

Huni Kuin Art and Cosmologies as a Form of Resistance

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Abstract

Home to the biggest ecosystem existent in the world the Amazon is considered the world's lungs. In addition to its biodiversity, the Amazon also houses its biggest protectors: the native people that inhabit such an ecosystem. The tropical forest is home to over 200 indigenous ethnicities. The number was even greater before Portuguese and Spanish colonization. According to the Brazilian Social-Environmental Institute about 1000 thousand different ethnicities summing a population of 2 to 4 million native Brazilians used to live in harmony. However greater, such an ecosystem of people and biodiversity is in danger. The lack of indigenous land recognition, the conflicts with loggers and settlers, and the lack of governmental support are the main problems that haunt such communities nowadays. On the other hand, there are people fighting for the conservation of the Amazonian ecosystem and for the preservation of the history and enrichment of artistic endeavors that there reside. This paper will analyze through the artistic and folk lens of interviewees part of the Huni Kuin people how art, through painting, folklore, and a number of other expressions has deeply promoted resistance, connection, and conservation of Indigenous Brazilian History.

Keywords: Huni Kuin People, Indigenous Art, Art Practices, Land Conflicts, The Amazonian Ecosystem.

Introduction

According to the FUNAI (Brazilian governmental branch entitled to protect and preserve all the aspects related to the Original peoples of Brazil), the current population of Original people in Brazil is of about 250 thousand people, which in accordance to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE) it is over one sixth of the population before Portuguese arrival. Contrary to belief, the genocide of such Original peoples continues to happens and is branched to several issues these Peoples now face. The lack of recognition for their importance and contribution to several societal arms (art, conservation, and others), conflicts with loggers, settlers, and miners, and lack of governmental support and agency are just some of the several problems such peoples face.

As it is home to several Indigenous ethnicities, the Amazon Forest is also a cradle to several forms of artistic expression, cosmologies, and folklore history. Although the region houses such a diversity of art and history, the lack of value recognition from society and govern deeply affect the development of such. Seen as “less educated” or “primitive form of art”, art made by these Peoples are not valued as it should in the market, museums, and other traditional methods for art development. The Huni Kuin people, focus of this documental research, are breaking barriers in what comes to the value of Indigenous Art. Being recognized and gaining solo exhibitions through their collective of art named MAKU (Art Collective of the Huni Kuin People) they have secured solo exhibitions in places considered important in the Art World. Places such as the Museum of Art of São Paulo, the *Veneza Bienale*, and art tours in Europe have welcomed their art. However, there’s still much work to be done as lack of recognition is not the only problem that affects them.

Conflicts with loggers have been ongoing and on the rise since Brazil's ex-president Bolsonaro's administration. According to the Conselho Indigenista Missionário, the amount of conflicts in regards to land saw an upbring of more than 10% when related to 2022. These conflicts happen due to the greed of loggers in trying to deforest areas that are legally protected to serve as sites for mining, cattle creation, and agriculture. In Bolsonaro's recent term, the numbers for deforested areas have risen in more than 150% according to the Institute of Men and Environment of the Amazon (IMAZON). The deforasted area have reached over 35.134 kilometers square, the biggest area registered in 4 years. Several Peoples have been affected with the lack of proper policing from the government and the often-times blodly conflicts with loggers. In special the Yanomami people, who have greatly suffered from lack of basic nutrition, lack of government protection, and harsh living conditions in their protected areas due to the pressure put on by such people. In response the Yanomami community came together to put on the show "The Yanomami Struggle" that as the name suggests portrays the struggles that the Yanomami people faces and encounters throughout their history and in recent years. This only shows how art is of deeply importance to Indigenous people and has served as a tool of resistance through time.

Finally, the lack of agency from the government in dealing with such problems as a matter of state has profoundly affected the indigenous peoples that inhabit such areas. The indigenous people to the land cannot count with steady and constant governmental support to keep their territories protected nor to intervene when their basic rights are violated.

The power of art has been shown through the resistance in the conflicts cited above. In this paper, I will analyze how the Indigenous people to the Amazon, in particular the Huni Kuin people, have been able through their folklore, art, and practices, to resist to such conflicts and

to create a strong bond with their history - past and present alike - and to keep their traditions alive throughout the years.

