



Amerindian conceptions on ‘writing’, as object and practice

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Abstract In most Southamerican Amerindian languages, the meaning of already existing words was extended to also denote “(alphabetic) writing”. The original words refer to mythic-shamanic graphisms that transform bodies and objects into social beings. The shamanic origin of writing is a theme addressed by a growing anthropological literature, this is the case of the terms *kusiwa* among the Wajãpi of Northeastern Amazonia and *kene* among the Pano peoples of Western Amazonia. *Kene* comes from designs on the skin of the mythical anaconda snake, being transposed through graphic metamorphosis onto different bodies, textiles, ceramics. Current examples of this conception are presented, as well as cases that, in contrast, show an apparently non shamanic or profane conception of writing. Among the Kuikuro of Southern Amazonia, the root *ahéhi* refers to the tracing of maps and schemes on the floor, and has come to mean ‘writing’ since the very first exposure to this new object and practice. Anyway, all Amazonian cases are perceptive and cognitive transpositions that deviate from Western conceptions. This discussion leads to a current debate in anthropology about the need to break with a narrow conception of ‘writing’ and about the existence of other ‘writings’.

Keywords Writing · Pictography · Shamanism · Amerindians · Kuikuro

Prolegomena

At the edge of Brazilian Southern Amazonia, around seven hundred Kuikuro live in six villages, in the region known as ‘Upper Xingu’, the headwaters of the Xingu river, one of the major Southern tributaries of the Amazon river. The Kuikuro inhabit the Southeastern part of the ‘Xingu Indigenous Land’ (TIX),¹ their traditional territory since at least the second half of the sixteenth century, north of the state of Mato Grosso. They speak a dialect of the Upper Xingu Carib Language (LKAX), Xinguan Southern Branch of the Carib family (Meira and Franchetto 2005).

I remember a few lines from the introduction of my thesis (Franchetto 1986), which announced an *in fieri* relationship and asymmetrical contrast, at a time (the late seventies) when writing was still a matter of curiosity on the part of the Kuikuro, the Amerindian people I have worked with for over 40 years: “I am

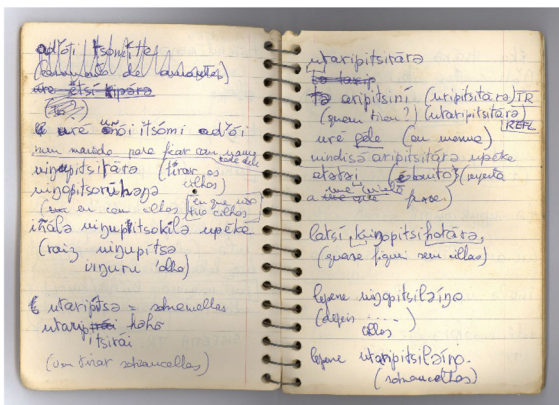
¹ The Xingu Indigenous Land is a protected area of 22,000 km². Its southern part, known as “Upper Xingu”, is a multilingual and multiethnic regional system where languages belonging to the three major linguistic grouping in South America (Arawak, Carib and Tupi) and one linguistic isolate are spoken by around three thousand people.

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writing watching-hearing them, they look (at) me writing”. What did they see?

(Alphabetic) writing was in my body, in my hands, in my thinking about and around the supposed object that I needed, and wanted, to grasp: a language. Writing is the *sine qua non* of phonetic transcriptions, tried and constantly revised spellings, scrutinized and offered “texts”.

There were the Kuikuro around me in 1977, drowning in the (continuous) flow of their still incomprehensible speech (speech, as disorder); there I was willing, very anguished, to break the continuum into sounds, phonemes, words, phrases, torn between listening, almost tamed by linguistic training (absolutely phonocentric and logocentric), and almost tamed by transcription (alphabetic, phonocentric), as a trained field linguist, but which emerged for my use and consumption at that time. Writing and masculinity reigned, and I was a female scribe. This was from the mid-1970s until the early 1980s, when the leap occurred: the emergence of the ability to speak, communicate, and, above all, sing, in Kuikuro, marking healthily a certain emancipation from written slavery and sharpening my ability to listen even beyond the sounds of speech. Anyway, I remain a militantly assumed linguist, phonocentric and logocentric. I am responsible for the sin of having contributed to the creation, say, of an alphabetic writing, for the use and consumption of the Upper Xinguan Carib peoples and mine from the mid-1990s onwards, as well as for their entry into another marked subalternity, in the world of school, media, documents.



Field notes of the author (1977)



The first school at the Ipatse village (photo by the author, 1998)

The brushstroke scene in the quotation above (“I am writing watching-hearing them, they look (at) me writing”) immediately takes me to the famous chapter of Lévi-Strauss “A writing lesson”, in his book *Tristes Tropiques* (1955), memories of his first trip to Brazil in 1935, specifically of his encounter with the Nambikwara of Western Amazonia (Lévi-Strauss 1992: 286–297).

“That the Nambikwara could not write goes without saying. But, one day, I saw that they were all busy drawing wavy horizontal lines on the paper. What were they trying to do? I could only conclude that they were writing, or, more exactly, that they were trying to do as I did with my pencils. As I had never tried to amuse them with drawings, they could not conceive of any other use for my pencils. But their leader saw further into the problem. Doubtless he was the only one among them to have understood what writing was for. So he asked me for one of my notepads; and when we were working together he did not give me his answers in words, but traced a wavy line or two on the paper and gave it to me, as if I could read what he had to say...Each time he drew a line he would examine it with great care. I could not but admire the genius of their leader, for he had divined in a flash that writing could redouble his power upon the others and, in so doing, he had got, as it were, to the bottom of an institution which he did not as yet know how to work. The episode also drew my attention to a further

aspect of Nambikwara life: the political relations between individuals and groups.”

Let's go straight to a synthesis of Lévi-Strauss's conclusions. Writing may well have been indispensable to the establishment of an enduring dominion. To bring the matter nearer to our own time: the European-wide movement towards compulsory education in the nineteenth century went hand in hand with the extension of military service and the systematization of the proletariat. The struggle against illiteracy is indistinguishable, at times, from the increased power exerted over the individual citizen by the central authority. Then, the primary function of writing is domination, complexified when the State enters into



The graphisms *tüihitinhü* (on the left) and *tahitse hangata ingugu* (eye behind the ear of red arara) (photos by the author, 2008)

the social and economic scene. The function of writing as mnemonic tool or as a channel for communication at spatial and temporal distance is secondary.

