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## Tupi Featherwork and the Dynamics of Intercultural Exchange in Early Modern Brazil

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### Introduction

The Tupi of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century coastal Brazil were renowned as fiercely warlike and, more sensationally, as cannibals.<sup>1</sup> They were also famed for their ritual featherwork capes made from scarlet ibis feathers, which were closely associated with both war and anthropophagic rituals (see figure). For the semi-nomadic Tupi, featherwork was highly valued, the capes being among the only things that they carefully preserved and carried with them as they moved from site to site.<sup>2</sup>

All eleven surviving plumed capes—with one possible exception—were produced between the arrival of the Portuguese in Brazil in 1500 and the Dutch departure from Brazil in 1654.<sup>3</sup> These are not, therefore, pre-Columbian artefacts; the colonial context is their original context. Today, all surviving Tupi feathered artefacts reside in Europe, the remnants of early modern collections. Indigenous American feathered clothing was much desired by European collectors, and the artefacts were procured and distributed through and by missionaries, merchants, princes, humanists and doctors.

In what circumstances were these cloaks produced and exchanged? What functions did they serve within their various colonial contexts? These questions can be answered only through colonial sources, such as missionary letters, inventories and images, which are certainly coloured by the biases of their European authors or artists, but also contain valuable information concerning the



Unknown artist (Tupi)  
Feathered cape, sixteenth – seventeenth century  
116 cm length  
Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (N.17.3.83)  
Photograph Geoffrey H Ashley

technical fabrication and functions of Tupi featherwork in colonial Brazil.

The Tupi were a semi-nomadic society inhabiting Brazil's coastal forests. Tupi culture was largely ephemeral, centring on ceremonial traditions that involved dance, sound, movement and adornment.<sup>4</sup> Stories and images of everyday life among the Tupi, their 'nakedness', their fiercely warlike society and their elaborate rituals associated with cannibalism fired the imagination of Renaissance Europe.<sup>5</sup>

Imagery of the Tupi, their rituals and their capes provided the seeds for centuries of vividly tenacious stereotypes concerning New World cultures, and created a great demand for their artefacts within the European marketplace. The Tupi were members of a

colonial intercultural: a new culture created through the intersection of many different early modern participants: the Tupi, non-Tupi Indigenous groups, Europeans of various nationalities and African slaves.

According to sixteenth-century chroniclers, the feathered mantles served many ritual purposes: as links to the ancestral realm during funerary rites, as signs of power or prestige during assemblies, as markers of status during captive–captor rites.<sup>6</sup> As I will discuss below, within the context of the Jesuit missions, the capes were incorporated into the performance of Christian sacraments as well.

All known Tupi capes are made from the feathers of the *guará*, or scarlet ibis (*Eudocimus ruber*), a wading bird of the tropical Atlantic coast. These medium to large wading birds resemble short and intensely coloured flamingos. European sources detail how the scarlet ibis was used for Tupi adornments of all kinds.<sup>7</sup>

Europeans viewed the Tupi relationship to birds as highly complex. The Tupi connected many bird songs, including that of the *guará*, to spirits and ghosts. One French missionary—Jean de Léry (1536–1613)—describes, for example, a small grey bird that the Tupi held in their ‘highest regard’ because it was a communicator with the supernatural realm. He further postulates on the greater significance of avian life to the Tupi:

But the mystery that I want to mention is this: his voice is so penetrating — even more pitiful than that of a screech owl—that our poor Tupinambá, who hear him cry more often in the night than in the daytime, have the fantasy imprinted in their brain that their deceased relatives and friends are sending them these birds as a sign of good luck, and especially to encourage them to bear themselves valiantly in war against their enemies. They believe firmly that if they observe what is signified to them by these augurs, not only will they vanquish their enemies in this world, but what is more, when they die their souls will not fail to rejoin their ancestors behind the mountains and dance with them.<sup>8</sup>

Léry’s account strongly hints that the wearing of feathered garments and bodily adornments may have been a way of ritually identifying with the appearance or behaviour of certain birds for spiritual ends.

The contrast in texture between a Tupi feathered bonnet and a full-length cape both now in Copenhagen provides some insight into how the very techniques used by Tupi plumists may have contributed to this ritual identification. The yellow bonnet is made by binding several pieces of down to a wooden core, which is then attached to the net-like support, thereby compellingly capturing the fluffy appearance of a baby bird. In the cloak, by contrast, only mature feathers are used and are attached directly to the matrix, imitating the body contour of an adult ibis. Such construction techniques suggest that Tupi featherworkers developed a technical mastery of imitative, naturalistic effects.

