

## *Chapter 7*

# INTERGENERATIONAL MYTHSCAPES AND INFANT CARE IN NORTHWESTERN AMAZONIA

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This chapter is about the perinatal practices of a small group of Amazonian Indians, known as the Warekena, who live along the minor tributary of the Rio Xié in northwestern Brazil. The chapter discusses their perspectives on raising infants, and reflects on change and continuity in how they care for babies. The material presented here is based on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork in the Brazilian municipality of São Gabriel da Cachoeira (between 2010 and 2011) and twelve months specifically in and around the mid-Xié River community of Tunu Cachoeira. The fieldwork was undertaken in the company of my husband, our son who turned five in the field and our daughter, Sofia, who was born during fieldwork. We lived together with the Warekena following, as much as we could, the rhythms of community living and their subsistence lifestyles (see Gow 1989). ‘Being there’ (Frykman and Gilje 2010) is the well-known Malinowskian method of participant-observation, a method that has the potential to yield in-depth, holistic and emplaced knowledge about people and the places they live in (Malinowski 1922: 10; Stewart 1998: 6).

The chapter describes the hydrocentric lifestyles of Arawakan Xié River dwellers and their specific ways of caring for children. The

Arawakans have a long history of interethnic contact, subsuming other groups and disseminating their ethos throughout the continent via the region's extensive waterways (Hornborg and Hill 2011). This chapter begins by detailing the riverine landscape, one that is formed by mythic ancestors and elucidated by way of an extensive mythscape, but one that equally informs contemporary practices – including how to care for babies. It moves on to detail one specific practice, that of bathing babies, which involves prolonged splash-washing often in rapid river currents. Building on what is known of ancient and contemporary Arawakan cultures (Hill and Santos-Granero 2002) this bathing technique is identified as a 'sedimented practice', an idiom which Heckenberger (2002: 199) has used to explicate the specific 'cultural schemas' of Arawakan sociality and one that elegantly conveys the heavily sedimented black-water rivers of the region to which the Arawakans are intimately entwined. In this context it also describes how Xié River dwellers come to consubstantially take on parts of the landscape thanks to particular, intersubjective, techniques of care. In phenomenological writings, 'sedimentation' describes how people come to incorporate their history and society, including the specific techniques acquired and practised over time which come to constitute their very make-up and which facilitate the execution of mindfully dexterous techniques (Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]; Ingold 2001). I also argue here that the specific technique of bathing babies allows Xié dwellers to embody their status (Toren 1999) and their hierarchically-dominant position *vis-à-vis* other ethnic and regional groups (i.e., those from the Makú linguistic stock) who contrast with Xié River dwellers because they live in the interfluvial forest.

The second part of the chapter turns to consider historical discourses, told by Xié dwellers, which narrate the Warekena's emergence from remote, temporary residences in the forest, to the banks of the main waterway, just over a century ago. These recount a dramatic change in lifestyle (from nomadic hunting to horticulture, fishing and sedentary riverfront dwelling) and raise the question of just how longstanding practices linked to the river, such as rigorous splash-washing, really are: historical narratives question the *longue durée* of 'sedimented practices' in Arawakan sociality. Considering the transmission of caring techniques from one generation to the next necessarily brings forth these questions of continuity and change, but the chapter seeks to reflect upon specifically Amerindian ways of representing and living with these changes, and importantly, the relevance of the stories that are told about them.

Throughout the chapter, words prefixed with G. are in the Géal language (a modified form of ancient Tupi) and words prefixed with P. are in Portuguese.

## **Myth and History**

The stories that we tell about ourselves are just as important as the way in which we tell them. Lévi-Strauss (1966 [1962]) famously distinguished between two quintessentially distinct forms of narration: myth and history. He thought of myth and history as characteristic of two different types of society and their divergent ways of thinking about the relationship between the passing of time and one's place in the world. History, as we know it, is based on a genealogical model of ancestry, in which chronology determines a linearly successive narration. Lévi-Strauss suggested that the construction of historical narratives in societies such as our own reflects a form of consciousness driven towards accruing pegs along a line such that our current state may be presented as the pinnacle of progress at a given point in time. Mythic thought, on the other hand, focuses on the recapitulation, incorporation and adaption of the generic, rather than the particular, features of history. It glosses over the specifics and looks for and explains reoccurring, basically equivalent, common experiences that form part of human existence. Societies whose dominant narrative form is history he labelled 'hot', reflecting their heated preoccupation with progress and the special place this value holds in our imagination. Mythic societies, such as those of lowland South America, he called 'cold', encapsulating their quiescent acceptance, as well as their openness to others (Lévi-Strauss 1966 [1962]: 233–234). The two narrative forms reflect as much the types of societies they characterize as the types of people who constitute them (Viveiros de Castro 2002).

