

# Artaud and the Yanomami: plagues, rituals and performing arts

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**Abstract |** The article reflects on the need to develop new forms of understanding and acting in the artistic field in order to face the complexity of the crises we live in Brazil and in the world. I return to Artaud's visions on the plague and the theater, bringing them closer to the discourse of the Amerindian shamans on epidemics, the violence of the colonial process and the importance of rituals. As such, I perceive in the performing arts an ecology of wisdom and of reinvention of shared ways of life.

**KEYWORDS:** Crises. Rituals. Performing arts.

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**Resumo |** O artigo aborda a necessidade de desenvolvermos novas formas de compreensão e ação no campo artístico para enfrentar a complexidade das crises que vivemos no Brasil e no mundo. Retomo as visões de Artaud sobre a peste e o teatro, aproximando-as do discurso dos xamãs ameríndios sobre as epidemias, a violência do processo colonial e a importância dos ritos. Reconheço nas artes performativas um campo de elaboração de uma ecologia dos saberes e de reinvenção das formas de vida em comum.

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**Resumen |** El artículo aborda la necesidad de desenvolver nuevas formas de comprensión y acción en el campo artístico para enfrentar la complejidad de la crisis que vivimos en el Brasil y en el mundo. Retomo las visiones de Artaud sobre la peste y el teatro, aproximándolas al discurso de los Chamanes ameríndios sobre las epidemias, la violencia del proceso colonial y la importancia de los ritos. Reconozco en las artes performativas un campo de elaboración de una ecología de los saberes y de reinvencción de las formas de vida em común.

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## Introduction

Faced with the malaise of our present time, we find it hard to understand and accurately name our current events and how affected we are by it all. Part of the Brazilian population is in a state of perplexity, not only in face of the pandemic situation, but in relation to the political moment, the economic and social uncertainties, the worsening of ecological situation and the so-called "culture wars"<sup>1</sup>. We are also living a crisis of the ways of perception, understanding and language. There is a proliferation of discourses and analyses in different vehicles, trying to account for the complexity of what is emerging, generally stemming from specialized knowledge. At the same time, there seems to be a kind of diffuse restlessness, which presents itself as the enigma of a time that we cannot decipher and that demands for other approaches.

Some artists and researchers feel the urge of creating spaces of dialogue between peoples and cultures that carry experiences distinct from the hegemonic lifestyles on the planet that seem to lead us towards a dead end. The Latin American scenario, so severe from the perspective of deterioration of social relations, paradoxically presents unique potentialities to imagine other ways of life, precisely due to the insistent and resistant presence of peoples and groups that do not fully bend to the hegemonic standards. The violence of the colonial process, in constant renovation among us, occurs also as a reaction to such possibilities. Even with the intensification of pressures (and facing the risk of pure elimination), the mere existence of alternative lifestyles can instigate us and promote both personal and collective transformation.

In Brazil, the native indigenous cultures, the strong African influence, the Eastern contributions brought by immigrants, alongside Western critical and creating traditions, instill differentiating elements - ways of being, perceiving, feeling, thinking, communicating - that resonate in the colonial machine, and may or may not gain consistency depending on the circumstances and investment they mobilize. In this sense, the performing arts can constitute a kind of cultural vanguard, mobilizing and providing a continuous coexistence between artistic, academic and traditional knowledge, producing investigations and practices from perspectives and compositions still little explored. Evidently, such a project also depends on macro-political conditions. What seems possible now is something modest: to create spaces for reflection and practice.

