

The Origin of Night: and why the sun is called 'thatching-leaf'

Introduction

In a previous essay that dealt with the significance of body ornaments in NW Amazonia, I suggested that the box in which the ornaments are kept "is a spatio-temporal operator, a manifestation of the sun, a being dressed in a brilliant feather crown who orders the passage of time" (Hugh-Jones 2014: 161). My aim here is to build on this insight by exploring how the peoples of NW Amazonia represent the alternation between day and night in the sounds and colours of the insects, birds and animals of the forest; in the materials, textures and colours of their houses and possessions; in the human body; and in the song and dance of their ritual gatherings - and how they use all this to exert ritual control over time. To do this, I draw on a large body of published texts of stories about the origin of night and related themes recorded amongst the indigenous peoples of the upper Rio Negro basin and adjacent areas.

At the same time I hope to throw light on why it is that, in several Eastern Tukanoan languages, the term for "sun" and "moon" appears to be made up of two morphemes, the first meaning "thatch" and the second meaning "leaf." For example, in Tukano the word is *muipū* and in Barasana¹ it is *muhihū*, with *mui* or *muhi* referring to thatch and to palms whose leaves are used for thatching and *pū* or *hū* the term for "leaf". *Muipū*/*muhihū* could thus be glossed as "thatching leaf" or as "*caraná*", a Lingua Geral term used throughout the Río Negro basin to refer broadly to thatch, to leaves used as thatch and also to the palms from which they derive. To simplify matters, from now on I shall use *caraná* in this generic sense to refer to all three meanings: palm, leaf and thatch.

The published stories that interest me here include some quite long narratives and other brief notes and fragments. They were recorded among the following groups: the Arawakan-speaking Baniwa, Baré, Kurripaco, Tariano, Kawayerí, and Yukuna-Matapí; the Tukanoan-speaking Bará, Barasana, Desana, Kubeo, Letuama, Makuna, Taiwano, Tanimuka, Tatuyo, Tukano, and Tuyuka; and the Kakua, a group speaking an isolated Makuan language.² However, it would be a mistake to suppose that these groups represent discrete social units, each with its own discrete corpus of narratives, or that differences between versions of the stories considered here reflect cultural differences between groups. The approach I adopt goes in quite the opposite direction: on both empirical and theoretical grounds I treat all these stories as parts of one and the same body of ideas. Let me explain why.

The peoples of NW Amazonia divide themselves into various named units with important implications for rights over territory, resources, marriage, ritual status, political relations, and

¹ From here on the languages will be referred to in abbreviated form: Tuk., Bs., etc.

² See References A for a numbered list of sources. To avoid overburdening the text with lengthy citations, I refer to these sources by number in footnotes, thus ACAIPI nd. is referred to as "1", Bourge 1976 is referred to as "7" and Correa 1997: 63 would appear as "13: 63." These references are indicative and not intended as an exhaustive index of each and every source.

other matters. Amongst the Tukanoan-speakers there is, in addition, a general association between patrilineal group and language so that exogamous groups are typically also linguistic units. However, in practice, a broad NW Amazon culture extends beyond the Tukanoan ideology of language-bearing exogamous groups. Even in the Tukanoan area, residence does not necessarily follow patrilineal/patrilocal rules and claims associated with group membership are often disputed. Throughout the NW Amazon there is a profusion of names referring to groups of different kinds, only some of which are recognised by people of the unit concerned.

Map 1 (from Epps & Stenzel 2013: 10-11) is typical of the way in which NW Amazonian peoples and their languages are represented in the anthropological literature. However, in line with the above, it is important to note that linguistic and social units do not necessarily coincide, that people are typically multilingual, and that names such as "Barasana", "Makuna", "Baré" or "Baniwa" do not refer to social or linguistic units of the same type. More importantly still, the units in question are in no way like so many "tribes". All of them form parts of an open-ended social system, a collection of peoples who live in the same general area, intermarry and exchange food, goods and services, attend each other's social gatherings, and share social conventions regarding the use of space, bodily behaviour, ways of speaking and social interaction. They also swap various kinds of information including stories and ritual knowledge.

In this sense these peoples are culturally all more or less the same. But difference is also integral to this system for it is the differences between people and their groups, signalled by differences in ritual possessions and in immaterial property such as language, songs and stories that allow exchanges of spouses, goods and services to take place.

All of this has important implications for the approach I adopt with respect to the stories that I examine below. On the one hand, the narratives show striking similarities that transcend linguistic and territorial boundaries - in general terms, they tell much the same stories. On the other hand, different individuals belonging to different groups will tell different versions of these stories. Here a teller's group identity may be pertinent to what he or she tells and the stories themselves may even explain the origin and nature of differences between groups. But group-identity is but one of several factors that work together to produce different versions of a story. These other factors include those relating to the speaker: age, gender, social role and knowledge of stories and other relevant information; the pretext and social context for telling the story; and the identity of the audience and what this audience already knows and wants to know and should be allowed to know.

The fact that, on one occasion, an individual from one group tells a particular audience a version of a story that differs from another version told on another occasion to a different audience by another individual belonging to another group tells us very little about what either individual does or does not know. In an open-ended social system characterised by multi-lingualism, extensive trade, inter-community ritual and frequent visiting, narrative repertoires will overlap. An individual with extensive traditional knowledge will be able to

tell a sequence of myth in a wide variety of modes covering brief summary, elaborate detail, key details chosen with reference to ritual and shamanic practices and even different versions of detail learned from other experts.

We also need to bear in mind that the missionaries, linguists and anthropologists who record such stories also introduce further levels of arbitrary difference and that what they publish certainly provides no reliable guide to what their informants did or did not know. The informants tell stories, often in rudimentary Spanish or Portuguese, that are tailored to suit the understanding and interests of relatively ignorant outsiders who then subject the stories to processes of translation, segmentation, abbreviation and other editing that are involved in the long journey from field notes to published texts. These texts, now objectified as discrete "myths", are a far cry from what the same individual would tell to a fellow insider. The different peoples of the region have also had very different histories of contact. Some of the stories are clearly told by people who have a good first-hand knowledge of the traditional world and natural environment to which they relate; in other cases this does not seem to be the case.

Finally, an allied complication lies in knowing where one story ends and another begins. Blixen's (2011) comparative study of South American stories of the origin of night compares stories about one and the same topic - night. But, as will become clear below, equally relevant to this topic are stories that are *not* explicitly concerned with night but which may be sequentially related to those that are or share a common plot structure.

Bearing this in mind, we see immediately that the stories of the origin of night are not stand-alone units. They can be told on their own and are often published as a discrete "myths" but they may also appear as parts of a larger whole in which they are preceded by other stories about earth, trees, caraná roofing leaves and may be followed by further stories about songs, ornaments, dance, water, mortality and other topics.

For all these reasons, on purely empirical grounds the notion of a (say) "Barasana myth" about the origin of night is highly problematic, as is any claim that this "Barasana myth" is different from a (say) "Kawiyerí myth" about the origin of night or a (say) "Tukano myth" about the origin of caraná. In addition, as Lévi-Strauss' various writings on mythology demonstrated long ago, there are also strong theoretical grounds for rejecting any notion of myths as discrete, stable entities. Where one myth ends and another begins is always a moot point. Following Lévi-Strauss' (1955: 435-6) advice that a myth consists of all its variants and that analysis will be enriched by taking all these variants into account, I hope to show below that our set of stories make sense of one another and that obscure details in one published text often become clear when considered in the light of another. Part of the aim of this essay is simply to make sense of the stories by providing a running commentary that gives some idea of their contextual background. As it is, the available sources are like the fragments of a damaged mosaic. Our task is to try to understand the picture: some parts of it are clear enough but elsewhere we can only grasp its outlines by assembling scattered fragments.

After this methodological aside, let us now take closer look at the stories themselves.

Stories of Earth, Trees, Houses and Caraná - an Overview

NW Amazonian stories about the origins of night are often told as one episode in a longer sequence about the origins of earth, trees, houses and thatch, elements that make up the components of space and time and are the pre-requisites of the ordered social life that the Creators established at the beginning of time. As seasonal rituals are also part of this wider spatio-temporal order, it is no surprise that stories of the origin of ornaments, songs, and dances also figure as part of this set.

