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## VIDEO-RITUAL: IMAGERY CIRCUITS AND RITUAL FILMING AMONG THE MEBÊNGÔKRE (KAYAPÓ) DOSSIER INTERSECTING GAZES<sup>1</sup>

### ABSTRACT

This article presents networks of imaginal and ritual relations among Mebêngôkre villages, in addition to describe and analyse contemporary cultural (and ritual) production by this Jê-speaking, Amazon forest-dwelling, indigenous people. It builds on results obtained previously in published research on the intricate relationship between video production and ritual. Given that image reproduction technologies were appropriated by the Mebêngôkre more than thirty years ago, the intention is to reveal not only the specific features of contemporary imagery circuits,

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but also the specific characteristics of the visual product that circulates most in this vast network: filmed rituals. Thus, we aim both to demonstrate the importance of the circulation of images among Mebêngôkre villages and to answer the question of why filmed rituals are the chief imaginal artefacts circulating in this network. Lastly, the article proposes a transgenerational Mebêngôkre ethic regarding the production and circulation of filmed rituals.

*My dream is to film all the festivities,  
all the activities and the whole process of each celebration.*  
(Bepunu Kayapó)<sup>2</sup>

This article presents some of the relations involving imagery and ritual among Mebêngôkre villages, describing and analysing contemporary cultural (and ritual) production by this Jê-speaking, Amazon-dwelling indigenous people.<sup>3</sup> It builds on results obtained previously in published research (Madi 2011, Madi & Demarchi 2013, Demarchi 2014) on the intricate relationship between video production and ritual. Given that image reproduction technologies were appropriated by the Mebêngôkre more than thirty years ago, the intention is to reveal not only the specific features of the contemporary imagery circuits, but also the specific characteristics of the visual product that circulates most in this vast network: filmed rituals. We aim both to demonstrate the importance of the circulation of images among Mebêngôkre villages and to answer the question of why filmed rituals are the chief imaginal artefacts circulating in this network.

In this regard, while previous study was concerned with the relation between body and camera, trying to understand “what is done with the body through its relation with the camera” (Madi & Demarchi 2013, 150) – that is, highlighting the filmmakers’ performance rather than the content of the filmed images – here, the analytical and descriptive concern is with the films themselves and how they circulate – and, more specifically, with the fact that most of the videos produced and circulated are films of rituals.

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<sup>2</sup> In an interview to Ana Estrela and André Demarchi, in São Paulo on October 19<sup>th</sup>, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> The Mebêngôkre (Kayapó) live in the states of Pará and Mato Grosso. Their population of around 12,000 is divided into a few subgroups living along the Xingu River and its tributaries. The Môjkaràkô village, where we spent ten months in field research between 2009 and 2013, is in southern Pará, close to the town of São Félix do Xingu, on the banks of the Riozinho, a tributary of the Fresco River, in turn a tributary of the Xingu. It has a population of approximately 700 inhabitants.

Although the descriptive and analytical goals have changed, the analysed data and the ethnographic experience continue to be based on the “Mebêngôkre Culture Documentation Project”<sup>4</sup> *Kukràdjà Nhipêjx* (making culture), which operated in the village of Môjkarakô from 2009 to 2015 in partnership with Museu do Índio. On a logic similar to that of previous audio-visual projects – such as the one carried out by anthropologist Terence Turner (1992) and filmmaker Mônica Frota (1996) – the *Kukràdjà Nhipêjx* project consisted in conveying audio-visual techniques and know-how to indigenous people by way of workshops in the village and at the museum, aiming to see them documenting their rituals and their knowledge. During the project, five Kayapó filmmakers were trained, in addition to a set of equipment which the museum provided the village with, including video and photographic cameras, audio recorders and computers, as well as data storage devices, such as HD, flash drives and DVD.

It is important to note how the filmmakers and inhabitants of the village of Môjkarakô understood the act of “documenting culture”, as described in the words of Bepunu Kayapó in the epigraph to this article. To them, above all, it meant filming the rituals produced in the village, regardless of whether they were naming rituals<sup>5</sup> or the rites appropriate to the surrounding society: sports competitions, beauty contests, Independence Day ceremonies. The important was to record images of these rituals, to watch them in collective showings and to make them circulate among the various villages of their vast territory.

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4 André Demarchi coordinated the project throughout its execution (2009-2015). From 2009 to 2012 he shared coordination with Diego Madi. From 2011 onwards, with funding from UNESCO and the Banco do Brasil Foundation, the project came to be called *Kukràdjà Nhipêjx* (Making Culture) on the initiative of the Môjkarakô village filmmakers’ collective. Diego Madi’s MA thesis (2011) and André Demarchi’s PhD dissertation (2014) were developed during the project execution period, using the fieldwork to hold audio-visual workshops.

5 Mebêngôkre naming rituals have been amply described in the ethnographic literature on this people (See, for example: Turner 1965, Vidal 1977, Lea 1986; 2012, Verswijver 1992; Gordon 2006; Cohn 2005, Demarchi 2014). The Mebêngôkre differentiate between two categories of name: common names (*idji kakrit*) and beautiful names (*idji mejx*). The latter are distinguished by being classified, for ceremonial purposes, into eight types: Bep and Takáak are exclusively used by men, while *Kokô*, *Ngrenh*, *Bekwynh*, *Iré*, *Nhàk* and *Pãnh* are mostly used by women and less frequently by men (Lea 1986). For each of these names, there is a specific naming ritual. Another constant in the literature is the ritual beautification of the person whose name is confirmed in a celebration. Both Lea (1986, 2012) and Turner (1965, 2009) state that the ceremonial confirmation of names and prerogatives divides the people of a given community into those who are considered beautiful (*merereméjx*), because their names and prerogatives were confirmed in a certain ceremony, and those considered common (*mekakrit*), because their names and prerogatives were not ceremonially confirmed.