These qualities were noted by European observers. Jean de Léry, for example, describes his respect for the level of technical craftsmanship specifically in terms of texture:

When the feathers have been mixed and combined, and neatly bound to each other with very small pieces of cane and cotton thread (there is no featherworker in France who could handle them better, nor arrange them more skillfully), you would judge that the clothes made of them were of a deep-napped velvet.<sup>9</sup>

Léry also adverts to their value as finely crafted artefacts back in France: ‘As I have said, [the Tupi] use their beautiful feathers to make [finely crafted] robes ... and other adornments for their bodies. ... [Upon] my return ... a certain person representing the king ... importuned me until he got them from me’.<sup>10</sup> Europeans perceived Tupi featherwork as virtuosic craftsmanship, as were most examples of both European and extra European artisanry within the context of European *Kunstammern*.

As with many Amazonian cultures today, the Tupi apparently placed greater value on feathers of certain colours over others, with red and especially yellow being the

most coveted, and they therefore developed techniques in colour modification. Although none survive, fully yellow capes were almost certainly produced through this practice. Tupi craftsmen employed different methods of dyeing the bird feathers, one being a brazilwood dye-bath to turn white chicken feathers red.<sup>11</sup>

A second method physically altered feather colours without dyeing, employing a process today called *tapirage*, but in the period known in Portuguese as *contrafeitos* ('counterfeiting', or 'imitating'). In *tapirage*, featherworkers plucked green or blue feathers from living parrots, or scarlet feathers from ibis, and painted the open follicles with a concoction of skin secretions of the dyeing poison frog (*Dendrobates tinctorius*), and botanicals.<sup>12</sup> The feathers that grew back were brilliant yellow or orange in hue and the bird continued to produce yellow feathers thereafter.

Colonial documents confirm that the Tupi practised *tapirage*. Among the earliest known accounts in Brazil is one written in 1576 by a Portuguese humanist and traveller named Gândavo, in his *Histories of Brazil*. He reports that:

The Indians of the land are accustomed to pluck the feathers [of a certain bird] while young, and to dye the birds with the blood of a certain toad to which they add certain other ingredients: and when the feathers grow out once more they are exactly the color of the real feathers [of another species].<sup>13</sup>

Gândavo goes on to note that 'the Indians deceive people by selling [the altered feathers] for the true species'. This is fascinating. Gândavo's comment reveals a European anxiety about being cheated in the marketplace—a tourist's concern over being deceived by the locals and denied access to an 'authentic' Tupi culture—already operative in sixteenth-century Brazil. Similar issues of imitation and mockery are prominent in descriptions of how Jesuit missionaries confronted Tupi culture and other European perceptions of the colonial Brazilian marketplace.

## Jesuit Accommodation in Brazil

Central to the missionary endeavour in Brazil were the Jesuits. The Jesuit Order was profoundly internationalised, with missionaries travelling to Brazil from Italy, Spain, Portugal and Germany who were specifically instructed to document their enterprise and send reports back to the Vatican regularly. The Jesuits founded Indigenous communities called *aldeias*, usually located at some distance from European settlements.<sup>14</sup> The conversion strategy in these *aldeias*, termed 'accommodation', was predicated upon the acquisition of native languages and the adoption and adaptation of aspects of Indigenous culture within the missionary process. To this end, the Jesuits in Brazil primarily emphasised multisensory ritual performance involving sound, scent and movement, all-important aspects of Tupi ritual culture. In fact, within the *aldeias*, the Jesuits observed and possibly encouraged the production of featherwork and the use of the vestments within their own Christian space.

In 1610, a Jesuit priest named Jácome Monteiro described how the 'Indians, through the vehicle of the Agnus Dei [a special form of communion wafer]', gave him a set of capes, which he sent on to Rome.<sup>15</sup> Monteiro couches this exchange as a material one: communion wafers for feathered vestments.<sup>16</sup> The true exchange, of course, is of Christianity for paganism. In a direct example of 'accommodation' at work, Monteiro goes on to mention that the residents of this *aldeia* were baptised while wearing the same feathered adornments that had been associated with their own rituals. The use of Tupi feathered capes in a baptismal ritual shows that the missionaries recognised their utility in solemnising Tupi entry into the Christian community. The Jesuits may well have equated the cultural significance of Tupi featherwork as employed in the performance of Indigenous, spiritually transformative rituals with Christian sacramental rites.

