

## **Selling “cultures”:**

### **The Traffic of Cultural Representations from the Yawanawa**

Excertos da tese doutoral, para a Disciplina FSL0638 – Sociologia Econômica

**(MATERIAL EM EDIÇÃO. NÃO CITAR OU CIRCULAR)**

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#### **Apresentação**

O texto a seguir corresponde a fragmentos de minha tese doutoral e foram selecionados com o intuito de fornecer um suporte à apresentação e discussão de alguns de seus achados relativos à produção e consumo de produtos que, de alguma forma, incorporam imagens e figurações de culturas amazônicas. Em particular, os excertos lidam com a transformação de sementes, imagens de indígenas pintados, assim como uma narrativa a respeito dos usos tradicionais dessas sementes, da luta pela terra e pela preservação da natureza e da cultura indígenas, em produtos de maquiagem. O foco da apresentação e dos excertos é na construção dessas imagens e dos produtos, bem como as tensões em torno de como avaliá-los e qualificá-los, em relação a estratégias mais amplas de posicionamento da marca no mercado. Uma questão fundamental aqui é o limite com que se vende e se consome um outro distante, um povo da Amazônia com receitas para a beleza e o bem-estar. Os excertos incluem o resumo da tese, para quem quiser compreender melhor onde essas considerações se inserem no objeto mais amplo.

Espero com esses excertos animar a discussão em torno de temas como uma sociologia do ator econômico, a construção de produtos e a permanente controvérsia em torno de suas propriedades, junto a associações simbólicas e materiais com seus consumidores/usuários, e o posicionamento de marcas em mercados.

Boa leitura!

## **Abstract**

What are the tensions, alliances, negotiations, and translations underlying the traffic of cultural representations in markets? This research analyzes two economic projects maintained by the Yawanawa, an indigenous population from the southwestern Amazon: one project produces annatto seeds for an American cosmetic firm, and the other involves the public performance of cultural and, notably, spiritual practices. The indigenization of market practices and specific Euro-American categories -such as monetary exchange, environmental protection, and cultural difference -allow cultural elements to be translated into representations of enduring cultures, harmonious lifestyles and good environmental practices. The economic valuation of cultural representations is being used as a new tool in local conflicts that occur internally among leaders and groups in their quest for prestige, loyalty, and material resources, and externally with the region's non-native population and with national initiatives to develop profitable activities in the Amazon. Part of our global market society, the Yawanawa can also employ the demand and valuation of representations associated with their culture to individual projects on the construction of reputation and leadership, and more broadly, to the reassertion of their collective identity as a specific indigenous population with special rights. This research explores market exchange as an arena of complex sociability and conflict. It analyzes how values are created and exchanged within the market in a true cultural economy, and how individual and collective identity projects are constructed, challenged, and sometimes reproduced by the traffic of material and immaterial objects.

## **Excertos**

### **6. An Upper Mississippi Interlude: Beauty is as beauty does**

Hitherto I have presented in details the actors whose culture, in represented forms, circulates in the commodity exchange. The goal so far has been to investigate the meanings these actors bestow to their economic undertakings and, more specifically, to commodification, the objects and processes it entails and brings. I also attempted to situate these actions of promoting ethnicity in broader strategies of indigenization. I finally showed

that the local accents, which they imprint to the external things, processes and institutions and the local mediations of their social structures are not consensual or homogeneous and that the community displays different expectations regarding these strategies. But before moving to the projects themselves, it is necessary to present, even if in a broad-brush fashion, another actor involved in these processes.

This research deals with two sets of products, resulting from specific projects or alliances maintained by the Yanawawa. One is the set of cultural practices, notably those that are part of their ethnomedical and shamanic systems, which circulate through their agents and visitors. This exchange requires the attendance of producers and consumers in a common space. The other product, I will attempt to argue in Part III, is not properly the *annatto* seeds, that the Yawanawa produce and employ in their body paintings, but *uruku*, a trademarked line of makeup produced and sold by Aveda Corporation. These products entail the transformation of seeds and the represented image and location of the Yawanawa into a new entity, which creates and is created by a network of actors. The encounters that originated this network and its dynamics need not to be explained here, as it is the topic of the first chapter (chapter 7) of Part III. Yet a few words on Aveda are in order, since despite using material and symbolic outputs of the Yawanawa, the firm is also a producer, involved in the cultural economy underlying this exchange. Part of the methodological proposal of this work is that economic transactions are better understood if the actors, their positions and specific interpretations are taken into account. And there is no ontological reason why this cannot be done with a firm. Even amidst agents fully integrated into market institutions, different orientations and creative forms of action might be found. Not least, because creative patterns of economic action might be a form of deflecting competition.

Given the limited access to the firm, I provide here a general portrait, focusing on the ways they represent and legitimize their actions. I attempt to demonstrate that despite all the differences with the Yawanawa, Aveda has also been extremely dependent on the workings of his chief and his visionary leadership, and that its success in enlisting loyal customers, mainly professionals of the hair and skin care industry, is related to its appropriation of foreign values through the mediation of the Western categories of thought. I finally show some fundamental tensions around the defining qualities of its products and the vision the firm wants to project. These tensions are significant to the politics of value underlying the commodification of cultural images of the Yawanawa and *annatto* seeds, which in the case of Aveda, affects the process of qualification of the product.

## 6.1 Towards green: a tribalization of beauty

The history of the development of the green and natural segment in the beauty industry is well described by Jones (2010: Ch. 8) and is relevant to situate the emergence of Aveda. Since the 1960s, the beauty industry faced attacks from a series of organized actors. It was not only accused of projecting ethnocentric and unattainable images of beauty that were oppressive to women and dismissive of culturally-specific patterns of beauty, but it also became increasingly clear that its products also represented a major threat to human health. Unreal promises to make all women alike, despite their differences, were criticized by feminists and colonized peoples calling for diverse forms of bodily expression. Environmentalists and consumer movements, in turn, started to raise concerns about industry practices and the risks of beauty products. Until that moment, scientific methods of synthesizing ingredients and concocting them were considered the safest and most effective way to create skin and hair products. But a series of scandals in both sides of the Atlantic involving chemical ingredients in cosmetics shook this consensus. The next decade produced a plethora of scientific evidence of the carcinogenic potential of regular hair dyes, increasing health concerns. Animal testing equally came under criticism. By the 1980s, the Ozone Layer crisis exposed the environmental damages of aerosols.

The industry response was varied. It would eventually adapt to the new times, more in terms of marketing than in terms of alternative ingredients, but the first reactions of large companies was to deny what they normally saw as exaggerated claims aimed at scandalizing the public opinion<sup>1</sup>.