Lévi-Strauss's project was to investigate two supposedly opposed ways of understanding the world. But the plethora of distinctive Amerindian narrative styles (some incorporating the most recent historical events and particularities of knowledge and experience not directly witnessed) and their contemporary coexistence (see Hugh-Jones 1988) make it highly plausible that both historical narratives and myth also existed before the advent of colonial empires in Amazonia. Even their otherwise convincing and contrasting classification (myth defined by an archetypic or mythic time that directly informs and is informed by lived practice, and history as a

lineal and accumulative temporality) does not entail their mutual exclusivity. Mythic narratives include history, but Amazonian oral histories also have mythic features (see Hill and Wright 1988). In spite of this, there is something particularly contingent about myth.

One of the key features of narratives of the predominately mythic kind is that their narrators can poetically incorporate the new by linking specific events to their generic equivalents. Thus Lévi-Strauss maintained that myths endure and appear timeless only thanks to their constant transformation and their ability to incorporate a range of newly encountered peoples and their things, including powerful 'white people' (non-Indians and Europeans, e.g., Hugh-Jones 1988). In this latter example, the category of the 'powerful other' remains an important value despite the fact that the people occupying that position have since changed from other Indians to Europeans (on the history of interethnic slavery, see Santos-Granero 2009; for more on the interface between European and indigenous slavers, see Wright 2005).

Gow's (2001) analysis of Piro myth elucidates Lévi-Strauss's (1970: 16) assertion that myths in Amazonian societies are 'instruments for the obliteration of time'. Gow (2001: 11) states, 'myths generate the appearance of stability, an illusion of timelessness that cannot be affected by changes in the world, but they do so by means of their ceaseless transformations, which marks their very historicity as objects from the analyst's point of view'. The object of mythic analysis is, for Gow, to identify those elements or idioms which are enduring and significant to the lived worlds of the people who narrate them. While for some people, the category of the powerful other is an important one, Gow argues that the Piro see kinship as important to their project of 'living well'.

Living well or 'the good life', a common indigenous idiom throughout lowland South America, is based on joyful care, co-residence and acceptance of continuous change (see Overing and Passes 2000). In the face of history, mythopoesis (i.e., the active and poetic reforming of the mythic narrative) is a means of periodically restoring the equilibrium that allows one to 'live well'. Among the Piro, theirs is the history of becoming and 'living well' as 'civilized people'. Historically this involved establishing kin relations with Peruvian nationals. Becoming 'of mixed blood' was essential to Piro ethnopoesis and this allowed Gow (2001) to argue that myth provides solutions to new problems by modelling these on previous (social) transformations explained by myth. In this way, the past (and certain myths) are made relevant to the present. Further, kin

relations for the Piro are ‘implicated in the landscape’ (2001: 51), since the physical environment is laden with memories of both the caring acts of kin whose labour benevolently transformed certain localities into bountiful groves, as well as the sites of dead ancestor souls, which are dangerous and should be avoided.

The potency of the past, in the form of the dead ancestors whose contemporary presence is respected, forms part of the vivacity of the animate environment that pervades all aspects of life and people’s accounts of it. In northwestern Amazonia such sites also form part of an elaborate mythscape littered by mythic motifs that punctuate the riverine environment, and in so doing, recall myth.

### Hydrocentricity of Place and Persons

Xié River dwellers live in the Amazon basin, in the microregion known as the Upper (Alto) Rio Negro. This region of northwestern Amazonia is formed by a dense expanse of tropical forest, floodplains and waterways defined by the upper course of the Rio Negro and its effluents. There are some 35,000 indigenous peoples living here, who can roughly be divided into twenty-four distinct ethnicities, with nearly as many languages. These languages and ethnic groups can be classified into three main linguistic groupings: Arawakan, Tukano and Makú. Arawakan and Tukano groups are particularly associated with riverfront dwelling, whereas Makú groups live primarily in the interfluvial forest. Makú are sometimes servile to Arawakan and Tukano groups, providing the latter with game in exchange for other products (Silverwood Cope 1972: 103), and are also periodically incorporated by them, making ethnic borders fluid and versatile (Santos-Granero 2009: 210–232). The Warekena, with whom I worked, are Arawakan. The fact that Arawakan Warekena live in riverfront locations is significant in terms of their particular lifestyles, the way they raise their children and their access to other peoples, their goods and services, including those of the ‘white’ (or non-Indian, *G. kariwa*) people.

Arawakan groups living on the geologically ancient, nutrient-poor soils of sandy black-water rivers, such as the Atabapo, upper Casiquaiare, the Negro and Xié, have lifestyles seasonally informed by the flood plain and the particular ecosystems of these rivers. During the summer season (November to February) the weather is much hotter, drier, the rivers are lower and water rapids are exposed. Summer is the time of plenty: the lower water levels



FIGURE 7.1. The Xié River. Map drawn by the author with assistance from Michael Athanson at the Bodleian Library.

make fishing easier than in the winter and Xié dwellers have a sophisticated and varied fishing technology, including the use of weirs at the seasonal crossover. Little boys will spend hours playing in the river currents and appear as deft at navigating their bodies through the flows as the fish themselves. Children in this way parallel the little fish (*G. pira miri*) caught at the seasonal crossover in the rapids, and babies bodies (*G. pira miri*) bear nearly the same name as their fishy counterparts.

