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Beatriz Labate

University of Heidelberg, blabate@bialabate.net

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***Kidnapped by Thunderbolts – Spiral Translations in Myth,
Anthropology and Theater: An interview with anthropologist
Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino***

BEATRIZ LABATE

University of Heidelberg

blabate@bialabate.net

This year, an indigenous Amazonian myth was adapted for the theater in Brazil by anthropologist Pedro de Niemeyer Cesarino. The play, entitled "Raptada pelo Raio" ('Kidnapped by Thunderbolts') was staged by "Cia Livre" ("Free Co.") under the renowned theater director Cibele Forjaz, opening in São Paulo in and running there throughout 2010, and in other cities such as Porto Alegre, Recife and Belo Horizonte. Cesarino, who holds a doctorate in Anthropology from the National Museum and Federal University in Rio de Janeiro (Museu Nacional/UFRJ), used the Marubo song narrative known as *Kaná Kawã* as the basis for his theatrical adaptation. The Marubo are a Panoan people of the Javari valley on the Brazil-Peru border in the western Amazon, where Cesarino conducted his dissertation fieldwork from 2004-2007. The play is a free transformation, based on the scholarly translation of this narrative included in Cesarino's (2008) doctoral dissertation. *Kaná Kawã* tells the story of a woman whose soul, or "double," is kidnapped by thunderbolt spirits, known in Marubo as *kaná*. Her husband undertakes a voyage through the cosmos to rescue her, battling various spiritual entities with the help of strange otherworldly tribes. The play attempts to bring perceptions of these invisible other worlds to the stage and into the spectacle. During one of the scenes, audience members are invited to lie down in hammocks, blindfolded with masks that allude to the sense-modulating work of Brazilian contemporary artist Lygia Clark. Such effects of sensory alterity – where "not seeing" opens the senses to "other ways of seeing" – are presented as alternatives to the hegemony of vision in Western modes of knowledge. Even commercial aspects of the production were influenced by such experimental and critical aesthetics: admissions were priced on a sliding scale of "pay what you can."

In this interview, Cesarino describes his experiences as an anthropologist-playwright working with a theater company in São Paulo, touching on other topics such as relationships between the living and the dead, tradition and modernity, the limits of finitude and humanity, and the rising global fascination with Amazonian shamanism. He also reflects on the connections and discontinuities between anthropological work and artistic creation, the challenge of translation, and the questions of authorship and authenticity. Finally, he provides his perspective on the synergies and tensions between Amerindian poetics and Western literature, and between anthropology and theater.

1. How did you get the idea for this work?

In 2007, Cibeles Forjaz, the director of Cia Livre, contacted me about researching a project called “Myths of Death and Rebirth in Brazilian Culture,” financed by São Paulo’s City Theater Support Program. Their initial plan was to study the mythic universes of indigenous, Afro-Brazilian and mestizo cultures with a view towards putting together a theatrical production after completing the research. From the very first sessions, the team from Cia Livre realized that the task was gargantuan, so they chose to focus on the indigenous universe. Their interests had much in common with my doctoral dissertation, which I had just finished the same year: a study and translation of Marubo ritual songs, which included a long series of funeral chants. So we began by choosing a large group of narratives from the Marubo and other indigenous groups that I translated and brought in for theatrical elaboration. I did this while at the same time teaching theoretical classes in anthropology, philosophy and mythology to the theater team, with the following goals: 1) problematize the concept of identity and its impregnation throughout the indigenous universes; 2) differentiate these concepts from the idea of “national cultural” and “popular culture,” considering their cosmological particulars; 3) present possible modes of articulation and contrast between Amerindian and Western aesthetics. This work was transformed into the play, “Come-Go, the Path of the Dead,” which met with an excellent reception by critics and the public and won important prizes. In this production, Newton Moreno wrote the script as a free transformation based on the materials I had researched and translated. Early on, we had considered the mythic song narrative, Kaná Kawã, a kind of Amerindian version of Orpheus, which stood out for its singular beauty. We decided to leave this material for a future project, which has now been included in the play of “Kidnapped by Thunderbolts.”

