity, or if it is someone using animal clothes to have abilities of other bodies, as perspectivist theorists propose (Viveiros de Castro 1996; Stolze de Lima 2005). The foreigners<sup>5</sup> can be gringos from whom the Matis can get powerful technologies, objects or money that can give access to many transformational goods, like the outboard engine brought by BBC’s Bruce Parry as part of the license-to-film-payment (Arisi 2012). Or they can be *tsussin*, disembodied beings or vital power, as Lagrou (2007) translates the Kaxinawa word *yuxin*. In this case, the Matis have to be very careful as the *tsussin* have ways to make even undesirable deformed babies in the women’s wombs.

The *tsussin* also come to party with the Matis in the *malocosmo*. Though they do not drink ayahuasca like most of their neighbours, the Matis prepare a vine beverage called *tatxik*. It has not made its way to the urban centers serving as new age rituals like the *kampok* - the frog vaccination the Katukina Pano, the Huni Kuin/Kaxinawa and the Yawanawa people made popular (see Cofacci de Lima 2005) or like the global famous ayahuasca, drunk in ceremonies all around the world, in Australia, the Netherlands and South Africa. As Calavia Saez has pointed out it is a rare case of “inverse mission”, a kind of “indianist contra-evangelism that, starting from the Amazon, has introduced indigenous issues and ritual elements into the religious world of “the whites”; not without these hybrids coming back for new hybridisation” (Calavia 2011).

During nocturnal *tatxik* drinking occasions, while singing or listening jaguar (*kamun*) songs, the Matis warned me that the longhouse was being visited by the *tsussin* (*yuxin*, disembodied forces) and also by one man that was physically away from the community, his *tsussin* was wandering among us or even sitting beside us. The *tsussin* visits are invisible to some people, but visible to others. Being or not being visible at

4 Performance as in the tradition of Turner (1974) and Schechner (1977), prioritizing not the interpretation of symbols on ritual practices but the relations that “emerge” between performers and that constitute reality, as Schieffelin has observed (1985).

5 For other implications on foreigners’ mimesis, it is interesting to read Taussig (1993).



one's own wish is a powerful accomplishment. Powerful like an animal that can be so beautifully mimetic that it can be visible or invisible while in the forest, like a jaguar, to be invisible in the right moment will make you a better hunter. The Matis also explained to me that beauty is one of the most powerful weapon that can be used in encounters with foreigners, animals, gringos or *tsussin*. I shall go back to this power of becoming visible and invisible at one's wish in the conclusion.

## Translation, bodies and ontologies

*Nëix tanek* are part of the preparatory celebrations for the Tattoo ritual, when young women and men receive in their faces tattooed stripes, but they are also held in several other occasions. In the feasts, the animal movements are experienced and imitated almost perfectly. The audience will experience how to hear, to see and to feel the presence of those animals that are embodied or incarnated in the body of Matis enacting the *nëix tanek*. The animal parties are performed mainly by young people and adults, some of them also by very young boys and girls. The old men considered elders (*darasibobon*) will just watch. There are other dances called *munurek* (in Matis language) and they are performed by both men and women of all ages, including the elderly ones, walking sideways along the central and side corridors of the longhouse, holding arms in arms, singing as some birds or monkeys, among other animal songs (or animal sounds). I have written that in those feasts the Matis are transformed as *animaluman* (Arisi 2011), a play on words mixing and unifying both terms animal and human. I would like to suggest that the *nëix tanek* can be understood as a way of objectifying the notion of Amerindian perspectivism proposed by Viveiros de Castro (1996) and Stolze Lima (2005).

