Exchanging Words
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Exchanging Words

Language, Ritual, and Relationality in Brazil’s Xingu Indigenous Park

Christopher Ball
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Kamala has died. His brother, my grandfather, told me just now. I have come by boat, arriving tired and hopeful, to his house in the village of Piyulaga. As soon as I saw him I could see the tears in his eyes. Inside his house, beside the room he had prepared for me for years, he greeted me as usual. He asked if I was “awojotai” (OK).

I said, “Yes” (nawojotai), “I’m fine. Pawojotai atu?” (Are you OK, grandfather?)

“Nawojotai.”
“Kamalajo?” (Really?)

He went right to it. Kamala has died. Today. Far away in Brasilia, from where I had just come by plane and car and bus and truck and outboard motorboat. I walked into the same place, but now hundreds of people cried all night, cried for days. I sank.

You see, it was all over. Years of work, years of learning, years of something like friendship, something like family, and something like awe ended. My grandfather held me. I did not cry. He did not stop crying.

A few days later his sons talked of debt. What had I promised Kamala and not delivered? What did I owe? Like any real chief, he was humble. He asked of me beads, some money for food, for fish while living in the city on doctor’s orders, a mosquito net, a tarp. I had also promised a new project, an initiative to document and map one of the most important places in Kamala’s and many Wauja people’s lives: Kamukuwaká. This project, the work I had been doing since the completion of the research on which this book is based, had just been approved for funding in the United States, and we had convened Brazilian researchers as well. I had come with good news about our many conversations over the years, and I missed him by hours.

Kamala is referred to by the pseudonym Sepí in this book. Sepí is the Wauja word for “stool”; it is a marker of chiefly authority to have one’s own seat. It means “throne” in his case. You will get to know him as he was when he was active and powerful, and I am happy about that. This book could not have been written without Kamala and his generous spirit. The next chapters of Wauja social, linguistic, and cultural life, of Wauja activism for their territorial rights, will have to continue without him. I owe it to him to do all I can to help.

— May 25, 2017
This book could not have been written without the hospitality and companionship of the Wauja people. So many individuals in the Wauja community taught me, laughed with me, and guided me. I cannot thank them enough for allowing me to develop what remains an evolving understanding of only some of the complexities, predicaments, and joys of their lives. First and last, I thank you, waujanau; I hope I can return my debt and that you will allow me to continue to incur more.

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Since coming to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame in 2013, where the long road to completing Exchanging Words has ended, I have benefited from the immense warmth and collegiality of the faculty and students. The faculty in cultural and linguistic anthropology warrant special thanks for their contributions to refining many of the ideas and arguments here. Susan Blum, Rahul Oka, Vania Smith-Oka, Catherine Bolten, Maurizio Albahari, Alex Chavez, Carolyn Nordstrom, and Gabriel Torres have each inspired me to think about the issues raised in the manuscript from novel perspectives, and they provided invaluable advice on the writing process. The positivity and attitude of sharing among all of the Notre Dame anthropology faculty, including Agustin Fuentes and Jim McKenna, has been a great inspiration.

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Introduction

When seen from the sky, the southern border of central Brazil’s Xingu Indigenous Park (Parque Indígena do Xingu, or PIX) is a straight line separating starkly brown ranchland outside the park from vividly green forest within. In March 2006 several small planes carried visitors across this border on route to the village of the Arawak-speaking Wauja people. They ran the last leg in an international journey that had brought a dozen shamans and medicine people from Canada, the United States, Surinam, and Colombia for a meeting of traditional healers held inside the park and cosponsored by the Wauja and an American NGO. The planes settled down amid clouds of dust, entering the village due west on the straight and wide main entrance road as is required of all ceremonial visitors in the Upper Xingu.

Many of the Wauja hosts and their indigenous guests appeared to have taken the Portuguese name of the event, Encontro de Saberes (Meeting of Minds), quite literally. Wauja shamans, responsible for cosmological equilibrium between humans and apapatai (spirit-monsters), sat in the central men’s house in their circular village and spoke through a bevy of translators with fellow medicinal specialists about the importance of breaking down borders between indigenous groups worldwide through trance. Each group presented and exchanged their distinctive medicinal vehicles, including sage, tobacco, ayahuasca, and other rainforest botanicals. The conference was centered around coparticipatory use of these medicines that individuated the groups at the same time as they united them all as indigenous people. During the closing ceremony, visiting Colombian ayahuasca specialists remarked that “our spiritual knowledge does not have barriers, is not limited by borders. So we will be in contact in our dreams, because Indians always communicate with one another through dream and ritual.” A Lakota medicine man said in English (as I translated into Wauja and others into the Tiriyo, Portuguese, and Spanish languages) that his ancestors had also traveled long distances to establish “spiritual connections” and to trade with others. This occasion was possible and generally successful for Wauja participants because they are, by and large, interested and engaged
in making spiritual and economic connections with other people, Indians and non-Indians.

