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Matthews Cascon, Leandro; Fernandes Caromano, Caroline
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Swaying on Feather-Roses and Imperial Crests: Brazilian Feather-Decorated Hammocks, Nation-Building, and Indigenous Agency

Balançando em rosas de penas e brasões imperiais: Redes brasileiras decoradas com penas, construção de nação, e agência indígena

Leandro Matthews Cascon

Leiden University, The Netherlands
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3289-3520>
L.matthews.cascon@arch.leidenuniv.nl

Caroline Fernandes Caromano

Research Center for Material Culture, Leiden, The Netherlands
<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6327-6010>
carolcaromano@gmail.com

Abstract: Feather-decorated hammocks from the Amazon have been documented in travel reports and incorporated into museum collections from the nineteenth up to the early twentieth century. Here we present an analysis of five of these hammocks, housed in European museums. Through an object-centered approach, combining data obtained by direct observation of museum objects and associated documentation, historic travel reports and ethnographic literature, new information was obtained on the hammocks, such as possible areas of origin and indigenous producer groups. Results show that the production of these hammocks occurred in an area larger than traditionally believed, and that indigenous peoples at times decorated these hammocks in such a way as to express elements of their culture, imprinting ethnic markers onto artifacts that were many times considered as non-indigenous due to their production in transcultural contexts.

Keywords: feather-decorated hammocks; transcultural objects; Amazon; 19th-20th centuries.

Resumo: As redes decoradas com penas da Amazônia foram documentadas em relatórios de viagem e incorporadas a coleções de museus do século dezenove ao início do século vinte. Aqui, apresentamos uma análise de cinco dessas redes, armazenadas em museus europeus. Por meio de uma abordagem centrada no objeto, combinando dados obtidos pela observação direta de peças de museus e documentação associada, relatórios históricos de viagens e literatura etnográfica, novas informações foram obtidas para as redes, tais como possíveis áreas de origem e grupos indígenas de produtores. Os resultados mostram que a produção dessas redes ocorreu em uma área maior do que se acreditava tradicionalmente, e que os povos indígenas às vezes as decoravam de forma a expressar elementos de sua cultura, imprimindo marcadores étnicos em artefatos que muitas vezes eram considerados não indígenas devido à sua produção em contextos transculturais.

Palavras-chave: redes decoradas com penas; objetos transculturais; Amazônia; séculos XIX-XX.

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Introduction

The first written record of Brazilian hammocks is found in the inaugural report of the territory, when Pero Vaz de Caminha mentioned how the Portuguese fleet that had landed in 1500 in what is now Northeastern Brazil encountered indigenous people that slept in a *rede* (Caminha 2020 [1500], 9-10). Câmara Cascudo (2003, 22) notes how Caminha had probably never seen a hammock and that, due to its similarity to a fishing net (called *rede* in Portuguese), used the term to describe the newly encountered object.

In the following decades, the importance of hammocks for the colonization of Brazil would be noted. In 1570 Pero de Magalhães Gandavo stated that most beds in Brazil were hammocks, a practice taken from indigenous peoples (Gandavo 1570 en Câmara Cascudo 2003, 27). This indigenous custom¹ was arguably adopted 'without reluctance' and hammocks were an object of exchange with native populations in the period (Holanda 2003 [1947], 169).

In the colonial context, hammocks were adopted and also adapted in their functions. An example is that, although they were probably not used (in normal circumstances) for carrying indigenous leaders in precolonial times, in the sixteenth century hammocks adapted as litters carried by enslaved Africans rapidly spread as a form of transportation in Brazil. In the seventeenth century these travel-hammocks were used by the Portuguese, and also by the Dutch during their occupation of Northeastern Brazil. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries they became more luxurious, with canopies which were at times embroidered (Câmara Cascudo 2003, 28-29).

At the same time that hammocks were physically and conceptually modified into the colonial system, their use was subject to contradictory views due to their indigenous origin. While the Western and foreign gaze valued the hammock's ease of use and versatility, it also imprinted on this object the idea of primitiveness and reduced it to a mere domestic utensil (Malta 2019, 109-110; Terena 2019, 54). Hammocks were used throughout Brazilian history to help create racist portrayals of indigenous peoples as indolent, images that ultimately assisted State politics of assimilation and extermination of the peoples who have in hammocks a strong cultural element.

The swaying feelings that hammocks have stirred in Brazilian collective thought are an example of the many contradictions constructed through the violent colonization process of Brazil. In their very existence, frequently combining indigenous and exogenous techniques, Brazilian hammocks can, in fact, be understood as a material representation of Contact. As an indigenous technology co-opted into the colonizing process, hammocks are a privileged category of artifact through which to study wider social and historical aspects of the relations between Indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans and Western colonizers.

1 It should be noted that not all indigenous peoples in Brazil use hammocks.

Nineteenth-century Amazonian feather hammocks as contact objects

A lot can be said about the power of objects produced under colonial interaction. Take, for example, the bark objects embroidered in dyed moose hair in the Quebec region. Originally manufactured by nuns in the early eighteenth century as souvenirs of New France and its Native peoples, by the beginning of the nineteenth century these objects had been (re)appropriated by indigenous people and, in the hands of native women, stereotypical images of indigenous people underwent changes, subtly but significantly bringing to light aspects of self-representation relevant in indigenous systems of thought (Phillips 1999). The role exercised by these artifacts in the negotiation of identities is a demonstration of the potential of transcultural arts (such as souvenirs) as mediators.

Paraphrasing Phillips (1999, 33), who sees what was described as indigenous “toys and knickknacks” as in fact “quintessential examples of the transcultural arts that contact zones produce”, we may consider Brazilian hammocks as privileged objects to discuss contact. The material outcome of diverse and multifaceted processes, indigenous and non-indigenous hammocks are to this day sold as souvenirs in various regions of Brazil, and have at times been transformed into luxurious items. Amongst the many types of hammocks produced in Brazilian history, perhaps none better demonstrate this mixture of luxury, beauty, and exoticism than the feather-decorated hammocks.