These events gave impetus to the incipient niche of green and natural cosmetics. The concept always existed, in fact, as herbalists, traditional pharmacists and perfumists predate the mass cosmetic industry. Nonetheless, natural products were discredited by the technological progress of the industry, at least until the scandals led to the recognition that beauty was not a synonym of health and science did not imply safety. And thus “natural”, “botanical”, “organic” and “green” became new categories and labels to the products of the beauty industry. Obviously the definitions and scope of these terms and their adoption by the industry always remained debatable. In fact, most of the firms continue still today to add “plant extracts to the same chemical formulas used in their existing products” (Jones 2010: 282).

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<sup>1</sup> See in this regard, the reaction of the top research scientist at L’Oreal, quoted in Jones (2010: 279).

Simultaneously, in different fronts, there were calls for decolonizing the image of beauty that was pervasive in the industry and liberating it from the patterns of beauty that enslaved women. Some firms also began to respond to these calls, albeit with different results. In the intersection of these challenges, multiple new firms selling all-natural products were created in the late 1970s, founded by influential leaders with new ideas for the sector, amongst which The Body Shop and Aveda became the most famous (Jones 2010: 283). Central to the development of their businesses were the presence of a rich discursive element, an institutionalized ideology calling for alternative practices, and their exposure to distant populations and their practices, which inspired them to return to natural ingredients and holistic practices, to recover the harmony of beauty, nature and health.

In the case of Aveda, as the name of the firm already indicates, the inspiration came from an encounter with Ayurveda, the ancient holistic system of healing from India. Combining the Sanskrit words *ayur* (life) and *veda* (science or knowledge), ayurveda means “the science of life”. One of the oldest healing systems of the world, its cures are based on the use of five basic elements, sensory diagnoses and the uses of mostly botanicals and oils. The system “aims to integrate and balance the body, mind and spirit” (USA/NCCAM 2011) and, thus, it provides a platform for reintegrating beauty and health. This encounter happened in the 1970s, when Aveda’s founder, Horst Rechelbacher, met Swami Rama, an Indian Guru in Minneapolis. Rechelbacher was so impressed that he spent six months in India learning about the uses of plants and oils. A hair stylist and salon owner, he developed products based on essential oils and introduced aromatherapy in his salons upon his return (Jones 2010: 285). The Ayurvedic practices seemed to him a solution to replace the heavily-chemical based, dangerous hair products that had made him sick.

The history of Aveda is inseparable from the history of its founder, the Austrian-born Horst Rechelbacher. Even after selling the firm to the giant Estée-Lauder and opening a new competing firm, Rechelbacher continues to be strongly associated with his first business creation and Aveda, in turn, at least internally and discursively, continues to uphold his rich narratives that give sense to the services and products it provides. The firm and, indeed, his experience, is founded on a myth of origin which shares elements of a Classic Greek Epic and the Schumpeterian conception of entrepreneurship (Schumpeter 1968[1934]). The narrated version of the development of Aveda, repeated in every interview he offers (Cf. Young 2011; Gordon 2011) and in his book (Rechelbacher 2008), emphasizes the ways in which he transformed challenges and hardships into opportunities to change his and others lives. One of

the chapters of his book *Minding your business* bears the suggestive title “Crisis = opportunity”. Rechelbacher’s trajectory is narrated in a *trope* of endurance and intrepidity analogous to that of the workings of the Yawanawa chiefs. It all started in Klagenfurt, Austria, where Horst was born to an herbalist mother and a shoemaker father deeply affected by his experiences of war. At fourteen, he decided to take an apprenticeship as hairdresser at the salon across the street. He turned to be very talented and his scissors were the ticket to travel around Europe, practicing his vocation (Gordon 2011). Invited to the United States in 1963 to tour the country with the American Beauty Association, Rechelbacher found himself in a life-changing experience: a drunk driver crashed into his new car, bought with his earnings of the tour. In his own words, he

*“ended up in a hospital with several broken vertebrae. [...] I was flat broke and owed a great deal of money in medical bills. The hospital confiscated my passport, leaving me with no choice but to stay in Minneapolis and take a job at a salon to pay off my debt.*

*So there I was, a young, internationally acclaimed hair stylist at the top of his game, fresh from the most prestigious salons in Europe, suddenly injured, broke, and stranded in a then unfashionable city in the Midwest”* (Rechelbacher 2008: 57).

Within months working at a local salon he managed to obtain credit to open his own. “Horst from Austria” was an immense success, followed by a cosmetology school, but other crises followed. He realized that the chemicals contained in the products he employed in his services were harming him and his clients. Luckily, his herbalist mother had the cure for his illness: a homemade brew (Young 2011). This was a trigger to rediscover the world of plants: “Through my mother, I discovered my passion for the plant world, and we began to develop shampoos, balsams, and massage oils from a plant base with lavender, rosemary, and eucalyptus. My customers were thrilled.” (Gordon 2011). But a third crisis came with a burnout and a failed marriage, prompting him into his journey to India. Ayurveda provided him a solution for all the problems he saw in the industry and upon his return, in 1978, he decided to start a business producing flower and plant-based hair and skin products. He named the new company Aveda, after the Sanskrit *Veda*, meaning knowledge. Rechelbacher later found all that *A* means all, making it the perfect name (all knowledge) (ibid.). The firm began to sell hair and skin care products to local salons and to develop service rituals associated with beauty.

Ayurveda was, in fact, more an inspiration and a philosophy than an actual guideline for the products and services provided by the firm. In fact, his first product, a clove shampoo, was the result of his mother's work, not of any Indian wisdom. Except for the spas later developed by Aveda, where some adapted Ayurvedic practices are offered, the sensorial system of diagnosis and cure of traditional Ayurveda was transformed into new products and ritualized services using turmeric, aromatherapy, the notion of *dosha*, or humors, and the notion of *chakras*, or body energy centers. The three *doshas* that, according to Ayurvedic lessons, are humors that combine in unique ways to comprise a person or ideal-typical bodies are presented to customers as a system of classification of their own mental and physical states that would enable them to select specific products for each *dosha*. Each of the seven *chakras*, in turn, related to sentiments and expressions of human life, is associated with a specific fragrance or, in their words, a "body mist". A full range of service rituals to be offered to clients seeking for beauty services was developed and its institute was used to train professionals on how to perform them. In 1999, Rechelbacher published a book on some of these natural health and beauty rituals (Rechelbacher 1999).