Xié dwellers make canoes of varied dimensions, or commission them from other river residents. With three to four days’ canoe travel, powered by an outboard motor, the city of São Gabriel da

Cachoeira can be reached. Here a variety of resources can be accessed, including biomedical healthcare. Health teams also travel upriver to carry out periodic health checks and in order to vaccinate local communities. Health teams may be accessed for various illnesses, but rarely are they sought for reproductive health matters. Xié dwellers consider themselves to be highly knowledgeable in the matter of giving birth, caring for and raising healthy children – activities that should all unravel in this hydrocentric environment if people are to live well (G. *kue katu*) in it.

Hydrocentricity is a term that has recently been used to describe the particular set of sociocultural traits and the lifestyles of Arawakan groups such as the Warekena's Venezuelan neighbours, the Wakué-nai (Hill 2011). Their hydrocentric social organization is thought to have been key in dispersing the Arawakan culture in the region and beyond. One important hydrocentric feature is the contemporary and historic process of mythscaping, manifest by extensive 'mythscapes' – detailed cartographic knowledge manifest in topographs elucidated by mythic narrative (and pointed out in daily life).

Mythscaping has been identified as one of the defining features of the Arawakan ethos, as it maps hierarchy onto the land, elucidates access and rights to specific locales and in this way enables the perpetuation of Arawakan sociality. Further, its ethos is often legitimized by allusion to ancestral places of mythic emergence, which are also sociopolitical centres (e.g., the Aiary River's Hipana rapids, see Wright 2013). As a ritual process mythscaping is thought to have provided, and to continue to provide, a blueprint that allows Arawakan cultures to expand and occupy new lands, pushing out local groups or including and incorporating them within a hierarchical framework of relations (Zucchi 2002). Often describing routes of (historical) migration (Santos-Granero 1998), a corpus of ritual narratives are chanted at specific sites so as to make distant and past landscapes present and contemporary (Hill 2002) in ways that perhaps written histories do not.

The mythscapes of Xié dwellers describe how particular places in the riverscape acquire their form and elucidate a range of topographs and petroglyphs (Figure 7.2) along the river's course. Thus some of their mythic narratives describe how the 'culture hero' (so-called, as the proclaimed originator of many key traits and contemporary practices) Napiruli or Nhiaperikuli came to this new land and what he did when he arrived. Mythic narratives and their associated topographs tell how Napiruli chased the celestial 'great snake' (G. *Buya Wasu*) up the Xié River. As the snake escaped from

Napiruli, his great body literally carved out the landscape and, as one discussant informed me, ‘made the map’ of the region (e.g., Figure 7.3). Today the *Buya Wasu* seasonally manifests in the river during winter, when the waters are fuller (fatter) and during which the snake is said to have eaten the river’s fish population, leaving its human inhabitants wanting. Later mythic cycles describe Napiruli’s misadventures with animist riverine agents, which he pacifies and plays with, generating new locales as he does so. Some of these locations are ‘doors’ to the subterranean homes of ancestral animal spirits (G. *maiwa*) who mitigate access to fish populations today, and others are their petrified form (e.g., rocks with the form of a turtle or jaguar). These are often avoided or well-respected areas whose potency can negatively affect people who pass them. Others are fortifying places.

Salient topography of the mythscape details contemporary practices, indicating where the first woman menstruated and what ritual was performed in order to secure and fortify her health. They show where the first birth took place and where the first woman sat in the cool waters of the flooded forest in order to give birth for the first time. The mythscape also describes how postpartum *couvade* (post-birth observances) practices and perinatal caring praxis came into being, including where babies were bathed (Figure 7.4). As such, for those who live along it, the Xié River emerges



FIGURE 7.2. The Xié River and its mythscape.





FIGURE 7.3. The Xié River and its mythscape



FIGURE 7.4. The Xié River and its mythscape

[These three pictures are the outcome of a project instigated by a Tukano teacher working in the lower-river community school of Campinas. Fifty pictures sequentially describe Napiruli's upriver journey along the Xié and his encounters and misadventures along the way. These gave rise to the riverscape as we find it. The pictures were collated into an unpublished booklet entitled 'The Warekena's Evolution'. The teacher granted permission for the author to photograph the pictures for academic use and publication.]

as a timeless but contemporarily potent background on which the foreground of existence plays out today. So the question of generational change and reproductive cultures emerges from this context, a context that orientates and guides contemporary practice as much as it feeds back into mythscaping praxis.