2. What is the original context of this myth?

Kaná Kawã is a Marubo *saiti*, a mythic narrative that is sung by an experienced shaman for his kin. It is both sung and recited, however, so that the Marubo will memorize it, which isn’t always happening today as in the past. The original myth tells how the spirits of the thunderbolt kidnapped a woman’s soul or “double.” The woman’s husband goes on a quest through different levels of the cosmos to rescue his wife’s soul. After battling the “thunderbolt people,” he is able to bring her soul back, but each time they arrive in the human realm her soul returns to the house of the thunderbolts. After three attempted rescues and returns, the woman’s soul begins to come apart: on earth, the husband’s relatives have cremated the woman’s body which interferes directly with the condition of the soul, leading to the unhappy denouement of the tale. The narrative covers various themes. First, it offers a reflection on the cannibalistic funeral rituals formerly practiced by the Marubo, who consumed the ashes of the cremated cadaver and thus influenced the posthumous destiny of the dead. It is also a myth about warfare and the kidnapping of women, common phenomena in pre-contact Marubo society, and the dynamics of retaliation between neighboring peoples or groups, whether they be visible or invisible, which is to say, spirits. It also presents a kind of narrative description about Marubo mythic cartography.

The myth also presents a reflection on the dilemmas of alliance and the relationships among foreign peoples, including the Luso-Brazilian “whites” who appear in a certain moment in the original narrative. All myth is a form of active thought: upon being retold, myths make people reflect on their themes and establish connections among a whole series of other related narratives.

3. How did you first encounter this myth?

My first encounter with this was as follows: one night during my fieldwork on the upper Rio Ituí, the Marubo shaman Armando Cherôpapa told me that the thunderbolt spirits rode cars and buses through wide avenues in their own cities. I found the image intriguing and asked him to tell the story of these spirits. And out came the narrative I describe above. Indeed, the song is thus also reflection about whites. Upon arriving in the house of the thunderbolts, the protagonist, “Shaman of the Kapok Tree,” Pajé Samaúma, invokes a series of bird spirits to aid him in battle. These bird spirits turn out to be the custodians of knowledge about firearms and other strategies of war which, later on, will be passed on to white soldiers and police. Thus the spirits possessed this knowledge before we “whites” did. It is of no avail to press the shamans on whether this detail might be an influence of later contact: the shamans say the spirits always had knowledge of firearms. The myth recapitulates in some form Levi-Strauss's considerations -- which deserve greater attention than they have received -- in “The Story of Linx”: Amerindian thought possessed a prefigured place for whites through which social transformations can be contemplated. This is a like a pebble in the shoe for the rigid contrasts between tradition and modernity we have grown accustomed to: we find here, and in other cases, at the very heart of what we consider to be clearly “traditional,” a living (and old) reflection on foreign technology.

4. What was your role exactly? How was the process of dramaturgy/playwriting?

Based on my initial translation of the song-myth Kaná Kawã, which I entitled “Kidnapped by Thunderbolts,” I carried out a reinvention for the stage in collaboration with Cia Livre. Which is to say, I displaced the original translation into the dramatic register, constructing scenes, dialogues and characters inspired freely by the original narrative. Much of the script was built during rehearsal, which is to say, in response to the demands of acting, staging and set design. We had to create dialogue, connections, character developments and other dramatic elements not present in the original myth. More than anything, we had to build creative connections with the theatrical audience and with the concerns of the actors of Cia Livre. Thus the work of dramaturgy, in this case, was a matter of transposition or creative transfiguration from one register to another. For this reason I felt obliged to develop diverse passages, dialogues, visual references and other dramatic elements not found in the original myth, creating novel names for characters and landscapes encountered by the protagonist. I maintained only the narrative structure and rhythmic cadences of the song's original translation. Some parts of the text were also rendered as song lyrics to harmonize with the musical score composed by Lincoln Antonio.

5. What do you consider the main risks of this type of "translation"?

It's important to distinguish at least two levels of translation: first, in relation to establishing the myth in written form, which begins with a literal transcription of an oral performance, and second, in reference to its transposition into dramaturgy. Each of these stages presents different challenges. The first presents the challenge of "trans-creating" (in the sense of Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos) the characteristics of a verbal Amerindian poetic idiom into a written, literary text. The second responds to a different kind of challenge: to transform this poetic translation of song-myth into a theatrical play. Passages that sound beautiful to the ears of a silent reader don't necessarily work as staged actions. Interesting references within the translation can become incomprehensible or inaccessible to the play of theater, and so on. In this case, the original translation has to pass on to another level, and it is subjected to a process of creative transfiguration, entering into contact with a series of crossed semiotic codes which result in a theatrical spectacle. The result is a product of creative hybridization, a creative encounter of references. All translation is risky – *traduttore traditore* ('translator, traitor') – and yet everything is translation. If we don't take risks, there can be no thought, and all thought is a reconfiguration of references. Anthropological knowledge is a translation of foreign thoughts into analytically determined categories and dilemmas. Literature and artistic creation are always forms of translation and transposition of multiple references for each work.