Aveda integrated environmental concerns, health and beauty in a way that catered for the Western contemporary client. Beauty would be healthy again, in a holistic way. Aveda introduced much of the Western world to a sort of Ayurvedic philosophy and aromatherapy which is, obviously, a creative reinvention of Eastern practices. The development of these ideas and this cargo cult of Eastern and distant practices are mediated by cultural patterns and values that are essentially Western<sup>2</sup>. This cultural exchange is no less dependent on the local schemes than the appropriation of modern artifacts by indigenous populations is on their native schemes. This quest for alternative strategies for holistic well-being and health, in which beauty is inserted, aims at operating bodily transformations at the individual level with results that are valued in the West, even if the search for personal well-being is framed as means to remedy the social and environmental malaises of modernity. It is through the individual and its practices that these illnesses could be cured (Lau 2000: 4). The practices of consumption of Aveda products, including the uruku line, and the discourses created by Rechelbacher, can be understood as expressions of "individualism and self-reliance" (ibid.: 4) that displace Eastern philosophies from their original semantic fields, reframing them according to Western categories. Thus, he writes about "ayurveda individual incentives" (1999: 37) to describe a number of individual behavioral prescriptions derived from

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<sup>2</sup> I reproduce the geographical metaphor for modern Capitalist areas of the world, but not without reservations. In the case of Aveda, Japan is one of its main markets, which blurs these geographical representations of cultural systems.

Ayurveda. There is nothing more central to the cosmology of Western capitalism than utilitarianism and its naturalization as a principle of action.

The appropriation of Ayurvedic practices through the lenses of Western radical modernity makes possible to transform the millennial practices of aromatherapy, a central component of the Indian healing system, into a solution for the commonest of individual problems of the modern subject, as the firm suggested in the 1998 issue of its magazine: “... your boss chewed you out. Your partner isn’t affectionate lately-nor washing the dishes. Your voicemail box is empty. Even the parking attendant ignored you this morning. We’ve got a solution: plant Aromaology/therapy” (Aveda 1998: 11). “Scents”, the text continues, “can even help you work harder and smarter” (ibid.: 13). “Because Aveda’s heart’s connection is to Earth” says Rechelbacher in another firm’s publication, and because we are displayed as part of a “web of all things” in the same publication, “the art and science of pure flower and plant essences” (the firm’s registered motto), may be used to transform “nature’s bio-energy into personal health and vitality”. And vitality, or potency, seems to be central to the New Age quest for alternative therapies and rituals, as further discussed below, in regard to the consumers of Yawanawa rituals. This complex cosmology linking beauty, environment and well-being can only be interpreted – and sold – from a Western perspective.

Aveda was founded at the intersection of the challenges to the beauty industry with a discourse against petroleum-based ingredients that, according to Rechelbacher, should “carry a warning label”, a new environmental paradigm and a critique to the artificial beauty of supermodels (Koelln 1995). The firm often uses non-European-like models and appeals to visual cues that are invocative of Eastern lands, without actively challenging the gendered, heteronormative patterns of Western beauty. At the reception of their headquarters in Blaine, a small board has the saying “Beauty is as beauty does”, an idea equally mobilized in the communication of the firm. The firm was organized around a mission signed by Rechelbacher and still present in all Aveda retail shops: “Our mission at Aveda is to care for the world we live in, from the products we make to the ways in which we give back to society. At Aveda, we strive to set an example for environmental leadership and responsibility, not just in the world of beauty, but around the world”. It was the first to sign the Ceres Principles, a ten-point corporate environmental governance agreement created in 1989 following the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Alaska.

It was also, together, with the Body Shop, one of the first companies to associate with distant communities to source ingredients. Aveda does not espouse, however, a “trade-not-

aid” policy and, in fact, frequently mobilizes its network of professionals, clients and supporters for philanthropic campaigns to help communities and environmental causes. Given the difficulties to find usable botanicals for hair and skin care after decades of heavy use of chemicals, Aveda understood these partnerships as a sourcing technique, framed as a search for the ancient knowledge on natural beauty still retained by these populations. In the words of David Hircock, the hunter of natural resources for the firm, “it all goes back to the philosophy of the brand”: looking for plants capable of generating good products proves “the power of plants” (DH). Nonetheless, once they have found an ingredient with the potential of yielding a high performance product, they can extend on the wisdom they obtain. At least in its original conception, this knowledge extends far beyond the ethnobiological: whether Australian Aborigines or Moroccan Berbers, these “traditional” communities are all repositories of a valuable knowledge on beauty, environmental concern and lifestyle. In his book, for example, Rechelbacher (2008: 74 ff.) discusses the lessons he drew from his experience amongst a tribe deep in the Brazilian Amazon, a certain Yabba tribe of the Gregorio River, obviously referring to the Yawanawa. I shall return to this point later when discussing the *annatto* project, but the cultural economy underlying exchange works for both parts of the agreement and as much as the Yawanawa receive values, they also send them. But again, the lessons are framed in essential categories of thought and in the general symbolic scheme of the Capitalist cosmology:

*“My time with these indigenous Amazon people taught me some of the most important business lessons of my life, especially as regards team management. I also learned much from the about community – about living, working, and worshipping together in harmony with nature’s rythms. [...] Since then, my business systems have been built around cooperative teams that reflect the influence of these indigenous tribal systems” [...]*

*Indigenous cultures are the members of our human tribe who live at the point of impact in our biosphere. Their ways of knowing allow them to perceive and understand many things that elude the more ‘sophisticated’ intelligence of our experts in white coats and business suits. Their fine –tune sensitivity to the natural world is an invaluable resource that humanity cannot afford to lose.” (Rechelbacher 2008: 75-77).*

The romantic description continues with its *bon sauvage* trope, describing a pristine, harmonious and democratic community for a couple of pages. Despite discussing the lessons from a distant population, there is no need for the introduction of incomprehensible or

unknown ideas. The lessons are, indeed, all much known or at least understandable for us. The first is about how cooperation makes for a better management system. The second is about harmony with nature. The third is a challenge to our modern notions of the superiority of expert knowledge and the “white coats” of sciences. This displays how business agreements are possible amongst misconceptions or very limited understanding, because objects and ideas transplanted to new cultural settings defy their material and ontological original properties and are open to reinterpretation. In this case, if we compare his lessons with Biraci’s lessons in Rio, it is easy to conclude that the commonality that would make cooperation possible was a lifestyle in harmony with nature.