Added to this synchronous dimension of the ritual filming, that is, the immediate way they are circulated and consumed, there is a diachronic dimension, an imagery project directed to the future. The production, circulation and consumption of these images is also aligned with a native conception of “keeping culture by means of video” (Madi 2011), as well exemplified in the reiterated declaration by Mebêngôkre that they film “for our grandchildren”. That expression must be understood as an intention and a thought for the future, that is, aiming future networks for circulating these images which refer to a transgenerational ethic, as explored in the final remarks.

In any case, to understand the production and circulation of these images (intended both for the present and for the future), it must be borne in mind that the Mebêngôkre are divided into villages that are politically autonomous (Turner 1992, Gordon 2006), but connected by extensive networks of relations (Demarchi 2014, Demarchi & Morais, 2016). Among the villages, there are “far-reaching connections of all orders, indicating the necessity to think about them not in isolation, but rather as comprising a Mebêngôkre relational regime” (Gordon 2006, 40).

Relations among the villages feature mutual rivalries, often resulting from processes of splitting that are characteristic of this people. It thus must be remembered that intergroup splits have historically occurred, with attendant outbreaks of war between groups that once occupied the same village. One hypothesis of this study is that the networks of imagery-based relations established among villages point to a transformation of relations of rivalry.<sup>6</sup> While “in the elders’ time” the process of breakup led necessarily to war (Turner 1991, Verswijver 1992, Cohn 2005, Gordon 2006), now it is conducted by other means: performance, imagery, aesthetics. Instead of warfare as a resource for attaining glory and demonstrating belligerence and bravery (Verswijver 1992, Gordon 2006), the modern Mebêngôkre also engage with each other by filmed rituals that circulate among the various villages, because they show the beauty of the village where the rituals were filmed. The moving images of the films convey the village’s *kukràdjà* (knowledge) and that of the groups and individuals that make it up, amplifying one of its key components, the need to be seen and assessed on native ethical and aesthetic criteria.

## WHAT CIRCULATES? RITUAL FILMING

During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, indigenous peoples’ appropriation of western technological apparatus became a subject for many authors, who highlight – among other things – the importance of this process in constructing and asserting ethnic identities, in the political struggle for traditional

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<sup>6</sup> For an analysis of these changes, see Demarchi (2014; 2017).

territories, in defence of their own ways of life, in documenting their cultures and forms of ritual and material expression (Turner 1993, Concklin 1997, Ginzburg 2002; 2003, Morgado & Marin 2016). Indigenous peoples' uses of video are certainly part of the process that Marshal Sahlins (1997a; 1997b) called the "indigenisation of modernity", with repercussions on the conception of "culture" (in quotes) as proposed by Manuela Carneiro da Cunha (2009). Both authors demonstrate that native peoples' objectification of culture – that is, their own manners of appropriating the anthropological concept of culture – depends necessarily on these peoples' differential skills in "demonstrating 'their culture' by performing it" (ibid., 313).

Native peoples' production of video – or what in Brazil is popularly known as "indigenous cinema"<sup>7</sup> – may be understood as "a rich manifestation" of culture (in quotes), underscoring the dilemma "between how Indians conceive the image of their own culture and metropolitan concepts of culture" (Brasil 2013, 248). The relation between video, performance and "culture" finds its ultimate expression in the filming of rituals. It was no accident that, in Brazil, the first experiments in producing videos jointly with indigenous populations, conducted by the non-governmental organisation *Vídeo nas Aldeias* (Video in the Villages), were filmings of rituals, which were promptly shown to the people in question, triggering unprecedented experiences of reflexive thinking, as expressed in the inaugural film of the project, *Festa da moça* (The young girl's celebration) (Carelli 1987), which records the female initiation ritual of the Nambikwara and the natives' reflections after watching the images.

In this article, however, we are concerned with the spread of productions that would be unlikely to circulate as products of the *Vídeo nas Aldeias* project and which, accordingly, elude the analyses of the so-called "indigenous cinema". Here we are dealing not with films in the *strict sense*,

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7 We share with André Brasil and Bernard Belisário (2016) the impossibility of defining "indigenous cinema": "it is not rare for the category 'indigenous cinema' (or others like it, such as 'native cinema', 'original or autochthonous peoples' cinema' etc.) to be targeted by criticism addressed to one or another term of the equation. On the one hand, the rubric is considered to reiterate the abstraction of "indigenous" – something that ethnography has worked to undo. On the other, it suggests a certain idealisation of that cinema which has in fact shown itself to be impure, crossbred, done in the midst of processes of formation and creation shared between Indians and non-Indian's; and on the basis of techniques, technologies and poetics in the western visual tradition (ibid., 603)". Nor can "indigenous cinema" be defined *a priori* by its format, these authors continue, "because the forms it takes vary: from records with almost no editing shown in the villages through to emphatically edited archive films; from urgent takes in situations of conflict through to the ritual-films [...]; from films edited in partnership with non-indigenous editors through to new work edited exclusively by indigenous filmmakers (a kind of production that is still incipient)" (ibid., 605).

but with “ritual filming”, a category created to express the main product that circulates in Mebêngôkre imagery networks.