Like any translation, *nëix tanek* is difficult to understand in any language other than Matis. Let me present some of the difficulties in translating the terms. *Nëix* may be a generic word for animals, but there are many occasions where the Matis will treat the animals as human people, so for the animals they might use the term *Matsë* (word that is also used for self-identification, meaning something like “people” or “we, the people” as opposed to other groups of animals such as the “jaguar people” (*kamun matsë*). *Nëix* is currently translated by Matis bilingual young students in Portuguese as “bichos” (another word used for animals), and another translation as proposed by Spanghero Ferreira (2005) in her Matis/Portuguese dictionary in Portuguese is “caça” (game, hunted animal). Many animals do not enter the *nëix* category, this term is used to determine those animals that enter the longhouse during the *nëix tanek* and that are hunted by Matis. As written above, the Matis often translate for those who do not speak your language *nëix tanek* simply as “feasts of animals”.

As for other Amerindian cosmologies, animals for the Matis share a common pool of humanity (Viveiros de Castro 1996). The *animalumans* (animalumanos, in Portuguese) are called *Matsës* (people in English) as for example *txawan Matsës* (*queixada* in Portuguese or wild pig people in English) or *atsaban matsës* (tuyuyu bird-people in English). However it is important to note that *nëix* and *matsës* are not synonymous nor interchangeable terms, because *nëix* is used only for *nëix* animals when these are seen as prey and the term *matsës* is used for human and non-human animals. As other researchers have observed Amazonian indigenous people consider that animals and humans are both understood as composite beings (Cesarino 2008), for other indigenous people they are a “plural singularity” (Fausto 2008: 353 - footnote 3). The debate on the status of animality and humanity have produced several concepts that can be grouped in various ways including some big old ones like: animism (Descola 2005), perspectivism (Viveiros de Castro 1996; Calavia 2004), phenomenology (Csordas 1990, Ingold 2000).

Viveiros de Castro and Descola once organised a debate in Paris on perspectivism and animism that was reported by Bruno Latour in a kind of academic event ethnographical account:

Descola then explained how his new definition of animism could be used to distinguish “naturalism” – the view most often taken to be the default position of Western thought – from “animism”. While “naturalists” draw similarities between entities on the basis of physical traits and distinguish them on the basis of mental or spiritual characteristics, “animism” takes the opposite position, holding that all entities are similar in terms of their spiritual features, but differ radically by virtue of the sort of body they are endowed with. (...) People differ not only in their culture but also in their nature, or rather, in the way they construct relations between humans and non-humans. Descola was able to achieve what neither modernists nor post-modernists had managed: a world free of the spurious unification of a naturalist mode of thought. (Latour 2009: 1)

Latour, in an interview given to Brazilian academics, affirmed his interest in also denaturalising the concept that those scientists that occupy the discipline’s centre have and the he considers to be a naturalist ontology:

People like Descola and Viveiros de Castro often say: “we study the others and not ourselves, so we do not consider modern for what they actually do naturalists, but only for what they officially say about themselves”. And so, the paradox is that we know less about the ontologies mobilised by biologists, the technical or computing guys and by western entrepreneurs, than we know about those [ontologies] mobilized by the Achuar hunting practices. Because we think that white people or that the residents of the center actually possess a naturalistic ontology. This is such a superficial truth that ends up becoming completely false. (Brazilians are interesting because they never believed, at the end, in this story of purification. They have a vision that differs from that of modernism of the French). (Latour 2004: 403)

This discussion plus the one brought by Ingold (2000) and others have become fruitful for recent ethnological Amazonianist debate so we could think broadly across and within our ethnographies. Just to illustrate how those debates can help to complexify the relationships between humans and other beings - the ones that sometimes anthropologist calls as “non-humans”, I will record some observations written by Cesarino with respect to Marubo people who live in the same river Ituí and are neighbours to the Matis:

“Animal” and “human” are multifaceted entities and shall also be understood carefully. What we call “animal” is understood by Marubo thought as a composite configuration on the one hand, its “own animal” (in Portuguese translated as “seu bicho” or *awē yoñi* in Marubo language), its carcass (in Portuguese “sua carcaça” or *awē shaká* in Marubo language) or its body (in Portuguese “seu corpo” or *awē kaya* in Marubo language) and its flesh or its meat (in Portuguese “sua carne” or *awē nami* in Marubo language) and, on the other hand can be also understood as its people (in Portuguese “sua gente/sua pessoa or *awē yora* in Marubo language), which can also mean its double (or in Portuguese “seu duplo” or *awē vaká* in Marubo language), the one that is the owner (in Portuguese the “dono” or *ivo* in Marubo language) of its “animal, carcass/body” (in Portuguese *bicho/carcaça/corpo*). The use of the possessive (*awē*) is therefore essential to understand it: a body is always belonging to a certain double body. As with birds (as well as with some other animals) occurs a spacial disjunction: its doubles/ persons (*chāi vaká*) are not inside their carcasses (*chāi shaká*), but they live outside their bodies, they live in their own longhouses malocas (*a vaká shovō shokorivi*) that from our perspective present themselves as trees. From there, they are surveilling their bodies/animals via a long tobacco sniffer (*rewe*), a powerful mediating instrument. (Cesarino 2008: 24-25, my translation).

Both Marubo and Matis peoples deploy the same term for “meat” (*nami*, in both languages), a quite similar one for the possessive pronoun “its” (*awē* in Marubo and *aun* in Matis) and a similar one for “owner” (*ivo* in Marubo and *ikbo* in Matis). I consider that there is also great similarity between Marubo’s and Matis’ way of understanding live beings like multifaceted entities, as Cesarino points (*idem*), and also as composites of potencies and composite of bodies’ pieces, composite bodies that carry something from



those forces who contains or had contained them for a while or those who had helped to shape them, to weave them, to build them, to invent them or to devise them. These body pieces can be also created by weaving, resulting in bracelets and anklets, and they can be wear.

### **Naming plants after animal's organs**

Briefly, I would like to add some information on the composition of animal and plant bodies and the matis science of naming its organs, accordingly to their shapes' and their patterns' similarity, on their shape mimesis capabilities<sup>6</sup>. The matis language deploy many words that designate body parts to refer also to objects and to technical infrastructure. For example, Erikson had already called the attention to the word used for paddle that is "nunte poro" (canoe's arm) (1996), as the paddles are observed as the equivalent arms of a swimmer, and the upper hole in the longhouse to let the smoke escape and to bring in some outside light is named "xubun dëxan" (house's nose) due to its shape resembling a triangular shaped nose. That is an interesting departing point to observe the words that refer to animal's organs such as kidney, ribs, leaver, etc, of animals are also deployed to name plants.

As in other hunting communities, the organs of animals are carefully known and learned by the Matis young generations by experiential learning as their daily activities involve a lot of hunting and butchering animals such as monkeys, tapirs, wild pigs and many different kind of birds and fishes. The animal organs morphology and their specific tissue constitution, shapes and words learning process usually take place during moments of butchering, preparing the meals and while eating. Later on, these morphology lessons of tissue constitution, shapes and words will be remembered and deployed to name plants. In the forest, I had observed adult men and women trekking along with young people and children and taking their time to explore and to teach the morphology and the words that refer to several different plants. Binan Chapu Chunu, one man recognised by the group as a specialist in plant knowledge, was in 2009 busy organising daily treks in the forest bringing along as pupils one school teacher and another young man to teach them how to recognise plants, naming the plants while smelling them, touching them and collecting some samples that soon after been carefully scrutinized and studied would be thrown away.

As a student you are considered successful in learning if you are able to reverse roles and soon you can also point to your teacher and name the plants that you have learned and show him/her that you have indeed learnt. As teacher, Binan Chapu Chunu made them observe carefully the plants' parts shapes and then named them. As explained before, many of those words referred to animal's organs such as tapir's kidney, for example. In some cases, powers attributed as characteristics of a certain animal would be related to the plant as well. Together with the recognising of plants and its naming, the old herb specialist man taught his pupils ways to prepare infusions to drink and to bathe as part of the pharmacology healing and harming powers (as the beverages or baths could be employed to cure or to poison someone). As if the plants would have developed a mimesis relationship with a certain animal and maybe it can be understood as well as the other way around, as if an animal could have transformed itself into a plant form.