6. What kind of result were you hoping to achieve when you decided to join this project?

This is not about "achieving results," but rather to raise debates and to circulate a form of knowledge and an aesthetic reference – the Amerindian – that is currently divorced from literate urban culture in Brazil. This is about overcoming the state of colonial infantilism in which cosmopolitan Brazil is still stuck: turned only towards Euro-American references and putting indigenous peoples into different straitjackets such as "identity," "popular culture," "primitive simplicity," or "low culture," among other assumptions that are foreign to the cosmologies and mythologies that are spread throughout the Americas. In sum, it's about putting our classic works on an equal footing (but with the due differences in ontological matrix) with the verbal arts and thought systems of Amerindian peoples, whose complexity has gone either unnoticed or else been silenced over the past 500 years. The partnership with a theater company, along with the work of anthropological research, raises the following question: how do we deal with Amerindian cultures beyond what our modernisms suggest? What forms of creative dialogue can we establish with the immense diversity of meaning present today in Brazil? There are diverse ways of circulating and producing such issues in need of further exploration, in an attempt to bring forth these other ways of producing knowledge and meaning that surround us.

7. Did you consult with your Marubo informants about this theatrical undertaking? What about the issue of copyright?

I don't have informants; only interlocutors. The Marubo with whom I work don't know theater, but they know of its importance in circulating portions of their knowledge in the white world. From the beginning, I conducted all of my research through agreements wrought with them, with the aim of publishing materials for the villages and for the non-indigenous world. I think that this can be a way to make the non-indigenous world (especially in Brazil) understand that groups such as the Marubo are not "imbeciles," which is to say that they have a rich base of knowledge with which to establish creative and intellectual relations. And this needs to be done through our institutions (theater, cinema, books, academic debates). All of the process of authorization for circulating knowledge is duly registered and documented.

The work with Cia Livre, however, is a transformation of the original material. This is a current procedure in the most diverse artistic creations: the reconfiguration of references in order to compose a work. At this point, I become the author of the dramatic text, which emerges from a certain reference: in this case, a mythic narrative structure that is not restricted to the Marubo, but which can be found among other indigenous peoples as well in Shintoism, or in Greek and Egyptian mythology and so on. Even if the structure is universal, the original narrative was nonetheless "actualized," it gained life through a specific song which belongs to the Marubo singers. They should be considered the "authors" or "custodians" of the knowledge in question, even if by means of different criteria from those used as a basis for copyright and private property in the West, and likewise different from its inverse, the mistaken assumption of "primitive communism." Knowledge referring to the original myth came to me through an accumulation of relationships, experiences, memories and commitments. It was passed on by the only people enabled to transmit the narrative, which constitutes a domain of authorship, even if mythic knowledge is truly virtual. Cia Livre recognizes all this, which protects the rights for the Marubo. In addition to my royalty as author of the dramatic script (which I choose to share half with them), a portion of any profits from the theatrical production has been necessarily reserved for Marubo singers, who are considered the authors/custodians of the "original material."

8. Do you think this kind of work could help renew the contemporary possibilities of doing anthropology?

The relationship between anthropology and theater is not new. There was a large impulse in the 1960s and 70s with the work of Victory Turner, Jerzy Grotowski, Peter Brook, Eugenio Barba, Richard Schechner and others. The English set designer Robert Wilson recently produced a grand theatrical spectacle based on an Indonesian mythic cycle (*I La Galigo*). Earlier, Peter Brooks adapted the *Mahabharata* for cinema. Even before all this, the whole avant-garde movement at the turn of the 20th century was adapting non-Western references. All this debate is somehow out of fashion in current anthropology. I think it is now possible to reevaluate the relationship between theater, performance and anthropology, expanding the horizons already opened by the authors I mentioned. At any rate, the work I did with Cia Livre does not pretend to be a renovation of anthropology. It is not an anthropological work, but an artistic creation. It takes knowledge that, to date, has been unfortunately restricted to ethnology, and circulates it in an

artistic medium. In this sense, *Cia Livre* is innovative, attempting to overcome the common sense modernist and evolutionist traps regarding indigenous peoples. It studies what is being done in anthropology and offers an original play for the city. A theatrical production circulates through a medium very distinct from academic anthropology, and thus represents an important contribution – very democratic, in this case – to Brazilian society and culture.

9. Recently, there seems to be a heightened presence of shamanism in popular culture, whether in cinema, video, poetry, art and music. Do you think this show should be understood within this context?