### *Hydrocentric Perinatal Care*

According to myth, the first pregnancy was the result of a sorcerous attack inflicted by Napiruli's unruly enemies. Napiruli's enemies used malicious sorcery in order to impregnate his wife, Amaru, with a snake. Amaru's abdomen grew as the day of birth drew near, but she had no vagina or birth canal since her nether regions were still closed shut. While suffering from the pain of the child impounded in her womb, she managed to maintain a cool-minded composure, as did her husband, who instructed her to sit in a wintertime, waterlogged lake. Here, using his deft shamanic skills, he performed a blessing and turned the fallen leaves in the lake into fish. One by one they attempted to perforate an opening (the vagina). Finally, the *G. jacunda* – similar to the piranha fish – bit an opening, and another penetrated all the way up, forming the birth canal from which the baby could emerge. This provoked the healthy underwater birth of the Amado, a fish or snake-like being, who shot out into the water's depths unseen by his mother. Today there is still a danger that the baby growing in the womb is not or may not become a proper human being. Only proper human care can make it so.

Proper care is epitomized by pre-birth, birthing and post-birth observances and includes, but is not limited to, periodic rituals such as those of infant naming (Hill 1985). In daily life too, being mindful of how one lives is necessary in order to live well (*G. kue katu*) and healthily with others, and others include the growing foetus, who it is hoped will become a proper person. Xié dwellers' myths, including that of childbirth, describe experiences of full, hot and piercing pain and the cool states required to counteract them. Foetuses, pregnant mothers and neonates are considered 'hot', full of blood and vital energy, which needs to be channelled in order to ensure proper growth. Being 'hot' is a full person, mind-body complex that conveys fiery tempers and the hot-headed, as well as sweaty somatic and fired-up social states. Thus during pregnancy the onus is on cultivating a cool environment in which the foetus can grow. Hot, full, bloody and its opposites are constantly brought into balance, not as radically equilibrated opposites, but rather as

a finely attuned and resonating medium that is part of living well. These become particularly pertinent questions during the perinatal period, when new persons are emerging and the pursuit of balanced relational states must be even more closely and finely tuned.

Thus in their heated pregnant state, women avoid more of the same by staying away from the burning out of canoes, the sweat of men's communal work and the use of 'hot' fish poison, all of which would have negative consequences on the fruit of men's labour. They bathe frequently during pregnancy in order to counteract their own heated condition and cool down the growing foetus. Bathing also facilitates foetal growth: water penetrates the abdomen and adds substance to the foetus, contributing to the place of dwelling by producing (amniotic) fluids in the womb. During delivery, breaking water is a sign of a healthy birth and demonstrates that the foetus has been properly cared for (in the womb as a result of its mother's frequent bathing). Paternal mothers-in-law, who normally attend a mother's first or otherwise complicated birth, explain that mothers with 'dry' births, that is, mothers who fail to produce water in quantity before delivery, experience a slow, drawn out labour due to the lack of sufficient lubrication, and their babies are also more likely to be born in a dangerous position (other than head first). Insufficient bathing during pregnancy is often the cited source of these complications.

Expectant mothers demonstrate their steadfastness by carrying out their tasks, normally an increased production in manioc bread to sustain their post-birth diet, purposefully and resolutely. This is demonstrated through the rapid cleaning of utensils used for the production of manioc flour and including the prompt washing of the manioc press after the manioc mass has been expressed. Such diligent and decisive cool-minded action is to do with the embodiment of the particular qualities that the mother herself requires for childbirth. In this context, healthy childbirth is for the birthing mother an art form, a practice for which her total life experience has prepared her. It is also thanks to the specific advice given by the mother/mother-in-law, and aimed at generating mindful states of being and 'a global visceral awareness' (Farb et al. 2007: 319; Hughes et al. 2009). The mother's ability to embody this quality will affect the ability of the child itself – its own early potency (*P. força*, *G. kimbawa*) – to wilfully facilitate an easy passage along the birth canal: in the first case babies are said to become crunched-up in this position and in the second, babies, like their mothers, will be indecisive about either coming out or staying in (the womb),

producing a drawn-out labour. Finally, food restrictions, often followed by both parents but more stringently followed by the mother, necessitate a degree of self-control.

During birth at home a mother is expected to stay silent, seated and to maintain her cool. She sits on a stool and is silent throughout the proceedings. In their sum, following these guidelines and properly caring for the foetus facilitates its growth and the ease of delivery. The coolness I refer to is not only a cool physical environment, but also a stylistically relaxed, upright and assertive bodily posture and mind stance, on the part of the carer, which aids the growth of infants. During the transition into motherhood cool-mindedness is cultivated, thereby enhancing a mother's potential to assume her new status as a cool-minded person able to care effectively for others.

There are, however, certain instances when mothers find it hard to keep their cool, and this is considered legitimate when sorcery is suspected. As myth also recounts, women fall victim to sorcery when afflicted by a jealous affine, and this can have some serious consequences for childbirth: delays, breach positions and haemorrhaging, leading to death. Some shamans, or other relatives, may also warn a woman that she is likely to be the victim of sorcery. If a woman suspects she will become the victim of a sorcerous attack, she will seek shamanic blessings during pregnancy. Such a decision is often evaluated according to her and her coresidents' suspicion of affinal envy, their coveting, greed and ambition, which can sometimes only be confirmed and definitely detected by a suitably qualified visionary shaman. In these circumstances, they are prepared to go to hospital if they need to, so travelling to São Gabriel is an increasingly viable option for those who have relatives living in the town and a home in which to stay.