The specific ways these partnerships, the ingredients and the lessons taken from the populations with which they interact are communicated by Aveda, as well as the efficacy of such messages and their target groups, are questions further analyzed in reference to the *uruku* line, which incorporates *annatto* from the Yawanawa. It should suffice here to show that these stories help validating the firm’s discourses, act as a symbolic resource and a mechanism of enticement within the firm and amongst its main and most loyal customers, hair and skin care professionals. Clearly, these partnerships demonstrate the commitment of the firm to help communities and the congruence between environmental concerns and corporate development and profit. More importantly, they aim at promoting, at least amongst the professionals that constitute the core target of their substantive message, the connection with the ideals and magical properties of a distant location. According to the current President, Dominique Conseil: “there was an early vision, since the inception of the company, to connect consumers of the modern world to traditional and Indigenous wisdom and diversity” (DC). When effective, stories about these partnerships produced by the company offer, in the words of Beckert (2011: 116), a “transcendence of place”. Through the ingredients contained in the products, its consumers have the opportunity to symbolically connect to the ideals and legacy of a distant population. More than the association with a distant place, however, they build a biography for the products.

The firm developed around this complex set of discursive and symbolic practices, showing concern for the environment and well-being in connection to beauty. On the one side, Aveda became a strong name among hair professionals who attested the performance of its products. On the other side, these discursive and symbolic practices surrounding the products created a true followership. The firm concentrated on selling its hair and skin care, makeup and fragrances in hair salons, creating a successful distribution mechanism, first in

the United States, and later expanding to Europe and Asia. Later, the company opened a number of retail shops, spas and expanded its training facilities, named institutes.

Their main channel of sales has always been hair salons affiliated with Aveda. The affiliation is a very particular form of franchising. Aveda does not necessarily determine the design, the protocols of service or forms of aesthetic expression. Nonetheless, the affiliation at its minimum means that the salon carries Aveda products, using them in their services and selling them. It operates as a qualification or judgment device (Karpik 2010), signaling the clients of certain predictable patterns of quality and style, which are associated with the brand. The affiliate salons might adhere to the brand in different degrees, offering additional services and rituals associated with Aveda or selling and using exclusively their products. To signal this degree of association to the clients, Aveda devised a number of different categories and labels. Any client looking for a salon on the Aveda website has the option to check if the affiliated salons offer exclusively Aveda hair color, participate in the Pure Privilege loyalty program, perform complimentary sensory rituals, spa services or meet goals set for their Earth month (Aveda 2012a). Salons performing complimentary sensory rituals abide to a protocol of “guest service experience” devised by Aveda, which involves “comforting tea, stress relieving rituals, aroma sensory journey and product recommendations” (Aveda 2012b). These rituals are further described below. The Earth month, an annual campaign to raise funds for designated environmental causes, is an important aspect of their brand. The campaign acts as a network of fundraiser teams in salons, institutes and spas for projects selected by the firm, normally run by non-governmental organizations.

The company also owns some flagship salons and spas, in which they demonstrate to the rest of the industry their conceptions and put to test their services. In order to develop and spread these conceptions, techniques and rituals, Aveda developed training facilities for hair stylists, cosmetologists and estheticians, called institutes. These facilities are either owned by the firm or by others, but the idea is to train a particular type of professional. Many Aveda salons prefer to employ professionals trained in these institutes, avoiding the need to induce them into specific procedures, techniques, language and rituals. As any educational institution, institutes are a fundamental space of sharing values. More than any other space, these allow the firm to instill its ideology, as well as aesthetic and ethical values in the future professionals. They form, thus, a community. In addition to training facilities, Aveda has a number of spaces that comprise a network in which images, concepts, styles, fads and

fashions are shared with professionals and loyal clients. Thus, the average client may expect to obtain a similar result in an Aveda-affiliated salon.

Aveda is mainly a professional brand, marketing its products through a network of fiercely loyal professionals that work in thousands of hair salons, spas and training centers. This network is built around a regular magazine, a loyalty program, called Pure Privilege, conferences for professionals, the participation of their hair and makeup designers in large fashion events and an Inner Circle formed by loyal clients. The latter is a group created for panel survey and product testing. The participants are selected from programs such as Pure Privilege or specific purchases and rewarded with the opportunity to attend special events with professionals, inspiring personalities and representatives of the sourcing communities. The company strives to maintain this network, which operates as a niche insulated from competition, just as the model described by White (2002).

Forging professionals strongly identified with the tenets, the myths, the techniques and faithful followers of the developments of the brand can be an effective way of guaranteeing the long run success of any firm. Albeit not being a direct selling organization or sold by door-to-door representatives, the role of its founding prophet and devoted professionals in selling the products creates a model not far from the Charismatic Capitalism of organizations analyzed by Biggart (1990). These organizations are built on the belief of moral values of entrepreneurialism, an institutionalized ideology that creates a following. In the case of Aveda, commitment and loyalty are secured through the moral value of integrating beauty, health and well-being, not just for the client, but for the world as a whole. The employees of the firm and professionals associated with the brand that I met seemed to believe genuinely in the transformative capacity of their partnerships and environmental practices, and reveal their true enthusiasm with the project. This is an instance of deep acting (Hochschild 1983), in which the workers own identities become intermingled with goals and values of the employers. As a consequence, similarly to the representatives of direct selling organizations, they reveal “a pleasure in being associated with what they perceive as an important moral enterprise” (Biggart 1990: 141). Just as other charismatic business organizations, the firm also created a community with multiple spaces – conferences and the Inner Circle – to celebrate membership and loyalty. Finally, the reliance of an eccentric but inspiring leader on an effective bureaucracy to turn whimsical ideas into profitable reality, another characteristic described by Biggart (1990), is clearly present in the history of Aveda. When Hircock talks about the beginnings of the partnership with the Yawanawa, this becomes evident: “you

would understand that, in some ways, this is a project that one should not have done” (DH) was uttered at the beginning of our conversation. It worked, he adds, against many odds. And it worked because he and other professionals managed to overcome the challenges of transporting *annatto* seeds from Acre to Sao Paulo without being destroyed by fungi and bacteria to later transform *bixina* dye in an ingredient of usable cosmetics.