Those animal organs or body pieces are considered to have their own will, like the head of a decapitated man's myth. In this central myth for the Matis identity, they tell that they are children that came from this decapitated man's heart, while the white people originated from his intestines and the black people from their liver (in some version from the dark blood). After all those tiny little pieces were laying on the top of the longhouse's wooden sits, during the night and thanks to the log fire they got warm and transformed. In the morning, from each little piece it stood a person. The myth shows how pieces of organs could transform

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<sup>6</sup> The matis mimesis observation could be also understood as an example of science of concrete (Lévi-Strauss 1962).

themselves into human beings. From the organs and body pieces, other life could be generated. There are values attributed to the heart, to the liver or to the dark blood and the intestine and they mark a kind of ranking attributed to each of those colours of men (indigenous, black and white) with the indigenous in the highest ranking and the whites in the lowest. These pieces of body carry something from the bodies and forces who contained them for a while or those beings that had helped them to shape them.

Animals are the central characters of these feasts. So, to perform the *nëix tanek*, the Matis will play, imitate, invent, create, mimic those animals entering the longhouse. Their clothes or their masks (if we prefer to use our word repertoire from theater and performance studies) is composed of branches, twigs, leaves or clay to create clothes and to revive mythological and shared narratives. The myths are narrated and recreated by the *taneke* for an audience that will be participating interactively. The events I shall describe are part of the festivities that Matis call *nëix tanek*, part of a complex knowledge festival that include singing songs, dancing and performances they had learned from their parents and grandparents and during those feasts can be invent and experienced in their own way. The animal feasts are, therefore, part of what anthropologists call traditional festivals, a fundamental part of the nexus that will be created by the anthropologist and later will become an anthropological account and maybe also be known as “culture between brackets” (Carneiro da Cunha 2009). The rituals are also very inventive occasions and sometimes they get more stable. About the processes of stabilizing “information and practices”, Deléage has written:

Si toutes les sociétés sont le théâtre de processus constants de transmission d'informations et de pratiques, la plupart d'entre elles ne se propagent pas au-delà des circonstances locales en rapport avec lesquelles elles sont produites. Certaines toutefois, que l'on qualifie souvent de “traditionnelles”, se transmettent plus et mieux que d'autres, soit qu'elles se stabilisent sous une forme assez similaire au long des générations successives, soit qu'elles envahissent une grande partie, voire la totalité d'une société. [...] Ce processus de sélection et de stabilisation repose sur des facteurs multiples: pour être mieux transmise que d'autres, pour pouvoir mieux résister aux inévitables transformations qui surviennent au cours de toute transmission, une information doit pouvoir être, dans un environnement donné, plus intéressante, plus aisément communicable et plus facilement mémorisable. (Deléage s/d)

I think that it is very interesting to observe the improvisations and the inventions that take place in what Deléage calls “théâtre de processus constants de transmission d'informations et de pratiques” of whatever is qualified as traditional information in the narratives (myths and songs) and in the experience (*taneke* performance and dances) during the feasts. We will now briefly reflect on designs and patterns as important part of the mimetic capabilities that are en-acted for the *taneke*.

## Designs and patterns

When studying the Kaxinawa (also known as Huni Kuin, another Panoan indigenous group), Lagrou points out: “the indigenous graphic art is a silent discourse on the human condition and its relationship with the natural and supernatural worlds; this relationship must always be studied in their specific existential context” (op. cit: 8). The author reflects that the relationship between beings (or mythological animals) and their designs is also an expression of power “of the body mutability, the possible visual transformation” (id. ibidem). She considers that, for Kaxinawa, when an animal has on its skin a *kene* (we can translate the term *kene* as “design”), it means that it has a lot of *yuxin* (*tsussin* in Matis, a disembodied force or power). To have a lot of *yuxin* means having a high concentration of power or having knowledge of visual processing. This means that the animals that show themselves to the human eyes as animals “with designs” are shamans that have spirit. They appear to humans in their illusory form of an animal, hiding

behind this skin its real quality of a human agent (id. ibidem). To Lagrou, designs are ways to communicate with the “spiritual side of reality” (op. cit: 14). After many years researching Kaxinawa’s designs and body painting, she concluded that:

*Kene* [designs or drawings] outlines and orders the perception, just as the walls of a large house delineate the interior space of a community, separating it from the surrounding world. The true *kene* [true design] is applicable only in healthy bodies that have passed through certain transition or initiation stages. (...) When fully reintegrated into normal social life, an initiated young man will be painted with a true design so he can dance with the adults. (...) The Kaxinawa person is a body, circumscribed by interpersonal relationships that associate a person with a certain right community and his/her specific place to live. The embodied existence, however, also implies changing processes, growing, weakinensing, and ultimately death. (Lagrou 2007: 538)

To the Matis, the most important design is certainly the one inscribed, perforated and inked on their faces, the design of their tattoos. The parallel lines are tattooed on their faces, in the Mariwin masks and in many of their objects such as their blowpipe and pans. In the Matis faces, the design lines go from low to high, they start below the nose and climb toward their ears it resembles the design a jaguar has. The Matis explained me they consider their face tattoos to be the same design (*kenek* is the word in Matis for the Kaxinawa *kene*) of their blowpipes (the lines made by egg shells). Crossed, the same lines appear as identity marks in their pots (ceramic pans and also in the aluminum ones), in their knives’ handlers, their shotguns and in their plastic kitchen pots and some special ceramic cups to drink the vine beverage called *tatxik*. The Matis also apply those lines or stripes in their artcraft - especially ceramic pots to sell for foreigners in the near by villages or cities. They make this “identity mark” (their brand) by scratching the clay with a knife in one direction, thereafter they intersect those lines with the same number of rows in the other direction creating many lozenges. As we will read below, the lozenges are related to the jaguar dots or the jaguar.

In 2009, I observed that the young Matis women wanted to learn how to paint the body and how to create different weaving patterns, but the only occasions of learning body painting I recorded took place at the animal feasts. It is almost as if there was a rule that you won’t teach someone when it is not the right occasion. Similarly, I had observed that no one teaches a child to do ritual weeping, she or he will just learn when there comes a period (a time) where she or he can hear and follow her/his mother or father in crying and then had the opportunity to mimic as a way to learn (as I observed with the learning process of the Kana Ękó daughter named Ętxó). I have never observed people teaching body painting outside the party event. Although it seems at first glance disconnected, this relationship between ritual weeping or singing and body painting learning was pointed out to me by Kana Ękó when I asked her why she had a different pattern of body painting during the party in her body and in the body of Ętxó, her little daughter. Kana Ękó told me that this was her drawing and that she wanted to teach Ętxó. She told me Ętxó was the only child that could cry properly among the Matis and that she had also learned how to weep ritually, so she was also teaching her to have her designs. She said to me: “You can only teach someone in the appropriate moment”. Gow (1999) had also observed similar understanding concerning designs’ learning among the Yine (he names them also as Piro) that what really counts in learning processes is when you can show how to do something, when you can prove you have the know-how, when you can demonstrate you actually can do it, you are able to do it. He adds:

Designs can only exist and survive in the heads of women who know how to paint with design. This point is important, because it means that any trans-mortem Piro social process depends on the interiorization of that process as specialized knowledge and its revelation as a sui generis act in the present by a living person. The ‘customary ways of the old dead people’ are socially efficacious only because they have been detached from the memory of the dead and interiorized as specialist knowledge. They are known and demonstrated; they are not remembered. (Gow 1999: 242)