Are there really cultures or societies without writing? What would be the breadth or the limitation of the reference or denotation of the term 'writing'? I intend to address these issues from an interpretation of elements from the Amerindian perspective, choosing as a starting point the terms that different indigenous people decided to use to refer to what we call "writing", acts and objects. The consideration of the semantic approximation of the terms attributed to our writing to those attributed to other graphic practices reveals other perspectives. Let us look at two emblematic and apparently contrasting cases.

Cosmological versus profane representations

Bakairi and Kuikuro live in Brazil on the border of Southern Amazonia; both speak languages of the two Southern branches of the Carib linguistic family. They are geographically close peoples and have shared at least a century of common history in the multilingual and multiethnic regional system known as Upper Xingu.

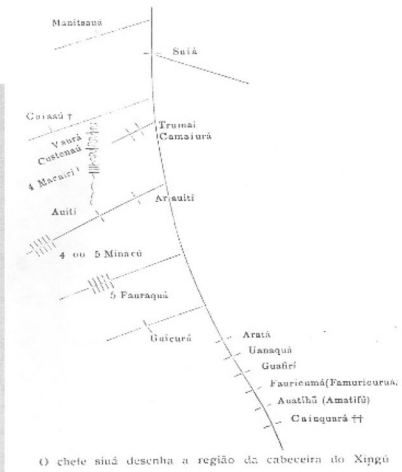
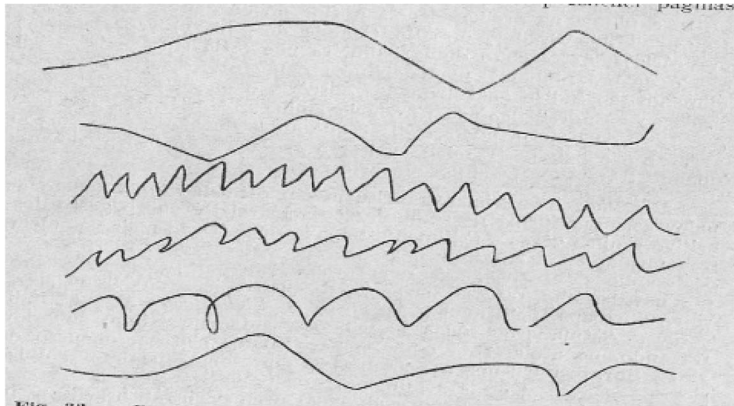
In the Kuikuro language, the noun *iku*, with the corresponding derived verbal stem *ikutse-*, is used for denoting graphisms painted on the skin and other surfaces, "making" (*üü*) the social existence of human and non-human bodies.

The *iku* graphisms were not, however, the source of the word that the Kuikuro chose to mean our writing, Western and alphabetic. The verbal root *ahehi* assumed this role since the first visual apprehensions of our writing, long before the Kuikuro began to be a schooled and literate people in the late 90s.

The original meaning of *ahehi* denotes gestures producing traces on the ground, an action that usually accompanies speech, representing maps, places, distances, schemas. See below two examples of *ahehi*, taken from von den Steinen's (1886) and (1894) books, the first ethnographies of the Upper Xingu people. On the left, wavy and irregular lines represent the rivers of the region, drawn on the floor by an indigenous consultant; each line reproduces the particular course of each one of the six rivers that form the

basin of the sources of the Xingu River (von den Steinen 1894, 1940: 304). On the right, we see a reproduction (made by the author) of the map drawn on the ground by a Suyá chief accompanying his oral explanation of the villages existing at that time along the Culuene river (von den Steinen 1886: 213).

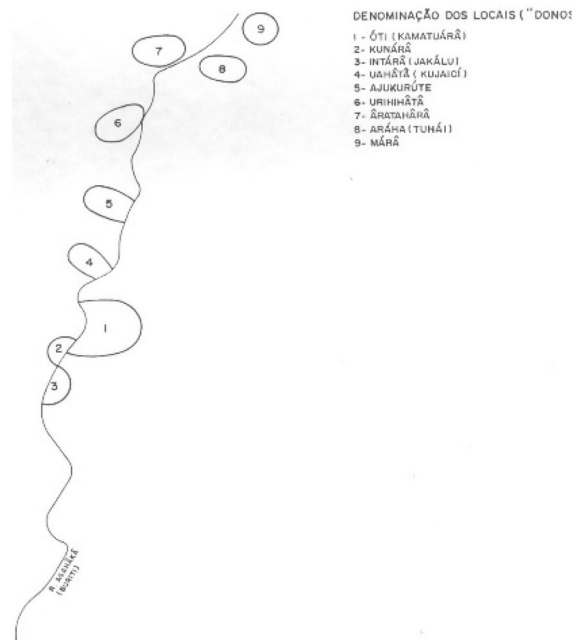
the Oti complex distributed along the Angahuku river, at the half of the eighteenth century (Franchetto 1986: 76).



von den Steinen's (1894, 1940: 303–304) comments on “drawings on the sand” are particularly interesting:

“... the descriptive gesture often and easily took a more complete form, transforming itself into a figure. More frequently, the drawing of maps was observed. Our second trip was caused by a drawing, drawn on the sand, of the upper course of the Xingu, a map by which the Suyá geographer explained his indications ... We saw the same thing among the Kulisehu tribes. Through transversal risks, the number was marked, sometimes of the tribes, sometimes of the waterfalls. The houses were marked with circles, and the villages were represented with rings of circles, according to the true layout of the circular houses around the great plaza ... the drawing had the value of a written word”.

A more recent example of ‘drawing on the sand’ can be seen in the figure below. It was done by a Kuikuro elder in 1981, when he was telling to the author a historical narrative about the old villages of



The Bakairi, neighbors of the Kuikuro, and speakers of another Southern Cariban language, made an

inverted choice. They extended the meaning of the root *iwe* to include the denotation of write/writing. Bakairi people made the inverted choice: (Collet 2006: 277–78), *iwe* corresponds to the Kuikuro *iku* whereas the Bakairi root *eku* corresponds to the Kuikuro *ahehi*.

