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Caiuby Novaes, Sylvia

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PLAITS, GOURDS AND JAGUAR SKINS IN BORORO FUNERAL TOWARD AN UNDERSTANDING OF THE BORORO NOTION OF PERSON

Sylvia Caiuby Novaes¹

Among the various rituals in Bororo society the funeral is the most important. Its first phase begins with the death, sometimes the agony of a person and it ends with the definitive burial of the ornamented bones in the margins of a river lake. This first phase can last up to three months because it is necessary to wait for the decomposition of the corpse before ornamenting the bones.

The corpse must be buried in a shallow grave in the **bororo** - the central plaza. This grave is watered daily, so that the corpse decomposes faster. During this period many rituals are performed and almost everybody participates: people who belong to the deceased's village, people who came from another village to attend the funeral. Funerals promote a coming together of Bororo society as a whole as it re-unites living and dead (evoked by their relatives), men and heroes (into which the deceased transform themselves).

Itaga is the word used by the Bororo for funeral. It comes from **ito** = body, and **aga** = head of hair; hair of the body. According to the Enciclopédia Bororo (vol. I, p. 647) this comes from the fact that funerals are ceremonies in which souls and spirits are celebrated and they are usually represented as beings with long hair.

In an earlier work (Caiuby Novaes, 1986) in an attempt to achieve a better understanding of the Bororo designation for funeral, I analyzed the social and cultural meaning of the hair and I showed why it is the privileged *sema* to characterize the whole semantic field of the funeral. I showed the way in which it is possible to understand the long funeral route following the threads of hair of the mourners. Here I want to resume this analysis and focus on two other elements that were not analyzed in that work: the **powari-aroe** (mortuary gourd) and the **adugo-biri** (jaguar skin).

Trying to explain how the Bororo build up their notion of person through their funerary rites might at first seem a paradox. Funerals stress a loss, a loss of a physical identity charged with social and cultural meaning. Nevertheless it is exactly in this moment, when society acknowledges this loss, that we can look for the social and cultural mechanisms in action, in order for a new balance to be achieved. It is also a

¹ Departamento de Antropologia, Universidade de São Paulo.

good opportunity to analyze elements that will contribute to the understanding of the Bororo notion of person. Let me first introduce some ethnographic data.

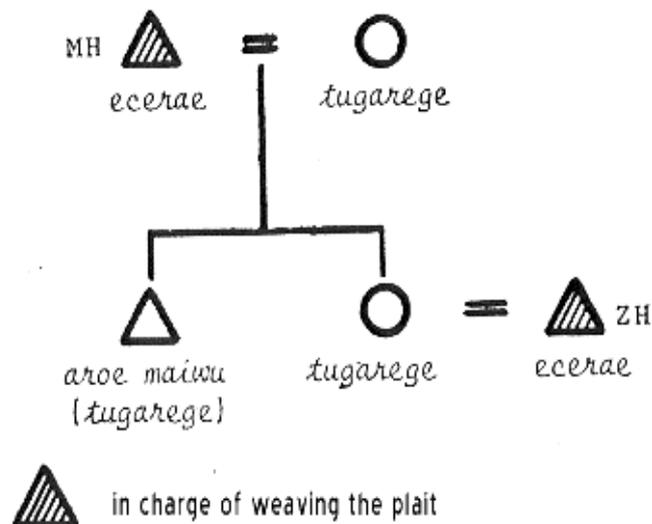
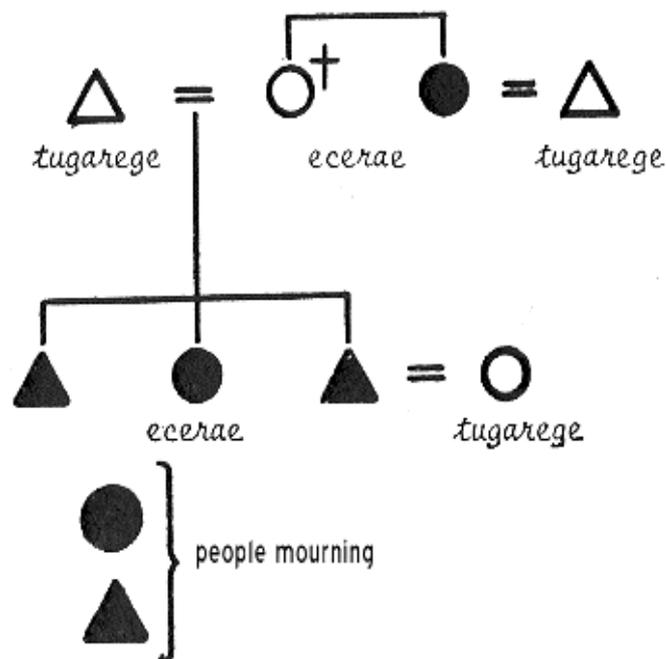
For the Bororo life is taken by the **bope**, a spirit that according to Crocker (1979:256) and Levak (1971:176) is associated with nature. "The **bope** might be seen as representing some principle of vitality that destroys in order to create. Not surprisingly they are identified with human strength or blood which is to say with **rakare**." (Crocker 1979:256). Death, on the other hand, implies the loss of this vital force (**rakare**) because the elements where it is found (blood and semen) stop its flow.