On hammocks, plants and birds: Spruce’s hammock at the British Museum

When poring over mid-nineteenth century reports by travellers and scholars visiting the Rio Negro region, in Northwest Amazon, we commonly come across the description of the home of Antônio Dias in Tomo village (Edwards 1847; Wallace 1853; Spruce 1908). A Portuguese merchant who regularly crossed great distances on the borders between Colombia, Brazil and Venezuela in order to sell boats and goods (Wallace 1853, 236), Dias on his travels would occasionally give rides to hitchhiking travelers all the way from Pará, passing through the current city of Manaus (Brazil), and reaching villages on the Upper Rio Negro.

Amongst the goods that made Dias famous were hammocks decorated with flowers made from feathers and plumes which were bought by travelers and collectors from Brazil and abroad. Wallace (1853) gives a detailed description of these:

Senhor Antonio Dias was rather notorious, even in this country of loose morals, for his patriarchal propensities, his harem consisting of a mother and daughter and two Indian girls, all of whom he keeps employed at feather-work, which they do with great skill, – Senhor Antonio himself, who has some taste in design, making out the patterns. The cocks of the rock, white herons, roseate spoonbills, golden jacamars, metallic trogons, and exquisite little seven-coloured tanagers, with many gay parrots, and other beautiful birds, offer an assortment of colours capable of producing the most exquisite effects. The work is principally applied to the borders or fringes of hammocks. The hammocks themselves are of finely netted palm-fibre string, dyed of red, yellow, green, and other brilliant colours. The fringes are about a foot deep, also finely netted, of the same material, and on these are stuck, with the milk of the cow-tree, sprays and stars and flowers of feather-work (Wallace 1853, 238-239).

Wallace's description included details on these hammocks' system of production, with indigenous labor, coordinated by Antonio Dias. Although it is difficult to identify with certainty which indigenous groups these people belonged to, Wallace's descriptions point to the Baniwa, which makes sense since there, on the border region between Brazil, Venezuela and Colombia, is where the Baniwa live to this day:

The language spoken by these people [in Yavitá] is called the Maniva or Baniwa of the Rio Negro, and is not so harsh and guttural. At Tomo and Maroá another language is spoken, quite distinct from this, but still called the Baniwa; a little further down, at São Carlos, the Barré is used; so that almost every village has its language (Wallace 1853, 256).

On the differences in Baniwa dialects noted by Wallace, Henri Ramirez considers that there are three super-dialects within what he called the Baniwa-Koripako language (Ramirez 2001, 2): the northern, central and southern dialect, this last one corresponding to the language spoken in Victorino, on the Guainia River in Venezuela, where the Tomo village and the home of Antônio Dias were located.

William Edwards visited the Upper Rio Negro a few years before Wallace and Spruce and, when discussing fiber hammocks produced in the region, described at least two distinct types of hammocks – the simple ones, sold at 'reasonable prices', and those sold by Antonio Dias. Edwards attributed to this Portuguese man the application of some of the feather flowers on the hammocks:

Senhor Antonio was a genius in his way, and some of his hammocks were exquisitely ornamented by himself with feather-work. One in particular was composed of cord twisted by hand, scarcely larger than linen thread; and in its manufacture a family of four persons had been employed more than a year. Its borders at the sides were one foot in width, and completely covered with embroidery in the most gaudy feathers [...]. The feathers were attached to the frame of the borders by a resinous gum (Edwards 1847, 140-141).

In Edwards's text, the hyper valorization of Antonio Dias' work in ornamenting the hammocks contrasts with the minimal concern in providing more details about the "four persons" who would take more than a year to make one. The work of Dias as a merchant demanded long travel periods, but the manufacturing of these hammocks required, on the other hand, great dedication and much time. It is likely that the emphasis given to the figure of Dias, to the point of erasing the importance of the women's work in the descriptions, is yet another reflection of the system of labor exploitation and repression of indigenous people in the Upper Rio Negro in the nineteenth century. As Meira (1993) points out, a significant portion of the indigenous population was subjected to forced or compulsory labor under the control of the religious missions, the military and the merchants of the *regatões* – the last was possibly the occupation of Antonio Dias.

In the reports of naturalists, the appreciation for the manufacture of decorated hammocks also opens the way, through the identification of plants and birds used as raw material, to descriptions and comparisons between plant and animal species observed

during the research expeditions. Wallace, for example, demonstrates interest in the aesthetic value of the artifact, but also lists fibers, dyes, latex used to glue the ornaments, and species of birds whose feathers are used to make the flowers that adorn their trims.

Spruce, when discussing different plants commonly called throughout the Amazon by the same native name (*cow-tree*), casually describes a feather-decorated hammock he bought for the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, the feathers of which would have been glued with the latex extracted from a type of ‘cow-tree’ found on the Upper Rio Negro:

A hammock which I purchased there for the Museum of the Royal Gardens at Kew has the borders ornamented with beautiful devices in bird’s feathers, all stuck on with the milk of the *Maceranduba* (Spruce 1908, 51).

The hammock purchased by Spruce, most likely sold to him by Antonio Dias, remained in the collections of the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, until the 1960s, when it was transferred to the British Museum (registration number Am1960,10.92) (Figure 1). Unlike this short note in his travel report, in the list of items collected during his trip Spruce gives a detailed description of the hammock:

167. Ornamented hammock (called Maqueira in Brazil, Chinchorro in Venezuela)

Made at Tomo on the Guainia (Upper Rio Negro).