The episodes in this sequence of stories typically have the same plot structure which goes roughly as follows: finding life impossible without earth, trees, a house, caraná, or night, a group of Creators, usually a group of brothers, set off to the house of an Owner to ask him to give them what they need. The Owner first explains that the element in question can be dangerous and cause various kinds of misfortune and that it carries heavy responsibilities and must be treated with respect. He then gives the Creators a set of instructions on how to manage and control the element to render it safe and avoid associated dangers and misfortunes. These instructions form the basis of spells and other ritual activities that are often referred to as "benzimentos" in Brazilian Portuguese and "curaciones" in Colombian Spanish. Only the youngest brother, the most intelligent and attentive and the prototype of the *kumu* or "shaman", takes these instructions in. The Owner then gives the Creators the element in question in a container with a stern warning that they should not open it until they reach home.

The Creators set off but the container seems not only far too small to accommodate all that they need but also extraordinarily heavy for its size. On the trail they are unable to contain their curiosity and decide to take a peek inside - with disastrous consequences. The contents explode from the container and scatter in all directions. After several false starts, the youngest brother recalls the relevant instructions and order is restored. On the positive side materials such as earth, trees, caraná, and night are now freely available but, because the Creators disobeyed instructions, instead of being easily manageable and free from problems, these materials now involve hard work, dangers, illness and even death.

The main axes of variation in those stories about caraná, sleep and night that are my special concern here, include:

1. The number and identity of the Creators or primordial beings involved.

There may be either a single person, eg. *Idn Kamni*³ or *Nhãpirikuli*⁴, or, more usually, a group of from two to five Creator brothers, the Sky People, Universe People

³ 43.

⁴ 9, 23, 44.

or Transformation People⁵ who are variously known as the *Kuwaiwa*,⁶ *Diroa*,⁷ *Ümüri Masa*,⁸ *Pamüri Masa*,⁹ *Bahuari Masa*,¹⁰ *Ayawa*,¹¹ *Munully*,¹² *Imararimakana*,¹³ or *Karipú Lakena*.¹⁴

2. The identity and characteristics of the Owner.

Usually male¹⁵, he is typically a Frog¹⁶ but may also be a Bat,¹⁷ a Cricket¹⁸ or the Chief of Crickets.¹⁹ Other Owners include *Dainali*, the Grandfather of Sleep,²⁰ *Tapurinami*, Owner of Sleep and Darkness,²¹ and *Je'echú*, the Sky-Jaguar and Father of the Sun and Moon.²²

3. The relation of this Owner to the Creators.

He is usually their grandfather²³ but may be uncle²⁴ or father-in-law²⁵ or brother-in-law.²⁶ The Creators typically offer the Owner something in exchange for what they seek, either coca, tobacco, a feather ornament²⁷ or other valuables or a sister or daughter.

4. The nature of the container the Owner gives the Creators.

This is usually a pot, gourd or nut or the palm-leaf box that is used to store feather head-dresses and other ornaments.

5. Whether or not the Creators are offered a choice between various lengths or grades of night.

⁵ 15, 27.

⁶ 13.

⁷ 2.

⁸ 15, 37.

⁹ 4, 35.

¹⁰ 15.

¹¹ 1, 3, 12, 24, 32, 45.

¹² 7, 10.

¹³ 21, 22.

¹⁴ 16, 17, 29, 30, 41.

¹⁵ But see 2, 42.

¹⁶ 1, 3, 4, 7, 10, 12, 18, 24, 25, 27, 28.

¹⁷ 33.

¹⁸ 12.

¹⁹ 41.

²⁰ 5, 9, 23, 39.

²¹ 16, 17, 30, 41.

²² 44.

²³ 1, 16, 17, 21, 30, 41.

²⁴ 21, 22, 40, 45.

²⁵ 7, 9, 10, 11.

²⁶ 15.

²⁷ 44.

6. Whether or not night and sleep are treated as separate components.

7. The often quite lengthy details about what happens during the long night that follows the opening of the container.

I am not concerned with 5 or 6 here and I only deal briefly with 7.

Armed with this general summary, first I look closer at stories about caraná and then at stories about night. Before doing so I must add 2 further caveats. My summaries of the stories are working approximations which are not intended to cover all the various details. My analysis should not be regarded as an exhaustive account of this copious body of material.

Caraná

Owners

In episodes preceding those dealt with here, the Creators first obtain the earth and trees that allow them to clear a space on the earth and make a house-frame from poles and vines cut from trees in the forest. When this is done they realise they lack proper leaves to thatch the roof so they set off to seek the leaves from the Owner of Caraná.

The Owner of Caraná warns them that to be the owner and headman of a maloka is a position that carries heavy social responsibilities and requires knowledge of many shamanic spells and that life in a maloka involves avoiding sleep and staying up late into the night eating coca and talking about serious matters.²⁸ Furthermore, he warns them that the thatch itself may contain hidden perils: the red, clayey earth that sometimes sticks to the leaves used for thatching is a premonition of the earth of the grave and when the crickets that hide in the leaves later sing in the house at night, this is an omen of death.²⁹ Finally the Owner gives them the leaves they seek all bundled up inside the feather box³⁰, a nut³¹ or pot³² and tells them that they must only open the container when they are standing up on the framework of their new maloka. But of course they pay no heed: they open the box on the way home and the leaves fly out in all directions, covering the sky and making it dark. Had they paid attention, caraná leaves would have been easy to find and thatching a house would have an easy task. As it is, the sources of caraná are now haphazardly distributed throughout the forest and thatching a maloka is very onerous.

Who is the Owner of Caraná? In the Tukanoan languages spoken in NW Amazon, the person who controls the missing material is usually referred to as either "father", as in (Bs. *ñami hakü*, "father of night,"³³ or "mature person, elder" as in (Des.) *púsua бүкү*, "old caraná" or

²⁸ See, especially, 16, 17 and 30.

²⁹ See for eg 14: 249; 17: 66, fn. 17.

³⁰ 3, 11, 13, 21, 22, 38, 42.

³¹ 3.

³² 41.

³³ eg. 11, 25.

(Bs., Mak.) *ñami būkü*, "old night."³⁴ In this context, the terms "father", "chief" or "elder" imply that these Owners encompass and incarnate the materials concerned as an extension of their person in such a way that they are relatively larger and more powerful than other persons.

In the case of caraná, the Owner is a bird, a hawk³⁵ or macaw³⁶, who embodies all of caraná, houses and house-building. His outspread wings are the gabled roof of the maloka. His bones are the posts and poles of the house frame, his sinews and veins are the titica vines used to bind the poles together. Each kind of feather on his body - the tail feathers, wing primaries, wing secondaries, coverts etc. - represents one of the different kinds of caraná leaves that can be used to make the roof and walls of the house.³⁷ In a manner typical of the totemic inclinations of the Tukanoan speakers, when the story is told in detail, each species of caraná and each different weaving pattern used to fix the leaves to the roof battens is assigned as the possession of a different group.³⁸ This information is an essential component of the ritual spells that are used to control these materials, make them safe to use, and ensure they provide effective protection from thunder, rain and various types of attack from hostile forces.

In his guise as (Bs., Tuk.) *Ñami Soda* or *Ñamiri Sota*, the Owner of Caraná is also the Owner of Night and Sleep, *soda* or *sota* being the name of an unidentified tree-frog whose large, golden eyes and slit-like pupils give the creature the appearance of sleep.³⁹ This embodiment of night and sleep spreads to other attributes of this Owner. His name is sometimes Night or Nights;⁴⁰ he has a body made up of night and day;⁴¹ he has big, droopy eyelids;⁴² he wears sleep on his head in the form of a set of feather ornaments;⁴³ he is lazy, a heavy sleeper⁴⁴ and can only be woken by placing a red-hot potsherd on his chest⁴⁵ or by cracking his shins with a club or the heavy wooden pestle that is used for reducing toasted coca leaves to powder.⁴⁶

Here we are dealing with examples of the widespread Amazonian Owner figure discussed by Fausto (2008), a being who encompasses a whole class of creatures or objects that are identified with his body. In this context it is worth noting that the notion of ownership also carries significant political implications that are an important dimension of the

³⁴ 3, 4, 25.