In their home communities, shamans and other specialists may conduct minor surgery, but they say they lack the knowledge about how to cut a baby out of a mother's womb without mortally injuring the mother. In hospital women have the possibility of a caesarean section. The decision to perform a caesarean section during a long, drawn-out and complicated birth is regarded as an extreme but excellent technological intervention that frees the mother from near-certain death associated with this type of lethal sorcery. However, there are instances when mothers go to the hospital because a visiting health professional, suspecting a complicated birth, has advised them to do so, even when Xié dwellers have no reason to suspect sorcery. Such advice and the biomedical conception of risk

is resented, and if they choose to follow it they are unhappy if their birth turns out to be normal and routine, and are disappointed by the attitude of medical professionals whom they describe as ‘white’ people who sometimes ‘just don’t know’.

Medical professionals are deemed to lack the knowledge to facilitate a normal birth. Their lack of physical presence and continuous monitoring of the birth, their unwillingness to physically hold and support the birthing mother (as a woman’s husband does at home), as well as making women lie down, are all factors indicative of this want. At home, women exercise their steadfast strength together with their husbands, and demonstrate their cool-minded endurance by remaining silent and composed in the face of their pain by being *G. kirimbawa* (potently strong, or mindful). By contrast the hospital environment, which also attends to military wives, does not promote this norm: lying down and hearing the screaming shouts of others, they are deprived of this possibility to be *kirimbawa*. Women also complain about the post-birth diet. Cold drinks and heavy foods, including game, are inappropriate postpartum as these substances radically diverge from and fail to nurture the mother who is in a ‘cold’ postpartum state. A further commentary of inept neonatal care is baby-bathing, which is infrequent and done with warm water in the hospital.

### *Baby Bathing*

In their home communities babies are bathed in a basinful of cold river water immediately post-birth by their grandmother. It is the first thing that happens to them after the umbilical cord is cut. They are then bathed every four to five hours, and throughout the night when they wake. They are always bathed before (breast)feeding. And a week after birth, when the umbilical cord falls off, they bathe with even more intense frequency and duration.

A newborn baby under three months, which is observed to have its eyes open – ‘looking’ – for more than five minutes is, for a Xié dweller, just asking to have a wash. Further, stating an infant’s desire to be splash-washed is synonymous with stating the child’s listlessness and desire to sleep: ‘when the baby keeps waking up, it means he wants to be bathed’. ‘He’s hot’, the mother will exclaim when their newborn writhes in its hammock, and bathing is the preferred cooling technique (Mauss 2002 [1934]). Washing is thought to cool the baby down, after which he returns to the warmth of his mother’s breast and then directly to his own hammock surrounded by a nest of blankets ready for sleep. Babies are

nearly never heard to cry and splash-washing is nine out of ten times the chosen remedy for crying. As a technique, Xié dwellers recommend splash-washing to encourage babies to have long, drawn-out naps as well as to augment personal strength, and their somatic firmness and bodily fat – issues to which I will return shortly. However, as it became clear over the course of my fieldwork, the baby does not just want to be wet, cleaned or cooled by the water, the baby wants to be splash-washed.

Newborn babies are not submerged, made to recline or dunked in water, as submerging or reclining the baby in water would cause it a serious shock. Rather they are splash-washed, and splash-washing begins immediately post-birth in a basin at home. On the baby's birth, river water is immediately fetched and transferred into the washing basin. Post-birth the baby has no direct contact with the mother: a female relative, often the mother-in-law, who supports the child one-handed, her right forearm and hand securing the baby across the chest in a forward-slumped seated position on her lap, will prepare to bathe the child. She places her foot in the basin full of water and transfers the baby (draped over her forearm) onto her submerged foot. Resting on his or her grandmother's foot,



FIGURE 7.5. Splash-washing next to an ancestral rock

the baby's buttocks are only half submerged by the shallow water. From this position the baby is ready to begin bathing.

With the free (right) hand, water is cupped-up from the basin and dribbled down the baby's exposed back with increasing speed and frequency, changing from a delicately administered trickle down the washer's fingertips to vigorous, hand-fully-cupped splash-washing,



FIGURE 7.6. Splash-washing next to an ancestral rock

as water is splashed over the head and dribbles down the baby's face, chest and legs. This technique is invariably accompanied by a 'brrrrin' trumpeting noise – as the washer forcefully expels air out between her vibrating lips. If the baby whimpers, it is consoled with back-patting and the washing continues. As the splash-washing increases in vigour, the 'brrrrin' sound becomes louder. Splash-washing continues for around fifteen minutes. The baby is then removed from the water, dried by a cloth, breastfed and laid to sleep in its hammock.