Methodology

This documental research has two phases, the second one being practical on-field research. Firstly, the study of several Indigenous art pieces, mainly the ones produced by the MAKHU (Art Collective of the Huni Kuin people), was conducted. Such pieces were either found at MASP (the Museum of Art of São Paulo), MASP's Archives, as well as through collaboration with Huni Kuin artists. The approach taken here was qualitative, based on art's descriptions, and the study of such images.

The second part of the research took place in the northern Brazilian state of Acre, in the Amazonian region situated by the margins of Rio Jordão (Jordão River). It is there where most of the Brazilian Huni Kuin population resides. I was invited by the Pagé (leader) named Iban Sales Huni Kuin, part of the *Xiko Kurumin Huni Kuin* Village, to stay with them for about ten days and to interview several members of the community, to document and understand their artistic and folk practices. The approach here was also qualitative. I conducted several interviews, mainly with elders from the village. I, then, documented such interviews by honoring their sayings and understanding their intertwined concepts.

Uniting both of the qualitative approaches, focusing on Huni Kuin's art and hearing directly from the source of such art, the Huni Kuin people, it was possible to explore their strong connection with their Folk and how such a connection helped them to keep their history as a form of resistance face the conflicts they know go through.

An Introduction to the Huni Kuin People's History

As reported by the *Instituto Socio Ambiental*, the Huni Kuin people are pertencents to the Pano Linguistic family, and inhabit the Amazonian region of Eastern Peru, and the Western Brazil region of the states of Acre and Southern Amazonas. The Huni Kuin, or in a direct translation to English True Humans, speak their own language named Hantcha Kuin. They have suffered from conflicts as early as the 18th century when colonizers organized slave raiding expeditions to the region they inhabited.

By the end of the 19th century, the Huni Kuin People saw a wave of invasions. Firstly by Peruvian rubber extractors, who among violence also brought new diseases to the area. In 1913 the region saw over 40,000 migrants coming mostly from the Northeastern state of Ceará. They were called "*mateiros*", and were responsible for clearing the path for rubber trails as well as killing any resistant people seen as "wild indians". From then on, a series of conflicts with rubber extractors were unveiled, causing the migration of some of these peoples to the area of Rio Jordão - where I conducted my interviews.

Contact with external civilization came throughout the 1940's and 1950's - a contact, according to Iban Huni Kuin, that sometimes they regret. Throughout their history, one things has remained: their connection with their folklore and art. As put by Sales "*Our art is passed by from generation to generation, it is our connection.*"

An Overview of the Huni Kuin Folklore

Huni Kuin's folklore stories revolve around one specific story, the tale of *Ybeinu* (Huni Kuin man) and *Ÿbeshanu* (enchanted woman). Their paintings, craftwork, geometry work, and

sacred religious ceremonies are all based on this tale. It is important to understand the tale in order to understand the references in their work and religious practices.

According to the story narrated by Iban Huni Kuin, *Ybeinu* goes out on hunt one day. He initially goes fishing, but takes cover under a rubber tree to observe a noise he has heard. He sees three Amazonian birds, one at a time, and kills the three of them. He first kills a *Jacamin*, where he finds a seed under its nose. He, then, kills a *Cotiara*, another bird species, and finds a seed under its ear. He finally kills the other bird, *a Juriti*, this time finding nothing. He then sees a tapir in search of *Jenipapo*² seed. He observes that the Tapir throws the seeds onto a river, and from there, a Jibóia (species of Brazilian Anaconda characterized for its geometric pattern) emerges, transforms itself into a beautiful woman, and they have an amorous encounter.

The tale tells that he can't take the beautiful woman out of his head. The following day he goes back to the river with the two seeds he had captured from the birds the past day. He then finds another *Jenipapo* seed and throws into the river. The enchanted lady, *Ybeshanu*, emerges again and asks him what he seeks. He says he wants to date her. The woman agrees, they have a sexual encounter and the woman goes down the river passing through a series of mystic creatures. Days pass by while they see each other, *Ybeshanu* then decides it is time for the man to meet her family. She warns her family that a mixed man is descending to the river, and asks them to not eat the man.