From the words of Bepunu Kayapó, one of the indigenous filmmakers who participated in the *Kukràdjà Nhipêjx* project, this production can be first defined in opposition to what reaches non-indigenous image circulation networks.<sup>8</sup>

I record the video on the camera and then I put it on the computer. If I cut just a little bit out, then they [the people of the village] say: “Where is that little bit? It didn’t come on”. That is why I make three, four films, each one telling one part of the celebration. But for white people, I have to do something else, just the dance itself, keep the film small. Just to show my work, I have to make it small. But the indigenous people of the village will remember the festivities from beginning to end, they will remember how many days the festivities lasted. They watch the film and then they say: “Where’s that little bit? That dance didn’t appear in the film”. That is why I do three or four films of two hours each with all the parts of the celebration (Bepunu Kayapó)

A “ritual filming” can thus be defined as a full-length video recording of a specific ceremony<sup>9</sup> that is practically unedited, or the editing is done directly on the camera and the images are assembled in a clearly

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<sup>8</sup> While producing this article, we were at first tempted to describe the differences between “films made for whites to see” and the “ritual filming” that circulates in the Mebêngôkre villages about the differentiation between, respectively, culture with and without quote marks (Cunha 2009). The former, produced in an inter-ethnic context, would be a faithful example of the generalising logic of “culture”, while the latter type of production, with no pretension to inter-ethnic dialogue, could be classified as belonging to the register of culture without quotes. However, following the remarks of Coelho de Souza on these notions, we preferred to shy away from this, perhaps innocuous, “schematic approach”, to perceive “that to speak of culture with quotes does not mean to perpetuate a duality between inward culture and outward culture”, because “culture declares itself, always and immediately, between inside and outside” (Coelho de Souza 2010, 107-108; original emphasis). Each of these productions thus occupies its own place by which it is differentiated in this *in-between*.

<sup>9</sup> “The editing process has figured larger and larger in connection with ‘projects’. Today, to an extent greater than in the scenario encountered by Terence Turner, there are people who value editing and who want to learn the technique. However, this appreciation appears to be connected with an expectation of corresponding to outside demands. These people are participants in ‘projects’ and, perceiving the need for a format, understand that the edited video corresponds better as a ‘product’ for interrelating with other networks (particularly in the world of the *kuben*)” (Madi 2011, 73).

sequential order. In addition, these films are consumed by the natives right after they are produced and are quickly put into circulation by recording them on DVDs and flash drives.

We understand that it would be a mistake to regard “ritual filming” as possibly video-making at a “rudimentary stage”. On the contrary, it is an aesthetic choice required by the audience’s interest in seeing the smallest details of the recorded ritual sequentially, to the point where the classic western differentiation between “raw material” and “finished product” makes no sense.

It makes no sense to say to a Kayapó that what we filmed that afternoon still needed to be cut and edited. I would even say that they film during the day to watch at night, ignoring any possible distinction between “raw material” and “finished product”. It should be said that they ignore that distinction not in the sense of being unaware of it, but of disdaining it. This seems to be extremely important in that it does not indicate a practice at a “rudimentary stage”, but rather reflects a choice (Madi 2011, 50).

That choice underlines other aesthetic principles regarding the ritual, its audience and participants. Here, the technical characteristics of the audio-visual product are determined by the theme and by imposition of the native audience. “We like to see the whole celebration”, say the Mebêngôkre to their filmmakers who are experimenting editing techniques. These, in turn, agree. They dream of filming “all the festivities [...] the whole process of each celebration”. Filming the whole process means filming the whole ritual prelude: the hunting and fishing in the forest to gather food, the preparation of the adornments to be used in the festivities, the production of body painting used by the different male and female age groups, the rehearsals of the songs and dance steps that will be performed during the ritual – as well as the ceremony itself, which may last several days.

The elementary characteristics of this audio-visual product, from its long unbroken takes, plus the almost complete lack of any editing or the editing being done directly on the camera, through to the extremely rapid process from filming to consumption to dispersion of the images on the circuits, are features that, at the very least, call into question the preconceived idea of film in western imagining, if not imploding it, at least widening it so as to counter-invent (Wagner 2010) in this other manner of filming and watching film. To understand this in the Mebêngôkre sense, it must be seen in reverse (Ibid.), to be thought of contrariwise, as Michel Foucault would say, or “taken apart”, in the words of Divino Tserewahú Xavante (Brasil & Belisário 2016).

According to André Brasil and Bernard Belisário (2016), Divino says that he has begun a process of taking apart films he made for a non-indigenous audience, to remake them “with a more and more indigenous eye”.

Tserewahú showed us a cut of a film that he is making about the ritual of initiation and progression in the world of *wai'a*, the spiritual and shamanic world of the Xavante man, 15 years after he produced his film *Wai'a Rini: the power of the dream* (2001). The piece we watched was, according to the filmmaker, “true” (*uptabi*, “notarised”) indigenous cinema: “cinema that we produce for our people, without subtitles. A long version [in] which they can see everything”. In the film, the speech is not translated into Portuguese and most of the takes maintain an intricate relationship with the duration of the ritual events; the editing follows the reiterative, cyclic movement of the corporal and sound performances (Brasil & Belisário 2016, 602).

These authors’ description of the “film” and even the need to explicitly state the differences from the conventional notion of film, show close similarities with what here is being termed “ritual filming” in the Kayapó case. To both Divino Xavante and Bepunu Kayapó, “true” indigenous cinema produces ritual filmings, long versions where we can see the ritual in full and where many of the cast can see themselves. As Divino puts it, a diversity of eyes produce these films: “elders’ eyes, women’s eyes, I have to accept everything. Then I put them together. That is why I do four jobs in the editing” (Brasil & Belisario 2016, 602). As in the words of Bepunu above-mentioned, the celebration *in progress* induces the final product, its characters call for their points of view and that is how reverse cinema is done.