This was not exactly my intention, although others might well interpret it as such. I only wanted to treat an Amerindian text in the same way that any other cultural reference is typically treated, like say Chekov, Tennessee Williams or Euripides. In other words, I attempted to translate a text, and then transport it onto the stage, only because I found it interesting, beautiful, charged with lyricism but also strangeness and originality; because it was potent as poetry, not because it fit into some other theme, like popular culture or indigenous culture or whatnot. Now, I don't know if I agree with the affirmation in your question. I think that these works of genius of the human repertoire have been neglected, most unfortunately. They remain unknown, little studied, poorly translated, and their presence in cosmopolitan culture (cinema, theater, literature, etc.) is still very timid, and mostly in Brazil.

10. The show seems to seek out parallels between the indigenous universe and our own. Couldn't this end up somewhat reducing the power and sense of strangeness that indigenous alterity can provoke in us?

The show does not seek parallels but rather dissonances. It is, above all, a laboratory, an experience of back-and-forth crossing of information. As I said earlier, the Marubo themselves form reflections about the “moderns” throughout mythic thought. Thus the fallacy of opposing myth and modernity is ours, not theirs. We may have been more or less successful in our attempts to explain or problematize these dissonances, which, in this case, were cosmological. This occurs throughout the reactions and expectations of the audience, the creative repertory of the actors, set design, direction and dramaturgy. This kind of original material allows for various choices of creative interpretation, and the approximation with “modernity” is no doubt risky: it could render the play awkward, or turn it into cliché. We are still testing and improving this approximation, which we felt necessary as we began to sense that the play was getting too delirious, constructed as it was on references that the audience might immediately interpret as surrealist. This in turn could lead to yet other distortions and dilutions of the “potential for strangeness” offered by the indigenous references. But keep in mind two caveats: first, the Indians are the ones whose reflections on the “modern” or “non-Indian” are found in the original myth, upon which the play was based; second, in carrying out the reinvention we chose to focus on a preeminent axis of the narrative that seemed capable of communicating with the audience; the relationship between the living and the dead, the limits of humanity, and the distinctive elaborations of finitude by ourselves and others.

This was the central point of approximation between the two sets of references. This choice might serve as a reference point for future interpretations by Cia Livre and, we hope, others.

11. When I saw the show, I noted that many of the people in the audience are connected with Santo Daime and other urban ayahuasca groups. Do you think the show attracts a kind of audience that is particularly interested in ayahuasca use?

There exists a certain relationship between ayahuasca use and Group Theater as produced in São Paulo. Just remember that when Teatro Oficina (an important São Paulo theatre group) produced “The Bacchantes” by Euripides, much of the crew had taken ayahuasca before the show. Cia Livre is one of the best-known companies of Group Theater in the current Brazilian scene, so it is natural that this particular audience showed up to see the play. But I do not believe they were a majority. The audience tends to be made up people who are simply interested in theater. As far as I know, there was no specifically ayahuasca-related response to the show, since ayahuasca isn’t even a central theme in the production. There was, however, a clear attempt to tie the show into the whole “indigenous question.” This derives from a reception that is still not mature enough to perceive that indigenous poetics can, as I mentioned earlier, be approached simply for what they are, as original artistic acts.

12. How do you see the growing Western interest in Amazonian shamanism and ayahuasca in particular?

I think all this interest in Amazonian shamanism and ayahuasca is fundamental, taking into consideration what Serge Gruzinski calls the “colonization of the imaginary” by the Western paradigm which still dominates on this side of the Atlantic. In other words, this interest tends to amplify the horizons of experience and knowledge for diverse human societies and, to some extent, helps diversify the conceptions of meaning which have so often been silenced by the global consent to Euro-American culture. But on the other hand, there seems to be a clear process of reification, mercantilization and distortion of “traditional” Amazonian knowledge, since the foreign viewpoint (especially that of the literate urban middle class) tends to be a bit desperate in its mode of relating with alien experiences. By this I mean: the relationship, specifically with indigenous peoples, tends to take place more in a superficial or idealized mode, in an attempt to find quick answers or outlets for curiosity and unilateral angst, as opposed to a relationship that emerges from dialogue, conviviality or deep affective encounters. Amazonian shamanism is a complex, ancient, heir to an ontological configuration that is radically distinctive from Western bases of thought and experience. It’s not something that can be understood or accessed overnight. The topic revives a whole series of assumptions going back to modernism and up through the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 70s. Which is to say, indigenous shamanism becomes a metaphor for our dilemmas – reintegration with nature, rediscovery of the self, religion as a lost totality, overcoming the problems associated with neurosis and solipsism, among others – rather than being understood according to that which is original and specific to itself. And things get even more confusing when the

