

The Shamanic behavior of Brazilian designers

The influence of the Amazon Indigenous cosmology on the Brazilian contemporary design.

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the relationships involving design and anthropology, more specifically, design in Brazil and Amerindian cosmology. For the purpose of outlining the supposed bridge capable of connecting both cultures, I intend to present parameters which structure the indigenous tradition of Amazonian tribes, and those which define the culture of the modern project in Brazil. The main aim is to demonstrate that the behavior of the Brazilian designer is shamanic. According to the following text, this project man, in order to create products imbued with renewed vitality, is able to unite thoughts concerning the shamanic logic with those related to Western rationality. In effect, the research of a culture in which its powerful tradition remains alive, simple, and (almost) uncontaminated still today, could establish a benchmark for design in the contemporary, as well as nurture it with new creative energies.

Key words: *Contemporary design, indigenous cosmology, savage thought, intuition.*

1. Introduction

One of the current trends in design is to evaluate the encounter between globalization and the popular culture of a country, since an effective channel to comprehend global culture can be to compare the native and the foreign [1]. Thus, primitive art has been constantly called to face the super offer of a market saturated of formal changes and technological innovations [2]. Taking this tendency into account, when analyzing the *Manifesto do Rio Negro* by the Frenchman Pierre Restany [3], and consequently, observing the lifestyle of the indigenous tribes of the Amazon region, it came to surface the intuition of how Brazil, in the area of design, would be able to propose answers to the new questions, and the new challenges of the globalized world.

Brazil does not attribute the vehicles of its identity to material culture, but imputes them to the transience of narrative, the temporality of parties, the fluidity of dance and music. Perhaps due to this fleeting identity, design in Brazil has been qualified in the international circuit as somewhat mysterious that repurposes itself as a novelty [1]. It looks as if this mystical terminology resided in the capacity of the Brazilian designer in uniting thoughts concerning the Western rationality to those related to the shamanic mindset. In the Western design there is a logic, a philosophy, a depth that is applied in a reverse process to Brazilian design. Within a rationality likewise interpreted as magic, the designer in Brazil is capable of understanding the relationship between men, and environment. On that ground, he is able to extract the poetic quality of banal materials in a "magic" manner with the purpose of composing useful and expressive things.

The native “make” *transforms* the aesthetics of things in technological solution, while the process of Western design first considers technology, and then defines its aesthetic. In pursuit of technological innovation, the contemporary Brazilian designer *re-defines*, and *trans-forms* the aesthetics of things executing three key actions: *re-cycling* things of nature, *re-using* already manipulated materials, and *re-contextualizing* industrialized products. In this context, the prefix *trans* always indicates changes, mainly those related to the act of *trans-figuration*, *trans-formation*, and *trans-mutation*; while *re*, aligned with the mythological narratives of native peoples, means repetition, interaction, but also return, backward, retreat. Hence, this study does not intend to deal with the forms of things, but with the processes which *trans-form* and *re-structure* them.

A reading key such that, which presumes a *redefinition* of thinking from its ethical and aesthetic qualities even before the style, can help the professionals of contemporary design to break the crystallized paradigms, and to surpass the limits imposed by habitual materiality.

2. Shamanic logic

In order to comprehend the indigenous way of thinking, the most appropriate step was to follow the Durkheim [4] suggestion, and to deviate the eyes of humanity, moving them along the course of an imaginary upward trajectory. Its apex is the ancient wisdom of shamans. My hypothesis is that the intellectual mode of thinking of designers in Brazil partakes of this traditional knowledge, even if unconsciously.



Figure. 1: At the upper Negro River, a *Tukano* shaman sitting down on a stool while smoking a cigar. These two objects have magical attributes. Foto: Theodor Koch-Grünberg (www.socioambiental.org).



Figure. 2: In agreement with the *Bakairi* cosmology, cosmos is designed in several layers situated at the horizon line. There are two lands, one concave and another convex, being the first the negative form of the second. Each one has its own rivers and groundwater (www.socioambiental.org).

