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CONTRIBUTION TO THE CONCEPT OF PERSON AND SELF
IN LOWLAND SOUTH AMERICAN SOCIETIES:
BODY PAINTING AMONG THE KAYAPO-XIKRIN (*)

Lux Vidal (**)

As Marcel Mauss once suggested, body ornamentation can reveal important aspects related to the concept of person and self, a concrete expression of fundamental cultural values. Years ago, looking at some Kaduveo body paintings, reproduced on paper by old women, Lévi-Strauss tried in a brilliant essay to reconstruct context: cultural orientation, social structure, style. Mary Douglas argued that there is a close relation between the treatment of the body and social structure. And since then anthropologists have been making important contributions to this subject.

Among Lowland South American Indians, body ornamentation is an elaborate and central aspect of their culture and a more systematic analysis of its symbolic use and meaning can lead to interesting insights and a better understanding of these societies.

Body ornamentation among the Kayapo-Xikrin, a Ge speaking group of Central Brazil, and especially body painting expresses in a very formal, synthetic and aesthetic manner, but also in a strictly grammatical form the understanding the Kayapo have of their social structure, religious beliefs, biological manifestations and relation with nature. But above all it reveals to each individual the manyfold facets of his own self a related to other selves in space and time.

Among the Kayapo to be, or better to make sense, is in a large measure to appear in a culturally appropriate manner. Body painting and body ornamentation as a whole, must be seen as a code itself internally patterned and itself a part of a larger patterned universe.

As a good number of monographs have been produced about social and political organization, economy, ritual and mythology among the Ge groups, it has been possible after a complete inventory of Kayapo-Xikrin body paintings (designs, sets and sequences of designs, superposition of

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designs, colouring substances, colour symbolism and body ornaments in general) to analyse on sure ethnographic basis and in context the multiple significance of these artistic manifestations, a symbolic means of expression and communication.

In the present paper I shall avoid generalizations and comment instead on a few concrete examples of what I consider important aspects of body ornamentation.

**Example 1** — The following table (Figs. 1 and 2) represents the graphic sequence and visual ordering of an event: the birth of the first child of a young couple. The table includes the different categories of kin (or non kin, as formal friends) involved and co-participants of the event, as well as the space of time necessary for the full recognition and expression of the event at its biological, individual, domestic and communal levels. The signification of each graphic unit can only be understood in relation to the other units and to its position in the set. And the set as a whole is only intelligible as part of the larger patterned Kayapo-Xikrin universe. This is also true for all other possible pictorial event sets (nomination, initiation and marriage ceremonies, mourning and post-war restrictions, maize feast etc.).

The set displays an internal structure recurrent in all other event sets. The categories of persons involved may change and some graphic units may be different, but the structure and order of the sequences do not. There are always two invariable poles, one symbolizing retreatment from every-day life, isolation; absence of body paint; a dangerous liminal position, with only red urucu applied on the face, and emphasis given to biological survival and biological manifestations. The other pole is the full participation in social communal life and daily activities according to age and sex, when the body is decorated with one of the appropriate genipapo designs. Between these two poles there is a transitional phase where for each event the nature and ordering of the graphic units differ because it is during that space of time that the "unique features" of each specific event, including the relation of each self to other selves is communicated through visual messages. Invariably, though, genipapo designs follow the charcoal/urucu sequences.

Though there is no space for a detailed analysis of the sequence and how it relates to other spheres of Kayapo culture, some aspects must be emphasized: 1) The importance of the formation of a new nuclear family; 2) The bilaterality of the kinship system; 3) The spatial dichotomy, typical of Ge groups, between periphery, domestic sphere and center of the plaza, men's council; 4) The symbolism of lower lip perforation of the male baby and the big red lip plug worn by the wather when reintegrating the men's council; 5) The greater emphasis attributed to the father's reintegration ritual, especially when reintroduced into the men's council, invested with a
FIG. 1 — PICTORIAL SEQUENCE: BIRTH OF THE CHILD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>sequence</th>
<th>child</th>
<th>mother</th>
<th>father</th>
<th>kwatui MM, FM, FZ</th>
<th>ngêt FF, MF, MB</th>
<th>time space</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>7 first days after birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>MB makes the baby's outfit, a buriti palm leaf carrying band and a small mat.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>8th day - fall of the baby's umbilical cord.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III</td>
<td>G₁</td>
<td>G₂</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>G₃</td>
<td>G₄ₘ</td>
<td>9th day - first bath of the baby, perforation of lower lip by MF.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>G₄ₘ</td>
<td>G₅ᵣ</td>
<td>10th day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>G₃</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>G₅ₘ</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>12th day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI</td>
<td>G₅ₑ</td>
<td>G₄ᵣ</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>17th day</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII</td>
<td>G₅ᵣ</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2 months</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
URUCU
- Liminal position
- Severe restrictions
- Domestic groups periphery
- Each one applies his own layer of urucu.