The body of the hammock is made from the fronds of *Astrocaryum vulgare* (called Tucúm in Brazil, Cumári in Venezuela). The borders are an open network made from the fronds of *Mauritia vinifera* (called Murití in Brazil, Moriche in Venezuela); the white feathers with which they are ornamented are those of the Royal Heron, the blue is of the Curassaw, and the rest are of parrots, macaws, hummingbirds, etc. The cords are of Tucúm.²

The hammock collected by Spruce was analyzed in the British Museum’s storage facilities on a privileged occasion, during the workshop *Digital Repatriation of Biocultural Collections*,³ with the presence of four indigenous researchers from the Upper Rio Negro.

The direct analysis of the object allowed the identification of manufacturing characteristics. For the fabric, the weaving technique of compact twinned weft (Ribeiro 1988, 99) was used with fine strings of tucum (*Astrocaryum vulgare* Mart.) dyed in diverse colors, forming contrasting bands. The trim is made from a special type of fiber from the miriti palm (*Mauritia flexuosa* L.), called ‘miriti silk’, whose extraction technique is generally only dominated by the most experienced.⁴ The square weaving is of

2 Transcribed by the second author from the original document at the Library and Archives at Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, identifier KMDC1560. “List from [Richard Spruce] to the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew; from [Venezuela]; c.1853; three-page item comprising three images; folio 370”.

3 Under the coordination of Dr. Luciana Martins, Dr. Mark Nesbitt and Dr. William Milliken (www.kew.org/science/our-science/projects/digital-amazon).

4 Personal communication, Igor Rodrigues, 2020.

the *varanda* type (see further below), with twinned warps and wefts spaced vertically and horizontally (Ribeiro 1985, 54-55; 1988, 104).⁵

In the flower-shaped feather ornaments applied over the trim, it is possible to verify transformation techniques of the plumes and feathers (Schoepf 1985), whose edges, in some cases, are cut in order to reinforce the desired acute angle for the petals. The flowers are assembled separately and glued one-by-one using latex to the fibers of the trim, presenting a great variety of sizes, textures and color combinations. Black feathers cut horizontally are previously tied together, forming a long sequence of feathers called *feira* that is then sewn on the border of the trim. This black *feira* is overlapped by a white *feira* of plumes glued on the fibers, finishing the edge of the trim by composing a contrasting chromatic set (Vicente 2018, 33). Black and white festoons feathered by the rosette technique (Ribeiro 1986) form tortuous paths that connect the flowers, creating a spring-like aesthetic that resembles interwoven vines.



Figure 1. Hammock collected by Richard Spruce housed in The British Museum. a) general view of the conservation state; b) label with the original number of field collection (167) and Spruce's name; c) detail of trim; d) detail of fabric formed by distinct colored bands; e) detail of the different feather flowers and the black and white feather strips that finish the edge of the trim (The British Museum collection, registration no. Am1960,10.92, photos: Caroline Fernandes Caromano).

5 Due to movement limitations for the hammocks presented in this paper, many of which are very fragile, it was not possible to carry out systematic measurements.

Mrs. Umusipo Oscarina Caldas Azevedo, an indigenous Desana woman, attentively observed the raw material and the wefts of the hammock's fabric and confirmed Spruce's identification of the tucum fiber. When questioned about the trim, she said that the type of weave was called *varanda* and was taught by the nuns at the religious boarding school where she spent her youth in the Upper Rio Negro; as for the flowers, she said that this type of decoration was not made on her hammocks.

Salesian boarding schools, like the one mentioned by Mrs. Umusipo, were established in the Upper Rio Negro in the early twentieth century, lasting until the end of the 1980s (Cabalzar and Ricardo 1998). Indigenous children were taken to boarding schools at a young age and remained there until their adolescence, away from their families, in order to be educated in a strict religious system. In addition to formal and religious education, girls learned crafts such as sewing and weaving with tucum fibers as part of their training as workforce (Weigel and Ramos 1993).

In the nineteenth century, although boarding schools had not yet been established in the region, the actions of missionaries already mediated the subordination of indigenous peoples into a logic of production for the market (Weigel and Ramos 1993). The production of hammocks and the introduction of trims to traditional indigenous hammocks, therefore, were part of this system of multiple contacts (and oppressions) between the indigenous populations, merchants, and religious missions. As a result, indigenous people manufactured artifacts that articulated indigenous and non-indigenous techniques and aesthetics, and which circulated widely throughout the country and abroad.

The Empire hanging from trims: Brazilian feather hammocks at the Pitt Rivers Museum

The contribution of indigenous objects to constructing European gazes towards the Brazilian territory and its native peoples can be found already in the first reports and images created at the beginning of colonization. Over the centuries, the interest in things produced by native peoples resulted in these objects making long transatlantic crossings. While indigenous peoples were expelled from their territory, decimated, and enslaved through Portuguese, French, and Dutch colonization, their material culture was carried to Europe in order to fill cabinets of curiosities and to be gifted and displayed as objects of prestige, adorning members of the European elite at court parties and immortalizing them in portraits (Françoço 2014; 2016).

With the consolidation of Portuguese colonization and later the arrival of the Royal Family in Brazil (1808), the image of indigenous people, for centuries treated with violence by the colonizers, was transformed into a symbol of the Monarchy (Schwarz 1998, 14), reinforcing in the imaginary about Brazil the imprinting of romantic portraits of exotic bodies and nature. Paintings and sculptures were commissioned depicting exuberant nature and romanticized natives, while feathers and plumes from the land were absorbed into Western mantles and symbols of power.