³⁵ 7, 10.

³⁶ 15.

³⁷ 7, 10, 12, 15, 25.

³⁸ 12, 25.

³⁹ Probably *Hyla punctata* and/or other small arboreal Hylid frogs.

⁴⁰ 15, 19, 25, 27.

⁴¹ 17: 100; 27.

⁴² 23.

⁴³ 15.

⁴⁴ 3, 28, 29.

⁴⁵ 27, 35, 37.

⁴⁶ 5, 21, 29, 30, 38, 39.

responsibilities and dangers inherent in houses, caraná and sleep that are so emphasised as a repeated theme of our stories. The act of building a maloka represents a claim to status on the part of the man who initiates the project and a tacit recognition of this claim by those who agree to assist him and then live under his roof. As (Tuk.) *wiiogü*, literally "house-builder, house-initiator" or (Bs) *wii ühü*, "house chief", the headman and owner of a maloka is identified with the building he creates and also responsible for maintaining a harmonious and well-ordered life-style for the people who live with him and who he now represents. They are (Bs.) *ī wiiana*, "the people of his house" and it is he who orders the rhythm of their days, who guides their conversation each evening, and who sends them off to sleep each night. As one who orders space and time, a maloka headman partakes of the qualities of the Owner from whom houses, caraná and sleep derive.

Caraná as Leaves, Feathers and Hair

In our stories, Owners, bodies and containers turn in upon themselves in a densely layered pattern of reciprocal reference. The story of caraná tells us that the maloka is a bird whose different feathers make up the different species of caraná used as thatch. This implies that leaves and feathers and, by extension, feather ornaments are all one and the same. This is also suggested in a Kubeo story where that the top half of the box contained leaves whilst the bottom half contained ornaments to be used in a dance to celebrate the end of house building.⁴⁷ The fact that the Owner of Caraná gave the Creators leaves inside a box that is used to contain feather ornaments not only confirms the equation between leaves and feathers but also adds further density to these associations: the maloka with its painted panels on each side of a mouth-like door wears its thatch just as a dancer with his painted face wears his feather headdress or as an ordinary man wears his hair - the maloka is a person.

Feather ornaments and thatch are also linked together in terms of technology, appearance and function. To make thatch from the pinnate leaves of the palm *Lepidocaryum tenue*, the preferred caraná throughout our region, the individual leaflets of each leaf must be inter-woven in dense layers with the leaf stems woven, in several different patterns, round a palm-wood batten. The resulting strip of thatch looks strikingly like the layered surface of a Tukanoan feather headdress, this time made from layered macaw wing covert feathers with their shafts attached to a broad headband woven from twined palm-fibre string. It is for this reason that Makuna *kumu*-shamans use the phrase *hoa tuti* ("layered feathers") to refer to a defensive barrier. The barrier in question is constructed through the shaman's verbal spells but its concrete referent is the walls and roof of the maloka that protect the inhabitants inside.

This also explains why two Yukuna-Matapi authors should choose to begin a book on feather ornaments with a discussion of palm trees. They write:

"En el caso de las palmas, todos los adornos incorporados se hicieron con el fin de dar una idea: que estas palmas o partes complementaran los tejidos de plumajes u otras cosas de adornos rituales. Se hizo con el fin de que los nuevos seres vivientes descubrieran por ellos mismos la idea formada por Je'echú."

⁴⁷ 13: 154.

Las nuevas generaciones tendrían que aprender a tejer. Por eso las diferentes especies de árboles y bejucos tienen un signo, que con su naturaleza enseñan a variar los tejidos más que todo en las plumas; de esta manera, los creadores nos dejaron los poderes sobre los tejidos, prácticamente son del mundo, por eso en la actualidad los llamamos 'mundo de tejido'.

La maloka posee su propia decoración para que pueda tener sentido. Mientras que se comenzó la primera construcción de la maloka, los abuelos imaginaron que la maloka simplemente no podía ser construida sin haberla decorado de forma apropiada, pues cada decoración tendría su significado. Después de que acabaron de construir el armazón de la maloka, comenzaron con los tejidos de los pui,⁴⁸ un símbolo de decoraciones de la maloka" (Matapi et al 2010: 19-20).

The layered interconnection between hair, feathers and feather-like palm leaves is also revealed in a particular detail of our stories concerning the origin of night. Several of the stories take pains to specify the specific palm whose leaves were used when the Creators made shelters to protect themselves from the torrential rain that accompanied the first, catastrophic night. Sometimes the story explains further that the particular kind of leaf under which their ancestor sheltered determines the straight, curly, or kinked hair quality of different Tukanoan groups.⁴⁹ It comes as no surprise that the Makuna term, *hoa* meaning "fur, hair and feathers" is extended to cover "trees and forest" because the forest is also a covering growth which shares the texture and near-black colour of hair.

The feather box itself is made from leaves of (Bs.) *hēhēhū* (*Attalea microcarpa*) that are also used to make the walls of the maloka; *hēhēhū* belongs to the general class of *caraná* as "leaves used in house building." The material identity between walls of the maloka and walls of feather box would suggest that the feather box is itself a maloka and that the ornaments it contains are people in their own right. Although none of the stories under consideration make this point directly, the identity between ornaments and people was made explicit in the remarks of some Kotiria and Desana visitors to Berlin's Ethnologisches Museum when they saw NW Amazonian ornaments collected by Koch-Grünberg in 1903-5. These visitors were dismayed to find that, instead of keeping them all together in the feather box, the careful curators had kept feather ornaments in the feather store-room and ornaments made from bone in the bone store so that each could be best conserved. The visitors had a different view of conservation: "*These ornaments are all people*" they insisted. "*They will be lonely if they are separated from their companions. They all belong in the same maloka, the feather box.*"⁵⁰

At the other end of the spectrum, the stories make quite clear that in primordial times there was only one maloka, a building coterminous with the universe with the earth as its floor, the

⁴⁸ "Pui" is the local Colombian Amazonian Spanish equivalent of *caraná*.

⁴⁹ See 4, 15.

⁵⁰ See also Hugh-Jones forthcoming for references in Tukanoan stories to houses or compartments made of feathers.

mountains as house posts and the sky as its thatched roof. Inside this house, the sun hung motionless in the sky just as today the feather box hangs motionless above the centre of the maloka, suspended from the roof on a long vine sling. So here we have a series of equivalent containers of different scale, one inside the other: universe < - > maloka < - > feather box.

Given this we can now begin to understand why the Owner of Caraná should also be the Owner of Night for caraná does indeed produce night. The interiors of NW Amazonian malokas are cool and dark, an impression reinforced when one enters the house after being in the bright, equatorial sun. In contrast to this, the first thing one notices about an unthatched house frame is its stark, bright interior - just like the "long day" that the stories of the origin of night describe: a world (maloka) with no night (roof) in which the sun stayed motionless in the sky. Putting thatch on a house frame not only produces a protective roof but also shuts out the light making the maloka interior dark. In the words of a Kubeo story "*Al ratico vio que venía una nube negra, venía la hoja ya tejida cuadrándose sobre la casa.*"⁵¹ In time, as the thatch decays, pinpoints of sunlight begin to shine through small holes in the roof, standing out against the dark, soot-blackened interior of the maloka. These points of light are the stars that shine in the night sky.⁵²

So we can now give a preliminary answer to the question of why the sun should be called "caraná" or "roofing leaf". The thatch of the maloka is like a light switch: it causes an alternation between light and dark or day and night, just like the mobile sun. We see how the frog-like character *Soda* can be both Owner of Night and Owner of Caraná.