The deep connection between theater, dance and performance with the universe of traditional rituals is well-known. It concentrates precious embodied wisdom and worldviews that bring sharp questions, for example, about our relationship with death and the impoverishment of our experience. The Western performing arts, even if constituted from a progressive distancing from the rituals, still keep signals and traces from extemporaneous experiences, which

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<sup>1</sup> The expression "guerras culturais" (culture wars) has recently circulated in Brazilian political debates, but in general it is identified with Hunter's book (1991), which addresses the rise of cultural praxis discussions in North American political life and the clash between "progressives" and "conservatives" in this field.

transmit other rhythms and qualities of attention, distinguishing themselves from the forms of entertainment boosted by new technologies and producers of anxious and dispersive states. This explains why many relevant artists from these areas have showed interest and been inspired by traditional non-Western arts and by the cultural universes from which they come, at least since the end of the 19th century.

There is also, among several artists, a growing interest in practices and wisdoms not directly linked to the performing arts, but that present sophisticated paths and systems of education and training of the mind and the body, in *ad hoc* social contexts. In this field, dialogues are opened with a wide-reaching cultural phenomenon, which the German philosopher Sloterdijk (2013) called "anthropotechniques"; a concept that tries to include artistic, philosophical and traditional exercises aimed at ontological transformation of the subject, thus performing an essential function in the collectivity. The recognition of this proximity greatly expands our field of practices, as well as the discussion about the ethical, political and existential dimension in them.

More than providing techniques to be incorporated into the artists' repertoire, such meetings can help building a more acute understanding of the diseases of our time, in the context of a discussion about the power relations involved in such exchanges. Without transforming the Other into an idealized image that would represent a society or state to which we should return, being affected by the otherness of ways of being makes us see what we lose in the mirages of so-called "progress", as well as what is the measure of our ignorance and brutality. Without this withdrawal from a narcissistic relationship with ourselves and with the culture to which we belong, we will be condemned to repeat the same mistakes.

During the pandemic crisis, Antonin Artaud's lecture "The Theater and the Plague", presented in 1933 and later published in book form (ARTAUD, 1999), has been a common reference. In this well-known text, the artist describes the process of social and psychic disorganization provoked by the plague and its "theatrical" expression in the strange behaviors that occur in the city. The widespread crisis would reveal deep conflicts and latent evils, putting us before the urgency of a radical transformation or the threat of destruction. Such formulations have strong resonances with the diagnosis made by Amerindian shamanism representatives on the current situation of Brazil and the world. The connection between the wisdom of the forests and the question about the performing arts function gains, from there, new meaning.

### **The Xawara plague**

"We are not free, and the sky can still collapse in our heads" (Artaud, 1999, p.89) This sentence is from Artaud's work "The Theater and its Double" but could be easily integrated into the speech of David Kopenawa, Yanomami shaman, author of the book "The Fall of Heaven", written in partnership with anthropologist Bruce Albert. The Yanomami live in Roraima, Northern Brazil, near

the Venezuelan border; it is the state with the largest indigenous population in the country. Kopenawa and his people have extensive experience in epidemics: measles, influenza, malaria, tuberculosis, transmitted by whites, mark their childhood memories. The Yanomami have witnessed, perplexed, the prospectors' fever for gold, contaminating the rivers with mercury to obtain the metal:

"All these dirty and dangerous things make the waters sick and the fish soft and rotten. Those who eat them face the risk of dying of dysentery, meager, with violent stomachaches and dizziness. The owners of the waters are the spirits of stingrays, electric eels, anacondas, alligators and porpoises. (...) If the prospectors soil the rivers' springs, they will all die, and the waters will disappear with them. They will flee inside the Earth. Then, how will we quench our thirst?" (ALBERT; KOPENAWA, 2015, p.336)

Waters also get sick and men do not own the rivers. That which is on the surface of the Earth and would benefit us can simply retreat and ignore us, leaving us to thirst. The prospectors are, in this case, only the representatives of the eagerness that appropriates and destroys what does not belong to us. The shaman's speech reveals an understanding of one's position in a network of relationships with other beings, as opposed to a reified view of the human individual separated from the environment, explorer and dominator of nature. The violence of the colonial process also translates into an attack on various life forms. The diseases that spread through indigenous communities are the consequences of a project of appropriation of Earth's resources.