The coronation ceremony of D. Pedro II, in 1841, provides an example of how the image of this association between monarchical power and the indigenous roots of the land was constructed, as described by Lilia Schwarcz (1998, 87-88):⁶

[...] the poor frightened boy, in his fifteen years, barely hid his fear under the bulky and clumsy clothes, the heavy crown specially sculpted for that occasion, the long scepter that contained in its point a *serpe*, the symbol of the Bragança, the green mantle, with the branches of cocoa and tobacco, which dragged on the floor, due to the short stature of the new emperor, the pallium made of feathers of the cock-of-the-rock and idealized in his father's time as a tribute to the birds and chiefs of the land. It was said, at the time, that the pallium made of the cock-of-the-rock was ordered by a merchant to a group of Tiriyo Indians as a gift to the emperor. The piece became, then, fundamental in the garments of the Brazilian emperors, being replaced, in the 60s, by another one, made of feathers from the toucan's gullet. In this case, not only was the color more alive, but its manufacture was more artificial. In either way it was the monarchy that, symbolically, 'tropicalized itself'.

On one side, a monarch with no indigenous people around him adorned himself with feathers that symbolized the natives who had long ago been expelled from the eyes of those who lived at the court; very distant from there, in the Upper Rio Negro, indigenous hammocks were also adorned with feathers, referring to an Empire seldom seen in the region for its elegant court ceremonies, but that made itself present through the violent incursions in search of indigenous slaves and by the presence of military and merchants who circulated along the still-diffuse borders in the extreme north of the country.

The coats of arms of Brazil and Portugal were joined to the feather flowers in the ornaments applied to the trims of the most elaborate hammocks, as noted by Wallace and by Edwards:

In the best he puts in the centre the arms of Portugal or Brazil beautifully executed; and the whole, on a ground of the snowy white heron's feathers, has a very pleasing effect (Wallace 1853, 239).

Upon one side were the arms of Brazil, upon the other those of Portugal, and the remaining space was occupied by flowers and devices ingenious as ever seen in needlework (Edwards 1847, 140-141).

Two of these hammocks are housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum. They were part of the private collection of Stephen William Silver, a very wealthy London merchant and active member of the British Royal Colonial Institute. In 1906, after the death of S. W. Silver, his widow Sarah Constance Silver donated the two hammocks to the University of Oxford.

The first hammock studied (PRM number 1906.20.199) has a compact twinned weft (Ribeiro 1988). Palm fibers, natural and dyed in shades of brown, grayish green and black, form bands of different thickness and, in some cases, checkered bands (Figure 2).

6 Translated by the authors.



Figure 2. Hammock donated by S. W. Silver family. a) general view of the conservation state; b) feather coat of arms of the Brazilian Empire; c) feather coat of arms of the Brazilian Empire, without the crown; d) printed paper on the backside of a feather flower; e) detail of hand writing on paper on the backside of a feather flower; f) detail of the trim edge, with glued *feiras* and unfinished knots, and the weft patterns of the fabric (Pitt Rivers Museum Collection, object registration no. 1906.20.199, photos: Leandro Matthews Cascon).

The trims have a square weave of the *varanda* type; the fiber is of lower quality than that of the hammock housed at the British Museum. The trims are cut in the form of 5 semicircles on each side, with the central semicircle being approximately 30 cm wide and those at the ends approximately 15 cm wide. The little-elaborated finishing of the edges of the trims, with non-standardized knots and with apparent ends, suggests that larger pieces were woven and, later, cut into the desired shape.

There are two pre-assembled *feiras* with long sequences of orange and yellow plumes interspersed and glued directly to the trim, one on the limit with the fabric, and the other giving a finish to the border. In the central semicircle, a *feira* of blue and red feathers overlaps the yellow and red *feira* of the border and, in the other semicircles, the overlap is made by a *feira* of black and white plumes and feathers.

The feather flowers have become very deteriorated, which makes the identification of cuts not possible. These flowers are assembled on pieces of used paper, many of them printed or with handwriting. For one of the flowers it was possible to see a Portuguese text on the printed paper. It was not possible to read what was written by hand.

In the central semicircle of the trims we could identify two identical coats of arms, one on each side of the net. Although they have lost almost all feathers, it is still possible to distinguish the Cross of the Order of Christ in the center of both coats of arms. In good conservation condition is a red crown characteristic of the coat of arms of Imperial Brazil, created after independence in 1822. As in the aforementioned mantle of the coronation ceremony of D. Pedro II, it is also possible to see two branches that border the coat of arms. The level of detail is so high that one can see small red feathers on the branch to the left, a reference to the fruited coffee branch.⁷

The second hammock (PRM number 1906.20.200) has a compact twinned weft (Ribeiro 1988) and natural undyed fibers. The characteristics of the trims are very similar to those of hammock 1906.20.199, with the exception that in the second specimen fewer feather flowers remained glued to the trim and that, in some flowers, it is possible to identify the use of macaw feathers (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Hammock donated by S.W. Silver family. a) general view of the conservation state; b) detail of the label with the country of origin and collector's name; c) feather coat of arms of the Brazilian Empire with 19 complete stars and a break at the space where originally would have been a twentieth star; d) paper backside of a feather flower tied to the trim with string; e) first official use of the coat of arms of the Brazilian Empire with 20 stars in the Collection of Imperial Laws (Brazil 1875). (Pitt Rivers Museum Collection, object registration no. 1906.20.200, photos: Leandro Matthews Cascon).

7 For a description of the characteristics of the imperial coat of arms, see: Schwarcz (1998, 230-231).

On one of the trims a coat of arms was preserved. The state of conservation of the inner feathers that make up the coat of arms allowed us to count the probable number of stars over the blue shore. There are 19 complete stars and, at the top, a break that separated the crown from the rest of the coat of arms, and most likely also damaged a twentieth star. Although the star is no longer there, we consider its existence since, due to the distribution of the visible 19 stars, over the cross there should be a centralized star. This data is important, since the presence of 20 stars on the coat of arms allows us to refine the relative chronology of the piece and to infer that the hammock was produced between 1870 and 1889. In this period – the end of the Second Reign – a star was added to the original 19 of the imperial coat of arms, in order to adapt the number of stars to the new configuration of the country’s territorial division.⁸

It is interesting to note how these objects which carried symbols of the Brazilian empire may have come into the possession of an enthusiast of imperial ideology, such as S. W. Silver. His businesses encompassed a wide range of activities, all interconnected to the colonial network, from rubber exploitation in India to the publication of guide books for emigrating to the British colonies (E.A.P. 1905). In his travels around the world, Silver also occupied himself in assembling an extensive nature and art collection (Coote 2019, 236), and participated in world’s fairs (Buller 1888, 2).