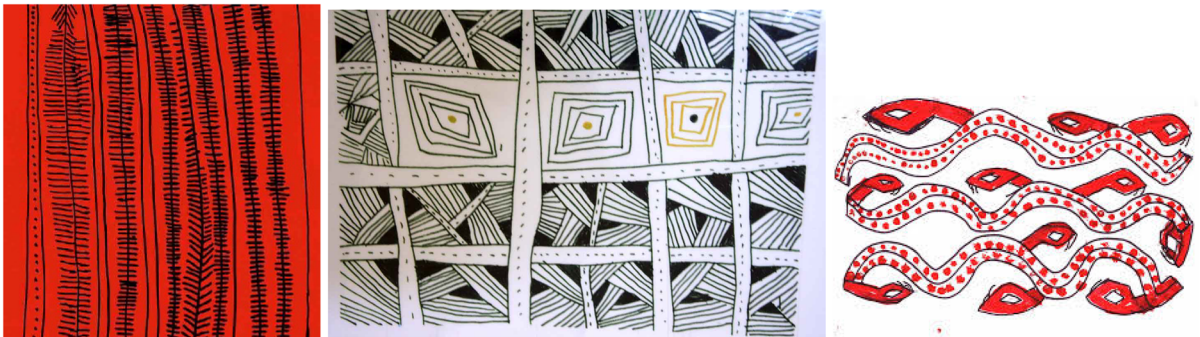
The Bakairi case shows the same path of most Amazonian peoples (and perhaps beyond them), extending to “writing” the meaning of an already existing word denoting graphism (drawing that composes geometric shapes), that ‘makes’ bodies, transforms them so that some type of communication between human and non-human worlds is possible. This is what has been called the ‘shamanization of writing’, and “shamanized” writing in the Amerindian universe will be the topic of the next section. We will return later to the apparently contrasting conception of a “non-shamanized or profane writing”, as exemplified by the Kuikuro case.

Shamanic writing

I must say, first of all, that in order to deal with Amerindian “shamanic or shamanized writing” I will explore, even if briefly, some outstanding works of the already rich anthropological literature on the subject.

“Upon entering the house, he saw me writing and asked me for a pencil and paper. He installed himself at the table and began to draw long curved lines, in the vertical direction of the sheet, which exceeded the limits of the paper. He wrote, just like me. I continued to write, watching out of the corner of my eye what he produced. At one point he stopped and gave me the paper saying, “You wanted to know, didn’t you? Now you know“. And gone, leaving me with the paper in my hands. I ran after him, and asked what the drawing was. They were the tracks of the anaconda, he explained to me.”

Among the Wajãpi, writing and graphisms are referred to by the same term: *kusiwa*, *ekosiware*. *Kusiwa* are graphisms traditionally written on the body, especially on the faces, on the back and on the upper and lower limbs. They are highly complex representations that are linked to the traditional knowledge of the Wajãpi people and their forms of social organization. *Kusiwa* is one of the ways that the Wajãpi traditionally use themselves to represent their ideas and communicate, even before the adoption of alphabetic writing in contemporary times, since these graphic patterns have always been immersed in a network of production of meaning.²



Kusiwa Wajãpi

The Wajãpi speak a language of the Tupi-Guarani family and live in Northeastern Amazonia. Macedo (2009: 510–11) recalls that, at the beginning of her field research, she had looked for an old man to help her understand Wajãpi songs and graphic patterns.

It was the observation of anaconda skin and bones, the fish thorns, the skins of wild animals, but also the

² The repertoire of *kusiwa* graphisms can be found at https://www.ipatrimonio.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/PatImDos_PinturaCorporalArteGraficaWajapi_m.pdf

body painting of enemies that the Wajãpi were inspired to create their graphic motifs. The Wajãpi do not need particular reasons to paint their bodies or objects. The aesthetics and beauty inherent in the drawings are sufficient reasons for their realization. Kusiwa motifs have a function that goes beyond that of aesthetics. The *kusiwa* have symbolic and cultural functions and constitute a way of establishing communication with other cosmological, religious and shamanic domains that constitute the Wajãpi world.

Macedo (2009: 514) quotes Dominique Gallois (2002: 22) who

describes “the use of the term *kusiwa* before the establishment of the practice of writing by the school and alerts us to the shrinkage of meaning that this term begins to suffer from its use in the school context: “The term *kusiwa* refers to the tooth of the cotia (*akusi*), used by the ancient Wajãpi as an instrument to make incisions. *Kusi* was the word previously used exclusively to designate any line, scratch or design produced with varied instruments in stones, ceramics, or even the body, for decorative or therapeutic purposes. Today, *kusiwa* -literally, the “risk path” -also refers to writing. Complex notions like this are not untranslatable, but, when transposed to the school’s only space, they end up reducing the scope of the contexts of meaning that the term expresses”.

Wayãpi graphisms are painted almost exclusively on human bodies; the skin is their support. Synthesizing Macedo’s arguments, they do not “represent”, but have an agency towards humans and other beings that populate the Wayãpi cosmos, showing the plurality of forms can be brought to light. The graphisms, not only among the Wayãpi, have a therapeutic agency also for their olfactory and visual qualities, such as the smells and colors of the pigments used in painting: the annatto (*Bixa orellana*), with its bright red, makes humans invisible and protects them from malevolent beings, while the black genipap (*Genipa americana*) makes them visible and brings them closer to beings of the cosmos and to the dead. Graphisms are thus able to communicate. Even so, when the Wajãpi designate writing with the term *kusiwa*, a movement to extend the meaning of the written word towards graphic practices, rich and imbued with symbology, takes place. Writing goes beyond the sense of technique

linked to communication between men to be understood in a broader sense of extensive communication with beings and cosmological dimensions proper to Wajãpi sociocultural representations. Writing, as well as graphisms and shamanism, would then allow communication between Wajãpi beings and cosmic dimensions. The written signs are, in this perspective, the graphisms of the non-indigenous, since through them it is possible to see and hear invisible beings, making them, in some way, present. Thus, the written signs, like graphisms, allow passages between worlds, to domesticate “other” beings by incorporating their existence.