He descends the river and meets the woman's family, who have all taken the form of humans. According to Sales, *Ybeinu* spends about six days in their submerged home and during these six days, they have an offspring of three children. Throughout his stay, the man observes that

the family stays a period away from him while performing some sort of ceremony. His curiosity grows, and he asks the Father of the woman to partake. The father initially says no, but cedes in the following days.

To prepare him for the ritual *Ybeshanu* paints three dots on his face. She does so using the red paint of Urucum, a specific fruit from the Urucuzeiro (a tree native to tropical America).

Entering the ceremony he takes a drink. Such a drink is referred to by the family as "Ahayausca". By taking it he sees the present, past, and future. By seeing the connection he created with the drink, the *Ybeshanu's* father decides to kill him since he sees too much.

Ybeshanu then helps him to scape, and feeling weak from the drink, he flees to his village.

At his village he spends days without being awake, due to the effect of the drink. When he finally awakes, the Serpent family convinces *Ybeshanu* that they must kill him.

Arriving at *Ybeinu's* village, they encounter resistance by the Huni Kuin, who kill the entire family in turn to protect the man. The tale says that *Ybeinu* brought with him the *Ayahausca*, which has been passed on from generation to generation, along with the image of the *Jibóia* being a sacred being in their culture. The story is passed mainly through songs and paintings made by the Huni Kuin which is found in the art, resistance.

Ayahuasca ceremonies as Huni Kuin's form of Art and Spiritual

Connection

In accordance to the tale that is passed on from generation to generation, the Huni Kuins take *Ayahuasca*, *Nixi Pae* in their language, to connect with their past, present, and foresee something of the future. In the ceremonies, for hours, they chant traditional songs that in most part tell the tale aforementioned, in order to connect with the powers they believe the

Ahayausca provides them. The ceremonies are also made in order to clean one of evil spirits and bad things - this takes form in the shape of vomiting, which they believe is the cleaning of the human body of all bad things that have happened to the individual partaking in the ceremony.

Huni Kuin's leaders, particularly from the *Xiku Kurumin* village, who have begun traveling the world performing *Nixi Pae* ceremonies and bringing with them their art in the form of songs, body paintings, and others.

The Sacred Geometry in Huni Kuin

Because of *Ybeinu and Ybeshanu's* story, the geometry encountered in Jibóias, a sacred being in their culture, is much used in body paintings, artwork, and craftwork. Each detail in the geometry has a different meaning. Before each Ahayausca ceremony, I observed that according to the ranking of who is performing the ceremony, the paintings are different. The artistic painting work is usually done in order to amplify their connection in the ceremonies and in other times, outside the rituals, to display proudly their culture.

The geometry used in their paintings, artwork, and body art are related to the geometry encountered in the *Jiboia* snakes. Such snakes are found in different colors, and possess distinct patterns in each variables of the species. In Huni Kuin culture, such geometry found in the *Jiboia's* body symbolizes their sacrecy, as well as knowledge and connection with their folklore and culture. The geometry also symbolizes their constant struggle to keep their culture alive as well as to preserve the lands they inhabit in.

Conclusion

The Huni Kuin people have developed throughout the years a sense of artistic representation that correlates resistance with their practices. Through their work and the passing of their stories and artistic practices they have created an intertwined network of teachings that develops a generational bond resistant of the struggles they face.

Their development of their artistic sense has also served as a base to keep their history alive over time. It is that sense that connects their people in unison and makes the several communities that form the Huni Kuin people connect with one sole purpose: the conservation of their history. It is through their art that the Huni Kuin people has been able to face the struggles that have come in their way and succeeded amidst turbulent times to embrace their culture and pass it on to the next generations. Through their geometry, sacred ceremonies, and forms of craft, in which all members of the community take part, in particular women, they have been able to sustain a nexus that without their art they otherwise wouldn't. Through witnessing first-hand and listening to Huni-Kuin artists and other members of the Huni Kuin

People it became clear that in their vision art is not only a form of expression, but rather a form of connection and resistance. It operated in their fight for cultural survival throughout the years. Their art keeps them together by promoting a sense of community in all members of the Huni Kuin villages.