URUCU, CHARCOAL
- Reintegration into the men's council
- Periphery → center
- Groomed by female formal friend and conducted to the center of the plaza by a male formal friend

B: fresh hair shaving, ointed with babaçu oil. Face dyed black with charcoal and body with urucu. Uses a large red wooden lip plug.

C: entire body and face blackened with charcoal.

GENIPAPO
- End of restrictions
- Transition towards normality and reintegration into the community
- Specific designs indicating process of reintegration

G₁: tep-ibe, design consisting of parallel, vertical stripes, specific for new-born babies, applied with the fingers; represents indiscriminately skin designs of young tapir deer or small fish. Recognizes the new-born as human and identifies him as a Kayapó.

G₂: å-ke-re-ko, first design for a new mother; represents the design of a fish.

G₃: rop-krori, usual female design indicating end of restriction period; represents the skin of the jaguar.

G₄: me-tuk, another variety indicating end of restriction period; all black, female (G₄f) and male (G₄m) variety differ only for face design.

G₅: Normal position
- Full participation in communal life
- Specific designs for children (G₅c), female (G₅f) and male (G₅m) adults.

always painted by kin women.
greater variety of strong visual symbols indicating marked transition, danger and power (sequence II and III). In sequence II the importance and separate treatment given to the head. This feature is striking in other pictorial sequences, male initiation for example. Human head is related to the center of the plaza, also center of the Kayapo universe and to the most valuedKayapo instrument, the maracá rattle; 6) The mother who remains in her own domestic group, at the periphery, is submitted to a less impressive ritual and not at a communal formal level. The whole process of reintegration, though, is much longer for her, lasting up to two months, when she is accepted as a member of the women’s society. Among the Kayapo-Xikrin, men are recognized as the only responsible agents for the formation of the child in the mother’s womb. The mother’s contribution begins after birth (milk versus semen) and the long me-tuk body painting emphasizes this mother-child relation.

Example II — We have seen that genipapo body painting is used during transition periods and to mark normality. By normal I mean healthy, clean and participating in all communal daily activities. Genipapo (G₃) designs are numerous though not infinite. The designs obey aesthetic rules of form and style, in terms of what is considered ideal: symmetry, fine regular parallel lines, close texture, correct proportions. Genipapo body painting is a natural and continuous activity, a deep rooted habit, an intrinsic part of the concept of being human and Kayapo. Genipapo body painting requires learning, practicing and skill. Only women paint, and sometimes for several hours a day. We must here draw attention to the symbolic expression related to the very action of painting. Women paint their children individually when they please, and are free to choose, out of the children’s repertory, the design they wish to apply. Young mothers use their children’s body as a laboratory, a canvas on which they can practice. Painting an adult implies in age and sex differentiation and follows a more rigid pattern related to different levels of social organization. Taken as a whole genipapo body painting symbolizes subtle similarities and differences between categories expressing tendencies rather than clear-cut boundaries. These tendencies, as shown in the table below are statistically proved and culturally admitted. We can illustrate this by presenting the different variants of one single design, the ā-ka-pruk and try to understand the criteria when applied on the human body. The ā-ka-pruk is a design of parallel inclined lines and there are seven variants of it, let’s say a,b,c,d,e,f,g, represented roughly in the following manner:

a,b — face-paint, always applied with a palm rib stylet, for both sexes and all age categories.

c,d — body-paint variants used on children exclusively, applied with the palm rib stylet.

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a,b,c,d — *ā-ka-pruk*, is a decorative pattern framed by a base design of parallel, vertical (body) or horizontal (face) stripes, a typical feature of Xikrin body painting patterns.

e,f — children and women body-paint variants; here the design as a whole is called *ā-ka-pruk*. The paint is applied with the hand and striped with a wooden comb.

g — an exclusively men’s variant. It differs from all the other variants for being asymmetrical, as a matter of fact the only Xikrin asymmetrical design we have registered.

The following tables represent the repartition of the variants when applied onto the body.

### *ā-ka-pruk, facial paint*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>variant</th>
<th>children</th>
<th>women</th>
<th>men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>b</td>
<td>x₀</td>
<td>x₁</td>
<td>x₂</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(1) very common, (2) less common, (3) rare, except for young men, whose body is treated as an adult and face as a child.