The "shaman" term is used to designate individuals endowed with magical-religious prestige inside native societies (Figure. 1). Indeed, the shaman is the mediator between his / her indigenous communities and their gods, a kind of priest, poet, and mystic who has always questioned the secret connections between the universe and its cosmic laws. As stated by the historian of religions Mircea Eliade [5], even with somewhat religious trend, shamanism must not be interpreted as a primitive stage of religion, but a highly developed state of consciousness, a key that human beings developed in the past to understand the environment, and to live in harmony with it [6].

As observed by the anthropologist Lévy-Bruhl [7], the native intellect is mystical, not with the religious significance defined by the West. For them, the meaning concerns an identity and a mutual belonging where "creation" is not necessarily constituted by an individual and its gods, but by men and their objects.

2.1. Indigenous cosmology

According to Eliade [5], cosmology continues to exert a great influence on the daily life of indigenous peoples, especially on those Indians of the Brazilian sphere. Therefore, to better appreciate the socio-spatial structure of Amazonian native tribes, it is necessary to start the study through the identification of factors that frame their cosmology [8].

In conformity with what shamans teach about cosmology, the model of the universe is usually tripartite (Figure. 2). It means that its *cosmos* is basically formed by three elemental levels linked by a central axis: sky, earth, and underworld. The latter could be further subdivided in other two levels, one underground and another, aquatic [5]. Considering that the shamanic knowledge refers to all actions of a native community, the paper aims to present the circumstances in which cosmology is fundamental to constitute the houses (*malocas*) in the Amazon villages.

2.2. Cosmic *maloca*

The *maloca* is in itself a religious cosmography: it reveals cosmic symbols and metaphysical routes [9]. Inside it, the community works, sleeps, meditates, eats, analyses the Cosmos, teaches the tradition, dies, and is buried [10]. Its construction requires technological and mythical knowledge, inasmuch as the source of autochthonous technology was always determined by the constant mediation between cosmic meanings and technical results of material things [11].

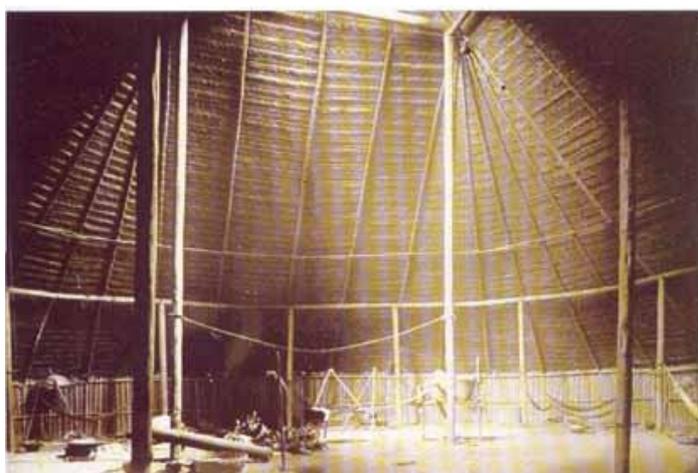


Figure. 3: An ancient *maloca* located at the upper Negro River (Amazon Basin, Brazil). Foto: Theodor Koch - Grünberg (<http://www.lablaa.org>).



Figure. 4: Inside of a *Yanomami*'s collective dwelling. Foto: René Fuerst, 1961 (www.socioambiental.org).

Symbolically, a *maloca* is understood as a replica of the cosmos and the three basic areas. It is the reason why indigenous groups try to establish a relationship between this complex cosmic model and its architectural elements. To that end, the world's axis is represented by the pillars which support the houses [5]. The composition of the roof symbolizes the heavens while its luminous projection on the ground delimits the sacred

space from whence the vital energy is conducted. This inner space, made of slightly distant stems one from the other, prevents the entry of animals, though allowing the light to penetrate. On account of their intensity, Amazon Indians can distinguish the different times of a day [12]. Then, due to the observation of the sun’s movement inside the *maloca*, it is also used as a solar clock (Figure. 3). At last, when these houses are covered up, the ends of the circular enclosure join the roof, leaving only two opposite doors open. Such doors, positioned face-to-face, are connected by a corridor of hammocks (Figure. 4). The place reserved for each hammock, how it is suspended, and the position of the human body, suggest the behavior of every individual in relation to the other members of the group who live together inside the same *maloca* [12].