Over fifty years earlier, the Spanish Jesuit António Blázquez had anticipated Monteiro's account of Tupi giving up their feathered capes for the sake of Christianity, specifically

as a market exchange in which the Tupi parted with items of great value:

The Indians of this town of São Paulo want to change all of their traditions. ... They have sold all the featherwork that they had for dressing themselves and their wives, which is a very clear sign of the Holy Spirit having touched their hearts. Because the feathers that they have are the finest ornaments that they own, and they used them when they killed their enemies and ate them, they make from them the capes and other clothing they wore.<sup>17</sup>

Blázquez's letter reveals that the Jesuits were well aware of the ritual function of these feathered adornments for the Tupi. It also gives an indication that the Jesuits saw feathered cloaks as powerful symbols of the Tupi past, the cultural space preceding the *aldeia* and the cannibalistic rites of Aboriginal Tupi communities. Blázquez's mention of the Holy Spirit is of great importance in the context of the letter. For him, the willingness of the *aldeia* inhabitants to sell off their featherwork signified their abandoning of their pagan ways and becoming Christian. Blázquez's market anecdote is part of the letter's larger message concerning the success of Jesuit enterprise in Brazil. The Tupi were not merely marketing craft items to feed their families; they were ridding themselves of their cultural objects from their past in order to embark on a new Christian life in Jesuit territory.

All this is significant because it sheds light on the process of how meanings were formed as the Tupi objects move between Brazil and Europe. Through this exchange process, the Tupi feathered capes that the Jesuits sent back to Rome were constituted as signs of encounters with otherness in the new territories and as material evidence of the success of the Jesuit missionary enterprise. That success was predicated upon the sharing of Tupi and European ritual objects within the missionary space.

In 1557, Blázquez wrote to Ignatius of Loyola with an extraordinary eyewitness account of a Tupi ceremony that preceded the ritual execution of a captive enemy.

Six nude women came by the public square, singing in their customary way, and making such gestures and shaking movements that they really did seem like demons. From head to feet they were covered with red feathers. On their heads they wore caps [in the style of 'Inquisition' caps] of yellow feathers. On their backs they wore an armful of feathers that appeared like a horse's mane, and to animate the celebration they played flutes made from the shinbones of their slain enemies. With this attire they walked around *barking like dogs and faking speech* with so many mimes that I do not know with what I could compare them. All of these acts took place six or eight days before the killing.<sup>18</sup>

The vestments of the 'demonic' women appear to have been Tupi scarlet ibis cloaks. Moreover, the yellow 'Inquisition' caps that Blázquez describes correspond to the one surviving yellow down bonnet in Copenhagen. This letter provides documentary evidence that Tupi featherwork was in use in the earliest period of the Jesuit presence in Brazil. Again an analogy is made between Tupi ritual featherwork—the yellow headdresses—and European ritual vestments—the 'Inquisition' caps.

Blázquez's use of the word 'imitate' to describe the sounds emanating from the women's mouths recalls Gândavo's comments about *tapirage*, that 'the Indians deceive people by selling [the altered feathers] for the true species'. Gândavo asserts that *tapirage* was used intentionally for illicit financial gain by hawking counterfeit species, selling fake exotica and fleecing the tourists in the market, a site of social and material exchange that had been introduced by the colonising Europeans themselves.

Analogously, the objects produced with colour-modified feathers become emblematic of the tensions in the marketplace of colonial Brazil. What was the framework available to Gândavo for understanding the intentions behind *tapirage*? What do we make of his casting this as a question of marketing counterfeit materials, of making a profit by passing off cheap goods for expensive ones? Two possibilities present themselves here. The

Tupi may have modified the feathers as a means of enhancing their symbolic or ritual value, meaning that Gândavo profoundly misread Tupi intentionality. The possibility remains, however, that Tupi featherworkers did indeed substitute inferior plumes, perhaps chicken feathers, for those of birds more coveted by European purchasers, thus asserting their agency within the colonial framework by manipulating the market for financial profit. Maybe Gândavo got it right.

Tupi featherwork, in fact, lay between cultures and functioned as a marker not just of commercial exchanges but also of the disconnections that can accompany experiential and cultural exchange. The Jesuits were central to the process of mediating and appropriating the Tupi and their material culture for Europeans, both in the *aldeia* missions and in the marketplace. The Jesuits were also instrumental in shipping Tupi featherwork itself. In the same letter that mentions trading Agnus Dei wafers for featherwork, Monteiro specifies that he shipped feathered mantles from Pernambuco to the Vatican: 'Your Highness, a few days ago I sent across the sea for you a box of feathered capes'.<sup>19</sup> This is our only known source that explicitly mentions the shipment of Tupi feathered capes, establishing that the Jesuits were directly involved in transporting Tupi materials to Europe and must have been a source of Brazilian artefacts for European collections.