### *ā-ka-pruk, body paint*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>variant</th>
<th>children</th>
<th>women</th>
<th>men</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>c</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>d</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>x</td>
<td>x</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>g</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Genipapo body paintings include a rich graphical variety for designs as well as variants of a same design, and this must be understood as related
to the amplitude of the semantic field it covers. Genipapo body painting is more informative than expressive, it is also closely related to the process of socialization; children are passive agents, who half asleep, lying on a mat, are submitted to the regular caress of the palm rib styllet. They are also painted with a greater number of designs and variants than adults. What is expressed through continual recurrent painting is the understanding the Kayapo have of the life cycle, age and sex, social relations, reciprocity, hierarchy, play, formal control, perfection, beauty.

Women always paint with apparent pleasure and calm control, certainly a lively social event when they gather for the weekly collective painting sessions. Body painting, however, is a compulsive, inevitable, formally controlled aesthetic activity, as regular and necessary as any other activity related to biological survival. Women are bound to paint.

Young initiates and adult men are also painted individually by kin women, but with collective chosen designs. Often young men's face and upper part of the body are painted in a style used for children. Adult men use few designs, their ā-ka-pruk outfit is unique and strikingly beautiful through uncommon asymmetry.

Any Kayapo-Xikrin duly painted with genipapo, after bathing in the afternoon, frictions urucu paint all over the body to turn it brilliant, oily and slightly copper-coloured. The face is painted with a thick layer of urucu, a specific design being used according to age and sex. Feet and lower part of the legs are also dyed with red urucu. If necessary the hair is cropped in the Kayapo fashion.

Young children are, after each fresh genipapo painting, heavily adorned with red ear plugs, a shell necklace, cotton strings and bead work and white harpy-eagle down glued on their hair. A charcoal and resin design is applied on the edge of the shaven area of the head to keep away harmful spirits.

Initiates back from a hunting party, and after bathing and urucu adorning use straw, bark, shell and cotton adornments for the afternoon dances in the plaza. When men go hunting in the forest they blacken their faces with charcoal, women pass urucu when leaving for the gardens. All these colouring and ornamental superpositions must be seen as successive increments and building up of symbolic expression and visual communication.

During the most important rituals a great variety of feather adornments are used, egg shell powder is applied on the face, white eagle down on the head and parrot down on the body. Individuals involved in a rite de passage are literally transformed into birds. Or else they disappear under the grandiose palm leaf and bark mask of monkeys, ant eaters and aruana fish.

The two most expressive forms of artistic production among the Kayapo are body painting, an exclusively female activity and the fashion-
ing of feather and palm leaf ornaments, a task performed by men. Body painting is an everyday activity carried out in the houses while featherwork and masks are associated to rituals and made in the men's house.

*Example III* — A final word must be said about style. As a matter of fact there are unmistakable differences in style for body painting as well as featherwork between the different Kayapo subgroups, especially between the spatially and historically more distant groups, the Kayapo-Xikrin versus Xingu Kayapo communities. This is especially clear for genipapo body paintings.

Kayapo genipapo designs consist mostly of a variety of geometrical designs, a combination of straight and broken lines, the final product having a well defined internal structure and specific style. The following Xikrin (rio Catete) and Mekranoti (rio Iriri) body painting designs may show this in a more striking manner.

The differences are instantaneously perceived and this is true for any design produced in one or the other group. The difference lies in the structure of the pattern used for what I have called the base-design. The Xikrin use fine, close, parallel, vertical (or horizontal) lines following a fish bone pattern (*tep-i ôk*), with regular blank spaces, filled or not with a decorative ornament. The Mekranoti apply the loose hexagonal pattern of a turtle shell (*kaprã-ôk*), with or without an inner decorative ornament. These two base pattern referentials led to different styles and structural possibilities of combining and ordering internal elements. The Mekranoti have a greater variety of designs, of ornamental patterns and of possible combinations, and there seems to be a wider margin for individual creativity. The Mekranoti also make a wider use of asymmetrical designs. These differences occurring among groups of the same cultural and linguistic stock, historically separated for at least 150 years, must be understood as the result of the elaboration and recurrent use of certain basic patterns in detriment of others. As we suggested above, a certain tendency finally produces a new pattern and gradually leads to completely different stylistic orientation and aesthetic expression, symbolically closing each group upon its own fantasies.

Today all the Kayapo groups experience intensive contact and drastic changes. Body ornamentation will be submitted to many alterations and symbolic manipulations. It is not our intention to predict the future, but whatever the issue it will keep pace with dying or merging concepts of person and self, whatever this means.

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(1) The Mekranoti designs have been collected by Gustaaf Verswyer.