But the play on light and dark is more complex than this because the thatch itself changes colour with time. Inside and out, a newly made maloka roof is the dark green colour of fresh "raw" caraná leaves, the dark colour of the forest assimilated to black. Over time, the sun's heat bleaches the outside of the feathery leaves to a yellow-white whilst the warmth and smoke from the fires within turns the inside to a rich golden brown and then to a sooty black (Figure 1). Meanwhile the feather box produces a mirror image of this effect: the box is made from overlapping strips of boiled *hēhēhū* palm leaflet. To begin with the box is the same bright sun-like yellow all over but, over time, the exterior becomes black whilst the interior retains its original colour [Figure 2]. So the switch-like nature of caraná is not just an effect of its absence or presence on the roof but also an inherent property of the material, depending on both time and the agent of change (bright sun or dark smoke).⁵³

I return to the feather box below but, for the time being, we have established that the maloka and the feather box are time machines, objects that signal and cause an alternation between

⁵¹ 13: 152; 44: 34: a leaf of *Oenocarpus bataua* in the pot of darkness causes night.

⁵² See also 17: 79.

⁵³ In a variant on this two-coloured box theme, a Kubeo story provides the following detail: after the first ever night, *Odoborū*, the Bat and Owner of Day, went to check that night and day were in proper order. He went to the Big River where all rivers end and brought back two kinds of ash, one white and one black, which he put on top of the feather box. (11: 48; 13: 64).

light and dark or day and night. The alternating periods of day and night are also like the sequence of life and death, something that makes maloka, feather box and feather ornaments potent but also highly ambiguous, a quality that caraná also shares: the roof makes maloka life possible but hidden amongst the caraná are blemishes of clayey earth and singing crickets, the harbingers of death.⁵⁴

Night

The Origin of Night

Stories about the origin of night follow on from those about the origin of caraná and, as we have seen, share the same basic plot-structure. Here I shall simply pick out certain details that are central to my argument.

When they had built their maloka and covered it with thatch, the Creators could have lead a relatively manageable and comfortable life if it were not for one major problem. The sun hung motionless in the sky and there was no night. The absence of night meant their life had no temporal order and was a never-ending round of work with no set periods for eating and resting so that their food soon ran out. Determined to correct this impossible state of affairs, the Creators set out for the house of the Owner of Night to obtain night.

When they had made their wishes known, the Owner took pains to explain that night and sleep would come at a heavy price. With night there would be not just rest and sleep but also a world of dangerous animals and spirits, gossip, quarrels, bad dreams and sorcery, sloth and laziness, and, ultimately, death. For all these reasons, he emphasised that night required great vigilance and special ritual precautions and must be treated with the utmost respect. To avoid the dangers, they should obey strict rules regarding diet and sex, resist sleep and remain awake for as long as possible. Night must be a time for serious pursuits - telling sacred stories, learning shamanic spells, using the spells to manage the temporal cycles of the world, and keeping illness and misfortune at bay.⁵⁵

As if to underline the point that once people had night they would also have time and thus death, some versions of the story describe how, before giving the Creators night, the Owner of Night first gave them sickness and sores - in some versions because they failed to offer him anything in exchange,⁵⁶ in others because he mistook their request for night for a request for illnesses and sores - in several Tukanoan languages the word for "night", *ñami*, sounds like *kami*, the word for "sore."⁵⁷

On the night before the Creators set off for home with their new acquisition, the Owner of Night told them how to manage the night he was about to give them. Before opening the

⁵⁴ See especially 5: '*História de Pûsua bükü*.'

⁵⁵ For a detailed treatment of the restrictions and spells associated with night see especially 17.

⁵⁶ 7, 10.

⁵⁷ 1, 6, 11, 13, 24, 25.

container, they should recite spells he taught them to keep the dangers of night at bay. They should prepare manioc beer first and only open the container in the maloka, for preference in the context of a ritual dance. Under no circumstances should they open the container on their way home. Having made this clear, he issued a set of detailed instructions about how to bring night to an end. But the Creators were not used to night and no sooner had the Owner started his lesson than they were already fast asleep. Only the youngest stayed awake to hear the lesson out.

In the morning, the Creators set out carrying their night in a container. Again, they were curious about the heavy weight and small size of container and furthermore it gave out strange noises. As they were about to learn, these were the noises of crickets and other night animals. Their curiosity soon got the better of them and they decided to open the container, take a peep inside and then shut it again. But, before they could do so, night flew out and they were plunged into darkness and heavy rain. Unable to see, they stumbled around in the dark, feeling not only wet and cold but also very tired. They managed to make a shelter from the rain and were soon overcome by sleep.

Stories from the southern part of our region tell how, as the Creators slept, the Owner of Night came as a bat and removed their eyes which he took home to roast and eat as a punishment for their failure to obey his instructions. Predicting what would happen, the youngest Creator managed to protect his own eyes and then succeeded in rescuing those of his sleeping elder brothers, replacing their eyes back in their orbits.⁵⁸

Waking fitfully, the elder brothers desperately tried to recall the instructions they had been given but to no avail. Their youngest brother then stepped in and, following the instructions to the letter, he finally brought the long night to a close. Dawn broke and order was restored.

We will return to these instructions later but, as they vary according to the substance of night and its container, we will look at these first.

The Substances of Night

What is the night that flies out of the container? In different versions of the stories, night appears in several different guises that come in various different combinations. This variety is organised in three principal registers. First there is a meteorological register in which night figures as a combination of dark clouds, rain, wind, and thunder: even by day, Amazonian thunder storms with their heavy clouds and violent rainstorms can turn the world quite dark.

Secondly, night figures in an auditory register, principally as the shrill noise of countless crickets, katydids and frogs all calling at once. These creatures are known as the "Old Ones of the Night" (Bs. *ñami būkūrā*). To these are added the cries of various nocturnal birds and also the cries of Douroucoulis monkeys and other nocturnal mammals.

⁵⁸ See for eg. 3, 17, 30, 34, 41, 44.

The third register is visual. On the one hand, the night in the pot is compared to a black earth or a black powder,⁵⁹ something similar to the soot that collects on cooking pots and on the interior of the roof. On the other hand, the stories focus on bats and on birds, especially birds with predominantly black feathers. Here the black japú (*Cacicus solitarius*) is singled out for special attention⁶⁰ in an explicit contrast with other "light" japús (*Gymnostinops yuracares*, *Psarocolius viridis*) whose brilliant yellow tail feathers are much used in making sun-burst crowns and other feather ornaments that are explicitly associated with the sun.

The weight of this avian contrast is brought home in several versions of our stories. In one, at the end of the long night, the Creator sends the light japú to check whether the day is approaching and then takes his and other bright bird feathers to make the day bright and clear.⁶¹ In another story, the Owner of Night promises the Creators "*if you open the box at the right time, you will have the feathers of parrots and japús to make ornaments.*"⁶² The right time was the night time of ritual not ordinary day time and the right place was inside the maloka not out in the forest. In another, the insects that escape from the box are accompanied by both night-monkeys and the birds whose feathers are used to make ornaments - japús, macaws and parrots,⁶³ and in another, both black and light japús emerge.⁶⁴ Finally, in one story we are told that the box contained not only birds but also feather ornaments themselves.⁶⁵ All this is consistent with the box being simultaneously a container of darkness and night and a container of light and day. Here it is worth noting that, although the predominant colours of Tukanoan feather ornaments are yellow, red and white, many ornaments offset these bright colours with minor touches of black, a discreet hint of the alternation between night and day.⁶⁶

A further point to note is that although only one version of our stories states explicitly that the container of night also contained dance songs, chants and shamanic knowledge,⁶⁷ the very presence of feather ornaments implies the presence of songs because the two are inseparably linked: serious song is always accompanied by dance and ornamentation. The significance of the pairing of song and ornaments and of the contrast between insect song and human song will become apparent below.

Still in the visual register of ornamentation, night also takes the form blue-black skin dye⁶⁸ and the alternation of night and day and the qualities of light at dawn and dusk are also signalled by strings of black, white, red and yellow beads. In two versions, night and day are

⁵⁹ See 17, 40.

⁶⁰ See 8; 11:121; 13:61; 27: 111; 37.

⁶¹ 4: 191.