Home splash-washing continues throughout the first week of life, until the baby's umbilical cord falls off (four to five days after the birth), an indicator that the baby and mother are now ready to bathe in the river. This prompts the G. *iyumi* (post-birth) ritual, which inaugurates river bathing and protects him from the malign water spirits associated with the *maiwa* (ancestral animal spirits). From here on the baby will be splash-washed in the river: seated either on the lap of the washer (mother, father, grandmother or other close female kin), who sits submerged on a rock in the water, or held against the washer's thigh as she stands (see Figure 7.5). Such everyday caring practices are integral to creating kinship in terms of the 'multiplication of identical entities' (Gow 2000: 49; also see Carsten 1997: 7). A variation of this technique is also used: the baby is held with the washer's right arm across its chest and the baby's buttocks are supported with the left hand. The lower body is then made to move rhythmically back and forth in the water. This technique is accompanied by the washer making a 'shwee', 'shwee' sound (see Figure 7.6). Sometimes both techniques will be used, one after the other. The washer is almost always the mother, grandmother or older female kin, but I have also seen elder male siblings bathe a baby in this way, as well as the infant's father. All babies, regardless of gender, are splash-washed frequently.

Babies are washed because they 'want to be raised/grow/brought up' (P. *querer criar se*, G. *re-yukirai*) and are understood to solicit and crave these particular techniques of care. This enables them to 'grow into social maturity rather than being trained into it' (Strathern 1980: 196), as caring becomes, in these contexts, a mutually responsive intersubjective relationship (see Toren 2001). Water is then both the precondition and the condition for proper growth: water in the womb is evidence of pre-birth baby bathing – something that the baby will want to continue, having 'acclimatized to it' (P. *acostombrarse*). Post-birth, the more frequently babies are bathed, the quicker they will grow and the stronger they will become. This



is especially true if the weather is warm, for fear that the baby will become 'dry' or 'thin' and crisp and brittle (that is, hard like bone, rather than firm as full or fat). Fatness (being P. *gordo*) is a desired characteristic of babies (also see Ewart 2000: 288) and it is part of what makes the developing *pira miri* (G. *pirá/a* = fish/body; *miri* = little) a source of delight and wonder. One woman pointed to her four-year-old son, and observed how 'hard/firm' and 'strong' (G. *kirimhawa*) he was as he bathed frequently (as a baby). Xié dwellers appear to be referring to a certain firmness of form, muscles and sinews, which develops in tandem with socio-moral qualities and dispositions – the developing upright moral character of growing infants.

Water is cited as cooling and refreshing, and we begin to get a sense of how infants come to be imbued with the cool qualities of the water. In local terms, the nearest we get to this concept is in the hardening of the body, where hard qualities are not only physical, but are also associated with the cultivation of inner calmness. These embodied moral dispositions mean that water contributes to the 'substantive make-up' (Ingold 2000: 144) of infants, cooling down their heated states, making cool-minded and cool-bodied persons. Such an orientation to the properties of the river is not a given, or a natural consequence of physical contact, but requires the enactment of a specific technique – splash-washing, as it impacts on one's thermic register.

In the context of high rates of flu and pneumonia, health professionals are wont to comment on the danger of early morning bathing. This is particularly the case in neonatal river baths, which nurses associate with the high incidence of neonatal mortality. Of course, such comments are very much at odds with customary praxis: early morning bathing for an expectant mother is described as and equated to a P. *vacina* or *vitimia*, i.e., like a preventative inoculation or a vitamin supplement, so often prescribed during pregnancy, and postpartum it is an essential part of infant growth. This contrasts to Xié dwellers' attitude to infant inoculations, which are regarded with ambivalence. I suspect that this is because they are seen to be hot and piercing – too much of the same, and conflicting with the already too-hot and piercing vital energy of babies (like cloth nappies with pins that I used for Sofia and which they verbally objected to as being 'a bore' for infants). Nonetheless, inoculations are also a means to incorporate some of the powerful technologies of 'the whites' and by so doing acquire some of their shamanic capabilities (evinced by their technologies).

Finally, the mythscape mnemotechnically records splash-washing as an ancient person-forming technique that Napiruli –when he first explored the river – observed to be taking place at specific locales along its course: culture hero Napiruli sees a woman bathing her child this way as he travels up the Xié River in a location that bears the name ‘the baby’s waterfall rapids’ (see Figure 7.1). This indicates fast-flowing rapids as an appropriate ‘sphere of nurture’ (Ingold 2000: 148) in which the baby can be raised. The rocks that form the rapids are also cold and stony reminders of the ancestors, imbuing their mythic cool qualities that help to secure the well-being of river dwellers today.

### **From Forest to River: (Re)orientation to Hydrocentricity?**

The mythscape makes a whole range of practices appear timeless. Since the culture hero Napiruli did these things, it appears to suggest that Xié dwellers have always washed their babies so. However when we trace oral narratives, we find that the past century has seen changes in the social make-up of these groups, changes that have not solely been informed by the burgeoning Brazilian nation-state, but rather guided by an autopoetically incorporative openness to others. Guiding this, I have suggested, is a logic at once pragmatic to the shifting dialectics of power and to an equally adaptive humoral logic (cf. Butt-Colson and Armellada 1983) that guides the incorporation of new techniques and the people who perpetuate them.