Ritual filmings, as images contaminated by their peoples’ cosmologies, also require that ethnographers “take [film] apart”, along with their pre-conception of what, to them, a film is supposed to be. Its sense, though, is also circulation and consumption. Having defined *what* mainly circulates in Mebêngôkre imagery circuits, we now will describe *how* these filmings circulate, what points they connect, what political forces and aesthetic forms (and vice-versa) they carry from village to village.

## IMAGERY CIRCUITS

By mapping contemporary Mebêngôkre imagery circuits in southern Pará, the town of Redenção would certainly be one of the hubs from which the images radiate – and this, thanks to the actions of a Catholic priest. Father Saul has a large collection of films, documentaries, videos and ritual filmings from several different Mebêngôkre villages, done by different

indigenous and non-indigenous filmmakers. As he receives contributions to his collection from indigenous people, so he feeds into the circulation of images by distributing DVD copies of the images from his collection to the residents of other villages. At Môjkarakô, we were able to watch DVDs with filmed rituals performed in villages in Mato Grosso State, such as Pykany, and in nearby villages, such as Gorotire, Kikretum, Pykararãkre and Aúkre – all coming from the priest's collection.

As soon as these DVDs arrive at the village, they are quickly copied by the filmmakers and distributed to the village people to be watched on the television sets that are present today in practically all homes, along with their attendant satellite dishes. In this connection, during the research, we accompanied the vertiginous growth of television sets. In early 2009, there was only one television in the village, belonging to the family of one of the sons of the old cacique Moté. By 2010, there were already six more televisions and by 2012 they were present in practically all homes in the village. Soap operas, romantic films (e.g., *Titanic*), fight films (e.g., *Rambo*) and soccer matches are among the programmes most watched by the Môjkarakô – none of which compares, however, with the audience for the filmed rituals of other villages. These DVDs are repeatedly watched, every night, by many people. They constitute a “programming” that points to the possibility of an “informal indigenous television” with “parallel programming that is distributed alternatively” (Madi 2011, 91).

This alternative distribution, with Father Saul at one of its hubs, is fed by, and receives feedback from, other networks of relations (particularly kinship networks) that make the images circulate. Relatives invited to take part in rituals by relatives in other villages take copies of these films with them; they are promptly shown during the night and draw large audiences. In Môjkarakô, a large showing was put on when a Xikrin family, invited to take part in a naming ritual, brought several DVDs of various celebrations held in Cateté River villages. On another occasion, when a Môjkarakô family was going to a ritual in the village of Aúkre, the oldest man in the family asked one of his sons-in-law (one of the project filmmakers) to record copies of all the DVDs of Môjkarakô celebrations for him to take as a gift for his relatives in the other village. On their return from the festivities, the man showed me the DVDs of filmed rituals that he had been given in return for those he had taken.

The circulation of these images attests to an inter-village network for ritual imagery that comprises all the villages in the south of Pará and Mato Grosso states.<sup>10</sup> That network operates and increases the spread of

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10 By “an archaeology of the concept of wealth among the Mebêngôkre”, Vanessa Lea (2012, 49) examined the Kayapó matri-house as a pan-village entity that connects dwellings in

knowledge, forms of ritual, designs of ceremonial objects, body painting patterns, songs and dance steps – in short, all of what the Mebêngôkre term *kukràdjà* – among a few villages. All this circulates by way of what here is denominated “ritual filmings”.

The presence of ritual filmings in this circuit seems to date from the earliest initiatives towards audio-visual documentation among the Mebêngôkre. Mônica Frota, a member of the “Mekaron Opôî D’jôî” (a project carried out in 1985 and the first audio-visual made in a Kayapó village) noted that the video cameras appropriated by the natives became powerful tools for recording rituals and enabled people of different villages to see each other after long years apart. Attentive to the use that the Kayapó were already making of the radio, Mônica suggested expanding imaginal communication networks by extending the activities of the project to other villages and encouraging them to share videos (Frota 2001, 96).

Another similar initiative was taken by the anthropologist Terence Turner in 1990. The “Kayapó video project” (1990) made it possible for people from different villages to have direct contact with video filming and editing equipment. Once again, just as emphasised by Frota, the rituals became prime contexts for recording. About the project, Turner states that “most of the Kayapó films to date are of cultural performances, such as rituals or political meetings, which form a natural narrative unit, with limits defined by the theme itself and a sequential order” (1993, 90).

In the *Kukràdjà Nhipêjx* project too, rituals were pre-eminently the material filmed and, just as in other projects, the resulting images were quickly put out to circulate. Because the project is located in Môjkarakô villages and the people have embraced it the way they did seem to have placed them at a strategic point on the imagery circuit that runs through the villages of southern Pará. The reason is that, during the project, the filmmakers trained in the workshops were invited to film ceremonies in other villages.