I understand that for the Matis, knowledge about painting are also kept in the heads of women and men who know how to paint, but they are also stored now on the covers of an NGO's booklets and in the many pictures they take and they keep of themselves. During the Matis animal feasts organised in 2009 for the inauguration of a newly built longhouse, Binan Mantê; also the one called the longhouse's owner (in Matis the longhouse *ikbo*) was painted with the design called *bëribëriuakin* or *kakëmerakit*, the only man painted with the jaguar pattern at that occasion. When Marcelo Markë Matis was elected in 2016 to become a representative in the municipal chamber of Atalaia do Norte (AM) he was also painted with the jaguar pattern. Today, the designs go through a kind of *renaissance* period, but there had been a time in the 90s when its practice ceased as they were too sad and too worried because of so many deaths after the tragic contact with the government episode<sup>7</sup>. In 2009, I recorded young women very dedicated to consulting older women about how to paint. They took the opportunity of an animal party held on that year to update their knowledge about the body painting. Some old ladies started painting some young people and soon there was a kind of waiting list of candidates that wanted to get painted by them, everyone was willing to accept very young candidates so that they could continue testing the designs that had just learned in their own bodies by reproducing them in painting the bodies of very young girls and boys.

Some Panoan specialists suggest that the animal patterns in body paintings are also made to transform (Calavia 2006, 2004; Lagrou 2007; 2009), and to communicate with *yuxin* (disembodied forces, same word used for images as mentioned above) [Lagrou 2007]. "Animal transformations are in many myths reached via the painting of the many different jaguar patterns" (Calavia 2006: 335, my translation). Later on, the author adds: "though the change of point of views is more common as a way to metamorphose or better said, to fix identities as different animals" (op cit.: 336). The drawings "fixed identities", as it is proposed by Lagrou. "If the humans are fixed and solid compared to the lightness of the *yuxin* (images, foreigners and travelers), they are nevertheless mortal and mutable beings compared to the celestial beings" (Lagrou 2007: 539).

### ***Nukin txu* (our things), patterns and weaving**

One of the translations that Matis offer to the word "culture" in Matis is *nukin txu*, whose literal translation offered by Matis would be "our own things". Its singular form is *nukun txu* or "my stuff". Coffaci de Lima (2010, com. personal) states that the Katukina (another Panoan speaking indigenous people) use to translate the word culture in their own language with the term *noke haweti*, an equivalent of *nukin txu*. Bëux Matis, the young man that is the president of Matis indigenous association, offered me an alternative translation for "culture" that would be in Matis *na'ne mete*, he translated in back into Portuguese explaining me that it could be understood as "something that is good to us".

The Matis also employ another term when trying to translate "culture" to their own terms, this translation concerns the minimal mimesis I am trying to explain in this paper. The Matis use the term *nukin bëribërikit* where *bëri bëri* is the noun for a *kene* (design or pattern, same word used in other Panoan languages). *Bëri bëri* is a pattern that consist of small dots or small trapezoids used in the animal feasts to colour the hats, they are like *petit pois* (in French) or small dots (in English). The *bëri bëri* pattern is also applied with by the tip of the finger or the brush on the woven bracelets. The weaving bracelets also present *bëri bëri* (small dots pattern) that are painted or woven creating in this latter case a fabric's relief game (*bas-relief*, *mid-relief* and *haut-relief*). The eye follows the 3D relief game, it reproduces the relief of the hairy skin of the jaguar. The relief of bracelets and anklets dots patterns are created by the weaving technique. The result is a kind of trapezoids design, formed by the 3D relief lines on the fabric bracelets and anklets.

<sup>7</sup> The death of around two third of the Matis population happened during the Brazilian civil-militar dictatorship, this information was not published in the final report of the Truth National Commission and the Brazilian state never had repaired the Matis people for their loss and traumatic experience.

Biologists call those dots forming the jaguar pattern “rosetta”; they are the very characteristic pattern of the coat of the jaguar, its spots or its dots. Interestingly, *bëri bëri* is a *kenek* (design) pattern, but also serves as a translation of the term Matis culture when employed in dialogue with speakers of Portuguese. They dress themselves with the jaguar pattern in a weaved and subtle way<sup>8</sup>.