Xié River dwellers’ narratives point to a time, only some hundred years ago, when Warekena were not as hydrocentric as they are today. They describe not having fishing technologies, and living in inaccessible dwellings rather than on the riverfront, and a far more nomadic lifestyle. Members of the prestigious Tunu community-dwelling Warli clan recounted a series of narratives describing these changes to me, which I audiotaped and committed to paper.

#### *The Elders of the Past and the Taming of the Early Xié*

In the early eighteenth century there was a large village lying on a minor mid-river tributary of the Xié River. It was headed by a chief known as Meru or Monoribu and was surrounded by smaller settlements. Darikawana, Meru’s cousin, lived a good distance upriver, along another minor tributary, and these tributaries formed the respective centres of their distinct territories.

The narrative tells how these two groups were engaged in the then-typical warfare practices of ‘the ancient elders’ (G. *kuxima*). Relations between these two groups of affines became embittered when Darikawana, and then Meru, captured each other’s family and sold them off into slavery. In return for these slaves they received firearms. The story reaches its climax when Meru attempts to avenge himself on Darikawana, but in a final confrontation Darikawana defeats him. Darikawana kills most of Meru’s allies and those still alive fall under his rule. Darikawana is an historical figure who is mentioned in Stradelli’s (2009 [1890]) account of the region, where he is described as a renegade leader unwilling to conform to state rule.

The second part of the legend of Darikawana tells of the taming of the Xié’s fierce forest-dwelling population who were largely domesticated through contact with immigrants to the Xié. The Tunu elder Luís told me how during this time, in the mid to late nineteenth century, an unnamed ancestor migrated upriver, along the Xié. He had come from the lower Rio Negro, seeking the river’s seasonally abundant fish, and then made the Xié his permanent home. At the time the Xié’s banks were still deserted, while the Xié-surrounding population, as Luís’s son Jurez described them to me, were forest-dwelling and thought to be ‘like game’ (P. *como caça*) animals. This is a common trait among many Amerindian groups: even as they apply the category of person (or humanity) to non-human fauna, they radically dismiss other ethnic groups as ‘animals’ (Viveiros de Castro 2004).

At the time of their ancestor’s arrival, people lived in secluded forest locations rather than riverine settlements, and fled to avoid interethnic contact (which they say is also the custom of contemporary Makú peoples). Being like game entailed eating wild fruits rather than engaging in horticulture, eating game rather than fishing, having a very rudimentary material culture and possessing no canoes. Unprotected and uncivilized, a further feature of being like a game animal is that of political impotency, and thus being without claim to the land or those who live there. Luís and Jurez described to me how through a series of encounters, Luís’s nameless great-grandfather lured the game-like population to the riverfront and became their master. When the nameless goes to meet him, he calls Darikawana his brother-in-law and over time establishes an affable exchange relationship.

There is a well-known ambiguity in the brother-in-law relationship: building on the observations of several regional scholars,

Viveiros de Castro (2001) specified how the brother-in-law could be a dangerous outsider, but as an insider would be an important col-luder. Using a concentric model, Viveiros de Castro described the centrifugal tendency of de-affinizing the non-consanguine and making him kin as the sociological axis of Amerindian societies. The opening of this axis appears to have facilitated this outsider's integration.

According to one of Aline da Cruz's (2011: 22–23) informants (Lina, born in the 1920s and interviewed in 2007 in Anamoin, which once lay within Darikawana's territory), Anamoin was 'opened' (P. *abrir*, which da Cruz translates as founded, P. *fundar*) before she and her family arrived. At this time, it was 'pure Warekena territory', but then these people left and the land at Anamoin was 'closing'. They came to reopen it. Certainly, the prestigious Warli clan's (found in both Anamoin and Tunu) account coincides with those they identify as descending predominately from these forest dwellers. When I spoke with these groups, now mainly resident in lower-river communities, they described to me their lifestyles, dwellings and technologies in ways that did not contradict those of their dominators. And they, like many other northwestern peoples, were incorporated into Arawakan sociality and therein ranked below that of the riverine newcomers.

Acting as an intermediary, first Luís's ancestors offered this population salt, then soap and later hooks for fishing. The forest-dwelling population was described as having a rudimentary material culture with little knowledge of fishing techniques, to which they were introduced. Over time, kin relations were established and the nameless's son, Cândido de Oliveira, married one of Darikawana's daughters. In addition to taming the wild forest population – by establishing affinal relations with them – Cândido de Oliveira, through a series of rituals, must also tame agents of the riverine mythscape: Tunu Cachoeria's crab-owner, a form of *maiwa* (ancestral animal spirit) associated with a rock by the same name, is also pacified. This ensures affable relations with animist agents and thus allows for the establishment of the first Xié riverfront community.

Luís describes how they acquired other features of civilized society, including the technology to make canoes and travel long distances for the purpose of extending trade relations. Eventually, Darikawana made a series of journeys to Manaus during the height of winter in order to buy industrialized products. By the end of this narrative, Darikawana is described as having been a powerful figure who resisted the authority of agents of the nation-state. Finally, the 'police' came to take him away, but Darikawana is remembered

for artfully evading their efforts to capture him. When they do, he hands the river over into the custodianship of Cândido de Oliveira.