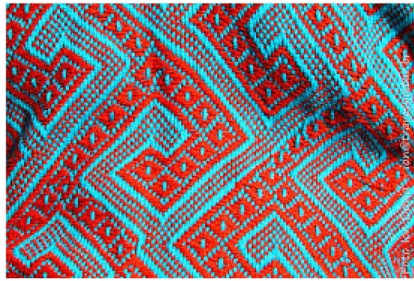
The anthropologist Peter Gow gives us a nice example of the relation between writing and shamanism. In his article “Could Sangama read?” (Gow 1990), he analyses an oral account about the knowledge of writing by a Piro leader, Sangama, before the introduction of writing by missionaries of the Summer Institute of Linguistics. The interpretation of Piro people of the mastery of a technique not yet known and on the contents that it allowed access to was that they were both based on Piro shamanism. Sangama claimed to read the newspapers in his hands without ever having learned to read, because the paper, as well as the graphisms, visualized by the shamans in their experiences with the hallucinogenic ayahuasca (*Banisteriopsis Caapi*), allowed to visualize aspects of a communication imperceptible to most people, to common people. In addition, the reading was done by means of murmurs and throat clearing, confirming its shamanic character. Writing seemed to allow a vision of causes and relationships not accessible to all. Gow (1988) criticizes the classic representationist approach that tries to freeze Amerindian cultures as devoid of forms of representation, as writing, photography and film would be for us.

To refer to our “writing”, the Pano (Huni Kuin and Shipibo-Konibo, among others) and Arawakan peoples (Piro, among others) of Western Amazonia expanded the meanings of the word *kene*, originally denoting graphisms used to cover the surface of the body, and other material supports such as cloth, wood or ceramics. Among the materials used to produce *kene* are natural dyes, seeds, cotton, colored wool yarns and beads.

Much of Els Lagrou’s work is dedicated to the development of a comparative ethnographic analysis of Amazonian graphic design systems, with a focus

and starting point on those of the Pano peoples of the western Amazon, in which the term *kene* (and its cognates) denotes “complex designs”, here called “graphisms”, and, today, as I have already said, also the newly introduced (alphabetical) writing. I synthesize, in the following paragraphs, her findings on Huni Kuin (Kashinawa or Kaxinawa) *kene*. In everyday life

Arawakan people of Western Amazonia, graphisms refer directly to powerful beings, those with designs, such as the snake anaconda and the jaguar. Jaguar is a shaman. The anaconda changes its skin and appears in the visions of ayahuasca and this snake is at the origin of the graphisms *kene*, with their visual mobility and the rising of luminous forms without substance.



Huni Kuin (Kashinawa) *kene*

kene is the art of women who paint, applying graphisms on the skin of the human body, or weave, emphasizing surfaces. This relationship is reversed in the state of creativity and visual mutability caused by the action of ayahuasca, an entheogenic brew consumed in shamanic rituals, above all but not exclusively by men, among many native people of Western Amazonia.³

When looking at *kene* covering skin or a woven cloth, the mind-eye is captured into the drawn space, that conceals and implies, at the same time, hidden or latent figures, that project themselves virtually beyond the limits of this space (Lagrou 2007, 2011, 2012, 2013). An unstable balance between figure and ground is produced by the systematic introduction of an asymmetric detail (Lagrou 2011, 2013, 2019) and the (in)invisible transformation of one motif into another.

Graphisms are on the border between visibility and invisibility and in the altered view induced by ayahuasca announce the transformation of bodies that are no more opaque, but become transparent and their shapes become fleeting and changeable. For Pano and

Luisa Elvira Belaunde, certainly inspired by Lagrou, and enriching the comparative panorama of Amerindian graphic arts, has written beautiful essays on the Shipibo-Konibo *kene* (Belaunde 2009, 2011, 2012, 2013), another complex Pano system of designs, comparable but not identical to Huni Kuin tradition. Belaunde synthetically reproduces Lagrou’s analysis when she says that the application of graphisms on a surface transforms the body, pointing to the possibility of perceiving undisclosed figures, only suggested. *Kene* calls for an act of imagination to be completed beyond what is explicitly given to see. Then, the graphisms can be read as a perceptual technique that points to the transformability of the perceived reality. Graphisms and art in general are seen here as instruments not so much to make invisible beings visible, but of perception that allow the passage between perceptual worlds.

On the Shipibo-Konibo *kene*, Belaunde (2013:199) says that:

“(It) is an Amazonian art of wrapping. Characterized by its *horror vacui*⁴ and its use of lines of multiple thicknesses filled by filigree, the shipibo-konibo designs weave networks of unfolded, inverted and parallel arabesques that surround

³ Ayahuasca is made out of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine, the *Psychotria viridis* shrub, and possibly other vegetable ingredients like *Justicia pectoralis*, *Brugmansia* or *Datura*, and *mapacho* (*Nicotiana rustica*).

⁴ Fear of emptiness.

the surface of the bodies. It is an apparently two-dimensional art, but finely adjusted to the three-dimensional shapes it covers. This is the mastery of women designers who paint, embroider and weave *kene* on all types of surfaces, including the human body...Lagrou (...) shows how the different formal characteristics of the composition of drawings made with *genipa* ink techniques for focusing the gaze whose kinesthetic effect is to suck the viewer into the graphic space, making the opacity of the surface disappear and producing movement and depth in the perceptual space.”

For those interested in writing, the last paragraphs of Belaunde’s text are particularly relevant (2013: 221):

“The fascination that this art has on researchers is not only of an aesthetic nature. There are those who maintain that this sophisticated graphic design fully belongs to the semiotic scope and

The difference is in the fact that Western writing is a method of communication among humans. The *kene*, by contrast, is not an instrument for recording words or concepts from human beings. Those who express themselves through the shipibo-konibo *kene* are the mother of water anaconda and the mothers of plants born from water and therefore also born from anaconda, the powerful being that gives women the ability to perform their drawings so that they can be seen by others. Therefore, the drawings are not a register: they have *shama*, they have “accumulated potency”; they transform and heal the world, beautifying it. But also they set traps that confuse and suck the eye into the graphic space and its mazes of paths...The Shipibo-Konibo women are the writers of the messages dictated by the spirits mothers who make and unmake bodies. The power of *kene* lies in the force of animation that they create on the skin, a skin that is not a surface, but a deep, moving space.”



Shipibo *kene*

could be a writing...it would be interesting to reverse roles and, instead of trying to decipher the *kene* with Western criteria, look at western writing with Amazonian eyes. If from the Shipibo-Konibo point of view the writing that covers the books and notebooks is a form of *kene*, it is not so unreasonable to think that the drawings that cover the skin, screens and Shipibo-Konibo ceramics can be a form of writing. The fundamental difference, however, lies in the purpose of the writing and the question of who, or to whom, the written messages are addressed.

Lagrou (2013) explores the connections and differences between her comparative model for abstract graphic design systems and the theory of chimeras and pictograms proposed by Severi (2007, 2011) in his study of systems of complex pictographic images such as those of the Central American Kuna. Lagrou points to two different, and complementary, mnemonic or relational devices in the universe of Amazonian thought and aesthetics, like *kene*, and, on the other side, pictograms, based on sequencing and salience.