Despite these tensions and challenges analyzed in the next section, the ideological construct which Aveda employs to elicit a loyal group of professionals and close clients is not a deception. If the message created as result of this cargo cult of Eastern artifacts appears to be less than coherent, a pastiche of holism and individualism, and somehow an opportunistic appropriation of alternative philosophies and environmental concerns for profit, this is because modernization - equivalent to indigenization - entails putting foreign ideas to local uses, according to local accents. Furthermore, there are no reasons to believe that the involved actors do not sincerely believe in the transformative powers of beauty. On the contrary, it does elicit commitment from professionals because in the first place they believe they need to adopt new practices of beauty, health and towards the environment. Without this homology (Bourdieu 2005), the meanings of this construct would not find true carriers in these deeply motivated professionals. For them, this provides a language to make sense of their world and occupation. Beauty is as beauty does legitimizes services that many judge as superficial, showing that it is not just about skin care, but about harmony and preservation of nature. Nonetheless, just as we find different expectations surrounding modernity in the Yawanawa case, we also find different discourses and aspirations of incorporation of practices and principles in the case of Aveda, to which I now turn.

## **6.2 Beauty is as beauty does: for whom?**

In 1997, Aveda’s products were sold in about 30,000 professional salons worldwide, 2,000 of which were exclusive carriers of Aveda products, as well as in a number of its “experience centers” retail shops, generating annual revenues of USD 120 million. The beauty industry giant Estée-Lauder then offered USD 300 million for its acquisition. The fifth largest beauty company in the world with almost USD 8 billion in revenues in 2008 (Jones 2010: 372), the family-controlled Estée-Lauder had a number of reasons to purchase the venture. The firm was interested in expanding its participation in the hair care segment, which

represented only six percent of its revenues (ThomsonFinancial 2010) and in using Aveda’s distribution channels for its makeup and skin care products (Canedy 1997). As part of a broader movement of the industry to incorporate alternative medicine practices, Estée-Lauder was also interested in the Ayurvedic-inspired products and services offered by Aveda (Jones 2010: 316). Rechelbacher remained in the firm during a transition period, after which he was replaced by Dominique Conseil, holder of a degree in Pacific Anthropology and Polynesian Languages, as well as a Masters in management.

Due to priorities and existing products of Estée-Lauder, the focus on hair products was strengthened, and makeup lines reorganized. This move affected the *annatto* project, since the ingredient is mainly employed in the makeup line *uruku*. Yet this was not the only change. My short visit to the firm, in early 2012, and the conversations I held with some employees, revealed that despite a high turnover since the acquisition, there is a lasting tension about the image of the firm and its future, mainly regarding the use of non-plant based products and, to a minor extent, the risks involving sourcing ingredients from distant communities.

More than producing hair and skin care products, the firm has built a reputation around a philosophy of producing beauty whilst doing beauty. Their products are considered to be highly effective and perceived as safe and environmentally friendly. Obviously, the mission of producing purely natural, organic, non-petroleum based, responsibly sourced plant-based products, on the one side, and the goal of achieving the highest possible efficacy do not always go hand-in-hand. Aveda under Rechelbacher seemed unequivocally committed to challenge the notion that science made for better beauty products, but this does not mean that the beauty being offered in its products was not scientific. My conversations with the Research and Development Team at the firm revealed the challenges entailed in using natural, plant-based ingredients to generate high-quality colorants, fragrances and, above all, to preserve them. Transforming them into effective products compliant to the patterns of beauty and standards set by industry requires technological transformations in a network of actors, raw materials and processes.

The very introduction of Eastern ideas of well-being into the hair and skin care industry was already marked by a tension between nature and its legitimation in terms of quality of the product. Thus, when presenting aromatherapy in an issue of its magazine, Aveda reasserts consumers stressing its scientific acceptance: “aromatherapy”, they inform, “is now taught at medical institutions in Germany and England. And in the U.S., the first postgraduate course is offered at Purdue University. But then, it becomes “aromaology”, the medicalized version of

the practices under the scrutiny of Western sciences. In fact, this tension has only increased with the orientations of the new parent company, despite its commitment to remain loyal to the original mission of the firm.

The main effort behind the development of the firm was to prove, and Rechelbacher seem obsessed with this, that beauty and individual and environmental health are one and only. Yet the company always strived to sell top products as well, creating a relative tension that does not surface in their basic ideology. The research and development team at Aveda insisted they have to work with a fairly limited range of essences, colorants and preservatives provided by nature (5) and still depend, in their words, “on all those firms from New Jersey”. Firms from New Jersey, I learnt, stand for the main representatives of the chemistry industry in North America, providing synthetic and mostly petroleum-derived ingredients. They proudly produce their own fragrances, considered one of the villains of the beauty industry, from organic-certified oils, but they define as naturally derived ingredients those in which “more than 50% of the molecules comes from a plant, non-petroleum mineral, or other natural source” (Aveda 2013).

On a tour through their factory in Blaine, Minneapolis, I was taken to a separated area where barrels containing these chemicals, with tags showing their origins from large industries in New Jersey are stored. This area is segregated due to security reasons, but the attitude of the tour guide and the idealist chemists who I saw on our way, showing it with some frustration and shame, especially when compared with their enthusiasm with the plants lab, could suggest that for them this is a tainted area they want to isolate from their otherwise clean production, even if these substances are later added to their products. Their employees uphold this almost religious commitment to produce clean and good products.

This shows how the institutionalized ideology cultivated by Rechelbacher continues to guide the employees at the firm. On the other side, the new administration seems more convinced that the role of the firm is to offer high performance hair and skin care products, which are additionally green and make a difference. An analysis of the communication of the firm over the years shows the introduction of the term “high-performance” to describe its products after the purchase by Estée-Lauder. “Some people say you cannot pursue naturalness and deliver cutting-edge results” declared the new president, Dominique Conseil, in an interview to the *Fast Company* (Sacks 2006), but talking to me, he confided that their clients, professionals and end consumers alike, are very demanding on the performance of the product and they do not want to be perceived as a “granola” company:

*“The brand has to be desired for the efficacy of its products. It’s a fine line that we try to walk. There is a ‘feel good’ factor that some people see [...] but it is not the core of the value proposition. And we need to be very careful about this. We have a director of creation that is very sensitive about this. She always says when she looks some pictures ‘that is a bit granola. It is too rural’. We sell high added value product, so we cannot be too raw material.” (DC).*

Conseil tries to find a balance between the purely natural and the high performance. He reasserted Rechelbacher’s mission of bringing healthy, safe, environmentally sound products that are as beauty as they do good. Yet, there are indications that the firm moved from aiming at producing high performance green products, to intending to produce as green as possible high performance products. Clearly, this generates different reactions within the firm and amongst followers who remain loyal to the original vision of the business.