The nineteenth-century world’s fairs and exhibitions were important showcases of countries’ cultures and industries. Exhibitors selected which machinery, agricultural resources and cultural objects would best represent them in pavilions, whose expography was also part of the image to be transmitted to visitors. Paris’ *Exposition Universelle*, held in 1889, was the last display of Imperial Brazil, which would become a republic in the same year (Barbuy 1996).

In the foyer of the Brazilian pavilion, the flag with the Imperial coat of arms was displayed and, just above it and along the second floor, a series of hammocks, not necessarily with feathers, but which carried in them the long history of appropriation of the image of the hammock for purposes of national representation (Figure 4).

In addition to attracting the interest of collectors and travellers, feathered hammocks were also objects of prestige offered to important political figures. The military officer Marechal Cândido Rondon offered the King of Belgium, during his visit to Brazil in 1920, a feather-decorated hammock, in his words “made by the Indians”, as a form of expressing his gratitude after he was decorated with the commendation of the Order of the King (Viveiros 1969).

8 The first use of the Imperial coat of arms with twenty stars in the Collection of Imperial Laws was published in the cover of the 1875 edition (Brazil, 1875). In any case, we cannot discard the possibility that the hammock was produced after 1889 by someone nostalgic for the Empire after the proclamation of the Republic.

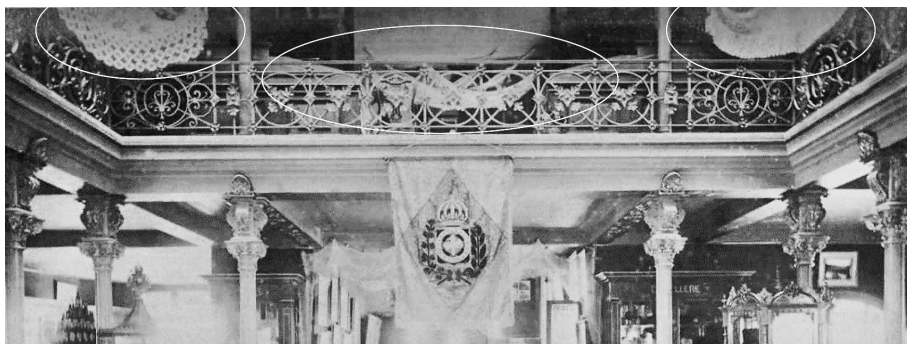


Figure 4. Detail from the interior of the Brazilian Pavilion at the Universal Exhibition of Paris, 1889 (extracted from “Exposição Universal de Pariz: exposição brasileira”. Unknown author. Source: Brasileira Fotografica, The National Archives of Brazil).

Rondon also gifted a decorated hammock to Benjamin Constant, which can be found today under the registration number REG.0583 at the Casa Benjamin Constant Museum, Rio de Janeiro. The decoration of this hammock is very similar to those found at the Pitt Rivers Museum, with the exception, of course, that the one in the Brazilian museum does not have an Imperial coat of arms (which would have been in extremely bad taste on an object given to a founding Republican).

Feather-decorated hammocks were, therefore, collector’s items and famous luxury souvenirs that remained in fashion for at least 100 years, serving as a canvas for the diffusion of symbols from the Monarchy and even reaching the transition to the Republic.

Rondon’s statement on the feather hammock gifted to the King of Belgium also shows how perceptions about the authenticity and authorship of these hammocks change. If in certain mid-nineteenth-century travel descriptions feather hammocks are associated with Western individuals who would have ‘planned’ their decoration, in the words of Rondon these hammocks are associated with indigenous peoples. As a trans-cultural art form, these objects possess an authenticity and authorship which change according to the point of view – and the projected gaze.

Seeing lost stories in skipping lines: the hammock at the Museum der Kulturen (Basel)

The demand for feather hammocks, whether as objects of prestige, decorative items, or desired museum artifacts, helped complexify the paths they took. After being manufactured by indigenous artisans, hammocks could be sold or exchanged for goods of non-indigenous people with merchants of the *regatões*, or by indigenous people who had direct access to product distribution markets in the Amazonian cities.

There are price descriptions for feather-decorated hammocks in various reports by naturalists, travellers and military personnel from the nineteenth century. The prices varied according to the year of purchase, but also according to the location. In the city of Barra, now Manaus, prices of 30 dollars were recorded for feathered hammocks exported (Herndon and Gibbon 1854, 270). Trims were also sold separately from hammocks, as reported by Wallace (1853, 269) on his payment of 3 pounds in silver dollars for the purchase of decorated trims. In local and regional markets, resellers purchased hammocks that would travel to the southeast to the consumer market of the capital.

As pointed out by Edwards (1847, 141), “such hammocks are rather for ornament than use, and they are sought with avidity at Rio de Janeiro by the curiosity-collectors of foreign courts”. In Rio de Janeiro, the feather-items market included other product types that were a success. There was an industry for the production of fans and feather flowers, which were sold as personal ornaments in the city market and exported to Europe (Schindler 2001; Volpi 2019). Some travel accounts associate the production of these feather ornaments with convents, the most famous of them in Salvador, Bahia (Bayern 1897, 477), and also in Rio de Janeiro.⁹ A distinct non-indigenous process of artifact production used feathers and plumes from native and non-native birds, from chicken feathers to swan plumes and, together with the feathered hammocks from the Amazon and the feather garlands from Bahia, created the fame of Brazil as a producer of luxury curiosities made with feathers, be they fashion ornaments or hammocks.