Anthropologist Carlo Severi has dedicated a good parts of his works to the analysis and interpretation of Kuna pictography and has launched, more recently, to a broader comparison of Amerindian mental artifacts that include the famous Andean *kipus*, Ye'kuana weaving, *kusiwa* and *kene*. Severi draws our attention to an extremely relevant fundamental issue (Severi 2012: 455):

“The false opposition between orality and writing, the reluctance to compare the West with the Rest, and the complexity of the relationship between the arts of memory and writing techniques have together contrived to hamper our understanding of the memory techniques that we find in non-Western oral traditions. This difficulty is, however, not merely theoretical. The study of these techniques frequently throws up little-studied objects that are also extremely hard to conceptualize. Our customary categories (drawing, symbols, ideograms, picto-grams, semasiography, writing, etc.) are ill adapted to these objects, which are normally vaguely described as “mnemonics.” It is also frequently hard to grasp their underlying logic.”

Severi had proposed to call “chimerical” the type of representation associated to such Amerindian mental artefacts, and he, pointed out that “chimerical” representations are characterized by the condensation of image in some essential traits (Severi 2003).⁵ Condensation engenders, by projection, one or more interpretations of the form. What can be seen is considered, implicitly, a part of another form, whose presence is imputed and possibly represented. In an act of looking like this, the invisible prevails over the visible and seems to indicate the context. Severi formulated the hypothesis that, in the traditions usually called “oral”, this structure, “for indications”, gives the image a particular aspect that allows it to play a crucial role in the social practices, both linked to oral performances, memorization and the consolidation of knowledge.

⁵ As Severi himself explains, “chimeric” representations are not exclusive to Amerindian thought and art and can be found in abundance in other contexts around the world, including in different periods and traditions of Western visual and verbal arts (Severi 2013).

It is worth emphasizing, at his point, Severi's contribution for a healthy association between Amerindian pictographies, orality and writing (Severi 2012: 465–466);

“...underpinning the wide range of local variation between different Amerindian cultures, we find a series of logical principles determining the use of pictograms. Different narrative themes (the journey, a spirit dialogue, or a war or hunting party) are played out in an oral genre (song, chant, or story) by means of parallelistic formulae with a fixed word order. This order transforms the narrative sequence into an alternation between fixed repetitive formulae and suites of variations, often in the form of lists of proper nouns. In the context of this mnemonically organized ensemble of words, the pictogram's role is to give mnemonic salience to the variations. In this way, via the iconographic transcription of variation, the pictogram makes it possible efficiently to memorize long, elaborate texts...In other words, social memory in many Amerindian societies is based neither on a process analogous to alphabetic writing nor on some vaguely defined “oral” tradition. Instead, it depends on graphic mnemonic devices whose primary role is to describe the relationship between a relatively stable iconographic set and a rigorously structured use of ritual language. Amerindian pictography is not then some abortive forerunner of alphabetic writing, but a supple and sophisticated mnemonic device in its own right, with a shared, coherent graphic style and a regular relationship to memorized texts.”

As the last sentence suggests, Severi (2012: 480) offers some provocative ideas, summed up at the end of his article, regarding the notion of writing and its multiple links to pictography, after a description of the first manifestations of writing in documents authored by Northamerican Amerindian, where, for at least fifty years, pictograms and writing coexisted.

“...the linguistic sign was deployed in a mental space still oriented by the operations (ordering and salience) implied by the use of pictography. In this case, it is precisely not (as has so often been claimed) Amerindian pictography that tries, and fails, to imitate Euro-American writing. Rather, it

is writing that has learned to speak the mental language (“common to all nations,” as Vico put it) of Amerindian arts of memory. It is obvious that there remains a great deal of work to be done teasing out and resolving these exchanges between mnemonic iconography and linguistic signs, as well as exploring oral and iconographic traditions and their links to mathematical calculations and numerical series. Let me just say that the theoretical and methodological perspective proper to the anthropology of memory (understood as the study of certain techniques of thought) in no way excludes the parallel study of the trajectories taken by alphabetic writing when it is introduced into predominantly “oral” cultures. Such a study would clear a path for the analysis of the uses of writing within “oral” traditions and, therefore, within a mental space characterized by the use of “mental artifacts” proper to the non-Western arts of memory.”

The idea of relations between mnemonic iconography and linguistic signs deserves some clarification. Severi’s analysis of Kuna pictography shows that its pictograms very often represent lists of proper nouns linked to formulaic narrative sentences that are only spoken orally in the sung speech of shamanistic chants, structured in parallelistic lines and blocs with variations between repeated formulae. Kuna pictography does not “translate”, intersemiotically, the repeated formulae, but just the sequence of variations, like toponyms and names of cosmological entities. One pictogram can be associated to a spirit’s village that in turn is associated with groups of names of the entities that inhabit it, the latter being made explicit in the chant’s “text”.

As Severi (2012: 464) says,

“The picture writing transcription of a Kuna chant consequently involves three separate elements: a graphic formula and a verbal formula, both constant and independent of one another, and a variation of the text translated into pictograms. Far from being completely superimposable on one another, the two graphic and oral codes, each provide specific information.”

The complexity of this relationship between pictography and verbal arts can be found in other Amerindian contexts, such as among the Marubo, another Pano people of the western Amazon (Cesarino

2013). To close this long section, I return to the Kuikuro and their apparently “profane” conception of writing, another cultural context, where there are no pictographies, but graphisms.

At the southern edge of the Amazon, The Kuikuro are also “a people with design” (Lagrou 2012), like the Wayãpi, the Huni Kuin, the Shipibo-Conibo, the Piro, the Assuriní, the Karajá, and, outside Amazon, the Kadiwéu, among many others, which all have complex graphics systems. The Kuikuro have a repertoire of more than 40 named graphisms, most of which combine in absolute symmetry, sequential or specular, basic forms that are repeated or are recursively encapsulated producing complex designs. The names of the graphisms refer to “animals” appreciated for “having *iku*”, such as snakes, turtles, butterflies, certain fish of the local ichthyofauna and certain birds. A few *iku* “only have names”, exclusively their own and untranslatable. A few others organize the minimalist figurative representation of an insect, like the dragonfly, in parallel oblique rows. Others are just short lines or dots. It is a very diverse repertoire. Like Shipibo-Conibo or Assurini graphisms, *iku* produces the perception of depth thanks to the interplay of parallel lines and the filling of internal spaces. The *iku* are painted on certain parts of the body within a frame in clearly delineated spaces, but gain a virtual infinity in woven baskets.