⁶² 8; compare 13: 154 where both leaves and ornaments fly out of the feather box.

⁶³ 15: 97.

⁶⁴ 19: 430.

⁶⁵ 35.

⁶⁶ See also Hugh-Jones 2013: 75-6.

⁶⁷ 1. See also Hugh-Jones 2012.

⁶⁸ 20.

set in motion by untying a knot in the string of beads that holds a gourd-like world motionless in its support.⁶⁹

Finally, night is also portrayed in the form of ants.⁷⁰ This is partly because ants are typically black and because, whilst the fat, sweet-tasting flying queens of most leaf cutter ants fly off during the day, those of one particular species called (Bs.) *ñamia*, "those of the night" fly just before dawn. But many ants are also poisonous creatures and all of them can change their skins. They are bound up with mortality and immortality as we will discuss below.

Boxes and Pots: Between Hope and Despair

Leaving aside one mention of a carrying basket⁷¹ and one of a bag⁷², our stories agree that night and sleep were contained either in a gourd,⁷³ a nut,⁷⁴ a pot⁷⁵ or a box⁷⁶ usually identified as the feather box. Following this lead, I suspect that the prototype gourd is probably the small gourds sealed with wax and containing special red carayuru paint, tobacco snuff or other potent substances that are kept inside this box.

As for the nut, in one version this is identified as the seed of the *Lepidocaryum tenue* palm, the preferred source of caraná⁷⁷ but, in other versions, the nuts seem more likely to be the highly-polished black tucúm nuts that are used to store carayurú face paint. This would include them along with the feather box and the sealed gourds in a set of objects all related to adornment. As black spheres that release darkness and sleep, these nuts would appear to be the counterpart of the white spheres, the eyes and organs of sight, that the Owner of Night steals from the Creators to punish them for flouting his advice about when and where to open the container of night. Night and sleep are equivalent to a state of blindness akin to the literal blindness of the Creators when the Owner of Night removes their eyes. When the eyes are restored, the Creators are able to see again just as the dawn ends the long night. A different version of this black-and-white pairing is found in the following passage from a Tariano story: "*Foi com a escuridão que as pessoas adquiriram a parte preta dos olhos e passaram a sentir sono. Os animais noturnos dormem durante o dia, durante esse período o olho deles é todo claro -- e vêem o dia como noite. À noite, o olho deles é preto -- e vêem a noite como dia.*"⁷⁸

If gourds, nuts and the feather box all belong together as a set, what of the pots? None of our stories gives information as to what kind of pot we are dealing with but several things point

⁶⁹ 15, 42.

⁷⁰ 36, 44.

⁷¹ 9.

⁷² 23

⁷³ 3

⁷⁴ 3, 16, 17

⁷⁵ 1, 6, 10, 12, 13, 33, 34, 39, 44.

⁷⁶ 2, 8, 11, 13, 15, 18, 21, 27, 28, 35, 37, 41, 43.

⁷⁷ 17: 50, fn.8.

⁷⁸ 1. See also Fontaine 2014: 64-5.

towards its prototype being the small squat ceramic pots that are used to store curare poison [Figure 3]. Consider the following:

Curare is a black, tar-like substance ideal as an image of night as a substance and, where it is described at all, the ceramic container of night carefully sealed with a cover tied with string sounds very like a curare pot. Like the Owner of Night, the Owner of Poison (Bs. *Rima Hino*, "Poison Anaconda") a character in a different set of stories, is also a heavy sleeper who can only be woken with hot pot-shards or blows on his shins. Like the pot of night, Poison Anaconda's curare pot is also a pot full of insects and allied creatures, this time with the emphasis on poison. The cover is the web of a poisonous spider, the string that holds the cover in place is a poisonous centipede and the spatula is the tail of a scorpion. In shamanic language, the phrase (Mak.) *ñami rima oka*, "the poison of night" is used as a cover term to refer to all the different dangers of night, from spooky animals and malevolent spirits, through gossip and quarrels, bad dreams and laziness, to sorcery, sickness, old age and death.⁷⁹ Finally, the pot of night was indeed a pot of poison not only because it was preceded by a pot full of sores (see above) but also because the acquisition of night set time in motion and with the alternation of day and night came the alternation between life and death.

Predictably enough, themes of mortality and immortality permeate the stories we are dealing with. The Owner of Night and the Creators who visit him are all immortal beings who live on today as enduring sources of shamanic powers and knowledge. But, as a result of the Creators' stupidity and the Owner's anger, ordinary mortals are condemned to die.⁸⁰

One manifestation of the Owner of Night's immortality lies in the division of his body between night and day, a feature already noted above. Another is his ability to renew himself by changing his skin. When he is woken from his deep sleep, he appears old and ugly with tangled hair and covered in drool but he then removes this old self as a skin or mask which he peels from his head and face and hangs on a beam in his house. He then goes off to bathe reappearing clean, bright and with painted face and earrings and necklaces in place.⁸¹

The theme of skin-changing and immortality that figures prominently in our stories brings us back to poison and to insects. Insects play a prominent role in the stories of caraná and night: the Owner of Night is the Father of Crickets,⁸² and the container of night contains ants, crickets, fireflies and other insects. Insects are appropriate because their black colour, nocturnal singing and nocturnal flight all connote night but they also shed their skins, a sign of immortality which they share with poisonous snakes and spiders.

This is clear in a story, widespread in the area, about a deity who offers coca from a gourd infested with poisonous stinging and biting creatures to the ancestors of humanity. The

⁷⁹ 3, 25.

⁸⁰ See, especially, 29.

⁸¹ 4, 27.

⁸² 41.

ancestors refused to eat from this gourd so today all people must die. Snakes, spiders and poisonous insects did eat from this gourd so can change their skins and live forever.⁸³ This story, intimately linked with the origin of night,⁸⁴ is also a transformation of another story in which the same poisonous creatures steal their poison from Poison-Anaconda's pot of curare. Skin-shedding, immortality and poison are clearly interrelated.

The pot of night was indeed a poisoned chalice for, whilst the generations may succeed one another like day follows night or one season follows another, each individual still dies. By contrast, feather ornaments are everlasting. The first pre-human beings were creatures of pure spirit with no mortal bodily substance who took the form of these ornaments where they still exist today inside their feather box maloka. During the rituals that ensure social reproduction and the fertility of the seasonal round, the dancers who wear these ornaments make a fleeting return to this immortal, ancestral state.

If my hypothesis about the pot as curare pot is correct, we might conclude that in presenting boxes of immortal ornaments and pots of poison as two alternative containers of night, our stories express a tension between hope and despair or between immortality and death

Be that as it may, what is certain is that the different containers go together with two alternative ways of controlling night, with pots and nuts on the side of dull, noisy insects and boxes on the side of coloured birds and human song and dance.

Noises in the forest

As described above, before giving the Creators a container full of night, the Owner issues careful instructions about how to handle this dangerous stuff. Some of these instructions relate to when and where they should open the container. Not all versions provide details but when they do it is clear that the Creators should only open the container inside the maloka and, for preference, in the context of a ritual dance, the appropriate context for the shamanic spells that protect people from the dangers associated with night.⁸⁵ The other instructions concern the correct way to bring the first night to a close and to ensure a measured, regular alternation between night and day.

In the stories that have night contained within a nut or pot, these instructions indicate that the Creators should reproduce the changing patterns of insect noise that mark the passage of night, in particular the period from midnight through to dawn. In some stories the Creators simply create, or transform themselves into, the animals or birds who then make cries that

⁸³ See 18: 49-51 and compare Hugh-Jones 2013: 238ff.

⁸⁴ See for eg. 18.