From his initiation as shaman, Kopenawa came to understand the different evils affecting his people as a single epidemic, named Xawara. The word expresses a synthetic apprehension of the diseases, translated in mythical terms, distinct from the analytical descriptions developed by Western science. Certainly, scientific knowledge today is indispensable for the treatment of the Yanomami people health crises. The indigenous view, however, clarifies the relation of epidemics with the "soul" of the white world, attached to an ignorant way of life and immersed in a kind of thought obscuration. As a physician of culture, Kopenawa glimpses the plague's invisible dimension and its origin in a civilization's passion for products and its insensitivity to the subtlest levels of the experience of being alive.

As in Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, the Yanomami see the plague as the consequence of a human crime that shakes the cosmological order and the cycles of life renewal. The colonizer violates the Earth, driven by greed for the ores and the power that comes from them, committing a severe transgression: he removes from the depths of the ground something that should remain there, due to the danger that such substances pose to beings, when removed from their function as the foundation of the world.

"What white people call ore are the fragments of the sky, the moon, the sun and the stars that fell in the first age. (...) The ores are stored in the freshness of the soil, under the earth, the forest

and its waters. They are covered by large hard rocks, hollow boulders, shiny stones, gravel and sand. If they are to be discovered, they will set the Earth on fire. While cooling in the grounds, they only exude an invisible breath, which propagates through its depths like a damp breeze. (...) This way, this iron is stuck on Earth like the roots of a tree. It holds it steady; as fishbones and skeletons do to their own. It makes it stable and solid as our neck makes our head straight." (ALBERT; KOPENAWA, 2015, p. 360-361)

More than a source of raw materials and energy available for exclusive human enjoyment, the Earth is the protective sphere in which living beings dwell, the net of relations that sustains the experience of life, the entity that we must recognize and revere. It has a support structure, a skeleton, made of "sky fragments", stored underground. To violate this interior, motivated by a kind of i, is a crime of devastating consequences. In the shaman's view, such transgression would release dense and poisonous vapors, which enter the eyes and chest, soiling "the body of the whites of the cities, without their knowledge of it". (ibidem, p.362) Contamination not only covers indigenous peoples, but rather becomes a threat of cosmological proportions. The *Xawara* epidemic thrives "where whites manufacture and store their objects." (ibid., p.367) It puts at risk not only human existence, but life in general, shaking the delicate intertwining of beings and the very fabric of the visible and invisible worlds.

Such an acute view of our crisis is only possible from other ways of reality perception expressed with rare beauty in the work *The Fall of Heaven*. The experience of the Yanomami's time does not conform to the idea of "history" propagated by Western colonization; it encompasses simultaneously the present and a mythical ancestral time of the "first humanity", which still influences all those who live (RAMALHO, 2006, p.49). As such, each current animal or creature carries its "ancestral image", accessible to the shaman. The apprehension these indigenous peoples have of the forest has very little to do with the territorial division they are now obliged to assume as part of the political dialogue with the whites.

The experience of intertwined plural worlds connecting human existence with other life forms includes the invisible dimension of a great nature, accessible to the vision developed by shamans. If nature differs from human culture, it is also the place of the supernatural, inhabited by spirits and ancestors, with whom Man must connect and ally with. All this makes us reflect on the restriction of our perspectives and our restricted experience of reality. For Kopenawa, the white man does not know how to "dream the forest" and lives in a thought obscurity state.

### **Indifference, mourning and ritual**

The pandemic further aggravated the problems of the Yanomami and the indigenous world in Brazil. In an article published in *El País* on June 24, 2020, the journalist Eliane Brum reports the story of three Sonoma women, a sub-ethnicity of the Yanomami. Residents of a village in Roraima, the three were taken to the

state capital, along with their babies, all suspected of pneumonia. In the hospitals, the children got infected with Covid-19 and died. The bodies then disappeared from contact with their mothers and were probably buried in a city cemetery. Two of the mothers also contracted the disease and were hospitalized in the “Casa de Saúde Indígena” (Indigenous Health House), an institution crowded with patients. Desperate, they begged for their baby’s bodies, without success, as they did not speak Portuguese. With the help of a translator, one of them sent a message to the journalist, saying she could not return to the village without her son’s body.