The relationship between Kuikuro graphisms and shamanism is very indirect if not non-existent. The shaman, leading with spirits and the dead, acts with his naked body, and “naked” means unpainted; avoiding any proximity to the pigments and their smells. The painted body is one of full socialization in the universe of human relations, on the stage of festive and joyful performances, with dances and songs, during the rituals that keep the Xingu people in their villages and participants in the intertribal exchange network. Bodies and objects are “made” by the application of graphisms, they are transformed into beautiful people, artifacts, ritual characters. Mythical narratives explain how various “beings with design” received their *iku* by ancestral demiurges and thus came into existence as they are (Franchetto 2015: 15).

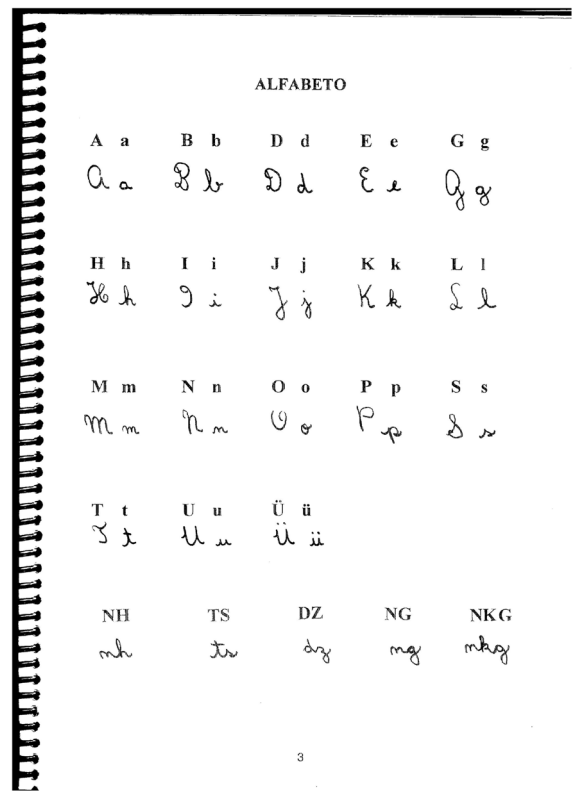
The Kuikuro graphic system is certainly not of the Huni Kuin type, but neither can it simply be included in the Shipibo-Conibo model. The further development of comparative research of graphic systems in lowlands South America will lead to other new models. So why did the Kuikuro not “choose” the term *iku* to

designate the alphabetic writing they were being introduced to? At the moment, I don't have a satisfactory explanation for this deviation from the expected standard, but I can suggest some interpretive keys. In the first place, I draw attention to the specificity of the formal features, conception, meanings and practices associated with *iku* graphisms in the Kuikuro context, which seem to me weakly connected with shamanism, if not even disconnected from it, as was discussed briefly in previous paragraphs. It is a very preliminary analysis, however, and one that needs further investigation. On the other hand, it seems that Kuikuro's visual and cognitive attention to writing focuses more on the formal characteristics of its traces and the gestures that produce them, leading to the *ahéhi*'s features and gestures, another graphic, communicative practice, more clearly connected to speech.

The Kuikuro deviation, however, does not prevent approximations to other Amerindian graphic experiences. In the initial phase of the introduction of alphabetical writing, the Kuikuro, individuals from a society of oral tradition, were peering at the letters in perfect order of an alphabet memorized and recited at school, shown on the first page of booklets, as an object already given and untouchable in its quasi-sacredness. Their eyes roamed the letters in multiple directions,⁶ as if looking at images to be captured and

interpreted. The choice of letters to represent "sounds" was the subject of endless debates in which "phonological" functionality was replaced by aesthetic or political judgments (Franchetto 2008). A letter can be beautiful or ugly. At first, the Kuikuro resisted the introduction of "exotic" letters, which do not exist in the alphabet of the dominant language (Portuguese), to subsequently value them as diacritics of a revalued identity. They rejected letters that represented the same "sound" in the alphabet of the neighboring indigenous people with whom they maintain unfriendly relations. Certainly, the meanings of letters and writing were different for the Kuikuro, who, despite not having any pictographic tradition, like the Kuna and Marubo, ended up producing, on a sheet of paper a seemingly pictographic hybrid of non-random images and written words, in their first 'writing' exercises, as shown.

⁶ Maia (2018), right at the beginning of the presentation of the book *Psycholinguistics and Education*, shows the photo of a Maori robe from New Zealand, made after the introduction of alphabetical writing by missionaries, in the middle of the nineteenth century, with embroidered letters among other decorative motifs. This use of letters is defined by Maia as a result of his iconic and non-symbolic appreciation. In the next paragraph, the author briefly mentions an experimental, unpublished research that showed how the Karajá, a Brazilian indigenous society of primary oral culture and recent exposure to alphabetical writing, visually go through written words (in the Karajá language) and graphisms, traditionally applied on human skin, in addition to other supports, with the same vertical saccadic ocular movements, suggesting the same "iconic appreciation". A Kuikuro consultant also participated in this experiment, reaching the same result when looking to a written word and a painting. Maia contrasts this discovery with the ocular movements of fully literate individuals, from a culture of alphabetic writing, who go through letters seeking their symbolic value (orthographic and phonological representation) and not their iconic value. Note that in the Karajá language, belonging to the Macro-jê stock, the word *rãty* designates both the graphisms that embellish the body and the alphabetical writing, as well as skin and paper are referred to by the term *tyy* (in the male variety) and *tyky* (in the female variety).



The Kuikuro alphabet (ISA/MEC/PNUD, 1996: 3),

The Kuikuro case is probably not unique, and reveals another path: the semantic extension of another term (*ahéhi*), that denotes the act of producing

traces on the ground, representing maps, places, distances, schemas, which we would call 'profane' in contrast to what happens even among neighboring peoples in intense contact with the Kuikuro, all connected to a shamanistic view of writing, but it seems that writing, in both cases, is associated with a visual-cognitive apprehension of complex relationships not directly visible. When the Kuikuro draw a map on the ground, they express relations between parts of a domesticated territory conceived as parts of a body; when they draw the base of a house, they express relations inside the domesticated space that will be the house also conceived as a body. The relationship with speech (its supposed phono-centered representation) is not at stake, but it is true that the act and products of *ahehi* (maps or schemas) not only accompany speech (a narrative, an exegesis, a song, a conversation), as something complementary, but have a (concomitant) speech in inherent relationship, where voice, gesture and gaze intertwine and are inseparable. It is *graphein* of orality, a writing of orality.