A similar tension involves the degree of reliance of the firm in sources of raw materials from indigenous and traditional communities. The introduction of new regulatory instruments to access their knowledge on biological diversity, and notably the *Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization*, added to the Convention on Biological Diversity, created new challenges to deal with these populations that were highlighted during my talks. These new regulations aiming at protecting populations create new demands and necessary procedures, besides increasing the legal liabilities of establishing partnerships with traditional populations. These instruments, together with scandals, criticisms and skepticism surrounding initiatives like Fair Trade have created a sensation within the firm that these partnerships are under increased public scrutiny and led to a more strategic approach to sourcing raw materials in distant communities (DH). I was told that agreements such as the one that was done with the Yawanawa, despite the fair compensation for the seeds and all symbols and images employed, would hardly be possible now (DH, 5).

In addition, these partnerships have presented them with multiple challenges. Learning how to deal and negotiate with different populations, finding intermediaries capable of translating and bridging two worlds, respecting different codes, securing both the goals set by the firm and their partners, as well as fulfilling expectations are difficulties they face in every partnership. Albeit passionate about them, David Hircock reveals that every new contact involves dealing with unique difficulties (DH). These challenges expose the firm to public questioning and criticism that, according to some, are not well received by the new owners of Aveda. The Lauders, I was told, strongly associate their names and reputation with that of

their firm and, thus, they are personally affected by any criticism or accusation directed against the firm.

The specific challenges and internal tensions in the firm involving the *annatto* project will be further analyzed below, as part of its politics of value, but a critical article on the partnership published in 2011 (Lyons 2011) apparently called into question the maintenance of their relationship with the Yawanawa. At the same time, as discussed above, these partnerships are an important part of the image of the firm and strongly defended by all the employees to whom I talked. It is exactly because they are so challenging, that their business is transformative and rewarding. And this adventurous nature was at the center of Rechelbacher's original vision of the business. The partnerships are a symbolic resource possessed by the firm to show that they are doing more than just selling beauty products, a discourse that motivates and elicits loyalties from employees and professionals. Amidst these tensions, Conseil must prove that, despite no longer run by Rechelbacher, the firm remains the tribe envisaged by its founder, a community of values loyal to its original substantive mission, and capable of maintaining the charisma that moves its professionals.

[...]

### **7.3 Producing and selling Uruku**

The engagement of the Yawanawa with the activity does not explain the entire project. The negotiations of the value of the product also involved the firm who purchases it and transforms it into makeup. There is not much to say about the singularization of objects – makeup – that follows their purchase, since this would require a survey into the consumers. But some observations on the politics of value involving the firm and their main target, professionals, can be shared. The long distance separating the parts and the limited knowledge each side possesses about the other do not hinder exchange. Commensurability is established through some categories that both actors appropriate and mobilize, even if retaining semantic differences. The fundamental element of commensurability here is beauty, for the Yawanawa also regard that painted bodies are a sign of beauty. The beauty of *urucum* is inserted, in the Yawanawa case, in the belief that these painted bodies are protected against spirits and the diseases they may provoke. Thus, beauty is connected to health and nature, corresponding to the ideal that Aveda attempts to promote from its inception. Nature is an important category

behind the encounter of Horst Rechelbacher and Biraci Brasil, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The challenges to protect their land, located in the forest, allows the firm to establish a connection between the partnership and the protection of the forest.

This very basic level of commonality leaves great room for a requalification of the objects by the firm. I argued that the product is the magical transformation of the seeds, images and symbols of the Yawanawa together with associations that this combination allows to construct with the place of origin of the ingredient, into a high performance makeup. The Yawanawa are conscious about the value and uses of their image, since the firm sent representatives to their land to produce these images. Moreover, as the communications department of the firm informed (6), the stories about sourcing are written after interviewing members of the communities. Aveda produced a video, in which some of these interviews are displayed. Some informative material on the partnership published by Aveda brings factual information about past and present challenges of the Yawanawa (see images 3 to 5).

Nonetheless, there is a large room for recreation. Neither the Yawanawa control the content of the message produced by Aveda, nor does Aveda seem to possess a thorough knowledge about the Yawanawa. It does not seem accidental that the firm was eager to obtain any possible information obtained during my stay in the community. Yet the fragments they do obtain from the Yawanawa are elements employed to qualify the good, in the sense employed by Callon, Méadel and Rabeharisoa (2002). These fragments of information are assembled together with the extracted pigment and chemical processes to stabilize its color and protect it from biological threats. Particularly important are indications of its location of origin.

The politics of value inside the firm entails the negotiation around the qualification of product. The firm, I attempted to demonstrate in chapter 6, develops its activities amidst a permanent tension to define its fundamental value. Known among demanding consumers looking for the highest possible performance and enticing emotional professionals with their stories of partnerships that connect them with nature, the firm must negotiate to define the meanings and values of its products. The new parent company seems more inclined towards the former, but the availability of different channels of communication with the public attenuates this tension.

The construction of the story sharing representations of the Yawanawa takes place in these various channels and is received differently by specific audiences. Aveda representatives emphasized that there are hardly specific strategies for ingredients or lines of

product. Their goal is to produce a general message about the brand. In recent times they have increasingly relied on new social media and internet, reducing printed materials (7). They also informed that the main target of their communication is a group of professionals and a number of close customers that comprise a loyal network. Dominique Conseil shared the results of a recent survey showing that around 40 percent of final consumers are aware of the mission of the firm, but 91 percent of their professionals are aware and identify with the mission (DC). Another survey from 2011, conducted with customers from the United States and the United Kingdom, reveals that only 58 percent are aware the pigment comes from the forest and less than a third was aware of the story<sup>3</sup>.

The circulation of these images in the broadest sense takes place through the participation of hair and makeup artists who represent Aveda in large fashion events (fashion weeks), partnering with famous designers to display new hair styles and techniques. In these spaces, the message is fundamentally about high performance. There is no space or time to discuss environmental and social actions and the focus is the beauty and fashion trends. Any message about what beauty does is lost in the essential statement of what beauty should be according to the codes that *haute couture* attempts to define for the next season. In these circles, the firm is known for the quality of its products. In connection or not to these trend-setting events, their products also figure regularly in magazines, but with limited or not attention to the sources of ingredients.

In the points of sales, salons and Aveda shops, small pieces of information are shared. The salons I visited all had an area, around the entrance, where the products are displayed and sold. Product placement images, signs and the organization of products are fairly similar. In fact, they act as a good identification that the salons, catering for different social spaces and with multiple designs, are part of the Aveda community. The following image (image 2) should help situating the form and extent of transmission of the message. Here, the focus is on the support Aveda gave to revise the territorial limits of the Gregorio River Indigenous Land. The image brings a young girl, painted with *annato*.