The indifference of Brazilian society to the complaint of these women reveals something of our ignorance and our refusal to face what these peoples can reveal to us about ourselves. In his doctoral thesis, Ramalho (2008) presents us with the complexity and importance of funeral rites for the Yanomami. In general, traditional rites reveal the fundamental values of a society. In this case, the death of someone provokes intensification of the community internal and external relations, in addition to calling for a work of disconnecting between the world of the living and the dead, which is considered indispensable. In funerals, they explicit the senses of person and the ontology that underlies a whole perception of the world, so distinct from ours.

The Yanomami funeral rites are divided by Ramalho into four distinct phases, which we will briefly summarize here. First, the “best” situation for a person to die is one’s own place of origin, preferably near a shaman. If births in general occur in the forest, in death it is better to be close to loved ones, with the support of shamanic work, which will begin a complex process of passage and disconnecting, according to that culture’s cosmology. After realization that respiration has ceased and the vital breath has left the body, the relatives take the center, starting a long period of laments and ritual cries. Death usually provokes speculation about sorcery from rival groups. An elder, as a political authority, can express the community’s anger and desire for revenge. From the beginning, it is a matter that concerns not only close relatives, but the village as a whole, especially if the deceased is someone who has played an important role.

In the second phase, the body is carefully prepared and placed in a basket, in fetal position, covered with a mat. It is then taken to a place in the forest, placed on top of a tree, protected from animal attacks. There it will remain for little over a month until the flesh rots and the bones become apparent. A male guardian will be responsible for the hard task of performing such procedures. Only when he states this period is over will the process of bone cremation begin. The idea of burying a body is totally foreign to the group. On the contrary, at first the corpse is “raised” to the top of a tree and the decomposition period is regarded as part of the mourning process. Such contact with aspects related to body decomposition contrasts strongly to the relationship that whites, in general, maintain with a corpse.

Another fundamental aspect of this second stage is that all objects connected to the deceased are systematically destroyed. For the Yanomami, such



a procedure is related to both the living and the dead. It is a way of dealing with the intensity of the feelings aroused by the deceased person: nostalgia, melancholy, anger. It is also a way to destroy the traces of its earthly existence and facilitate its passage into the world of the dead. Once the mourning phase is ended, the name of the person can no longer be pronounced by relatives and friends. Thus, the rite performs a kind of cutting of the "umbilical cord" that connected the deceased one to the world of the living. It pays attention both to feelings of pain and grief and to the importance of forgetting and letting go.

After flesh decomposition, the rite follows with preparation of the bones for cremation. The person responsible for this work should not show any revulsion, as a sign of respect for the family members and as proof of courage. At the same time, the surrounding community will intensely express the grief at the event through ritual cries and lamentations. The elders may also speculate on the death causes, the political problems involved, and the answers needed to avenge the deceased one.

After a funeral dance performed at dawn, when the last belongings of the deceased are displayed by his relatives, the bones and all these objects are incinerated, without hesitation. The ashes will be collected and stored in a gourd, being cared for by a woman of the family. Everyone bathes after this moment. Crying should now be restricted to close relatives.

The last stage will then begin with a ceremonial collective hunt that prepares food for the *Reahu*, a very important feast involving the village and external guests. The commitment to the slaughter of large animals demonstrates respect for the deceased one, for the community and for its visitors. The meeting preparations transition from the melancholic atmosphere to a new vital moment, involving dances, chants, ornamentation and cooking. The presence of external visitors is fundamental for strengthening bonds through the sharing of plentiful food, verbal duels, dances and other games.