The first sign of death is the desperate crying of the women who were keeping vigil in the house of the deceased. They pull out their head hair with their hands and for a time their baldness will be a sign of mourning. According to my field data the only ones to pull out their head hair were those who had some sort of identity, with the deceased, either people who belonged to the same nuclear family, sharing with the deceased a common vital substance - like blood or semen - or those who belonged to the same lineage, having thus the same social identity.²

Soon after someone's death the clan relatives of the deceased meet to decide who among the prestigious men of the opposite moiety will be the **aroe-maiwu** - literally new soul, who from then on represents the deceased. A couple will be chosen to take care of the deceased's material representation: the mortuary gourd and a **pariko**, the beautiful headdress that will be made in his honor. The **aroe-maiwu** will be treated as a ritual son of this couple.

Once the **aroe-maiwu** is chosen, his **inodowu** (ZH or MH) will weave with the mourner's hair a plait, without mixing different people's hair. Notice that the one who weaves the plait (in fact a hair string) is ideally someone who belongs to the same moiety of the deceased as can be seen in the diagram below.

²For a better understanding of the notion of **rakare** see Crocker 1967, ps. 55 - .



The plait will then be given to the **aroe-maiwu** who will tie it to his arm whenever he leaves the village to hunt the animal for the ritual reciprocity - **mori**. **Mori** is a general term for reciprocity and in this case it refers to the vengeance of the deceased, the main task attributed to the **aroe-maiwu**. According to the Bororo this plait gives the hunter a visible sign of the deceased, besides providing him with strength and courage. The hair, which the Bororo call **ao** is now named **ae**. After death

Boe is transformed into animals and among them those hunted for the ceremonies of reciprocity (**barege morice**). The ritual hunt is thus a central part of a Bororo funeral.

The skin of the animal hunted as **mori** will be given by the **aroe maiwu** to the deceased's relatives; as a retribution he will receive ceremonial bows and arrows, a **powari-mori** (wind musical instrument), names that belong to the patrimony of names of the deceased's clan and the possibility of making ornaments according to patterns that belong to that clan. He might eventually receive a new woman to whom he can marry.

Mori is celebrated in a ritual called **barege-e-kedodu** (the feast of the animals). According to the authors of Enciclopédia Bororo "It is not the hunter that comes covered with red paint to receive bows and arrows and ornaments, but the soul itself that in the souls' kingdom will then have weapons to hunt. The jaguar skin, although given to a relative of the deceased, will provide the soul with shelter against bad weather". (vol. I, p. 229).

The jaguar skin will be given to the oldest man in the deceased's clan, who will then give it to every other men in his clan, so that they can sleep for some nights on it. Only after that will the jaguar skin return to the oldest man who first received it and from then on he will be its owner.

The same happens with the teeth of the hunted jaguar, with which the Bororo make beautiful necklaces. These teeth necklaces are female property and the woman who receives it gives it to her real and classificatory daughters and sisters. More than one animal can be hunted as **mori**. In this case the skin and necklaces will be distributed among men and women.

Why should the men who are mourning sleep over the jaguar skin? My view is that because they share with the deceased an identity of substance, they too have been contaminated by this death. If the death of a relative and the social marginality therein implicit imposes actions over the body of the mourners (scarifications, pulling out the hair, etc..) it is only possible to leave this marginal state through a close relation with the element that permits the reintroduction of the mourners in Bororo society: the **mori**.

It is only after this ritual - the feast of the animals - which sometimes takes place a long time after a person dies, that the mourners can leave their mourning. Their long and messy hair can then be cut in the traditional way and ornamented with red paint.

Lets now introduce some data on the **powari-aroe** , the mortuary gourd, which is a wind musical instrument, kept by the relatives as a material *memento* of the deceased.

This gourd must be made by the ritual father of the deceased who will then ornament it according to patterns that belong to the deceased's clan. Every person who

dies will be remembered by one of these gourds and each of them should produce the sound in a unique rhythm.