This overlap between drawing and speech is not new. Present in debates on the evolution of writing, drawing was commonly taken as a precursor to writing, taken in turn as a fixator of oral discourse. However, the relationship between the domains of drawing, writing and orality is more complex and less "split" than proposed (Severi 2004). In his work on Cuna pictography, Severi looks at the fallacious opposition between orality and writing, demonstrating, through his ethnography and analysis of Cuna pictograms, the bridges between these two domains. The Amerindian graphisms that we are dealing with here are not pictograms in complementary relationship with oral reports, but they are imbued of the metamorphic logic that defines the relationship between domains and beings in the cosmos. It is in the relationship between the visualization of graphic motifs and the utterance of words that metamorphosis takes place.

When 'writing' reaches the Amerindian people

As we have seen, writing as graphics, a cultural pattern, is apprehended, incorporated and used by Amerindians as a means of communication and for establishing interaction with other beings through graphic patterns applied on sheets of paper and

notebooks. Writing, like graphics in its visual condensation, would present, identify and metamorphose multiple beings, facilitating communication between them.

If we look at the experience of writing among Amerindians—living in small and dominated societies, recently conquered by literacy—from another point of view, writing, intended to be 'civilizing', annihilates forms and mechanisms of memorization and transmission inherent to orality. It freezes the movement of versions, of saying, words and constructions. We know almost nothing about the reshaping feed-back of exposure to a dominant language, seen as superior, seen as inherently written, on the oral language, not only due to the overwhelming entry of lexical elements, but also by the subtle penetration of new grammatical elements.

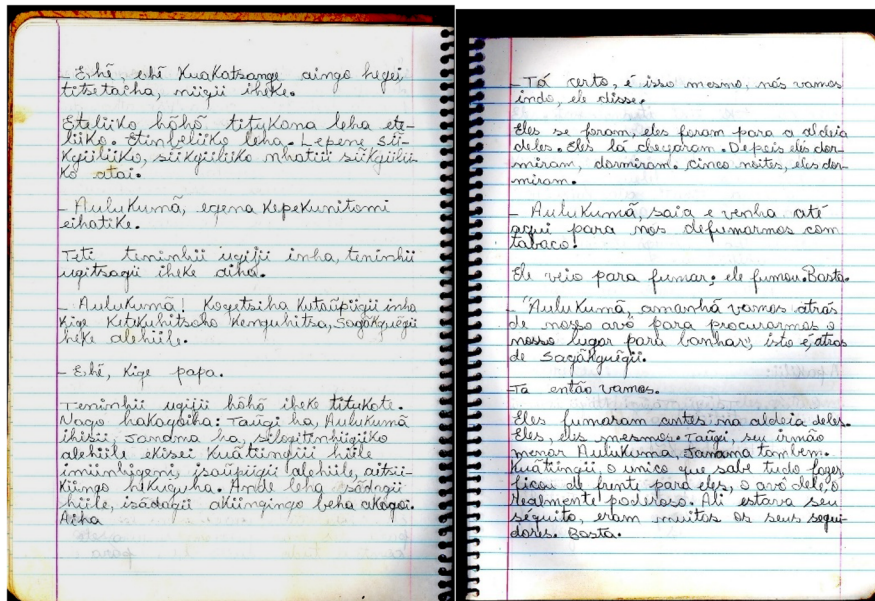
The awareness of mutilation and reduction, which characterize the transformation of speech into writing, emerged dramatically when I began to analyze the diversity of registers and styles that permeate narratives, ceremonially sung speeches. Every natural human language has, in its spoken realization, a rhythm, a melody, which is influenced by syllabic groupings, metric structures, stresses and accents. The rhythm of the speech-language is transfigured into the rhythms of the narration and, even more, into a sung speech.

Kuikuro life is crossed by *akinha*, 'narratives': memory, explanation, paths of understanding, cosmological sedimentation, construction of emblematic characters, transmission of knowledge. The art of the *akinha oto* ('masters of narrating') is the art of the rhythm of parallelisms, of the calm and progressive stitching that keeps the *enga* (path, base) through successive *itsikungu*, deviations, comments, the necessary dialogue between narrator and his *itütsüingi*, 'the what-sayer', a specific listener who plays the role of the story-teller's interlocutor with his phatic interventions or requesting clarification. I taught the rudiments of writing to the first Kuikuro, a teenager in puberal seclusion, in 1980. I participated in the training of the first indigenous teachers in the 90s. The researcher is a writer responsible for the emergence of indigenous writers. I am responsible for the appearance of the first generation of Kuikuro writers in their native tongue. We produced books, where, based on simple, childlike prose, the narrative art of performing an *akinha* disappears. The Kuikuro

teachers’ decision not to write *akinha* anymore, for and at school, came when the awareness of mutilation was associated with the refusal to spend long hours listening to *akinha oto*, transcribing, reducing, translating.

The Kuikuro language documentation project, of its genres and verbal arts, started in 2001,⁷ and resulted in the continued training of indigenous transcribers and translators, who learned to listen carefully to recordings, carefully transcribing what they heard. Jamalui Kuikuro considers himself, today, a professional translator; his brother, Mutua, embarked on the adventure of becoming a researcher of his own language and culture. Here is the reproduction of two pages from one of Jamalui’s many notebooks (Franchetto 2012).

On the left is the transcription, made in 2002, of a mythical narrative—*tuã etihũtepũgũ*, ‘the origin of waters’—on the right the translation. Observe the marking of dialogues, which constitute no less than half of any narrative, the use of punctuation, the division into paragraphs. The prose text model is still present; Jamalui had passed by the school, where nothing is said about the traditional art of story-telling. The distance between this writing-translation exercise and the first written essays of indigenous teachers in training is striking. See below what a group of them produced almost ten years earlier, in 1994, the year of the first training course for indigenous teachers in the Xingu region, when they were asked to ‘write’ the narrative *ana otsogitsũgũ*, ‘the origin of corn’.