Finally, depending on the group, the rite ends with either ingestion or burial of the ashes. This moment is accompanied by the use of *epena* by members of the group, a plant capable of strongly altering perception. The assimilation of the ashes is preceded by the ceremonial presentation of younger men carrying bows and arrows. The gourd is broken by the ritual conductor and the ashes mixed with a banana porridge. The content is ingested by close relatives and key allies. This will also be the occasion of an eventual revenge planning, articulating the community against an outside enemy blamed for the death.

According to Ramalho (2006), funeral rituals can be understood as a central operator of Yanomami cultural life. They process not only the reconfiguration of the community's social and political life, but also the elaboration of complex affections and the reaffirmation of the cosmological and metaphysical vision that inspires them. From there, it becomes clearer the despair of Yanomami women in the pandemic, facing the impossibility of holding the funerals for their children. The contrast between the ritual and symbolic

complexity surrounding death among these indigenous peoples and the current neglect with the pandemic by part of Brazilian society, especially regarding minorities and poor populations, gives some measure of the physical and symbolic violence we are experiencing.

### **Necropolitics and culture wars**

The discomfort caused today by the indigenous world in part of Brazilian society may come not only from the white man's desire for territories and appropriation of natural wealth, but also from the refusal of the official country to face cultures that look at us with dignity, utterly exposing much of our own violence. The statement of a former state minister at a presidential meeting on April 22, 2020, expressing his hatred for the expression "indigenous peoples" (since we would be "a singular people"), reflects well this passionate and violent reactivity. The attack on democratic culture is here made by drastically reducing the space for diversity of ways of life, behaviors and thoughts, and by imposing an essentialist representation of the "Brazilian people", as Christian, Western and conservative.

Beyond grossly flattening the diversity and complexity of that which we call "Brazil", this attack is about hiding the uninterrupted work done to diminish living and diverse cultural forces, or even eliminate them. Alongside physical violence, invasion and destruction of territories, the implementation of a "unified nation" representation that expels or denies the different is often supported by processes of "conversion" and demonization of indigenous cultures, through missionary activities. Religious fundamentalism, which does not recognize spiritual life possibilities other than a certain version of Christianity, thus becomes a key element in the process of expansion and imposition of a way of life. The invasion of territories goes alongside a "culture war", in combating indigenous narratives and rituals and imposing theological discourses, new rituals and values.

The specific attack on indigenous communities can be understood as part of a broader strategy in force today, which recycles the colonial project, relocating Brazil in a broader framework of neoliberalism's sphere of influence in the world. The Amazon devastation and the aggression against indigenous communities, made possible by the loosening of state control, occur concomitantly with the loss of social rights, the resurgence of police violence and the dismantling of educational and cultural institutions. The pandemic has made even clearer the logic of necropolitics between us, which distinguishes disposable bodies from those to be preserved.

The ghostly return of discourses preaching a new "Ato Institucional n. 5" (Institutional Act Number 5) and celebrating "the dictatorship's good old days", in street demonstrations and social networks, clearly show that the passage rite from the military regime to democracy happened superficially and insufficiently. Today, in some sectors of the Brazilian society, we see the reconfiguration of the idea of an "internal enemy" to be fought and eliminated, one that no longer fits with notions of former left-wing militants,



engaged in clandestinity and armed struggle in the 60s and 70s. In far-right discourses, the new "Left" to be attacked is a multiform creature, identified by adhering to any critical stance toward capitalism, be they ecological in nature, or related to gender, race, religion, or moral issues. More than a critic of economic injustices, this enemy would profess the so-called "Cultural Marxism", which intended to undermine the customs and foundations of Judeo-Christian Western culture. By bringing the debate to the field of customs, these discourses evade from the hard economic issues they should otherwise face.