In a ritual called **powari-doge-aroe** this instrument must be given by the ritual father to the new soul that now represents the dead person. During this ritual all the dead are remembered through their respective **iadu-mage** (their representatives) It is also during this ceremony that the ritual father teaches the new soul how to blow the instrument. When the ritual is finished the gourd will be given to the ritual father and it will be kept by his wife in her house until the next ceremony.

During the different phases of a funeral all the material belongings of the dead will be destroyed. Soon after a person's death the Bororo burn in a fire near the dead's house the worn out and less valuable objects. The most important objects will be burned after the **aije-doge** ceremony, in a big fire near the men's house in the central plaza. If the deceased is a male adult his bow and arrows will be ritually broken and burned on this occasion.³

Only some very specific objects will be saved from the fire, or in any other way destroyed:

- the **pariko**, feather headdress.⁴

- The gourds that can be of two different types: the **powari-mori** which is a wind musical instrument, received as a prize for the jaguars that the deceased killed in honor of another dead; and the **powari-aroe**, to which we have already referred.

- the **ae**, plait made of mourner's hair.

- the **adugo-biri**, jaguar skin considered the most valuable of all objects.

The feather headdress and the gourds, together with the ornamented bones will be put in a big straw basket that the Bororo call **aroe j'aro**. This basket will be wrapped with the jaguar skin and then tied with the plait. After the funeral this basket will be taken to a bay or buried in a graveyard (as do the Bororo who live in the village under the missionaries influence).

How can we understand the Bororo notion of the person after having in mind the ethnographic data on these funerary objects?

All the elements described - the plait, the gourd, and the jaguar skin are, in different ways, closely associated with the dead. They are not vestige objects that belonged to the dead and were kept, but are all objects made after his death. They are, in a sense, imperishable objects that testify the permanence of a lasting social identity, which unlike the flesh will not disappear with death. These objects provide important information on the many aspects of the Bororo notion of person.

³On this phase of the funeral and the destruction of objects that belonged to the deceased see Caiuby Novaes, 1980: 169-170.

⁴On this ceremonial object see Ferraro Dorta, 1980.

It is my interpretation that each of these objects refers to a specific aspect of the Bororo conception of the person that can be described as in the diagram below:

AE	POWARI-AROE	ADUGO-BIRI
obe	iedaga	bai/eda
human body	social category	"place in the world" (shelter)
transformation	stability	transience

The plait - **ae** - refers to the dead in a metonymic process. It is made with the mourner's hair, those who the Bororo say are like the dead, because they share a common vital substance or belong to the same lineage, having thus the same social identity. That is why the hunter can be reminded of the dead through the plait that he wears tied to his arm. The plaits, made with the **obe's** (relatives') hair can be thought of as the material substratum of the Bororo identity - the physical body of a person.

The Bororo traditional hair cut is the same for men, women and children. It is the most suitable element to identify those who are equal, who belong to the same society and thus share the same Bororo humanity. On the other hand, in spite of the fact that all plaits are equal, regardless of the deceased's clan, the hair from different people can not be mixed in the same plait. In my view, this points to the fact that although all Bororo share the same human identity, this identity can only be conceived when it expresses itself in concrete human beings, specific men and women that are not to be taken one by the other and that do not mix randomly. It would not be too risky to say that the **ae** refers to the physical dimension of the individual, constantly renewed by the long life cycle where the living substitute the dead,

The **powari-aroe** - mortuary gourds - are related to the perennial aspect of social identity, lineages and clans, the important social categories in Bororo society. As in the imperishable bones, which are ornamented in a very specific way, according to the clan's pattern of the deceased, and then put in the mortuary basket, the same will happen to the objects that refer to the perennial aspect of a person.

The **ae** points to an identity between the dead person and his **obe**, who are like him. The **powari-aroe** relates the dead person to a more specific social category - the **iedaga** (Viertler, 1976). The Bororo have a policy of not letting go of their names, one of the most important items in the patrimony of a clan. The mortuary gourds also can not be lost or this would mean the end of Bororo society.

The small mortuary gourd is for the Bororo a kind of metaphor for the dead. Even the process of making and ornamenting it makes explicit the complex mechanisms for engendering Bororo social identity. It reproduces the basic processes

of opposition and complementarity that organize the relationships between individuals of Bororo society: people of different moieties, men and women, the living and the dead. It shows in a very clear way the importance of the **other** to the emergence of the social **I**, being at the same time the expression of the transformation and transcendence of this **I**.

Lets see how this is possible.