This cosmic symbolism is a constant reference to the ancestors who continue to live where “the sun rises or the rivers reach the end”. In effect, the *maloca* is the home/shelter of a nuclear family and, at the same time, it has a special place in the mythical order [9].

3. Cosmology of Brazilian design

After researching and confronting the Amazonian indigenous cosmology with the roots of the modern project in Brazil, I can see signs of a phenomenological connection between both, not of a formal nature, but of a philosophical one instead. From a first reading based on an artistic and intuitive reflection, the conclusive considerations indicate a symbiotic relation between a universe framed within the European and indigenous parameters, and another universe structured from the cosmological parameters perceived by the shamans of the Amazon tribes [13].

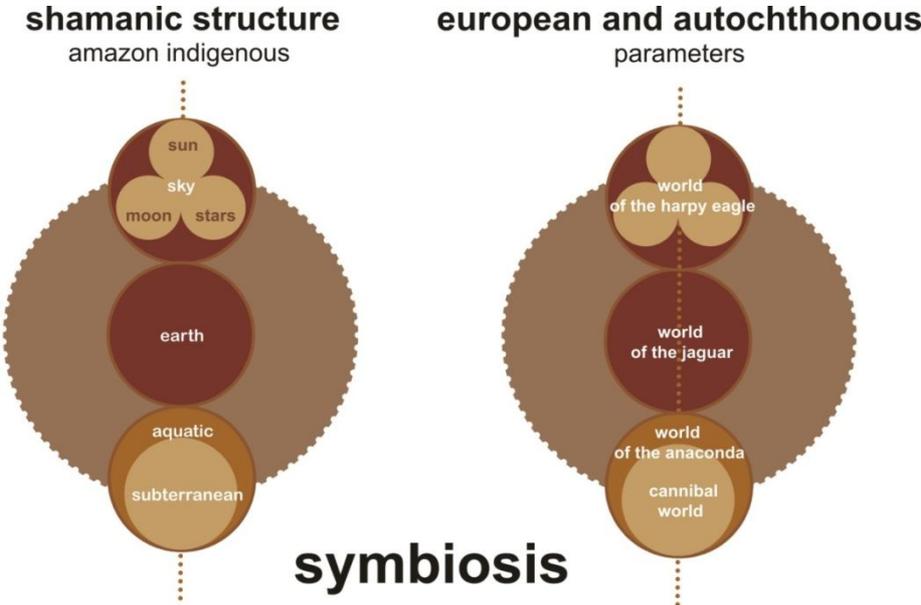


Figure. 5

It is noteworthy to know that each sphere of the indigenous universe is dominated by an ancestral-*anaconda*, the more powerful spirit of each world. In this sense, the anaconda governs the aquatic world, the jaguar dominates the terrestrial world, and the harpy-eagle, the celestial world [5]. Under this scheme, the conformation of the universe of Brazilian design could also be outlined in four specific worlds (Figure. 5).