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<sup>3</sup> Only selective results of this survey were shared with me and unfortunately I did not manage to obtain methodological information.

**Image 2: Retail area, Aveda Institute, Minneapolis.**



Customers have the opportunity to try the makeup after their salon treatment, when they are offered a “makeup finishing touch”. The consumption is ritualized, but the ritual of beauty provided has no intention to mimic the Yawanawa rituals. Indeed, this experience has no pretense to relate to the rituals practiced by the Yawanawa to make themselves beautiful. The focus of these services is not on the stories of the product, but the makeup techniques the professional explain to the client. One of such professionals, at a salon in Minneapolis, confessed that it is difficult to transmit the message to consumers, given the little time and attention they have. The makeup artist, in turn, was very emotive about the importance of the partnership and of helping to make the world beautiful.

The main channels in which references to *uruku* and the Yawanawa may be found are in media and events targeting the network of affiliated professionals and a select group of loyal consumers. The firm invites Joaquim to their beauty congresses, to talk to professionals about his community. Joaquim normally wears a headdress, talks about their role in the preservation of the forest and shows the sniffed tobacco, *rapé*, to much excitement of the audience. These gatherings are emotive moments to reassert the sharing of values, and entice the professionals.

An instructor, responsible for teaching new professionals about the products and their properties, described her experience when meeting Joaquim:

*“Oh, so positive, because when these people live so close to nature there is an energy that is transmitted just by their presence. Because we think that we in West are removed from it. We don’t live in the forest. We live in cement buildings. We try to bring a little bit of nature where we can, but our lifestyle is not such as we are in nature as much as they are. And so, I think there is a disconnection in there that when you meet someone who lives a simple life, connected with nature, there is a presence in your energy that is tangible. And I think it reminds us of where we return to, anyway, which is really nature. For me it reminds me of my unity with nature. And, you know, we come from that. We are part of the nature. And yet we live in these artificial environments. And unless we consciously take the time to reconnect with this nature in whatever way we can, whether is walking in a park, whatever way it is, we know that, unless we do that, there is a part of us that does not feel quite fulfilled, satisfied.*

*And I think that when we have our indigenous partners to come, it reminds us of this connection, the power of that.” (10)*

The position of the speaker should be considered: she is a global trainer, training other instructors and professionals. She occupies a pivotal position in the production and diffusion of the story behind the product, creating value. Even if taken as a non-subjective statement, these words at least display the discourse the firm and its intention to provide a contact between professionals and indigenous populations. More than invoking a distant space, the indigenous carry the spirit of nature, acting as a connection between the moderns living in cement buildings and nature, considered the true human essence. Relating to the other is the way to an imagined representation of an environment that is nothing less than our essence. In other words, we seek in the other our own lost essence and this connection is possible because of a shared essence, the essence of nature. Other printed materials bring the message “out of the forest”, equally connecting to a generic and imagined landscape (image 1).

These stories validate the substantive message of the firm, their philosophy in business jargon, amongst professionals and employees. After listing a number of problems and the additional costs of using *annatto* from the Amazon, I asked the R&D team why, then, they would do it. The three members replied “because that is what the company does” (3). My contacts with professionals equally demonstrated that they are motivated and, to a variable

extent, find justification to their occupation in these stories. For these professionals, beauty is, in fact, as beauty does: a cleaner environment, a more harmonious lifestyle and autonomy for different cultures.

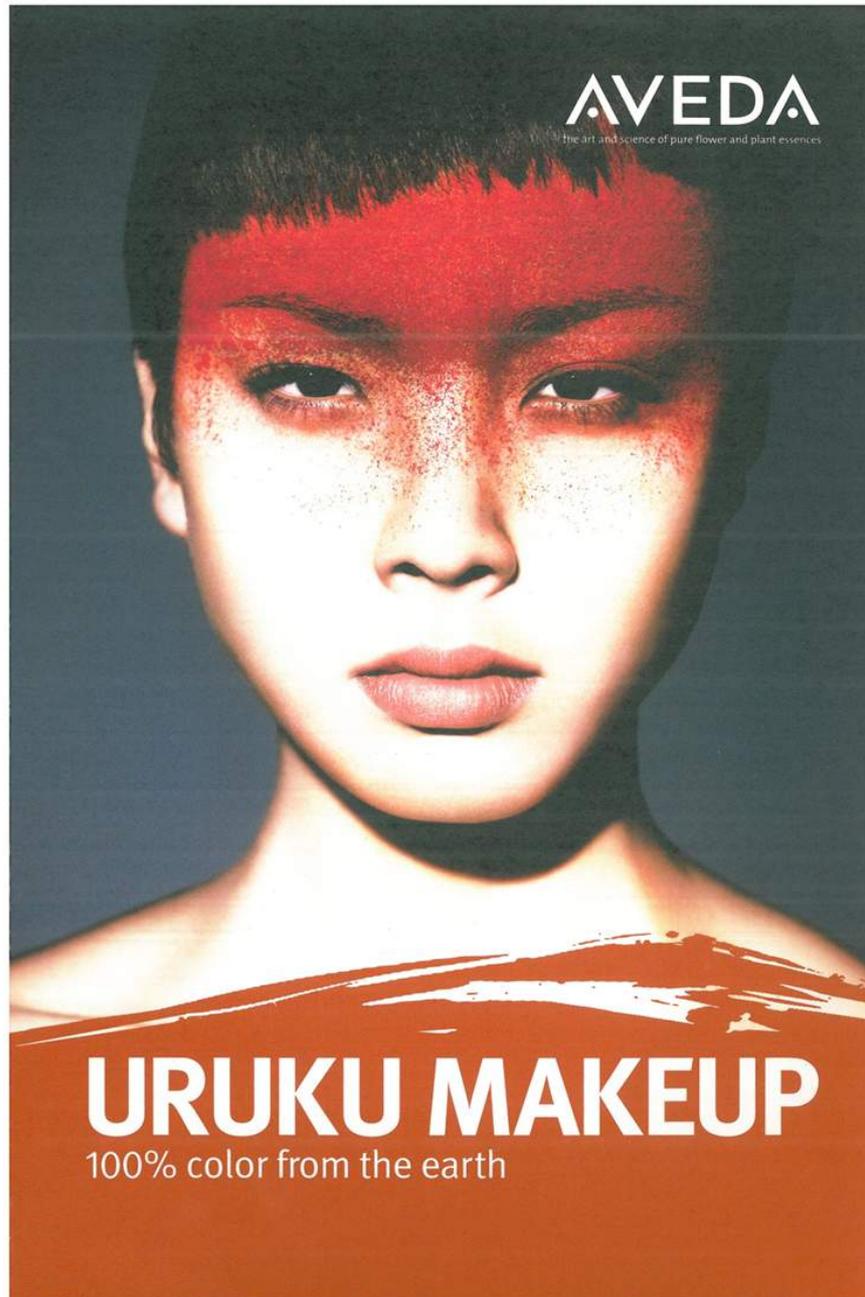
Elements of the story of the partnership and the circulation of cultural representations of the Yawanawa might also be found in other materials. There are visual displays (image 2), brochures, articles in the firm’s magazine and training material on products incorporating *urucum*. These texts focus on the resilience of the community after many challenges faced by the indigenous populations and the promised economic independence of the community, which was never achieved through the project. As already mentioned, after a derisive article published on the Wall Street Journal (Lyons 2011), this claim was removed of all forms of communication.