The news that one of these projects was ongoing in the neighbourhood – by indigenous filmmakers with cameras, computers, tapes and DVDs donated to the “community” by Museu do Índio – soon spread among

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different villages by its distinctive legacy of names and *nekrets* (ceremonial prerogatives). This perspective, based on differentiation and connection, seems to unfold on different scales, with the “distinctiveness” being expressed by the local elaboration on the “manner” of a person, an animal, the men, the women, or a collectivity (Demarchi 2014). The “manner” is an aspect that makes it possible to produce “parts” and “wholes” (Strathern 2006) according to precise relational contexts. In the case of ritual filmings, it is the “manner” of a village that “takes the stage” (literally) as the principle that differentiates and collectivises, producing otherness and identity.

the villages of the Riozinho, Fresco and Xingu rivers, and the Môjkarakô filmmakers were soon invited to film rituals in other villages. These requests did not bother the filmmakers, much less the chiefs and villagers of Môjkarakô. The former developed a strong desire to “get to know other villages” through their work and, no less important, wanted to apply the new *kukràdjà* (knowledge) they were learning to master in another context, and to enjoy the status afforded them, within and among the communities, by the position of filmmaker. For the leaders and village people, the invitations from relatives offered a dual incentive. The chiefs felt happy and strong that Môjkarakô was the only village in the vicinity with a team of properly equipped filmmakers. According to them, this was “good for the village” – but it was not the most important thing. More than demonstrating the new wealth gained by Môjkarakô to relatives, by embracing the project they enabled the community to occupy the strategic position on the imagery circuit running through the villages of southern Pará. This, once again, was thanks to the filmmakers’ work. They filmed the festivities at the request of those who had invited them, but because of an elementary technical impediment in the project, the filmmakers could not leave their hosts with a copy of what they had filmed: without a deck, an editing apparatus, it was impossible to digitalise the precious Mini DV tapes and copy the images onto DVD. Often, to remedy truly tense, embarrassing situations, the filmmakers display the images by connecting the camera to one of the televisions of the village, in a public place, possibly in front of the head chief’s house. This technical impediment, on the other hand, was used very well by the villagers of Môjkarakô, because the filmmakers would return to the village with the tapes and immediately be asked to publicly show the footage of relatives’ celebrations in almost daily night-time sessions.

Showing the images made it possible for ceremonies performed in other villages to be immediately consumed, drawing aesthetic judgments about them. During the night-time sessions, they would remark on the innovations, on what the others had done to brighten themselves up: the colours and images of the bead ornaments, the necklace designs, down to minute details of the coloured beads, the invention of new body painting strokes, new music and dance steps. They would also comment on whether the celebration was beautiful and whether it was being performed in the proper sequence.

In addition, the night-time showings of “images of relatives” allowed them to plan their festivities in a clear spirit of contest. Their ceremony had to be done more beautifully than the others’. While preparing themselves for the ceremonies, the chiefs called for effort from the members of the community, reminding them of the images that showed clean villages, free of scrub in the central square. Using words of encouragement

over the “iron mouth” (the village loudspeaker), Akjabôro once said:

Yesterday we saw the images of our relatives. We saw their celebration. The village was clean. Everyone was working for the festivities to take place. They are filming here too, because Mômjkarakô has a project. Now we have to work properly. Everyone has to work for the community, for our celebration to be more beautiful. We have to make it right (beautiful, correct) (Akjabôro Kayapó)

We found a position similar to Akjabôro’s when we were invited to hold audio-visual workshops in the village of Kôkraitômoro. As soon as we arrived there, we were surprised by the chiefs and villagers wanting to watch the films of the rituals performed and filmed in Mômjkarakô. One of our first activities at the village was to show this footage to a large audience on the television set up in the men’s house. Mundico, the village chief, revealed after the showing that the intention in seeing the images of their relatives was for them to produce more beautiful celebrations. Accordingly, in the days that followed, the men and women of Kôkraitômoro, both adults and youngsters, not only presented the camera with their versions of the ceremonies performed by the villagers of Mômjkarakô, but also performed others that the latter had not. At the end of each day of filming, we were asked to show the filmed images in the men’s house. These showings were accompanied by remarks from the spectators, particularly about the beauty of the festivities that they had performed or, on the contrary, about shortcomings that should be improved for the next day. After one of these sessions, we heard chief Mundico tell the young men that they should clean the village square properly, because it looked dirty to him in the film. After another showing, the same chief told the young men and women who had danced the *Kwôre Kangô*, whose performance they had just watched, that they should do it again the next day, because there was only a few people dancing and the dancers were unenthusiastic. At the end of our stay, as we were returning to Mômjkarakô, Mundico asked us to show the people of that village the films recorded at Kôkraitômoro for them to see that they knew how to put on beautiful celebrations.

Once back in Mômjkarakô with these images, there was no need to announce Mundico’s request. The villagers soon asked for night-time sessions to watch their neighbours’ performances, until the stock of tapes recorded in the other village was exhausted. These showings took place while they were preparing a *Menire Bijôk* (celebration of painted women) naming ceremony. In that context, showing the images recorded at Kôkraitômoro encouraged the people of Mômjkarakô to prepare the festivities that were to take place in a few days. There was once again a desire

to put on a more beautiful celebration than those they had seen on the television at night, moments before the rehearsals for the ceremony.

Similar contests between Mebêngôkre villages were noted by Cohn (2004), particularly between the Xikrin of the village of Bacajá and those who had left to find another village. The latter, to celebrate the founding of the new village, held a *Kwôre Kangô* ceremony and asked the anthropologist to take the cassette tapes with the recordings of the songs they had produced for the ceremony to Bacajá. As portrayed by the author, there was “a pride to be tended to” in this attitude and a “desire to stand out” by producing “a more beautiful celebration than that of Bacajá” (Ibid., 10). The anthropologist’s impressions of how the people of Bacajá received and listened to the tapes are interesting to note, particularly because she points to something similar to the agonistic spirit of ritual dispute that runs through the imagery network abovementioned. Cohn writes:

many gathered to listen [to the tapes] and seem to have appreciated what they heard. Indeed, the discussion of the moment was about which village held more rituals or danced more, so that the question they asked me most was whether they really danced every day in the new village of Mroti Djãm (Ibid.,10).