## Conclusion

Tupi feathered capes assumed multiple roles in varied cultural contexts, embodying different types of knowledge for their various owners and viewers. As mediated by colonial accounts, the Tupi appear to have valued the capes as essential components in highly charged religious and communal ceremonies and as precious commodities. Missionaries and merchants carried Tupi plumage back to Europe as material evidence of their evangelical success and as commercial evidence of the new economic potential of the territories. For the Tupi, the ibis-feather capes and the rituals associated with them served to establish their own communities and social orders within

a colonial world, both outside and within Christianity. The technical mastery of Tupi plumists imitated the forms and textures of the natural world, as in the downy bonnet, and modified them when cultural values dictated, as in *tapirage*. Within the Jesuit *aldeias*, the accommodation of feathered cloaks, in their continued manufacture and their use in both Tupi and Christian rituals, facilitated the process of conversion and the integration of Brazil into an increasingly global market. By tracing their interwoven histories, as mediated by marketplaces on both shores of the Atlantic, I hope to have given a glance into the complexities and processes by which the colonial enterprise played out between Brazil and Europe.

## NOTES

- 1 This article is a synthesis of various sections of Amy J Buono, 'Feathered Identities and Plumed Performances: Tupinambá Interculture in Early Modern Brazil and Europe', PhD thesis, University of California, Santa Barbara, CA, 2007. I owe special thanks to my advisers Jeanette Favrot Peterson, Swati Chattopadhyay and Francis Dutra. For their thoughtful feedback, I am also grateful to Larry Silver, Charles Zika and my fellow participants in the 'Cultural and Artistic Exchange in the Making of the Modern World, 1500–1900' session at the 32nd CIHA conference in Melbourne. The names 'Tupi' and 'Tupinambá' were terms applied by early modern chroniclers—and then taken up by twentieth-century anthropologists and historians—to describe a large number of Native American groups within the same language family and sharing certain cultural affinities. The Tupi occupied over 4000 kilometres of the Brazilian coastline during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, with a population of 1.5 to 2.4 million at the time of contact with Europeans. For the foundational studies of Tupi culture, see Alfred Métraux, *La civilisation matérielle des tribus tupi-guarani*, Librairie Orientaliste Paul Geuthner, Paris, 1928; Alfred Métraux, *La religion des tupinamba et ses rapports avec celle des autres tribus tupi-guarani*, E Leroux, Paris, 1928; Alfred Métraux, 'The Tupinamba', in Julian Haynes Steward (ed.), *Handbook of South American Indians*, vol. 3, US Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1948, pp. 95–133; and John M Monteiro, 'The Crisis and Transformations