⁸⁵ The stories actually run from a 'weak' version where the Creators are merely told to ensure they have wood to make a big fire (eg. 30: 61) through a 'middle' version where they are told to first prepare manioc beer and body-paint, the pre-requisites of ritual dances (eg. 1, 8, 19) through to a 'strong' version where the full dance is explicit (eg. 4: 188-91; 37: 66).

signal the approach of dawn.⁸⁶ But in other stories the Owner of Night issues explicit instructions that the Creators should imitate the sounds of nocturnal insects, the "Old People of the Night" (Kub. *tiritiriari*). For example, in a Kubeo story⁸⁷, the Owner of Night tells the Creators that they should first repeat "ti-ti-ti, ti-ti-ti"; then "tiri-tiri-tira-tira tiri-tiri-tira-tira"; then "ti-ti-tira-tira, ti-ti-ti-tira", that they will hear the insects respond to their different calls and that, if they get all this right, the night will end and the dawn will break.⁸⁸

But of course it is quite difficult to get all this right, especially when stumbling around in the dark and rain, soaked to the skin - even if you have managed to stay awake to hear the instructions in the first place. So the elder brothers consistently fail in their attempts and it is only with some difficulty that the youngest Creator finally manages to remember the instructions correctly and bring the first catastrophic night to a close.

Song and dance in the house

In the stories that have night contained within the feather box, the instructions become more elaborate. Although one version still includes imitation of insect noises, the emphasis in this second set of stories is on the manipulation of the feather box, the putting on and taking off of ornaments, the singing of songs, and the use of a ritual whip or rattle lance. Let us look at these instructions in more detail by examining some versions of the story that are clearly close transformations of one another:

A. Before handing over the feather box, the Owner of Night dresses in feather ornaments and then pushes the box across the floor of his house with his toe. Moving the box in this way serves to emphasise that, for him, the box is light [Figure 4]. The Creators later find it excessively heavy. The passage of the box across the floor marks the passage of time: each push of the toe marks a minute and, on each hour, the Owner beats the box with his baton or whip and calls the night creatures by singing "titi titi", etc. as described above. Starting at dusk, over the course of the night the Owner pushes the box from the rear of the house till it arrives at the front door at dawn. He then takes off his "adornos de sono", hands the box to the Creators and goes back to sleep.⁸⁹

B. In another version we are told that, instead of singing or beating the box with a whip or baton, the Owner uses the rattle lance to imitate the night insects. Later on, after his elder brothers have failed, the youngest Creator successfully brings the night to an end by using the

⁸⁶ Here the focus is often on the contrast between the white-headed piping guan (Aburria pipile) and Spix's guan (Penelope jacquacu) that plays on their different colours and calls of the two birds and on the different times at which they are active in the pre-dawn period. A detailed treatment of this theme is beyond the scope of this essay but see Lévi-Strauss 1970: 204, n. 3 on 'bird-clocks'.

⁸⁷ 13.

⁸⁸ This replicates more or less exactly what is told in the Pirá-paraná area. See also 11, 12, 44 and the more general theme of a container that makes the noise of, or is full of, crickets.

⁸⁹ 8, 27, 28.

rattle lance to imitate the insects, rattling it first at midnight and then four more times till dawn.⁹⁰ In yet another version, the Creators use "fishing rods" to beat the box, first in order to open it to see what is inside and then to persuade some of the crickets to get back into the box to bring the night to an end.⁹¹

C. Another version reads as follows:

"Ele já vinha fazendo cerimônia com seu chocalho. Por isso, hoje em dia, se escuta no começo da noite os insectos cantando.

Esa caixa tinha todos os ornamentos e enfeites de dança. Ele empurrava a caixa com o pé e explicava: primeiro, na caixa tem um colar de miçangas, depois tem osso de veado, esclarecendo como cada objecto deveria ser usado depois. Mandou deixar peneiras e colocou em cima delas. Cada vez que começava a explicar, eles cochilavam. Depois de cada explicação, ele dançava. Disse que nos quatro pontos há ganchos, nos quais pendia a noite. Depois da meia-noite ele ainda ensinou como guardaria os instrumentos e ornamentos que estava usando. Primeiro, explicou como desmanchar a amarração dos ganchos - os nós que os seguram - e guardá-los na maloka. Depois ele foi guardando os ornamentos, após um movimento da dança. Firam tirando cada enfeite até amanecer, quando fechou a caixa e entregou para eles. Por isso, até hoje os baya dançam durante toda a noite".⁹²

Later on, after the two elder brothers had failed to bring the night to an end, they hand their younger sibling a ritual whip made from a forest sapling and let him have a try. *"Sendo o último, o mais inteligente, ele se ornamentou com as colares de miçanga, conforme havia visto na maloka, e cocares de penas de arara. Ele pronunciava o nome de cada enfeite e ia juntando-os e ornamentando-se. À meia noite, já estava pronto, com todos os adornos que o baya usa. Pos isso, quando chega essa hora todos os insetos aparam de zoar. Ele começou a reza, desmanchando os ganchos presos no norte, sul, leste e oeste. Também começou a tirar e guardar os ornamentos".⁹³*

D. A final version runs as follows: *"Ñamiri começou a explicar como desmanchar o nó da corda de miçangas ..que mantinha a terra presa no seu suporte, impedindo o movimento do dia e da noite. Em primeiro lugar, disse que eles deviam pensar que, um dia, as futuras gerações teriam um tempo reservado para dançar os cantos de kapiwaya.. os cantos que acompanham a tomada de caapi, e que esas danças iriam durar uma noite inteira.. a noite equivale ao tempo de duração da dança dos kapiwaya".⁹⁴*

Later, the youngest brother brings the night to an end: *"calculando que era o tempo do encerramento da dança de kapiwaya, começou a cantar a cerimônia de dividir o tempo, desmanchando o nó da corda de miçangas".⁹⁵* Accordingly, he sings a song whose four

⁹⁰ 19: 28.

⁹¹ 2.

⁹² 4: 189; see also 44: 32 for a similar ornament and dance sequence.

⁹³ 4: 191.

⁹⁴ 15: 94.

⁹⁵ 15: 98.

different verses refer to a succession of different coloured beads: red beads like caryurú - dusk; black beads like night insects - night; yellow beads like ochre - first light; then white beads - day, the first two verses with a chorus of "*titi titi*" and the last two with "*titi tiri sira sira sira*".⁹⁶

The Rattle lance and Feather Box

Several points emerge from this set of variants. To begin with, the stories present the control of night in different registers, one aural, the other a combination of both aural and visual, that are predominantly, though not exclusively, associated with two different kinds of container, a nut or pot on the one hand and a box of feather ornaments on the other. One set of instructions is about insects and chromatic gradation applies only at the level of sounds: different insect noises signal different parts of the night but the insects and their containers remain as black as night. Night time is an essentially colourless experience but it is one in which one's sense of hearing is greatly heightened - and the Amazonian night it is filled with an extraordinary cacophony of strange, disordered sounds.

The other set of instructions is about birds, not only because the box is a container of birds and feather ornaments but also because there is an implicit contrast here between the noise of colourless, nocturnal insects and the songs of the colourful, diurnal birds who provide the prototypes and raw materials for human song and dance. Birds may belong to the forest alongside insects but, unlike insects, they can be domesticated and brought inside the house as pets and as a source of feathers. In the avian and human worlds, song and coloured ornamentation go hand in hand.

The instructions associated with the feather box are chromatic at several levels: they involve first putting on and then taking off an ordered series of ornaments that are inherently colourful and worn in an ordered sequence from the front to the back of the head and on the rest of the body (see Hugh-Jones 2014). In the story, the sequence of ornaments is also interspersed with a sequence of different song verses, organised, chromatic human music that contrasts with the cacophonous insect noise in the forest and which goes hand in hand with a series of dances. Here it is song and dance in the house rather than noise in the forest that orders time. Finally, the ritual dances held at different seasons of the year require different ornaments and different musical instruments.⁹⁷

Stories of the Owner of Night dressing, dancing and singing are not only stories of the origin of night but also, by implication, stories about the origin of ornaments and the songs and chants that go with them. A Makuna version states explicitly that "*esa noche se estaba originando la palabra de conocimiento, - keti oka -; en ese momento, los Ayawa no supieron manejarla y la dejaron escapar. Sugieron las danzas buenas para la gente, y también las dejaran escapar.*"⁹⁸ The demonstration given by the Owner of Night is a teaching session and

⁹⁶ 15: 98-100.

⁹⁷ See also 31: 36.