In this conformation, the first layer is the cannibal's world. In analogy with indigenous beliefs, the cannibal is confined in an underground stratum which element of strength is the fire. Fire means *transformation*, so the cannibal world consists of interpreting and *transforming* the indigenous forms. Here, the inspiration to develop the project is the outcome of an extensive research on the "roots of Brazil", substantially based on vernacular qualities (Figure. 6). Still pursuant to Amazonian cosmology, the anaconda is the being who represents the aquatic world. In agreement with the shamans, water is the element of creation, thereat, in Brazilian design, the anaconda's world marks the beginning of the creative relationship which connects the project to the other languages. Despite being the speech indigenous and the aesthetic modern, the style remains, essentially, European (Figure. 7). The jaguar's world is the third of this apophenic universe [14]. Its design carries within itself the power of nature and communicates somewhat of vital, ancestral. The approach is "savage": it depends on the wealth of available resources in the region, on the constructive solutions adopted by the vernacular architecture, and on the potentiality of labor. This behavior promotes contextualized results always in conformity with the physical and cultural environment in which they are inserted (Figure. 8). Finally, the last world is the harpy-eagle's one, and it corresponds to the celestial world of indigenous cosmology. The designer inserted in this sphere executes actions of "self-production", which are inherent to the conscious use of *secondary* materials. Here, the raw material comes from the scums of the roads and from products denied by society. Consequently, the approach becomes "artistic".



Figure. 6: The designer Lina Bo Bardi did not only recover materials, techniques, and crafts of indigenous, but was sensitive to the Brazilian culture as well (www.iuav.it).



Figure. 7: With a strong commitment to the Brazilian reality, Joaquim Tenreiro designed this chair with three feet, in 1947. Due to a great concern with contemporary language, he rejected the provincialism, always seeking a major simplicity and functionality to his design (<http://www.arcoweb.com.br>).



Figure. 8: Armchair of *pequi* wood, sculptured by Hugo França. Heavy and strong, his furniture is carved directly inside half-burned logs, abandoned canoes, and roots of large trees (<http://www.mcb.sp.gov.br>).

3.1. World of the Harpy-eagle

About these four worlds, the one of the harpy-eagle presents the most obvious correlation with magical manifestations from the shamanic cosmology. These expressions can be recognized in the individual attitudes of designers, in their particular motivation, and in the subjective ability to offer technical and aesthetical innovations. This world organizes itself through a set of fragments that come together in an intuitive way. The process consists in subverting the original function of industrial materials and components, in order to use them

in another context. In this world, there may also be found three "cosmic eggs" which distinguish themselves due to the raw material of reference [15]. The first one, characterized by *re*-cycling, is done with things of Nature whence creativity *transforms* its elements (Figure. 9). The *re*-use is the main action of the second egg. Here, the *reinvention* of the matter resides in *re*-using what is useless, always manipulating non-*re*-processed wastes and urban originated materials (Figure. 10). Finally, the third one is characterized by *re*-contextualization. This system uses conventional materials found on the market, and bestows to them different functions regarding the originals (Figure. 11).

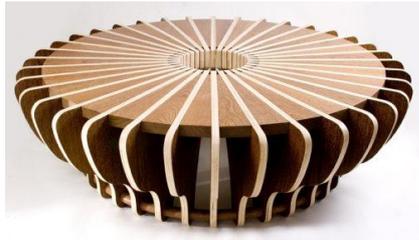


Figure. 9: Radial bureau, projected by Julia Krantz. The designer works with native certified wood, a process that moves between function and formal aesthetics, exploring the infinite possibilities of Brazilian wood (<http://revistaabcdesign.blogspot.com>).



Figure. 10: Stools, designed by Valter Bahcivanji. They are used to sit on and to store objects (<http://veja.abril.com.br>).



Figure. 11: Sushi chair, designed by the Campana Brothers. The designers developed this chair with industrial wastes, such as remnants of carpet, felt, and other colorful fabrics. The piece has no structure of metal or wood (www.arcoweb.com.br).

4. Cosmological principles

Thus, considering the harpy-eagle's world and analyzing the shamanic theories about Cosmos, I presume there are three elementary principles that are able to establish an interdependence between the universe of Brazilian design and the indigenous universe: contiguity, correspondence, and experimentation [16].