In Brazil, the recent transition to democracy has stumbled upon legal and political problems that have prevented the broad recognition of crimes and responsibilities, as has occurred in other Latin American countries. This incomplete rite of passage contributed decisively to the lack of a well-rooted democratic culture that would allow the symbolic elaboration of conflicts, allowing for renovation movements in society. We watch the return of unburied ghosts, who never cease to produce grotesque scenes in Brazilian public life. Feelings such as fear, grudges and resentment contaminate relationships, sickening the collective body by a physical and symbolic violence.

Therefore, some indigenous discourses have resonated in sensitive portions of the Brazilian population, as they speak of the expansion of an entire lifestyle that spread with colonization and is today the greatest threat for life on Earth. They invite us to other dialogues, not yet contemplated in Brazilian history and increasingly urgent, in which the arts can play a fundamental role.

### **From "anthropophagy" to the "fall of heaven"**

The idea of "anthropophagy", formulated by Oswald de Andrade and inspired by warrior rites of Tupinambá culture, has been a recurring metaphor in Brazilian cultural life, adopted by different artistic and cultural movements in affirmation of an anticolonial and inventive position. However, the new scenario in both Brazil and the world seems to summon symbols and point to other forms of dialogue between artists and indigenous cosmovisions. The anthropophagic attitude presupposes a combat field in which there is a defined "exteriority", consubstantiated in an "Other" that can be "devoured" and assimilated by a culture that has "dentition", that is, ability to digest and incorporate. What should be said about a situation in which colonial advancement is imposed in a multiple and diffuse way, intending to occupy all spaces and eliminate any alternative possibility?

In this context, new indigenous discourses emerge from some leaders that have gained greater public visibility in recent times. Such voices tell us of the "fall of heaven" (Kopenawa) and "ideas to postpone the end of the world" (KRENAK, 2019), referring not only to the calamitous situation of indigenous peoples, but to the risks of a global catastrophe. A shaman like Kopenawa not only acts to save his people but assures the importance of indigenous peoples for

humanity's survival. At the same time, the presented diagnosis, of a civilizational disease that has spread through the planet, is not limited to economic, political and social aspects. There is an apprehension of spiritual and existential poverties that generate destructive and rapacious attitudes. The trivialization of death and its political and economic use, which characterizes the idea of necropolitics, also express the impoverishment of the experience of living and the inner misery of the "carcass-man", to use an expression of Artaud.

The brief discussion we set on the Yanomami funeral rites gives us a glimpse of other types of relationship with death, mourning and passages, which are fundamental aspects for reestablishing the collective's life force and preventing a society from getting sick. Without this work of recognition, assimilation and burial, we shall remain trapped in a vicious circle, in which past ghosts return without ceasing, as they have not been elaborated and dealt with. Such a process depends not only on rational languages but must involve the affective and sensorial dimensions, as well as an openness to the very mystery that calls into question the meaning of life and death. The artistic and performative languages are the ones to most closely approach the wisdom embodied in rituals, capable of operating with the multiple dimensions involved in the experiences of separation, be they traumatic or not. Of course, when dealing with complex societies and Western democracies, all this must also involve a legal dimension and institutional politics.

A subtle resonance seems to be established between some indigenous leaders and artistic and cultural means interested in a renewal of perception modes and comprehension of the crises we live in. It regards not only the content of these people's discourses, but a certain quality of presence, marked by rhythms, tones and attitudes that come from the signs of other lifestyles. Sensitivity to the qualities of presence is a capacity developed in the performing arts. Perhaps the indigenous presence will give us an archaic memory of something valuable that we forgot or let atrophy, immersed as we are in an accelerated whirlwind of images and information. At the same time, we know how long the path of sowing less violent and ignorant ways of life will be. The consistency of the process will depend on our ability to manage different perspectives and contributions, based on the renovative circulation of affections and the cultivation of a ecology of wisdom, generating new ways of living together. Only through new alliances can we again "believe in a sense of life renewed by theater" and an art "capable of naming and directing shadows" (ARTAUD, 1999, p.8).

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