An example that indicates the reach of these Mebêngôkre imagery circuits involves the *Yna Yna* ritual appropriated by the Kayapó from a small group of indigenous Peruvians who visited the village of Môj-karakô in 2014 during an interethnic seed exchange fair. The intensity with which the Kayapó devote themselves to this ritual was documented in a film with the same name by filmmaker Bepunu Kayapó.<sup>11</sup> In that film, several groups of men and women execute the Peruvian Amerindians’ characteristic steps in a synchronised dance. The music, also characteristic of the Peruvian indigenous people, echoes from an enormous loudspeaker in the men’s house at the centre of the circular village.

A few months after the film was finalised, a mobile phone recording of the Peruvian ceremony performed enthusiastically by dancers in the village of Gorotire, many kilometres from Môj-karakô, was posted on Facebook by a member of another indigenous village. We were impressed by the speed at which the images of this ritual were spreading when, on the same social network, we saw a video of the Panará (Krenakore) indigenous group, where male and female dancers performed the characteristic dance steps of the *Yna Yna* ritual in the village square of

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11 Title: *Yna Yna*. Director: Bepunu Kayapó. Duration: 60 min. Year: 2014. Shown in “Olhar: um ato de resistência”, of the Festival ForumDoc, Belo Horizonte, 2015.

Nansepoti, but with Indian music in the background instead of the usual Peruvian indigenous songs performed among the Kayapó.

These are only some examples of the intensity of these imagery circuits, where the rituals, their images and sounds, or rather their *kukràdjà*, are the preferred goods in circulation, the seeing and hearing of what drives the production of new rituals, performed and recorded in a clearly agonistic spirit, because they will be seen by others at other points on the circuit.

### VIDEO-RITUAL: BEAUTY AND *KUKRÀDJÀ*

To understand both the complexities that these imagery circuits produce and the importance of the main item circulating in them, the “ritual filmings”, one apparently obvious question must be answered: why are rituals the preferred imaginal content for circulation among the villages? Or, in other words, what makes the ritual form a preferred item for recording and circulation?

To answer that question (even briefly),<sup>12</sup> we need to first consider an existing concept in the Mebêngôkre literature, which is required by this analysis, that is, the notion of *kukràdjà*, a word that contemporary Mebêngôkre designate by ‘culture’, i.e., “tradition, habits, practices, knowledge, wisdom, way of life” (Gordon 2009, 11). Highlighting a trend in the Mebêngôkre literature on this concept, Gordon defines *kukràdjà* as:

a *flow* of knowledge, wisdom and attributions that people the cosmos and can be acquired and appropriated at various levels, from the individual to a broader collective. It can thus receive successive inputs (or losses) that is, new parts, new knowledge or attributions, that then come to form a new part of someone (the appropriator: shaman, warrior, chief) and sometimes a new part of all Mebêngôkre (Ibid., 11).

It is this continual flow of cultural elements (names, objects, songs, dance steps, patterns of decoration and body painting) appropriated from other humans and non-humans that feeds intensely into the Mebêngôkre ritual system and appears in detail in the “ritual filmings”. The beautiful names and *nêkrêjx* which, as Lea (2012) notes, constitute the wealth of the Mebêngôkre, are captured from outside, and their beauty and potency stem precisely from their exogenous origins. Also, the visual component of the Mebêngôkre *kukràdjà* must be stressed, because, in addition to being appropriated from others, it has to be shown in the rituals.

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<sup>12</sup> For a more detailed discussion of this concept in Mebêngôkre literature, see Demarchi (2014).

Rituals thus become a preferred form in which to circulate images, because they concentrate a series of *kukràdjà* deployed by villagers in producing the ritual. These are the *kukràdjà* that people of other villages want to see, and in turn to learn, copy and even judge. Accordingly, as abovementioned, body painting strokes, designs, decorative forms and colours, songs and dance steps are preferred items for observation and analysis by those who consume the filmings of a celebration in any village. The circulation of these images that concentrate various types of knowledge heightens an inter-village dispute, which hinges on the beauty of the rituals.

An immediate relation in fact exists between beauty and ritual. Turner, for instance, declares that when a Kayapó is asked “why he dances or really why the ceremony is being performed, he will probably answer: ‘because of the beauty’” (Turner 1980, 130).<sup>13</sup> It is precisely beauty (*mejx*) and its connection with ritual that must be considered to answer the question posed above. Gordon (2009, 16-17) offers new clues that interrelate the characteristic visual quality of Mebêngôkre *kukràdjà* with ritual as a locus of Kayapó beauty.

One of the features of Mebêngôkre society is what can be called its visual character. From the architectonic display of the villages to the importance of the appearance (*amirrin*) of adornments, decorations and ceremonial roles in festivities and dances in the square – that is, in the ritual unveiling of names and *kukràdjà* – there is a visual component in the objectification of value and beauty. This is not by chance. It is in ritual that beauty is objectified and shown to its utmost sociological and cosmological extent. [...] Ritual is thus the high point in the production (or extraction or attribution) of beauty. In fact, it is the context in which all the beauty that the Mebêngôkre have been able to produce, learn or appropriate from the cosmos is objectified. Rituals are moments when Mebêngôkre society shows itself as it should be: beautiful, right, good. *Mebêngôkre kukràdjà mejx kumrenx*.