In this paper, the first fundamental principle to be observed is the contiguity. According to shamanic beliefs, the reality is not perceived within an interaction of cause and effect [6], but it acts as a link among differences, allowing new associations to be constructed, and new meanings produced. This method of connecting fragments creates an identity among things which establishes a criterion of contiguity on the discontinuity of events. In a second moment, considering the principle of correspondence, the ethnologist Lévi-Strauss [17] noticed that the sense of identity is greater than the notion of differences among native peoples. Moreover, shamans have a strong feeling about the concrete character of their knowledge. The same said Lévy-Bruhl [7] when commenting that autochthonous peoples do not feel any need to study or to know the beings deeply. They are capable of identifying the essential similarities which unite all of them. The technique used by natives to classify organisms is very precise, and devoid of equivocalness. Beings and natural phenomena are usually classified by means of an extensive system of correspondence [17]. In the end, to close off this issue, experimentation is the last principle that, while indicating a way to create, shows explicitly a risk of bankruptcy which permits to *re*create new things. In truth, the experiment allows the emergence of difference. At a first moment, the difference produces an effect of "surprise" for whom perceives it, but after that, it gets meaning. For shamanic wisdom, difference is not inequality, neither does resemblance establish identity among things [18]. Essentially, things communicate by correspondence, while contiguity is materialized by means of experimentation.

Inserting these three principles in the core of indigenous culture, several are the reports which indicate how contiguity, correspondence, and experimentation support the existence of an interconnection that *rejoins* and integrates all parts of the unit [18-19]. Lévi-Strauss [17], for example, says that contiguity depends on an identical system while correspondence does not require the participation of any system. Its substrata are determined by the common possession of one or more characteristics which are part of the whole. Subsequently, the anthropologist Gonçalves [18] observes that correspondence provides basis for contiguity because the first one associates denotations that produce new meanings only by comparison. Still in the words of Gonçalves [18], the principle of experimentation evidences the possibility of *transformation* and continuous creation of the elements of Cosmos. However, as the Brazilian researcher Gordon [19] affirms, such *transformation* is thought from the very indigenous modes of acting themselves [20]. As it seems, the shamanic theories are focused on the actions responsible for the metamorphoses which allow the *transmutation* of shamans in animals. *Transmutation* would be a way to show that shamans are able to abandon their human condition [5].



Figure. 12: The thin corporal designs, made by *Kadiwéu* natives, are a remarkable expression of this art. Qualified craftswomen print their visages with detailed and symmetrical drawings. *Kadiwéu* women also produce beautiful pieces of pottery. They are decorated with exclusive patterns which follow a rich repertoire. It is stationary, and their forms are filled with various colors (www.socioambiental.org).



Figure. 13: Reader's House, designed by Nido Campolongo. The designer reproduces the environment of a house: floor, ceiling, walls, doors, partitions, shelves, beds, sofas, armchairs, table and chairs, all made of paper. Foto: Eduardo Barcellos (<http://www.arcoweb.com.br>).

If, in a second time, the same principles are moved to design, they can be interpreted as project stages of a non-conventional process constituted by the fusion of banal elements to technological components. Here, *transformation* is not *transmutation*, but subversion: the fragments have their original function overturned to be used in another context. In this case, subversion is interpreted in the aesthetic sense as novelty, innovation, and not in its dialectical sense. In practice, designers *transform* things by organizing them in not necessarily new ways, but by new processes of juxtaposition. Under these circumstances, their purpose is to discover new worlds *remounting* the ones which already exist. Anyway, taking as example the *Kadiwéu* indigenous art (Figure. 12), Brazilian designers consider a kind of ambiguity that is projected in successive plans: representation and abstraction, angles and curves, geometry and scrollwork, symmetry and asymmetry, line and surface, edge and center, field and frame, figure and background [21]. The dynamics of design depends on the way in which ambiguities like these are mixed and overlapped at all plans of a system of objects.

The house *per se*, for instance, gives a unitary sense to the complexity of objects, not through the unification of styles, but by a symbolic perimetry of each thing endowed with expressive and functional autonomy (Figure. 13). In this sense, the house must be designed as an organic being, animate, perspirable, flexible, and likewise cosmic. In a manner of speaking, as long as the polysemantic things exist as material reality, their meanings can always be *reworked*. This allows them to remain alive and current forever, instead of being placed in a timeless category [19].