And yet it was not without some tension that Wauja people identified with their indigenous visitors at this meeting. One Wauja chief, observing the dress and complexion of the North American Indian guests, commented to his younger compatriots in a Wauja utterance that I declined to translate: *yunupa kala muteitsi, akajaopatapai, itsawé aitsu yekitsa* (“Look at those [non–Upper Xingu] Indians. They have become whites; this is what we will be like in the future”).1 Here was a negative, or at least ambivalent, evaluation of what many Wauja imagine as a real trajectory of their own identity, one that is linked to the very kinds of outreach that characterized this meeting and that highlights the risks many Wauja perceive in the various cultural projects through which they attempt communication and exchange with the outside.

Three themes from this shamans’ meeting provide a framework for the subject matter of this book. First is that Wauja people, like human groups everywhere, construct their own identity (who one is like) in relation to others (who one is different from). The social-scientific way of saying this is that identity is only possible in dialectic with alterity. This book traces a series of moments in Wauja self-identification that come from instances of interaction with others. By looking at how Wauja people define themselves through others, the analysis focuses on instances of interaction that occur at borders: those between the human and nonhuman, between Wauja people and members of neighboring Xinguan ethnic groups, between Amazonian Indians and non-Indians.

Second, this meeting characterized a Wauja cultural project of outreach and highlights some of the risks that Wauja people perceive in communication and exchange with the outside. On the one hand, there are good reasons to seek health care, environmental development projects, connection to indigenous spiritual and/or political causes, and the sale of Wauja art in craft or professional markets. On the other hand, as this ethnography shows, as Wauja people embark on these exchanges, they discover that they are fraught with difficulty and marked by interactional failures.

Third, the shamans’ meeting, like much in Wauja social life, was organized around ritual practice. I analyze language use in ritual settings throughout this book in order to understand how Wauja people construct relationships, and thus aspects of their own identity, with the powerful spirit-monsters, ancestors, and ethnic trading partners with whom they share their environment. What the term “ritual” means will develop as the chapters unfold, but for the time being,
it is meant to include collective action that yields connections between micro-
ecosmic scenes of performance and macrocosmic orders. What we recognize as
ritual performance is often the result of delicate and complicated coordination
of interaction among people, but it is important to remember that some ritual
activity is less obviously explicitly organized. Indeed, to some degree all inter-
action is ritualized, but in different ways. Ritual provides a way to understand
how something like talking to spirits generates frames of meaning and action
that inform how Wauja people engage with outsiders in contexts (such as devel-
opment meetings) that do not appear to have much to do with ritual at all. I
suggest that ritual as an analytic category helps us to understand how interac-
tion with spirits and Indian neighbors, for example, is connected to interaction
with the Brazilian government, international NGOs, and museums in projects
of development. Ritual is a contributing factor to relationships of development
and it is also bound up with the politics of indigeneity.

One assumption that guides my analysis is that language and culture are
interconnected along various scales. These include the level of grammar and
semantic meaning, the level of ritual and pragmatic action, and also the level
at which people pay reflexive attention to their own language use and that of
others. The Upper Xingu is a great place to study questions of the relationship
between language and culture, in part because the indigenous groups who live
there share a cultural world constituted through myth, kinship, subsistence,
politics, and economy but, by and large, all speak different languages and avoid
learning the languages of their neighbors. Any anthropologist of the Upper
Xingu is faced with the following question: How do ethnic groups integrate in
such a system? I, like others before me, begin to answer this question by arguing
that if this complex multilingual system is not integrated through shared gram-
matical languages, it must be integrated through shared interactional principles
that are mobilized and reinforced in Upper Xingu intergroup ritual.

Previous linguistic and anthropological research has consistently reinforced
two important points about the Upper Xingu social system. First, it comprises
a particular kind of multilingual area, wherein many genetically unrelated
languages are found side by side, but where most people are monolingual in
practice, a situation that reinforces an ideology of ethnolinguistic group dis-
distinctiveness (Basso 1973, Franchetto 2001). Second, anthropologists have shown
that, despite such grammatical linguistic boundaries, the social system is
actively maintained through intergroup ritual exchange (Franchetto 2001). Fur-
thermore, ideas about how one should properly challenge, complain, demand,
or remain silent in speech are conventionally linked to how one should properly reciprocate, refuse, accept, and so on, tying linguistic behavior to social relationships as exchange relations in this cultural system. This ethnography builds on such insights to demonstrate how these central features of Upper Xinguan social life—language, ritual, and exchange—translate into Wauja engagements with outsiders, often in complicated and unexpected ways. What do the basic contours of the Upper Xinguan social system look like, and how do Wauja people fit into the system?