
Book Review

Robin M. Wright, *Mysteries of the Jaguar Shamans of the Northwestern Amazon* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 408 pp., \$47.34 (hbk), ISBN: 978-0-80324-394-1.

Robin M. Wright's book on shamanistic practice and its underlying metaphysics among the Baniwa, an indigenous group of the Amazonian rain forest whose territory straddles the national borders of Brazil, Colombia, and Venezuela, appears as a welcome companion piece to the much-lauded book *The Falling Sky: Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (2013) by Davi Kopenawa, written in collaboration with French anthropologist Bruce Albert.¹ In a similar vein, Wright provides his exploration of Baniwa cosmology with important (auto-)biographical elements. On the one side, we gain a rare insight into the strenuous life of one of the last active 'true *pajés*' or shamans of the Baniwa; on the other hand, this book could not have been written without the lifelong commitment of the author himself to the differential world making of a marginalized (from our perspective) indigenous people. Having written extensively on Baniwa cosmology and ritual, anti-colonial prophetic movements, and the more recent evangelical conversion movement, this time Wright focuses on traditional shamanism as a struggling 'local reserve' against the onslaught of globalizing forces. As we learn from this book, the point is not so much the imminent loss of cultural diversity, but the firm conviction of Baniwa religious specialists that this world will come to an end when the ritual accompaniment necessary for enlivenment processes in This World stops.

The capacity of Baniwa savants literally to 'deify' themselves as embodiments of the creator divinities in order to be able to protect and channel the forces of life can be considered as the 'mystery' of Baniwa theology. In this perspective Wright's book is an important contribution to a recently emerging debate on the (ideological) sustainability of indigenous cosmologies in the face of imminent ecological destruction. Ironically, appeals to consult indigenous savants as 'experts on the end of the world' (Danowski and Viveiros de Castro 2014) are of course not without their own tradition.² In the book, things commence on a more mundane level as we read of the trajectory of Mandu da Silva, considered by his constituents as a 'true' or 'Jaguar shaman' equipped with likewise powerful forces (accumulated during his inter-ethnic sojourns) as this charismatic animal of the Amazonian rain forest. In order to release particularistic social tensions, the religious specialist calls on the universal forces of the 'Other World'.

1. See Wright's review of *The Falling Sky* in JSRNC 10.2 (2016): 245-54.
2. See, for example, the speech of *Sealth*, aka Chief Seattle (McKenzie 2005: 1511-12).

Another 'mystery' of Amazonian shamanism is that physical appearances in This World hide a 'really real' essence that originates in primordial creative time that only shamanistic expertise can access. One means to do this is the skilled handling of the hallucinogenic snuff, *paricá*, by which the shaman acquires firsthand experience of the powerful forces and divine agents of the Other World.³ Wright's decade-long collaboration with Baniwa shamans allows us to catch a glimpse of the shaman's crucial encounter with *Kuwai*, the key figure of the Baniwa pantheon. Described in stark images, the shaman apprentice experiences a reversal of his birth passage, when he is pulled up into the sky by the cosmic umbilical cord. Body images are largely modeled on female procreative passages and it is important that shamans acquire an adequate body to be able to perform their work, ultimately assuming the 'subjectivity and agency of a Creator Deity' (p. 75). A shaman's skill is principally centered on the control of 'open' or 'closed' body passages: whether it is a cosmic passage he travels along into the Other World, or it is his own body extracting sickness from the bodies of his patients. The role model for a Baniwa shaman's habitus is *Kuwai*, an entity of excessive dimensions. Wright's representation of the *Kuwai* myth and his masterly comments are, to me, the highlight of this volume. It is impossible to recap the narrative in a few words, but suffice it to say that *Kuwai's* eventual death leaves, on the one hand, destructive forces in the form of sicknesses necessitating the jaguar shaman's work in This World; on the other hand, he leaves the primordial means of enlivenment in form of the sacred instruments, flutes, and trumpets, which are sounded during the grandiose rites of passage in the Northwestern Amazon. The sound of the wind instruments channels in a controlled way the creative sounds of *Kuwai's* excessively 'open' body during mythical times.

Wright's book also gives us a clue to how this *Kuwai* (or *Yurupary*, as he is called in the vernacular on the Upper Rio Negro region) religion is anchored in the mind of the Baniwa and their related Arawak- and Tukano-speaking neighbors. While the universe of the spatially distributed sets of sacred instruments of the various ethnic groups, phratries, and sibs form a veritable 'soundscape' of the territory, the vertical cosmos travelled by the Baniwa savants with dozens of layers may also be laid out horizontally over the hydrographic system of the Northwestern Amazon. The ubiquitous rock art is 'living memory' of mythical events and makes the riverine passages into a veritable 'mythscape' (Chapter 5). Within this setting the religious virtuosi stage their dramas that reaffirm and transmit primordial powers to their clientele, the territory they indwell, and its natural resources. But there remains the question of what these indigenous cosmologies might really contribute to a viable planetary future.

In the last chapter Wright discusses some recent examples of world making among the Baniwa. First, Wright criticizes the encroachment of evangelical Christianity, which not only vehemently opposes traditional forms of shamanism and ritual but also creates the habitual basis for what Wright calls an 'entrepreneurial culture', which again is harnessed by a powerful NGO investing in projects of 'differential' indigenous education and fair commercialization of forest products. Wright clearly sides with alternative attempts of more traditional communities trying to revitalize the aesthetics of Baniwa ritual. This reader, however, would have wished that more analytical attention could have been given to the reasons for why the Baniwa shamans

3. *Paricá* is widely used in this area of the Amazon in powder form, derived from the pith of a tree from the nutmeg family.

seem to fight their last stand. One cannot overlook that the stance on nativistic purity (and its 'rule of non-mixture', p. 289) by shamanic elders like Mandu might not be an option anymore in our globalized society.

To me the most impressive insight into Baniwa cosmology and ritual—masterfully represented by Wright—is the peoples' conviction that the cosmos depends on the *active intervention* of humans. I would venture to say that the aesthetics of the *Kuwai / Yuruparí* religion surely encourages the people of the Northwestern Amazon to relate in a sustainable way to their environment. I would not, however, categorically preclude that the essentials of this aesthetic cannot be upheld also within the context of new 'hybrid' or 'mixed' cultural contexts.

To sum up, Wright's book overflows with ethnographic detail, is beautifully written, and is theoretically buttressed by the phenomenological approach to indigenous religions advanced by Lawrence E. Sullivan. Indeed, Sullivan's magnum opus *Icanchu's Drum* (1988) was in itself strongly influenced by Wright's then unpublished dissertation! *Mysteries of the Jaguar Shamans* is effortlessly understandable to non-anthropologists. And importantly, works like these are less a melancholic glimpse of the past than encouragement to think up a viable future.

Wolfgang Kapfhammer
Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München
Wolfgang.Kapfhammer@lmu.de

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