5. Shamanism and design

Occasionally, shamans and designers, in order to carry out their activities of *transformation*, decompose and *recompose* the world they know by exploring it through free associations of elements. Under an aspect known as magical, both are benefited by the same creative ability of juxtaposing used separate parts of a frame for the purpose of creating new structures with new meanings [22]. More than just understand the connections between things and beings, they are able to modify the original environment by *re-contextualizing* it. Moving the original matter from its natural habitat, the spectral character of the world of objects is *remounted* in an experimental kaleidoscope. By means of its *reassembly*, the values of the fragmented components are reverted in allegory within a context of *re-valorization*. Taking again the principle of correspondence into consideration, the process focuses on establishing a relationship among concordant, but not identical, things. Indeed, *re-contextualization* makes a new framework to emerge; one that organizes itself, ambiguously.

By the way, the hypothesis is that the magic in design results of the juxtaposition of ambiguous elements, insofar as it breaks the structural paradigm of objects. Above all, what activates the ideology of the hidden forces is the abnormality of the shape and the size of the object, be it in the animate context of the shamanic objects or in the inanimate context of contemporary design [7]. This logic accomplishes new structural combinations, in which the fragments are resultant of a random break in itself. In the case of juxtaposition of residual parts, the entity is added to other entities, *transmuting* its original form, *transforming* itself in another entity.

The formation of a "new being" includes a game of mirrors in which certain signs acquire the quality of significant things. This happens because each combination is expressed as strict relationships among its parts, and also because such relationships have no other content other than the same combination that consequently, in the observer's experience, does not correspond to any other object [17]. In the subversion, since the "new being" is subjected to cultural channels of diverse nature, it opens itself for manifestations of different emotional impacts. As a matter of fact, the transgression of the original matter encourages the spectator to undertake a further reading of the object which, hence, leads him/her to express an unexpected emotion translated, in West, as mystical or magical.

5.1. Final consideration: shamanic behavior of Brazilian designers

Thinking about this hypothesis, I realized that the behavior of the Brazilian designer could be considered shamanic. On one side, indigenous art annuls any separation, inasmuch as it expresses an intuition that is normal for shamans and their tribes. In the same way it does not answer any aesthetic criteria rather than magical-religious ideologies [7]. On the other side, the Brazilian designer creates original pieces with great expressive

force and strong emotional appeal. Uncompromising with the weights of the past, this project man is intuitive, and does not rely on theoretical models to develop his designs. Imbued with a natural spirit of observation, an attitude that is personal and subjective, he finds inspiration in ethereal worlds. In order to create his projects, the starting point does not follow paradigms: he thinks of things that may stimulate people's senses, even before thinking of an image that determines the shape of the object. In consequence of this shamanic behavior, the project has been developed as if it were a *quasi-corpus*, i.e., a being whose reality is not exhausted in the foreign relations of its elements. This product is not restricted to occupying a place in a concrete space, but it transcends it when creating a new meaning in which the objective notions of time, space, and form are not enough to determinate its reality [22].

It looks like shamans and designers are able to understand and communicate other models of thought due to their capacity to embody rituals of intuitive nature. Intuition promotes creativity because it considers a variety of outlooks. Being this is a prism that opens to the research of the "new", the logic of shamanic thought - which has the intuition personified into its behavior - seems to relate to creative thinking at its most possible strict sense.

The shamanic thinking has a logic of values that allows the shaman to communicate with the outside world. Its mechanisms include magic, and do not depend on valid models, but on knowledge and experience. Substantially, in West, the parts of a thing are organized and interpreted, in general, in a sequential way, while they are offered, simultaneously, by magic. The difference between a logic and the other is that the Western rationality guides the thought, while the shamanic logic serves it. Understanding the structure of this mechanism does not help one to learn supernatural formulas; comprehending it helps one to realize the existence of other ways the designer could take to make better use of his own intellect. Thus, whereas intuition has been used by designers in search of new results and new languages, adding the mechanisms of shamanic thought to rational thinking could bring, in this situation, new perspectives to design.

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