The arrival of decorated hammocks in large trade centers facilitated their circulation for buyers from distant areas. At each intermediate stage between the origin and destination of the hammocks, information about their production and provenance could be lost and inaccurate histories could become embedded in the biographies of these objects. Some of those in private collections were eventually donated to museums, and constitute that class of artifacts with almost completely blank descriptive sheets that cause curators and researchers so much frustration.

That is the case of the hammock analyzed at the Museum der Kulturen, Basel (IVC 67), which does not have associated data about its area of origin, or the people who produced it. In this case, an analysis centered on the characteristics of the object can provide an unprecedented set of data for reconstructing parts of the object’s biography.

For manufacturing the fabric, a linkage with a row-skipping technique was used (Gruber 2000; Ribeiro 1988) with fine strings of natural palm fibers, as well as dyed in yellow, grayish green, brown and black, forming contrasting bands. The characteristics of the fabric caught our attention, since this technique is described by Ribeiro (1988) as common to the Ticuna in the Upper Rio Solimões (Figure 5).

9 Freyre (1922) mentions Afro-Brazilians working on feather-flower production outside of the Amazon.



Figure 5. Hammock with feather ornaments housed in the Museum der Kulturen, Basel. a) general view of the object; b) detail of fabric's linkage with row skipping; c) detail of plane flowers' distribution in lozenge-form decorative fields (Museum der Kulturen Basel collection, registration no. Ivc 67, photo: Leandro Matthews Cascon).

The trims have a square weave of the *varanda* type. There are two pre-assembled *feiras* of red and yellow feathers tied at the base by a cord (Ribeiro 1988), sewn directly onto the trim; one on the limit with the cloth, and another giving the border a finish.

The distribution of the ornaments glued to the *trim* is delimited by lozenges formed by the crossing of ribbons with glued red, yellow or blue feathers, and the empty spaces of the lozenges are filled with flat flowers.

In the flower-shaped feather ornaments it is possible to verify transformation techniques (Schoepf 1985): the feathers that make up the base of the flowers have horizontal cuts so as to not exceed the limit of the paper circle where they are applied. Overlapping them is a smaller circle of contrasting colored feathers and also serrated-cut feathers that form crosses over some of the flowers. The set of flowers has a flat appearance, more two-dimensional than those seen in the hammocks previously described, in which some flowers present longer petals which exceed the base limit or that are glued in such a way as to give texture and three-dimensionality to the ornament.

Given the possible association of this hammock with the Ticuna due to the technique used in the fabric, we searched for information about the artifacts collected during the famous 1817-1820 expedition carried out by Spix and Martius (1824) in the regions of the Negro and Solimões Rivers and that were later added to the collections of the

Bavarian State Museum of Ethnology. Hammocks were collected during visits to several indigenous groups, including a feather-decorated hammock made by the Ticuna people.

During World War II, some of the items that had not yet been evacuated from Munich, including the hammocks, disappeared under the building's rubble (Hartmann 1981). Although it is no longer possible to observe the hammock with feathers collected by Spix and Martius, the association between the reports of the trip and the objects' description registration, recorded in the catalog published by Otto Zerries, reveals characteristics similar to the hammock in the Basel collection, and, more importantly, unravels another possible region for the production of this type of artifact. Spix's encounter with the Ticuna took place in the region of Tabatinga, on the Solimões River and the border between Brazil, Peru and Colombia (Spix and Martius 1824). According to the description, the hammock was a magnificent specimen decorated with feathers: the fabric had longitudinal colored stripes in yellow, violet, and green; the trim was adorned with feathered stripes and feather tassels on the border, and feather flowers (Zerries 1980, 259).

The identification of the fabric manufacturing technique, combined with the data provided by Spix and Martius, are important clues for a possible Ticuna origin for the Basel hammock. A more attentive look at the object, specifically the composition of the decorative elements and their arrangement, further reinforces this association. The circular flowers with serrated crosses, applied to the trim of the hammock, may be understood as *matü* (word that designates any ornament applied to a surface) and are very similar to the graphic representations applied on other supports, such as masks (*mawü*) and shields (*jiatchine*) – which are also masks (Gruber 2000, 257) (Figure 6). In addition, the long sequence of lozenges (*paiwecü*) inserted between two lines (which, in the case of the trim, are the *fieiras* of red and yellow feathers) is another geometric motif widely used and that adorns baskets, pots and various objects for ritual use (Gruber 2000, 252) (Figure 5).

The indigenous peoples of Solimões River experienced situations similar to those of the Negro River, dealing with alternating systems of control of the region by missionaries, government, and merchants. At the time of Spix and Martius' visit to the Solimões, part of the Ticuna already lived in the vicinities of the villages in the Solimões River channel (Oliveira Filho 2012, 23). In addition to the exploitation of indigenous groups for extracting forest products and the displacement to distant areas in order to serve as workforce, there was a commercial interest in products of these peoples, such as the *curare* made by the Ticuna (Zárate Botía 1998). Apparently, the Ticuna also attended to the demand for decorated hammocks for resale in the markets of present-day Manaus, Belém, and even Rio de Janeiro.

By understanding feather-decorated hammocks as a class of artifacts inserted into the market system, we can draw a parallel with the production of the Tururi, a type of panel painted on tree bark and which started being produced as souvenirs in the 1970s. Despite their commercial purpose for non-indigenous people, the Tururi have



Figure 6. Comparison between decorative graphic elements present on Ticuna masks and mask-shields, with decorative elements applied to hammock trim. a) Serrated motifs present on *mawü* masks; b) *Jiatchines* with geometric cross motifs; c) details of decorative elements with serrated feathers; d) details of feathers arranged in a cross shape (a) and b) modified from Gruber 2000, p. 257; c) and d) Museum der Kulturen Basel collection, registration no. Ivc 67, photos: Leandro Matthews Cascon).

significance for the Ticuna, serving for experimentations and aesthetic improvements that can later be applied to artifacts of traditional use (Gruber 2000, 255-256). Feather hammocks intended for sale would, therefore, be perhaps one of the first supports of this type for experimentations with the application of a set of graphic elements and colors that could later be inserted into artifacts not for outsiders, but for the Ticuna themselves.