⁹⁸ 1.

the stories reflect quite closely what actually happens during ritual dances in NW Amazonia. Feather ornaments are especially associated with the dancing that occurs at night. The ritual as a whole consists of a sequence of two different dance-songs. During the first song (Bs. *basa müta*, "the small dance") the dancers wear only simple red-and-yellow sun-burst crowns. Then, around dusk, the feather box is opened, full sets of ornaments are distributed between the dancers and the second song (Bs. *basa bükü*, "the big or main dance") begins and continues till after dawn.

As in the stories, the temporal sequence of the dance is marked by a change in ornamentation and, as the night begins, the box is opened and the ornaments are distributed to the dancers just as leaves and ornaments were distributed throughout the world. The passage of the night is segmented by a sequence of different song verses alternating with long sessions of chanting and, from midnight onwards, these sessions are marked by the *kumu* sounding the rattle lance. Throughout the night, the *kumu* sits blowing spells over gourds of coca and other substances held on special stands. This is the "reza" that undoes the knots and keeps time in motion in the story above, a set of procedures also referred to as "curando el tiempo". After dawn, in the full light of day, the dance ends and the dancers take off their ornaments and stow them back in the box.

Finally, any indigenous person who tells or hears these stories of the origin of night will take it for granted that the dances to which they refer are intimately linked with the annual seasonal round. They celebrate the seasonal felling of swidden-gardens and the abundance of food that comes from the seasonal fruiting of trees and the flying ants, spawning frogs and piraçemas that follow the seasonal pattern of rainfall; they also mark important events in human time: a girl's first menstruation, a boy's initiation or the inauguration of a headman's new maloka. The time released in our stories was not just the time of night and day and the human life-cycle from birth to death but also the annual round of the seasons. This is not explicitly stated anywhere in the published stories but it is there by implication in copious references to the origins of different species of tree-fruits in accounts of the first long night⁹⁹ and in details such as when we learn that animals released from the container of night became constellations in the night sky¹⁰⁰ or that these constellations are themselves feather ornaments.¹⁰¹

A second point is that the stories make very clear that the feather box is indeed the sun. The box is made from bright yellow palm leaves whose colour is like the sun; it contains a set of ornaments whose predominantly red and yellow colours are also those of the sun; it hangs above the centre of the maloka as the sun hung in the sky before the liberation of night; and its movement across the maloka floor marks the divisions of the night from dusk to dawn. Given that the maloka has its rear to the west and its front to the east, we can also deduce that the passage of the box across the maloka floor from back door to front door represents to

⁹⁹ See especially 1 and also 3, 10, 12, 30.

¹⁰⁰ 2, 38.

¹⁰¹ 32.

sun's nocturnal passage through the underworld that brings it from the west to rise again in the east.

A third point relates to the ritual whip and rattle lance that are used to beat the feather box and imitate the sounds of insects and are therefore equivalent instruments for controlling time.

The whips in question are cut from readily-available, thin, peeled saplings that also serve to make fishing rods. They are used to beat people to make them grow strong, mainly the initiates during rites of initiation but sometimes also women and children (see Hugh-Jones 2013). In some Tukanoan languages the whips are called "tocandira stick" (Bs. *heta waso*): like venomous tocandira ants, the whips have a painful sting. The whips are thus associated with both insects and poison. Finally, the whips are also musical instruments - in the stories they are used to beat the feather box and in the rituals the *kumu* flicks them aggressively to make a loud swishing noise. Appropriately, tocandira ants also make an audible a squeaking noise.

In our stories, the rattle lance and whip are functionally equivalent: both are paired with the feather box; both make insect-related noises with the lança imitating the sound of crickets and the swish of the whip that is used to beat the feather box also announcing the bite of an ant; and both are also weapons, the whip obviously so and the lança figuring as a weapon in other stories.¹⁰² Finally both are used as alternatives for very similar ends and one can serve as a substitute for the other: in version C above, the Owner of Night uses the lança in his house whilst the Creators have to make do with a hastily-made whip as they try to repeat his instructions in the forest. We might say then that the whip, a mere peeled sapling, belongs to the forest whilst the lança, the whip's highly crafted equivalent, belongs in the house - just as insect noise belongs to the forest whilst elaborated human song and dance belong in the house.

The rattle lance (Bs. *besuwü yukü*; Tuk. *yeegü*) is an instrument that appears to be unique to the NW Amazonian area from which our stories derive. It consists of a flexible tapering rod of finely-polished, deep red hardwood some two metres in length. The thinner, lower end terminates in a sharp point. Above the point is a hollow swelling with slits in its sides containing small crystal pebbles. The lança is effectively a maraca on a long, flexible shaft. It is played either by simply shaking it in two hands - "titi titi, titi titi" - or by grasping it towards its the upper end with one hand and striking the shaft with the other hand - or against the shoulder - so that it vibrates along its length causing the rattle to sound - "tiriri tiriri sira sira".

The top of the lance is richly decorated. At the end are two prongs of bone or teeth and below them is an engraved section with outlines filled with white chalk: two repeat bands, each with roundels on opposite sides separated by hour-glass shapes. The upper roundels are the sun,

¹⁰² See for eg. Galvão & Galvão 2004: 404

the lower ones the moon and the hour-glass shapes are gourd stands. Further down are three feather ruffs, the first of black curassow feathers, the second of red and yellow toucan tail feathers, the third of white down from high-flying vultures or birds of prey. Between these ruffs are bands of mosaic made from the tiny iridescent blue cotinga feathers, each one carefully glued to the shaft. Below the white ruff, the engravings are repeated with another white down ruff below [Figure 5]. Finally, when in use, a monkey-fur string terminating in a pair of bright yellow japú feathers fringed by red and yellow toucan feathers is attached near below the bottom ruff. This fur string appears to echo the "largos mechones de cabello humano los cuales quitan cuando venden el objeto a un blanco" described by Stradelli (cit Biocca 2007: 52), for human hair and monkey fur both have connotations of periodicity (see Hugh-Jones 2014: 164). The lance is an instrument of sound and light with a rattle at one end and bright coloured celestial feathers at the other end. The fur or hair and images of the sun and moon underscore its role as an instrument for the control of time.

The instrument is controlled by the *kumu* who manages the proceedings at collective rituals and carries out the spell-blowing and other shamanic procedures that protect the participants from the perils of the night and the dangers of the season with which the dance is associated. The *kumu* uses the lance to mark the divisions of the night, sounding it first around midnight and then periodically between the sessions of chanting and dancing that go on through dawn just as, in our stories, the Creators imitate the sounds of insects to divide the night, sometimes with the rattle lance, sometimes with their own voices.

The lance is the subject of elaborate verbal commentary that further emphasises its role in the control of time. In addition to the engravings of the sun and the moon, the feathered top of the lance is the face of the Sun and the shaft is his dorsal column, an axis mundi uniting the different layers of the universe. The distal swelling of the rattle is the container of night with its two slits as the division between night and day and the point below as the key to the box in which the night was carried. The lance also served as a compass guiding the ancestors as they travelled upriver from the east in the ancestral canoe and served as a gnomon which allowed them to find the equatorial region where they now live: stuck vertically in the ground at midday it cast no shadow.¹⁰³

Finally the lance and feather box are stored together as a pair, hanging together on a vine sling from the roof above one side of the central space of the maloka. Opposite them, on the other side of the central space, stands the post that is used to light the maloka at night: the light comes from burning resin placed on its top or from splints of wood stuck in a notch cut in its side. This post and the combined sun-like lance and feather box are paired as sources of light (Figure 6). They are also contrasted as metaphorical light from an elaborate set of artefacts and illuminating flame from burning a forest product

Conclusion - the control of time in an expanding universe

Armed with this complex web of information about the nature and associations of whips and rattle lances, their role in the stories, and their relation to the feather box, we can now begin

¹⁰³ Galvão & Galvão 2004: 29

to assemble the pieces of the jigsaw scattered throughout these stories to bring the bigger picture into focus.