Indians themselves begin operating through our categories and disseminating a generic kind of shamanism based, for example, on the lexicon of nature, which is often quite different from that which was (and is) practiced by their older relatives and ancestors. And the thing becomes more complicated still, like I said, when this generic shamanism is turned into a product and circulates in a setting that gets even closer to the market. But I don't want to sound merely pessimistic with this analysis. There is also the phenomenon of cultural hybridization which can be very interesting, which often produces ritual experiences through an interesting form of cultural anthropophagy. A kind of "ayahuasca baroque" that I find very interesting.

13. Could you elaborate a bit more?

For me, the issue of ayahuasca proper generates a whole other set of problems. I do not intend to judge an alien experience of the sacred, because I think this goes beyond the order of discourse and analysis of cultural processes. All experience of the sacred is valid in and of itself, and in this sense, perhaps it's not so important if the subject participates in a ritual conducted by an old shaman in the middle of the forest, or if it's done by some supposed urban shaman. I myself have had extremely powerful experiences with ayahuasca in São Paulo which have taken me at times as far away as those in the forest. And this doesn't seem to me to be related to the people conducting the ritual. What I mean to say is that the ayahuasca experience is extremely personal. It is something mysterious and powerful; something that, to some extent, goes beyond the specific ritual conditions in which a given person is situated. Ayahuasca agglutinates and disperses worlds, it is a channel that makes the universe focus on you, and through which you multiply yourself in the universe. It is, at the same time, something that doesn't linger over problems, well resolved or not, of hybridization or distortion of traditions.

Now, when we're talking about producing discourses and reproducing these processes through, or in the name of, an alien matrix – Amerindian shamanism -- the situation becomes more complicated. And this happens because Western references tend to mystify indigenous traditions without realizing one of the most interesting meanings that ayahuasca itself has for Amazonian cosmologies: the way it is considered to switch between worlds. It's no coincidence that ayahuasca is described as the "cinema of the forest." For ayahuasca belongs precisely to a kind of radical shamanic experience of cosmic diplomacy and alterity, and not some supposed Rousseauian communion with nature. As anthropologist Peter Gow (1994) has shown, many indigenous ayahuasca rituals were transformed through contact with mestizo peoples' use of the vine in the wake of the Rubber Boom at the turn of the 20th century, which then got re-coupled within the interior of indigenous cosmology in the Peruvian Amazon. Which is to say, precisely in the place where the West seeks out unadulterated shamanistic traditions as a kind of primitivist balm for modern ills, we find in reality a complex (and quintessentially modern) process of translation and invention.

14. Some ethnologists seem to ridicule the "New Age" appropriation of indigenous ayahuasca use. At the same time, such researchers often take part in the rituals during their field work in Amazonia. Isn't this a kind

of elitism or superiority complex, whereby some anthropologists consider themselves “above” their urban counterparts, when in fact they are just as far from the native meanings attributed to the experience?

I don't know of any specific cases where someone has ridiculed such urban appropriations, but I can easily imagine it has happened. Now, a good anthropologist is, by definition, one who assumes that all human experience is complex, dense and worth investigating. Why should New Age shamanism be any less intriguing, from an anthropological perspective, than any other ritual form? The phenomenon involves diverse processes of re-translation and category-twisting, which are worthy of deeper investigation, and which are possibly being overlooked due to prejudice. On the other hand, ethnologists are the ones who usually establish the most systematic, lasting and intense relationships with indigenous peoples, the product of long years of arduous and militant dedication. Which is to say, yes they do have authority to analyze cultural processes and to separate the wheat from the chaff when we are looking for straight talk about shamanism. But see, they have the authority to talk about processes of cultural mediation, but when we're talking about shamanism itself, it's the Indians who have the last word. To deny this authority would imply obscuritanism, it would be shooting oneself in the foot for anyone who hopes to understand the complex processes of mediation involved in the transportations and recreations of shamanism – about which ethnologists (at least good ones) might still be the most competent people. And note that ethnology has even been responsible for helping guarantee the right to survival of the very indigenous groups who came up with and maintain shamanism, everything from protecting their lands to safeguarding traditional knowledge. From this perspective, they are indeed very different from their urban counterparts – as different as an economist and a lawyer – though this does not always get the recognition it deserves.

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