About hammocks and networks: the hammock of the Tropenmuseum

Long before the arrival of Europeans in the New World, a series of regional networks between indigenous groups already existed. The arrival of Europeans in the Guyanas took place between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but their products circulated long before, through an extensive network that interconnected indigenous groups in the long strip of land that today encompasses the limits of Venezuela, Guyana, Suriname, French Guyana and the area to the north of the Amazon River in Brazil (Barbosa 2005).

In order to understand ethnographic materials from the region now housed in museum collections, it is necessary to consider the contacts and frontiers established in

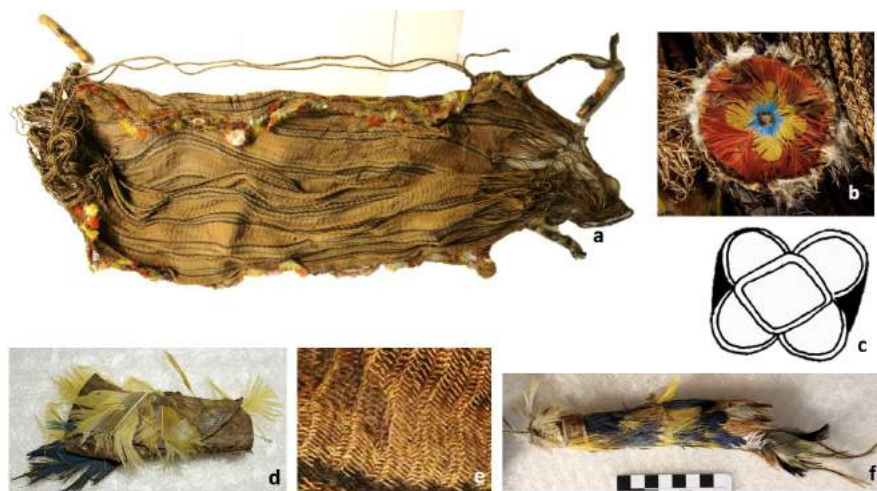


Figure 7. Hammock with feather ornaments housed in the Tropenmuseum, Amsterdam. a) general view of the object; b) detail of feather ornament with curvilinear flower pattern; c) curvilinear flower pattern found on nineteenth-century apron from Guyana, extract from Cheetham 1987, 66; d) backside of a detached ornament glued to possible bast, leaf or another fibrous material; e) detail of fabric pattern; f) detail of tassel (National Museum of World Cultures (Netherlands), registration no.TM-A-6179, photos: Leandro Matthews Cascon).

this network of sociability, and how they implied the exchange of goods between groups and the circulation of techniques, graphics and drawings acquired¹⁰ and shared.

In the hammock analyzed at the Tropenmuseum (TM-A-6179), the fabric appears to have been made using the same technique described by Roth (1929, 67-69), with strings of plant fiber (perhaps *miriti*) in its natural color and dyed brown, grayish green and black, forming thick bands alternated with sets of thin lines of two or three colors (Figure 7).

The trims are of the *varanda* type. The state of preservation of the hammock did not allow the trims to be opened and completely analyzed; however, it was possible to identify at least one *fieira* with feathers tied at their base by a cord, in short sequences of red and yellow interspersed plumes, giving a finishing to the border of the trim.

The few feather flowers that can be observed have become very deteriorated, which makes it not possible to describe the majority of them. In one of the flowers it is possible to identify the remains of white plumes and blue feathers on the edges, which indicates

10 To better understand how forms of sociability are materialized in the Guyanas – through festivities, kinship, shamanism and wars – see Barbosa (2005). About the ‘acquisition’ or predation of drawings from other groups, see Grupioni (2009).

that the ‘petals’ exceeded the limit of the paper circle on which they were glued. In the central part of the same flower the following sequence occurs: red feathers with horizontal cuts forming a circle overlapped by 4 yellow feathers with rounded cut edges and arranged so as to form another flower, overlapped by a small circle of blue, black and white feathers that delimit the center of the flower. There is a flower detached from the hammock whose base seems to be a tree bast or another fibrous material. Three tassels of miriti fibers, approximately 17 cm long and 3 cm in diameter and covered by blue, yellow, red and black feathers, are tied to the ends of the hammock. There was likely a fourth tassel on the remaining end.

Little information is available for this hammock. The digital database of the NMWC states that it was donated in 1921 by the *Natura Artis Magistra*, the largest zoo in the Netherlands which, like many similar institutions of the time, also displayed ethnographic objects in a way which reflected nineteenth-century natural history conventions and practices (Mehos 2008, 177). Although we do not know if this particular hammock was displayed at Artis, according to the Tropenmuseum database it was presented in 1940 to visitors of the Kolonial Instituut museum in a showcase of objects from Surinamese indigenous peoples.

Cornelius van Coll, a missionary who arrived in Surinam in 1871 and lived there for fifty years, described the production of hammocks by indigenous peoples and Maroon communities, but not with the use of feathers (Coll 1903). The anthropologist and colonial administrator Walter Roth, in his detailed studies of the material culture of indigenous peoples in the Guyana, describes feather-decorated hammocks on two occasions. In 1924, he mentions that hammocks can occasionally be decorated with feathers and presents a picture of a cotton hammock with feather decorations with a caption stating that it was made along the “Brazilian-British Guiana border” (Roth 1924, 395, plate 129c). In a complementary work published five years later, he mentions a decorated fiber hammock at the same museum and that “little more is known than that it came ‘from the Brazils’ some 30 years ago” (Roth 1929, 6).