In addition to concentrate various *kukràdjà*, Mebêngôkre rituals are linked to a native conception of beauty expressed by the word *mejx*, which, like *kukràdjà*, covers a broad semantic field. As Gordon noted:

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<sup>13</sup> Fisher (1998; 2001), on the other hand, would say that another possible answer to the question is that the ceremony is performed “because of happiness”. An analytical stance in line with this proposal by Overing (1991) enables these two dimensions – happiness and beauty – to be united, as mutually constitutive aspects of everyday Amerindian life.

*mejx* [...] expresses not only aesthetic values, but also moral or ethical values. The semantic field of the word covers a series of attributes that can be glossed as good, proper, beautiful, handsome, correct, perfect, excellent. In addition, *mejx* can be contrasted, depending on the context in which it is enunciated, with the following antonymic terms: *punure* ('unpleasant, ugly, bad, wrong') and *kajkrit* ("common, ordinary, vulgar, trivial"), or simply *mejx kêt* (where *kêt* is a negation particle). In any case, *mejx* (beautiful, good, perfection) designates a set of values essential to the Xikrin [and to all Mebêngôkre]. Producing or obtaining *mejx* things, people and communities (in short, society) seems to be the ultimate purpose of Xikrin action in the world, which is revealed on both the individual and collective plane (Ibid., 8).

An immediate relationship can thus be traced not only between beauty and ritual, but also between beauty and *kukràdjà* – because not all *kukràdjà* is subject to appropriation; what are appropriated are particularly *kukràdjà* considered to be beautiful. These are what are brought out in the rituals and in producing beautiful people. As among the Kisêdjê (Suyá) studied by Coelho de Souza (2010, 3), the adoption of exogenous elements – particularly from the Xinguano, with whom they came to coexist at one point in their history – “depended on an appreciation of their ‘beauty’ [...], while this [Xinguano] cultural equipment was considered by the Kisêdjê, in a diffusionist spirit, as a set of features to be taken up or rejected separately”. As she notes referring to a citation from Seeger: “[...] everything was adopted because it was ‘good’ or ‘beautiful’” (Seeger 1980, 169, in Coelho de Souza 2012, 3).

The same can be said of the Mebêngôkre. Not everything that is seen in the filmed rituals is considered *mejx* (beautiful) and thus suitable for appropriation. A pair of sneakers used by one of the boys honoured in a *Bemp* naming ceremony in the village of Aúkre and watched on one of the village television sets, was considered by the Mebêngôkre of Mô-jkarakô to be *punure* (ugly), an example of what they should not use in their own rituals. Aesthetic appreciation can thus be considered an important factor causing their rituals and their images to circulate in different villages – but it is not everything.

Another more direct relationship between beauty and ritual can be drawn from remarks by other authors. In an article on the appropriation of video by the Kayapó, Turner (1993, 94) states that ritual not only creates community, but can also be understood “as expressing the supreme Kayapó value of beauty”:

“beauty”, in this sense, includes a principle of sequential organisation: successive repetitions of the same pattern, with each performance growing in social value, as it incorporates additional elements and acquires greater stylistic delicacy, thus approaching the ideal of wholeness and perfection that defines beauty (Ibid., 95).

In recent article, Turner (2009, 159), returning to this conception, devotes a few words to the Kayapó concept of beauty, using ritual as an example:

As a term of value, “mêch”, which I have translated with the general term ‘beautiful’ [...], connotes both completeness (meaning that all the parts or aspects of a thing are present in the proper proportions) and perfection of production or performance. The word is associated with the principle of repetition, as when a ceremony becomes more fully and perfectly performed the more times it is rehearsed.

Following Turner’s first definition, Lea (2012, 121) states that “to the Mebêngôkre, aesthetics is associated with the idea of totality”. In another article, she takes ceremonies as an example of this native conception of aesthetics: “the ceremonies are eminently aesthetic occasions, because they materialise the most complete composition of the social body, interrelating the members of each house by way of their respective roles” (1993, 275). In other words: “Mebêngôkre ceremonies owe one of their aesthetic aspects to the fact that they require that the whole village participate (as performers or spectators) to different degrees that vary depending on the occasion” (Lea 2012, 397). In these extracts, Lea seems to be reasserting the importance of the element that Turner calls “wholeness” or that she calls “totality”, emphasizing the notions of proportion and symmetry as important components of beauty.

Gordon presents similar ideas regarding artefacts when remarking on the Xikrin’s aesthetic appreciation of certain objects in the collection of the Archaeology and Ethnology Museum at São Paulo University (MAE-USP): “among the immediate criteria on which Xikrin appreciate beautiful objects, I firstly noted conformity to a given, culturally established pattern (or *form*, proper to each object), as well as alignment with the senses of harmony, proportion and symmetry” (2009, 09). The Mebêngôkre notion of beauty thus seems to be based on aesthetic values such as “wholeness”, “totality”, “harmony”, “proportion” and “symmetry”. These values, as Gordon asserts, are replicated in the rituals, materialising an “aesthetic parallelism” between the production of artefacts and the production of ritual. Therefore,

the ritual performances can themselves be considered a temporal and spatial ordering of different *kukràdjà*. Indeed, the proper distribution of *kukràdjà* during the celebration – their appearance in the middle of the village square in the proper order and correctly disposed or positioned – indicates harmony, symmetry and beauty. In a certain sense, it is this that makes the festivities be considered beautiful or good (*metoro mejx kumrenx*). [...] The same principles or criteria, replicated on another plane, can be seen in recognition for the beauty of material objects. As with the beautiful object, so the beautiful celebration is also the harmonious outcome of alignments and separations, approximations and removes among elements – in this case, *kukràdjà* – in relation to one another (Gordon 2009, 13).