The minimum design, or pattern basis, for weaving are divided in two main groups: one called *bëriuakit* (translated like “the one that has *bëri* - spots or dots”) and a second one called *kënakit* (“the one that has lines”). For an illustration to follow the transformation and simplification of the design of the jaguar’s coat or the jaguar rosetta’s pattern as it becomes simplified for the weaving of bracelets and anklets, see Arisi (2011).

There are different names for these trapezoids, these rosetta patterns, whose differences mark the many names and sizes of certain cats or jaguars. It took me a long time to be able to see and understand what I will try to explain below, the transformation of the patterned design of jaguar’s rosetta in a Matis bracelets’ or anklets’ woven pattern. Lagrou comments that the Kaxinawa explained to her that certain people are more able to see certain drawings and that you have to work hard in order to be able and imaginative enough so you can visualise the continuation of a given pattern, you need to be able to have a mental creative vision (2007). I understand that the 3D relief game requires the same visual and imaginative capabilities, the trained ones can see the 3D relief game, they can see the lines in the space, like in an ayahuasca vision. The weaving technique suggests that beauty to be perceived externally is as much present in the invisible world or in the imagetic world, as they can be displayed by the perceptive, imaginative and creative eyes or minds of some people. Then, when you have prepared eyes, beauty can be truly perceived or imagined, and the result can be even better than when compared with the artistic production that was already externalised. The quality of a drawing that can be perceived in an arbitrary cut that has to be completed by an imaginative eye or mind had been noted by Müller (1990: 232) when she studied the body painting among the Asurini (Tupi speaking indigenous group). Müller uses the concept of “window effect” to designate the impression of a cut in an infinite drawing (Lagrou 2009: 83).

The Matis’ bracelets, as Kaxinawa’s weaving clothes art, present a sort of window effect and a 3D relief game between figure and ground (like Escher’s drawings), as it has the power to move the eyes of its observer. Lagrou recalls the example studied by Gell of the Trobriand canoe’s figureheads to propose that Amazonian decorative arts have a recurrent aspect in their basket weaving and in the body painting that is the dynamic relation between figure and ground, a kinetic quality of the image that allows the eye to decide which perspective approach it has to adopt. The game between image and counter-image expresses the idea of duplicity and co-presence of re-veiled and undisclosed pictures in the world (Lagrou 2003: 105). The Matis bracelets and anklets play their game in a 3D relief figure and ground, communicating the relief perceived in the jaguar coat.

The Matis’ bracelets and anklets weaving patterns have different names that mark the age of the person that should wear such a bracelet and anklet. For example, the *katxu bëri* is the pattern of a forest cat called *Leopardus Wiedii* (margay or tree ocelot, in English; *gato maracajá* in Portuguese). This pattern *katxu bëri* is used for the adornments weaving for women aged around 15 or 16 years and for young and middle-aged men. The bigger pattern ones are woven to be used by old men that are considered the top hunters. Children get a thin bracelet and anklet that have a small pattern interwoven. The weaving helps the Matis to establish a relationship with these cats, specialists in hunting and in moving almost unseen in the forest.

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<sup>8</sup> Erikson (2000) has written on the men transformation into jaguars and noted it was achieved by an economical employment of means, with a “i...i...i...” scream.



The enchantment of technology is the power that technical processes have of casting a spell over us so that we see the real world in an enchanted form. Art, as a separate kind of technical activity, only carries further, through a kind of involution, the enchantment which is immanent in all kinds of technical activity (Gell 1992: 44).

Lagrou explains the concept proposed by Gell about the power of the Trobriand canoes:

Gell departs from the criteria of aesthetic enjoyment to call attention to the effectiveness of a super decorated ritual bow: the decor does not want itself beautiful, but powerful; it aims efficacy, an agency, it aims to produce practical results rather than contemplation. The decorative mastery captivate and terrify the ones that look at it, they will have to stop and to think about the magical powers of those who have produced such a canoe. It means the art has a function in the relationships between social agents. (Lagrou 2003: 96).