Amongst the material shared with me, the most informative is a brochure on the *uruku* makeup. The brochure (image 3) is the careful work of Rudy Miles, a famous makeup stylist, and previous Aveda’s global makeup artist, who visited the Yawanawa to see how they used *urucum* in their paintings. The content can be divided in three parts, reflecting all the goals in the construction of the products and their potentials. The first deals with the products themselves and their qualities. The second offers two suggestions of looks, lists the employed products and give hints on how to use them. This is the work of Miles and Angela Conti-Smith, another makeup professional. The third offers information on the Yawanawa and the partnership, including a code to understand the symbols in their body paintings. The stated benefit of the partnership is, once more, the economic independence and protection of a rainforest ecosystem<sup>4</sup>. Its cover brings an Asian woman, reflecting the new tendencies of the industry to de-colonize the image of women (Jones 2010). Interestingly, although the body painting is a unisex practice, and production involves members of both genders, almost all images of painted Yawanawa are of women. In fact, in all the material shared with me, there is only a residual, small corner picture of Manuel Tika. Another man, probably José Martim, is seen with a tray full of extracted seeds, but not painted. The original beauty, in its original ritual use, that allows for transportation and translation into the beauty of the makeup world is gendered, female only.

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<sup>4</sup> There is clearly a gender dimension to the construction of the product and the message. After all, makeup is currently used mostly by women, almost exclusively sold to them. Therefore, the message must dialogue with expected, permitted or encouraged patterns of beauty and attitudes. In one picture, we see a woman using a blush that employs *annatto* with the message “be cheeky”, a pun with cheek. And it continues “go ahead, break the rules, color outside the lines”. First, it is an invitation to break with the expected female behavior of subservience and compliance with norms and codes. This assertiveness rests in difference, in the colors and forms of spreading them over one’s face.

**Image 3: Brochure cover: Asian woman covered in *bixina* powder**



### Image 4: Brochure (cont.): The Yawanawa painting code

explore yawanawa art

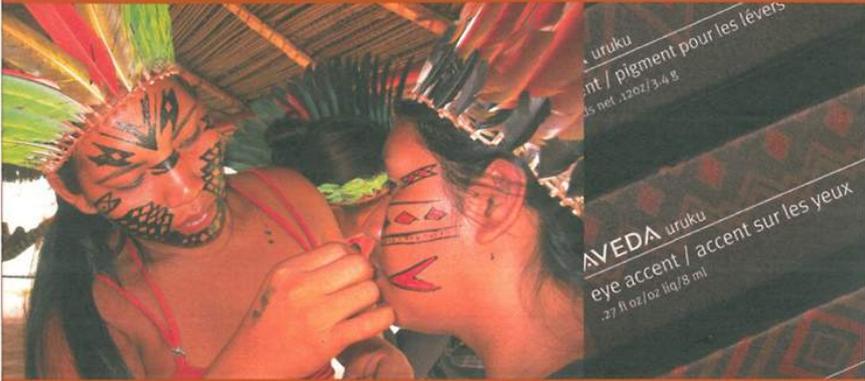
- Uruku packaging is designed with symbols the Yawanawa paint on each other to reflect their spirit.
- Their vivid pigment—annatto—is in our Uruku makeup and the glaze on the surface of our cartons.

◇ The **diamond** is inspired by the anaconda snake, believed to be a teacher of wisdom and healing.

➤ The **arrow** is a symbol of courage and strength.

▽ The **fish** represents the sustenance of life.

We partnered with the Yawanawa to choose the best symbols for our packaging, compensating them for their ideas and design work. We hope to bring their indigenous art and culture to a new audience.



“The symbols reflect our spirit and that of the rainforest, which is sacred to our people. They also remind us of the importance of caring for the earth.”

—Tashka Yawanawa,  
chief of Yawanawa People

OUR MISSION AT AVEDA IS TO CARE FOR THE WORLD WE LIVE IN, FROM THE PRODUCTS WE MAKE TO THE WAYS IN WHICH WE GIVE BACK TO SOCIETY. AT AVEDA, WE STRIVE TO SET AN EXAMPLE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL LEADERSHIP AND RESPONSIBILITY, NOT JUST IN THE WORLD OF BEAUTY, BUT AROUND THE WORLD.

Soy ink on 100% post-consumer recycled paper. Please recycle where possible.  
©Aveda Corp. Minneapolis, MN 55449-7106 800.328.0849 USA / 763.951.6999 aveda.com

**Image 5: Brochure (cont.): Information on the partnership**



The packages of the products belonging to the *uruku* line also incorporated the stylized version of two *kene*, patterns of body paintings, representing the *jiboia* (*boa constrictor*) and the mythical arrow (see image 1). It is written that they are symbols of the Yawanawa. Both command great mythological meaning for the Yawanawa. In short, the *jiboia*, the Yawanawa told me, is associated with one of the most powerful spirits. The arrow is the instrument that the Yawanawa used to defeat their enemies in legends and myths. The package states that the arrow symbolizes courage and strength and the anaconda snake is a teacher of wisdom and healing.

In sum, the distance between the Yawanawa and Aveda offers the ability to the firm to create the product highlighting values that are important for the consumers of makeup products in the Western world. Value is created through the quality and the performance of the product, on the one side, and through the story, the biography of *uruku* and its producers. More than a simple spatial transcendence, the product creates a narrative of extremely efficient makeup incorporating ingredients from an enduring and environmentally friendly population from the forest. The qualification of the product is the result of attempts to steer the value towards the former or the latter. There is an attempt to connect professionals and customers aligned to the firm’s mission with the producers and remember the importance of preserving their lifestyle. Yet the performance of the product is the priority for the brand.