In the discussion above about the relationship between leaves, feathers and hair, we noted that universe, maloka and feather box are related as a set of similar nested containers, one inside the other (Fig. 7). Prior to their acquisition of houses, caraná and night, the Creators lived in a single maloka coterminous with the universe. But, inside this Universe-maloka, there was another smaller maloka, inhabited by a powerful Owner who controlled the materials they needed. With respect to the Creators in this Universe-maloka, the Owner's maloka was like a feather box, a feather-source contained inside their Universe-maloka but, from the Owner's point of view, his maloka contained a yet smaller feather-container, the box that he gave to the Creators. All this is especially clear in the stories about night. Outside in the Universe-maloka it was still eternal day but, inside the Owner's maloka, night and day not only existed but existed on two different scales: he issued his instructions and taught the necessary spells during the night, the appropriate time for such talk, but then he gave his visitors this very same night encapsulated in a box.

Our stories repeatedly emphasise an initial situation in which earth or trees or roofing leaves or night are tightly confined in a single bundle or container, and a final situation in which, having been explosively released by the Creators' foolish actions, these materials are now randomly distributed throughout the world. With the release of trees and leaves throughout the universe there could now be many individual malokas within the Universe-maloka with each maloka containing its own feather box as a yet smaller container within. This is a shift in scale in which the universe has expanded to its present form. This shift in scale also applies to the Creators for once they had obtained the materials they needed, they had become Owners in their own right. And the same applies each time an individual builds a new maloka, takes control of a box of ornaments and starts out on a career as the sponsor of ritual-dances. He too has become an Owner. This is the burden of the lesson repeatedly emphasised in our stories: that building a maloka and organising the rituals that are integral to maloka life are avenues to power but they also carry heavy responsibilities and potential dangers. These responsibilities and dangers are both human and cosmic in scale. The rituals in the maloka where the rattle lance, feather box and ornaments are used are at once events where social positions are negotiated and occasions dedicated to the ritual control of time.

We are now also in a position to understand why the Owner of Night was so insistent that the Creators should open the box of night at the right time and in the right place - when they had lit a fire to illuminate the interior of their maloka and made preparations for a ritual dance. Although, for them, night did not yet exist, they were supposed to open the box at a time that was destined to be the time of night. This is the proper order of things, the timetable of a normal ritual dance that happens inside the maloka today. After the Creators doubly erred (in both time and place) by opening the box during the day and in the forest, they caused a violent and uncontrolled shift in scale between feather box, maloka and universe. This expansion in scale that set time in motion is the equivalent of a reversal between inside and outside. The night that was inside the box was now outside in the Universe-maloka,

enveloping the Creators.¹⁰⁴ The thing inside had become the thing outside and the contents had become a container.

Bearing in mind the equivalence between universe, maloka and feather box, let us look at how this ritual control of time works in more detail (see figure 8). During the day, sunlight illuminates the interior of the universe: the salient sound is the song of (typically) coloured birds and the noise of crickets and other insects fades into the background. Inside the maloka, the situation is reversed: the exterior is lit by the sun, the interior of the appears quite dark and no (sun)light comes either from the light post or from its twin pair on the opposite side, the feather ornaments and rattle lance. The ornaments are inside their box, the top of the lance is enclosed in a protective sheath, and there is no singing or dancing. Inside the feather box, the maloka of the ornament people, the situation is reversed again: the exterior is dark but the interior is bright yellow and lit up by sun-like ornaments, people in their own right who are no doubt singing and dancing there for this is their night time - the world outside the box, in the maloka, is in darkness.

During the night of a ritual dance all the terms are reversed: the interior of the universe is dark with only dim light from the moon and stars, no colours are visible, and no birds sing - but the air is filled with insect noise. The outside of the maloka is dark but the inside is lit up by a flame of burning resin on the light post. The ornaments are now taken carefully from their box and distributed amongst the dancers, a repeat of the first catastrophic opening of the feather box but this time under the carefully controlled conditions that were first taught by the Owner of Night. Instead of being enveloped in darkness, the dancers now put on the ornaments, one by one, till they are clothed in costumes of light.¹⁰⁵ They have become like the Creators and they dance round and round a maloka that is now also on a cosmic scale. Meanwhile, if the exterior of the feather box is lit by the light of the dance, it is now dark within for the ornaments are absent. As they dance with the dancers, they too shift up in scale. Finally, as the sun rises in the sky and a new day begins outside, the cycle starts again: the dancing ends, the crickets fall silent, the ornaments are stowed away in their box and the interior of the maloka is once again dark - "night".

All this takes me back to where I began. We see that the feather box is indeed a spatio-temporal operator, a time-machine like the sun that turns day into night and night into day. But we have learned a lot more than this along the way. In exploring the relation between caraná and feathers, I have shown how the significance of the box extends deep into details of materials, colour and texture. I have also shown that much of the symbolic load of the box lies in its relation to a set of other objects, on the one hand the nuts and pots that serve as alternative containers of night and on the other, the rattle lance. My suggestion that the pot of night could be the pot that is used to contain curare needs following up in dialogue with people from the region. The rattle lance brings me to a final comment.

¹⁰⁴ See also Fontaine 2014: 56, 68, 73.

¹⁰⁵ On feather ornaments as containers see Lana & Lana 1980: 68 (wombs) and Hugh-Jones 2014: 165 (wigs and bags).

In a discussion of how time and seasons are acoustically-coded in South American mythology, Lévi-Strauss (1973: 361-422) draws an analogy between the tapped-out sounds of various Amerindian noise-makers and the European clappers, rattles and other "instruments of darkness" that were sounded instead of church bells towards the end of Holy Week. With reference to a story, much like those considered above, where night comes from inside a nut, he observes that this nut is an instrument of darkness in the literal sense - it contains night - whereas it's European analogues are so only in a figurative sense. Their link with "darkness" comes only from an association with the darkness that covered the earth when Christ died and with ancient rites involving the extinction and renewal of domestic fires. However, despite his own emphasis on sound, when it came to musical as opposed to visual instruments of darkness, Lévi-Strauss was hard-pressed to find any very convincing Amerindian examples.

Now in the pairing of the feather box with rattle lance we have a perfect example of the kind of thing that Levi-Strauss had in mind and we see that the two objects operate in tandem through a combination of visual and aural registers. The feather box is at once an instrument of darkness and an instrument of light for it combines night and day in the manner of the sun and moon. As such, the box is primarily a visual instrument but, various ways, it is also a musical: it is beaten with a whip to produce sounds, it contains ornaments that are indissolubly linked with singing and dancing, and the dancers who wear the ornaments also wear ankle rattles whose sound is the sound of nocturnal insects.¹⁰⁶ As an elongated maraca, the rattle lance is primarily a musical instrument but it too is an instrument of light for it has its own celestial ornaments. When the box is opened it releases ornaments that set time in motion but with the risk of one extreme to the other, a long night that simply replaces a long day. It is the sound of the lança and the singing and dancing that it accompanies that cut short the long night and serve guarantee a tempered alternation between night and day.

In reaching this conclusion I have also tried to make sense of a large corpus of stories, some of them very impoverished versions of the real thing, by relating them to one another and putting them back into their ethnographic context. At the same time, in a reverse move, I have used the stories to shed new light on aspects of a culture that is shared in common across much of NW Amazonia, in particular how the ritual manipulation of objects serves as a means of controlling time. I have had to talk here in quite general terms for a detailed treatment of ritual would take me far from the focus of this essay.

I have explained all this very differently from the way in which a Tukanoan *kumu* might explain it. The *kumu* would layer yet more mythical references and lists of the dangerous and protective properties of actions, things and places. My analysis uses a rather different kind of layering but it is still based on the very same materials from which the *kumu* derives his "curación del tempo." The *kumu*'s aim is to protect his people and ensure the continuing order of the world. My aim has been to provide some understanding of the stories that underpin this ritual control of time. As a part of this exercise, I have also tried to explain why

¹⁰⁶ Luis Cayon, personal communication.

it is that the word for "sun" should also seem to mean "caraná." At first sight this looks like just another uninteresting case of homonymy. On closer inspection we find that a whole cosmology is hidden under the thatch.

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