The dialectic between forest and river is a well-known idiom for exploring differences, and degrees of difference, between peoples. The forest is the place of 'wild Indians', fierce and undomesticated, while the river and cleared spaces are the proper abodes of civilized persons. Riverine lifestyles – secret ritual observances (*G. jurupari* cultism), skilled fishing, the production of canoes, the acquisition of prestige items – stand in sharp contrast to that of the marginalized forest-dwellers, in their inaccessible and more rudimentary forest dwellings. In these narratives, coming out of the forest is then couched as a historical process, one also encompassed by myth.

In historical narratives the Warli clan trace their genealogy to important people in the past and this is said to be a time just after their mythic ancestor arrives, who lived in adjacent locales, thus also mythically confirming their place in the river's ranking order. But in the context of myth and mythscaping, a genealogy of descent has only the depth of decomposing leaves piled one on top of the other, which during ritual come to reconnect and offer a special contingency in the present (Hugh-Jones 1979: 139). This evinces the 'relational' or rhizomatic view of generation, which is part of mythic thought and animist societies. Charismatic persons, in the past and today, literally embody the mythic ancestors (Hugh-Jones 1988: 151) regardless even of their specific rank and genealogical heritage. Darikawana is a legendary figure on the border between history and myth, who embodies the deft shamanic skills of mythic ancestors and the first shaman. In these contexts, hydrocentricity is accrued by ritual and daily practices that confirm a reorientation to riverine living, making forest dwellers into real persons.

## Conclusion

The chapter has described perinatal caring practices, and specifically the technique of splash-washing, which unfolds as part of Xié dwellers' hydrocentric lifestyles and which are understood to be highly efficacious in meeting the needs of babies. However, rather than being passive recipients of care, babies are understood to crave and solicit this proper caring praxis in order to grow. A carer's responsiveness to this need asserts their position as a responsible carer (and real person) as much as it produces the baby being cared for. Carers then carve out a special niche from which babies may emerge into

kin persons. Identified here, thermic cycles are somatically sensed and very closely mediated and associated with life-cycle changes, and are used to orientate appropriate actions and caring techniques. From a Xié dweller's perspective, executing environmentally emplaced techniques, such as splash-washing, contributes at once to creating a growing infant's fleshy substance, as well as to the production of an autonomously dependant, strong and cool-minded person who can live well with others.

Xié dwellers also tell stories about these caring techniques and refer to mythscapes that appear as a timeless backdrop for their contemporary, yet 'sedimented' (Heckenberger 2002; Merleau-Ponty 1962 [1945]) perinatal practice. However, I have suggested that this is at once confounded by their openness to others, which makes the possibility of incorporating new techniques and practices all the easier. Transformations in the minutiae of caring practices (such as splash-washing), and as a consequence bodily techniques (Mauss 2002 [1934]), are probably as hard to trace as the transformations of the content of oral traditions such as myths (Gow 2001: 23). By the same token, mythscaping makes them appear as their own, timeless practice. In this way, mythic narratives, thanks to their orality (Guss 1986), their contingent malleability and their liveliness, offer a mindful narrative that equals their daily mindful practice. Ultimately then, 'there is no opposition ... between continuity and change' (Ingold 2000: 147).

While the narrating of personal experience is an active way of shaping memories (see Gow 2001), myth speaks to the reproduction of more generic, barely perceptible everyday habits that people literally carry with them in their body-mind. This mindful way of being in the world is reflected by mythic discourse: mythscaping is the narrative accompaniment to daily mindful practice, a way to live with changes in such a way to make them relevant on sociopolitical and corporeal levels as part of the wider aesthetics of Amerindian living. Perhaps then, there is a positive link between certain types of narrative form and mindful states of being: in the mindfulness literature the suggestion is that the narrative mode of mind inhibits living in the present (Raffone, Tagini and Srinivasan 2010). However, the fact that mythic protagonists 'are not merely commemorated but actually made present for the assembled audience, as though they had been brought to life and invited in' (Ingold 2000: 92) may activate rather than disable 'living in the present'. It is only in animate cosmologies, where the liveliness of the landscape is apparent, that oral narratives of the mythic kind have this particularly contingent

poiesis. This mindful and mythical mode of dealing with the past, a past which in Amerindia is all too often scoured by bloody histories of domination and forced dependence in the face of postcolonial exploitation, is perhaps also, in some instances, a less traumatic narrative alternative than accrued and commemorated histories (cf. Echeverri 2010).

Finally, I have proposed that new techniques and practices are evaluated according to a humoral logic specific to northwest Amazonian Arawakan groups and that this logic forms part of their defining lifestyle and maintains their status. In this way, Xié dwellers' imperative: 'go and bathe and be strong' is at once a health-promoting practice as it is a socially and politically motivated one that upholds the status-conscious and hydrocentric parenting values of these river dwellers.

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