Accordingly, when one considers the rituals, certain aesthetic principles stand out. These are related with the ideas of sequence (or process) and repetition, as highlighted in the extracts from Gordon and Turner above-mentioned. As they state, it is this sequential order and the repetition of these sequences in a ceremony that adds beauty to the ritual – and this is also what is present in the long filmings of rituals that circulate among the Mebêngôkre villages.

Regarding a film produced by Tamok, one of the *Kayapó video project* filmmakers, Turner says:

[Tamok's video] shows faithfully the repetition of each performance, each with its successive addition of adornments and participants. The structure of his video reproduces the repetitive structure of the ceremony itself and so itself creates 'beauty' in the Kayapó sense of the term (1993, 95).

This seems to be a fair answer to the question posed earlier as to why the filmed rituals are a preferred item for circulation. This is not only because, as Turner says, ritual expresses “the supreme Kayapó value of beauty”, but, more importantly, because the very production of the video by the filmmaker, in addition to reiterate this supreme value, produces even more beauty. By always accompanying the sequences and repetitions of the ceremonies in their continuous process of addition of beauty, the filming results in a product that objectifies both the beauty of the ritual and the “surplus-beauty” resulting from the filming, because its production is guided by the ritual sequence itself.

In addition, the filmmakers' videos objectify the networks of relations deployed to produce the rituals, making others see the inter-ethnic and

inter-village alliances that are created to materialise them. The filmed rituals display, to neighbours in other villages, the partners and partnerships established to hold the ceremonies and are faithful documentation of the chiefs' deploying resources of the surrounding society for their production. The circulation of these virtual images thus reasserts the chief's prestige, broadcasting his mastery in marshalling resources and establishing networks of relations. It also reasserts the beauty of the communities where they were produced, thus feeding and feeding back into a dispute among those villages as to who produces the most beautiful celebration.

### FINAL REMARKS: A TRANSGENERATIONAL ETHIC

One of the first known film records of the Mebêngôkre was made in 1953. It is also considered one of the Mebêngôkre's first contacts with western image production and reproduction equipment. Those filmings were made by journalist and writer Jorge Ferreira along with the brothers Cláudio and Orlando Villas-Boas, during a trip to make second contact with the Txukarramãe (Metuktire), a Mebêngôkre subgroup. Although this short (approximately 15 minute) film<sup>14</sup> does not show the members of the newly contacted group handling the cameras, it does record the curious gazes of several indigenous people on that object that was capturing their images. Some stare deeply towards the camera, others laugh and still others look on mistrustfully, seeming not to know what that "strange" artefact is doing.

In one part of the film, men, women and children can be seen forming a large circle beside the river, dancing, singing, and holding each other by the waist, as if foreshadowing the far-reaching connections that their future relatives will establish between video and ritual. In this first record, they anticipate the evidential relationship between the production of ceremony and the filming of it. They seem to send a message to the relatives to come, that in the future there will be no ritual that is not filmed and put into circulation in a vast imagery network.

For the last time and by way of conclusion, we highlight the connections between filming and ritual. According to the pragmatic approach developed by Severi & Houseman (1994), on which ritual is to be understood as a relational device (a "*mise en relation*", to the detriment of an approach centred on the manipulation of symbols), filmings can then be understood as veritable rituals that "communicate" and "keep culture" (Madi 2011), connecting villages and also generations.

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<sup>14</sup> The film *Os primeiros contatos com os Txucarramãe* (1953) can be seen at: <https://goo.gl/4J4hNu>.

By communicating and keeping culture, the ritual filmings display a pragmatic that is both synchronous and diachronic. In the latter, diachronic, it seems useful to think about Amerindian material in the light of Leach's hypothesis (1974) that, to understand a people's ethics, one should study its aesthetics.<sup>15</sup> The ritual filmings are situated on the register of a relational aesthetics (Lagrou 2009) able to produce points of contact in a system of (non-verbal) "analogical communication" characteristically conveying an intention or "thinking" addressed to future generations. The Mebêngôkre have been experiencing considerable renewed population growth in recent decades and they address this concern in different ways, as becomes clear from the village anthem of Môjkarakô, created by Mokuká Kayapó. The village anthem, which is performed in collective celebratory situations, highlights the fact that new people are "appearing" (*amerin*). This demographic comment seems to prepare the ground for important thinking about the future. Specialists about the "end of the world", as suggested by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro and Debra Danowski (2014) regarding the Amerindians, the Kayapó are emphatic when they assert they use video as a means of "saving our culture for our grandchildren".

Thinking about video as relating to a transgenerational ethic makes it possible to input new data to studies of Amerindian art and its devices for establishing relationships. On that perspective, the filmings are contemporary rituals that try to deal with the historical experience of symbolic and material loss and destitution. The pragmatics of ritual filmings can be related with the production of social memory, considering here the local conception of "memory" as a faculty at once cognitive and emotional (remembering how elders did things; "thinking" of responsibility and affect towards new generations). Moved by responsibility and affect, the ritual filmings are ultimately preminent contexts for illuminating an indigenous philosophy of ethics.

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<sup>15</sup> Leach's proposition was analysed comparatively by Els Lagrou (2009) for Amerindian material. In the same direction, Demarchi (2014) addressed Mebêngôkre sociality on the basis of a relation between ethics and aesthetics. See also Madi (2015; 2017) for an approach of the same type among the Guna (Kuna) of Panamá.

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