All gourds must be made according to ornamenting patterns that belong to the deceased's clan and lineage (**iedaga**). They are made by someone who does not belong to this clan but is married to a woman who is. In the same way it is the man who makes children for his wife's clan.

The **powari-aroe** metaphorically refers to the person, with all his/her idiosyncrasies and peculiarities. Each individual is unique in his/her peculiarities and in the same way each gourd should produce sounds in a very specific rhythm. Like any person, a gourd should be made by a man (the soul's father) and kept by a woman (the soul's mother). And like any other Bororo, the gourd can only be socially seen through the other - the new soul - the dead's representative, that will play it in ritual moments. As in other dialectical societies like the Ge to whom the Bororo are closely related, I can only exist in the other and through this other. It is always a man from a different clan that will make the ornaments of mine, it is he that will perform the heroes of my clan; it is this man that through the complex marriage system permits the physical and social reproduction of my clan. These relationships are very specific and were established in mythical times through mythical heroes.

The jaguar skin, on the other hand is symbolically associated with a third element that builds up Bororo identity and which is the house - **bai** or **eda** (shelter, place where one lives). The literature on the Bororo has already shown the importance of Bororo village, made up with houses around a circle. The house and its exact position in the circle is a basic point of reference for orientation in Bororo society; it is through the house that someone knows his/her position in the world. The spatial position of the houses is relatively fixed and even when the Bororo are not in circular villages (like those who live under the influence of salesian missionaries) they refer to the people they are talking about pointing to the position of their houses in an imaginary circle.

Like the other Ge societies, the Bororo also have a relation of opposition and complementarity between the centre of the village (seen as a more typically male space and related to the juridical domain of society) and the houses (seen as a more typically female , domestic space). Besides the Bororo relate the centre of their village to the **aroe** and the houses to the **bope**.

The **bope** is the entity of major natural transformations, like birth, death and some kinds of illness. From all these transformations death is certainly the one which brings more consequences to Bororo society to the point it has to choose a ritual representative for the dead. It is the **aroe-maiwu**, someone who belongs to the moiety opposite to the deceased's that will in a sense recover the dead through the hunt of a big feline, offering its skin to the clan relatives of the deceased. The more prestige the dead has, the more selective will be the choice of its new soul, who should be a hunter of known abilities.

The relationship between the house and the jaguar skin can be seen in many different ways. First of all, they are both related to the **bope**. **Bope** is the main agent of transformations and it is in the house that they happen. In the house people are born and die and it is there that cooking transforms raw into cooked food.

Both the house and the jaguar skin are elements of spatial circumscription. A man's life cycle is marked by three basic references: his mother's house, his wife's house and the man's house. If a house shelters the living, it is to the body of a big feline that the dead's soul migrates. In a previous work (Caiuby Novaes, 1983) I showed the way a house "speak" of its members reflecting the transformations in the life cycle of the household members.

In the same way the hunter tries to examine the jaguar's viscera to check for any remaining food. This analysis of the entrails will provide the Bororo with nicknames for the deceased, his parents and his ritual representative. (Enciclopédia Bororo, vol. I, p. 3)

From the material objects that testify the presence of a person in the world, the house is the last element to be destroyed, sometimes long after the funeral is over.

What we can see from the elements here analyzed is that the funeral provides Bororo society with the possibility of recovering the dead through the reorganizing of the elements that characterizes the Bororo person. His social identity is taken by the **aroe-maiwu**, the ritual representative chosen among men of the opposite moiety. In physical, material terms, there is also the cultural reconstruction of the body taken by death. The perishable flesh is disdained; the bones ornamented. The skull is ornamented with feathers and red paint in patterns of the deceased's clan and placed in the first level of the basket, which is separated from the next level by a small piece of straw mat. They put all the other bones painted with red in the second level. In the funerary basket the Bororo also put the **pariko** and the mortuary gourds that refer, as we have said, to social identities the deceased took when he was appointed as **aroe-maiwu** of another person.

Bones do not stay together without the flesh and the jaguar skin seems to provide here this necessary boundary, which is then tied with the plait. It is interesting

to notice however that if the bones are those of the deceased, all the other elements in the funerary basket are objects that testify the presence of another person, taken over by the deceased. Bororo society seems thus able to endlessly recreate its members and their *persona* and with them society itself. As a Bororo explained to me one day:

"Boe (the Bororo word for self designation) was born to make things complicated. He is born, we make a hole in his lips if the child is a boy and give him a name. The same happens when he dies. If he is dead everything should be over, but instead it starts all over again, because of the gourds. Boe does not want to end".

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