- of Invaded Societies: Coastal Brazil in the Sixteenth Century', in Frank Salomon & Stuart B Schwartz (eds), *The Cambridge History of Native Peoples of the Americas*, vol. 3, part 1, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, UK, 1999, pp. 973–1024.
- 2 Jean de Léry, *History of a Voyage to the Land of Brazil, Otherwise Called America*, trans. Janet Whatley, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, 1990, p. 92.
  - 3 The eleven extant Tupi capes include: Nationalmuseet Etnografisk Samling, Copenhagen (EH5931, EHc52, EH5933, EH5934, EH5935); Museum der Kulturen, Basel (N. Ivc657); Musées Royale d'Art et d'Histoire, Brussels (AAM 5783); Musées Royale d'Art et d'Histoire, Florence (N. 281, N. 288); Musée du Quai Branly, Paris (N. 17.3.83); and 'Museum Septalianum', Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano, Milan (no inventory number).
  - 4 For excellent discussions of Tupi cultural performance, see M Kittya Lee, 'The Arts of Proselytization: Music as Mediator of Jesuit-Amerindian Encounters in Early Colonial Brazil, 1549–1579', *Leituras: Revista da Biblioteca Nacional*, no. 6, 2000, pp. 149–72; and Paulo Castagna, 'The Use of Music by the Jesuits in the Conversion of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil', in John O'Malley SJ, Gauvin Alexander Bailey, Steven J Harris & T Frank Kennedy (eds), *The Jesuits: Culture, Science and the Arts 1540–1773*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 1999, pp. 641–58.
  - 5 For a discussion of the role of woodcuts and engravings in visualising Native Americans, see Christopher Burghard Steiner, 'Travel Engravings and the Construction of the Primitive', in Elazar Barkan & Ronald Bush (eds), *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1995, pp. 202–419.
  - 6 The varied functions and connotations of Tupi capes are discussed in a wide variety of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century sources. For some of the most notable, see Pedro Vaz de Caminha, 'Letter of Pedro Vaz de Caminha, Written in Porto-Seguro of Vera Cruz on the First Day of May in the Year 1500', in Charles David Ley (ed.), *Portuguese Voyages, 1498–1663*, Phoenix Press, London, 2000, pp. 41–59; Léry; Hans Staden, *Hans Staden, The True History of His Captivity, 1557*, ed. Malcolm Henry Ikin Letts, G Routledge, London, 1928; André Thevet & Suzanne Lussagnet (eds), *Le Brésil et les brésiliens*, Les Français en Amérique pendant la deuxième moitié du XVI<sup>e</sup> siècle, 1st edn, Presses universitaires de France, Paris, 1953; Claude d'Abbeville, *Histoire de la mission des pères capucins en l'isle de margagnan et terres circonvoisins (1614)*, facsimile, ed. Alfred Métraux & Jacques Lafaye, Akademische Druck- und Velagsanstalt, Graz, 1963; and Yves d'Evreux & Hélène Clastres (eds), *Voyage au nord du Brésil fait en 1613 et 1614*, Payot, Paris, 1985.
  - 7 Cristóvão de Lisboa & Jaime Walter (eds), *História dos animaes e árvores do Maranhão*, Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, Instituto de Investigação Científica Tropical, Lisbon, 2000; Fernão Cardim, *Tratados da terra e gente do brasil*, ed. Ana Maria de Azevedo, Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, Lisbon, 1997.
  - 8 Léry, p. 91.
  - 9 *ibid.*, p. 60.
  - 10 *ibid.*, p. 88.
  - 11 *ibid.*, p. 59.
  - 12 For a modern discussion of this practice, see Alfred Métraux, 'La décoloration artificielle des plumes sur les oiseaux vivants', *Journal de la Société des américanistes de Paris*, vol. 20, 1928, pp. 181–92. This article was amplified and published in English as Alfred Métraux, 'Tapirage: A Biological Discovery of South American Indians', *Journal of the Washington Academy of Sciences*, vol. 34, no. 8, 1944, pp. 252–5.
  - 13 Pero Magalhães de Gândavo, *The Histories of Brazil*, trans. John Batterson Stetson, Longwood Press, Boston, MA, 1978, p. 68.
  - 14 For discussions of *aldeias* in Brazil, see Charlotte de Castelnau-L'Estoile, *Les ouvriers d'une vigne stérile: les jésuites et la conversion des indiens au Brésil, 1580–1620*, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon and Paris, 2000; and Dauril Alden, *The Making of an Enterprise: The Society of Jesus in Portugal, Its Empire and Beyond, 1540–1750*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1996.
  - 15 Translation mine. Jácome Monteiro, '[Enformação da Provincia do Brasil, 1610]', in *Bras. 8-I*, Archivum Romanum Societatis Iesu, Rome, folios 99 verso – 100 recto.
  - 16 The use of the term *Agnus Dei* could also refer either to a liturgical prayer, the last part of the Roman mass or a talisman. As a talisman, the *Agnus Dei* took the form of beeswax wafers imprinted with the image of a lamb, often made out of the remainder of the consecrated candles burned during Easter. They were blessed by the pope and worn as an apotropaic talisman. Some had a grey dust mixed in with them, said to be from the bones of saints, and thus were

- effectively relics. Special thanks to Professor Francis Dutra for advising me on the alternate possibilities of the Agnus Dei in colonial Brazil.
- 17 Translation mine. António Blázquez, '[Do P. Antonio Blázquez por comissão do P. Manuel de Nóbrega ao P. Diego Laynes, Roma, 1559]', in Serafim Leite SJ (ed.), *Monumenta Brasiliae, v. III (1538–1565)*, MHSI, Rome, 1956–68, p. 137.
  - 18 Translation mine. António Blázquez, '[Do Ir. António Blázquez por comissão do P. Manuel da Nóbrega ao P. Inácio de Loyola, Roma, 1557]', in Leite, *v. II (1538–1565)*, p. 386.
  - 19 Monteiro, folio 99 verso.