Roth seems to question the attributed Guyana origin of the fiber hammock, stating that “the fringe to which the feathers are attached is of a type that I have not hitherto met among the Guiana Indians” (Roth 1929, 6). Another commentary on the same page deserves our attention, when he says that “doubts may, however, be thrown on its alleged purely Indian origin because on more careful examination it will be found that while some of the prepared feathers have been attached direct to the material by means of some cementing substance, there are others that have been attached indirectly through the intermediary of a sheet of printed matter”.

Interestingly, Roth questions the authenticity of this hammock based on the type of trim and the feather ornaments pre-mounted on printed paper. In our analyses, trims were the most complicated elements since, during our survey of techniques for manufacturing

Brazilian indigenous weaving, we did not find descriptions of weft with the same exact characteristics. The best information we obtained was the account of Mrs. Umusipo about this technique having been taught by nuns at a boarding school in Upper Rio Negro, as mentioned before. Regarding the presence of printed papers, these were also observed in our research. We strongly believe that this should not be interpreted as an ‘impurity’ or something that invalidates an indigenous origin, as we will discuss further below.

A similar manufacturing technique is used by Warao groups in the Orinoco delta region, and also by groups from the Guianas region, such as the Tiriyó on the border between Brazil and Suriname, and the Waiwai on the border between Brazil and French Guiana (with an emphasis here on the detailed sequence of drawings and descriptions of the technique employed by the Waiwai, presented by Roth in 1929).

The distinctive four-petal flower described earlier is another element that may indicate an association with materials produced by indigenous peoples in the Guianas. Researching South American glass-bead aprons, Linda Cheetham identified an artifact housed at the Pitt Rivers Museum (b. 1886.1.962), and collected in the Guyana in the nineteenth century, with a ‘curvilinear flower pattern’ (Cheetham 1987, 66) very similar to the four-petal flower present on the hammock analyzed at the Tropenmuseum (Figure 7c).

Another eye-catching and unique element of the Tropenmuseum hammock are the feather-covered miriti tassels that, due to their cylindrical form and the presence of longer and thinner feathers that exceed the piece, create the visual aspect of a bird’s body with long tail feathers, resembling ornaments made with bird carcasses. Jens Yde (1965, 129, 151) describes, among the Waiwai, “skins, i.e. breasts with wings, of the three species [of toucans] are presenting the big tassels hanging from the end of the men’s gala hair tubes and have also been observed as decorations along the edges of hammocks”.

The contact networks between collectors and Dutch museums were quite possibly concentrated in the region of their own colony. Likewise, in this hammock there is an association of the manufacturing technique, the graphic element of the decoration, and the presence of bird tassels on artifacts manufactured by peoples of the region. These are strong indicators that this hammock was produced by indigenous peoples in the Guianas.

Final considerations

As explored in this non-exhaustive study, feather-decorated hammocks can present diverse characteristics and their area of production goes far beyond the Upper Rio Negro, with zones of production in the Upper Solimões, the Guianas, and possibly other Amazonian regions. Therefore, the widespread idea that feather hammocks are made by peoples of the Rio Negro (O’Neale 1963, 129) has been shown to be limiting and inadequate.

As transcultural artifacts, they are a point of encounter between indigenous technologies and a new colonial world. The very introduction of feathers as a decorative element transforms the indigenous hammocks into new objects, since the large featherwork

surfaces result in a loss of much of their traditional function as a reliable place for sitting and lying down, reconfiguring them into a decorative object. However, although they could not have existed without combining native and exogenous elements, we argue that they are indigenous. The fact that they were made according to a logic of production for sale, incorporating elements of the 'whites' (e.g.: printed papers used to structure the pre-assembled flowers, or trims with their weaves that seem influenced by religious missions) was not an impediment for indigenous artisans to introduce elements from their own cultural repertoires.

While the fabrics of the hammocks seem to be fundamentally indigenous, with patterns produced by weaving techniques characteristic of each manufacturing group, the decorations applied on the trims and their arrangement were spaces of dispute and dialogue.

On one hand, there was the imposition of colonialist messages with imperial shields or an idealized Nature, with colorful depictions of Europeanized flowers that seem out of place in a tropical rainforest marked by its many variations of green. On the other hand, there was the introduction of ethnic markers, where flowers were transformed into mask-shields, decorations were distributed in literal or imagined fields, and color palettes were applied by indigenous artisans who created spaces to experiment (Gruber 2000) as well as to express individual agency and collective identities. These examples show that the functionality of the trim as imagined by non-indigenous people, as a simple space for the display of beauty, exoticism and power, was subverted by indigenous artisans.

In addition, the fact that decorations are formed with feathers of selected bird species deserves further research. Only a relatively small percentage of vibrantly colorful species provide the basic material for ornamental featherwork (Robbins 1991, 117), selected according to availability and cultural criteria. Feathers are transformed into ornaments using specific technological processes, which operate as ethnic markers, creating a style for which ancestors were known and are recognized by subsequent generations (Reina 1991).

Indigenous cultural elements compose hammocks, from the selection of fibers and feathers to the use of weaving techniques and decorative motifs. Therefore, the introduction of exuberant decorative elements is a consequence not solely of demand, but also – and more importantly – of indigenous agency over that demand. Modern ethnography demonstrates how indigenous people of the Amazon have adopted strategic forms of acquiring and reconceptualizing Western goods as a form of 'pacifying' non-indigenous people (Howard 2002; Velthem 2002). Feather-decorated hammocks show how indigenous people used their own goods that were destined for the market as another form of *pacification of the whites* – in this case, enveloping their gaze and their bodies with visible and invisible elements that entered the composition of these hammocks.

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