Akinha: Tuã Etihũtepũgũ (the origin of waters): transcription and translation

⁷ The Program for the Documentation of Endangered Languages (DoBeS) supported the Project for the Documentation of the Kuikuro language from 2001 to 2005.



The figure above is a clear example of the coexistence of pictography and writing. Pictography, in its various manifestations, as we have already said, was and is present in many Amerindian societies. As Severi (2013) points out emphatically, it should not be thought of as a pre or a proto-writing, but as another writing, possible, real, one among all those non-alphabetic representations that were generated and used at different times, in specific contexts, for different purposes, in the history of the native peoples of the Americas.

The central elements of the narrative, from the point of view of the authors and of their indigenous readers, are in this drawing-writing. The narrative is condensed into two horizontal planes: the upper plan is covered by the 'design' of a corn plantation, the place of the mythical transformation. The lower plane is in turn organized in vertical 'lines': on the right, the results of the transformation (different types of corn and the origin of the women's pubic hair from the straw of the burned ears). On the left, there are the transforming characters with their names and arranged in a vertical,

precise sequence, of two pairs followed by two individuals, all belonging to the (non) time of the origins, and a sentence written in Kuikuro that says "so, at that time, they moved the corn, first of all, they went to move the corn".

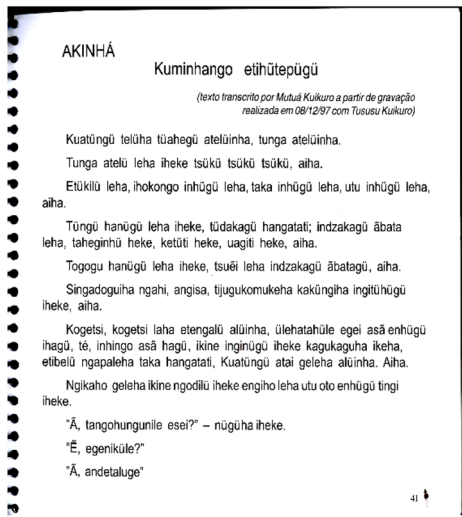
This creative—and really inter-cultural—fusion of graphic modalities of expression is true iconography, the Amerindian writing, and nicely illustrates what Severi says (2012: 468):

"...if we wish to analyze an iconographic tradition linked to the use of memory, we must begin by looking at the relationship it establishes between encoding and evocation, ordering and salience, and power and expressivity."

Then, using once more Severi's words, first, and most radically, we must tilt at the opposition between oral and written traditions. In many cultures, social memory appears to rely only on the spoken word when, in fact, images play a central role in the transmission of knowledge. There is no symmetrical opposition between orality and writing. The counterpart of writing is not merely the spoken word, but the hybridization of word and image in the form of a mnemonic device. Pictographic traditions seems to realize an "impossible combination" of picture and sign.⁸

In a few years of schooling, this hybrid of images and writing was replaced by monochromatic lines on the page of a book. This is what we see in the figure below: the Kuikuro narrative on the origin of corn transformed into typed text, edited many times and published in a book for school use. Parallelistic repetitions were eliminated, as well many other narrative elements considered superfluous or redundant, despite their value for the appreciation of the mastery of verbal art by a skilled story-teller.

⁸ A reviewer suggested that some comics or graphic novels seem to use also a "hybridization of words and images". I consider that, compared to the hybrid Kuikuro "object" analyzed here, we are facing unparalleled hybrids, because they have a completely different hybridization logic.



Akinha Kuminhano Etihũtepũgũ (the origin of our food)

Kuikuro (2002:41),

Beauty in everyday practice is understood as an expression of moral and political value, but there is no beauty on the written page. Alphabetical orthography is a “pure” conversion—adequate, although not perfect—of the real phonological units of the oral language. So far, the task seems to be only, we would say, technical, that of a mere scientifically based code conversion. There is a whole process that baptizes writing, this new “language”, means another conversion, at the same time religious, social and political, spread by the West and imposed to fulfill its civilizing mission, leveling and limiting the expression of forms of orality. The introduction of writing accompanies the entry of Amerindian populations in the colonial world. The Kuikuro, however, maintained some resilience in the long discussions about choosing the letters of their alphabet. When they “discovered”, for example, that the central high vowel (not rounded) does not exist in Portuguese, the reference language, the young literacy students attributed to it the grapheme *lũl*, an invention, a *bricolage* of visual elements, to name graphically this sound, making it distinct from the other high vowels (i, u), but not as distinct as the letter | y | used for the same sound by the Kamayurá neighbors, whose speakers were compelled to follow the tradition of writing Tupi-Guarani languages (Franchetto 2008): *lũl* was judged, first of all, a beautiful letter. In addition, letters are objects of disputes, identity emblems, vectors of social and political approximation or

detachment. Letters or graphemes are not just letters or graphemes, they are visually aesthetic and moral objects, indexicals of relations in society and in the cosmos.

Final remarks

It is necessary to deconstruct the idea that indigenous peoples are unwritten. It is possible to perceive the meaningful effects of a perverse colonial linguistic policy that materialized the belief that “Brazilian Indians” only had access to forms of writing with the European invasions and, consequently, only from that moment would they have at their disposal a technology that was able to store their history, their memories. This understanding is the result of a Western logic that instituted a formal and limited division between the oral and the written, reducing orality to speech and writing to an alphabet, which ended up labeling the Amerindian peoples as “illiterate”.

What historically did not exist, in some groups, is an alphabetic writing, which does not mean that they did not have forms of writing. After all, there are countless forms of records with communicative intentions, especially graphics, found by anthropologists and linguists in different native cultures of the Americas (Rezende 2019). Menezes de Souza (2006: 203) states that it is necessary to understand writing “as a form of interaction through which an action of the hands (with or without an instrument) leaves traces on any surface; in this sense, writing can be conceived as a form to represent ideas, values or events not only alphabetically.” There are many types of writing that constitute orality itself, if we seek to understand, in one movement, writing or scriptures and orality.

I can’t find better words to conclude than those of Sandra Benites, a Guarani Nhandeva intellectual:

“For the Guarani, what is on paper is not so important, what causes an immediate effect is the daily practice. *Juruá*’s (non-indigenous people) knowledge is on paper, standing immovable, not following the movement, *omyĩ wa’e* and *guata*, the walking. My grandmother said she could not believe the paper very much, because the paper is blind, the writing has no feelings, does not walk, does not breathe, is dead story. We need to be careful about this, although writing is also part of our lives today.”

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