### **Weavestablishing relationships**

In dialogue with Gell and Lagrou, I propose that the Matis, with their finely woven bracelets and their 3D game of figure and background, highlight the 3D relief game, the third dimension of the jaguar pattern, to the perception of the jaguar design with its black hairs growing higher than the orange yellowish hairs that grow a bit lower. This perceived difference in the jaguar coat pattern relief seeks to bring an attention to this minimalist aesthetic trace to the Matis' arms and legs (since they also use bracelets and anklets with the jaguar patterns). I understand that those patterns and designs would be part of "window-effect", as proposed by Müller (1990) and commented by Lagrou (op. cit). The jaguar patterns would bring somewhat of jaguar to arms and legs as to remind and to empower humans' arms and legs to be agile in their hunting and in their daily tasks, the "technology enchantment" seeking the jaguar powers' effectiveness, from whom the Matis weave (and to whom the Matis weave) the patterns. But it is important to stress I do not consider it to be just a symbolic or a metaphorical bracelet and anklet, it is also part of a relationship that is intended to be *weavestablished*<sup>9</sup> relationship, at the same time it intends to established and to interweave a Matis with the jaguar.

As Ingold proposed about possible relations between weaving a basket and a bird's nest, we can imagine: "if one were to ask where culture lies, the answer would not be in some shadowy domain of symbolic meaning, hovering aloof from the 'hand on business of practical life, but in the very texture and pattern of the weave itself" (2000: 361). So, to find matis culture lying, we need to be open to contemplate the jaguar patterned bracelets and anklets, and to comprehend the carefully woven relation they weave as a way to originally create and to increase their jaguareness.

### **Conclusion: minimal mimesis and intertwining**

I have learned that the Matis consider animals to have designs that are beautiful (therefore powerful) and worth to be painted on the body, animal clothes are great to be copied via mimesis (with the subtle ways of showing the plant and animal transformations and their relations) and some of the plants and animal minimalistic clothes (like the jaguar pattern bracelets and anklets) can be dressed after they were woven by Matis women [see Arisi 2011: 211-212]. The animals had technologies that after being given, shared or stolen made Matis lives easier and transformed, like cooking fire and frog vaccination, other animal technologies made the Matis more powerful like the face tattoos. The animals were great foreigners to exchange with. Of course, good opportunities are always a bit risky, so you better do it in a controlled and

<sup>9</sup> A concept I propose that in Portuguese, "estable-tecida" plays with words mixing the words "established" (estabelecida) and "woven" (tecida). In English, it plays with the verbs: to weave and to establish.

experienced way, try them on your terms. You better try them in a ritual party, a very good laboratory for relationships (Calavia & Arisi 2013). The Matis animal feasts are great for experimenting new relationships or updating old ones, via exchange, bargain or stealing. The feast rituals are good for checking who is stingy and who is not, who are the best ones to become allied with and who are not worth to be in debt with. In the last years, it has been good time for dancing with foreigners and gringos like Brazilian anthropologists, South Korean or UK filmmakers, German tourists (Arisi 2011). The feasts are a place for exchanging with strangers, maybe the foreigners will keep on bringing the Matis new technologies to make the Matis become stronger and bigger in numbers. The foreigners come with their cameras to see, to admire, to capture images (*tsussin*) of the Matis beauty. As once a Matis man said to me: “*Istá, mundo inteiro, índio bēra kimon*” (“Look, whole world, beautiful/nice Indians [we are]”). If not well measured, beauty can kill, as I have learned from Txema, a Matis elder (Arisi 2011). Like the bodily painted symmetry of the jaguar lines and relationships inter-woven in their bracelets and anklets, like the distinct mark of the Matis tattoos expresses in their faces their power in this world, including the power to attract so many animals to exchange with, and now so many gringos to film them, to pay them, to stay with them, to study with them and to admire their beauty. The Matis invest minimally and mimetically in the animal feasts to achieve their own empowerment and their own growth.

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