



Shamans versus Pirates in the Amazonian Treasure Chest

ABSTRACT This article explores how the recent rise of shamans as political representatives in Brazil addresses tensions and contradictions associated with the internationalization of indigenous rights movements. Identity politics and transnational organizational alliances concerning issues of environmentalism and human rights have greatly expanded the political leverage and influence of indigenous activism. However, some transnational environmentalist discourses collide with Brazilian discourses of national sovereignty, and the 1990s witnessed a nationalist backlash against Indians, whom politicians, military leaders, and media commentators have frequently portrayed as pawns of foreign imperialists. Opponents of indigenous rights also seized on apparent contradictions between rhetoric and action to discredit indigenous claims to environmental resources. The analysis examines how the shift to redefine knowledge as the core of indigenous identity circumvents some of these liabilities by shifting the basis for indigenous rights claims from environmental practices to environmental knowledge. As shamans mobilize and speak out against the threat of biopiracy, they blunt the nationalist backlash, repositioning indigenous peoples as defenders of the national patrimony and solid citizens of the Brazilian nation-state. [Keywords: Brazil, indigenous peoples, identity politics, shamans, biopiracy]

President Bush thinks that he is the owner of the world but the shamans are the ones who have the knowledge. He is not the first world. We are the first world.

—Davi Kopenawa, in an interview at the 1992 Earth Summit¹

THE YANOMAMI SHAMAN Davi Kopenawa traveled from northern Brazil to Rio de Janeiro in June 1992 to represent his people at the “Earth Summit” (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development). Although denied an official role or significant voice in the formal proceedings, indigenous representatives from dozens of countries organized a parallel, alternative gathering at a site they named Kari-Oca, which attracted the attention of journalists from around the world.² In statements such as Kopenawa’s above, participants articulated the pride, confidence, and aspirations of a new generation of young, bilingual Native activists who are claiming innovative political spaces for indigenous peoples as global citizens. At the center of this shift is a redefinition of knowledge as the core of indigenous identity, with a corollary recognition of shamans as the bearers of privileged forms of valuable knowledge. In the decade since the Earth Summit, shamans and other healers have become increasingly prominent figures in indigenous rights movements, forming organizations and speaking out on an array of national

and international political issues in countries around the globe. Indigenous activists increasingly identify themselves as shamans, and Native rights supporters and the media increasingly treat shamans as representatives of their people and icons of indigenous identity in general. In the process, shamanism itself is being redefined.

In Kopenawa’s home country of Brazil, shamans, as well as other ritual and religious leaders, have become increasingly politically active since the 1970s, organizing political events and representing their people in communications with the government and outside agencies. This is one dimension of a broader phenomenon in many (though certainly not all) parts of lowland South America where shamanism is flowering and shamans’ influence and prominence are growing. This is happening in settings as diverse as the Xingu Indigenous Park in central Brazil (Ferreira 2002:44) and cities such as Rio Branco, Acre in western Brazil, in which Native shamans’ clientele includes indigenous and nonindigenous local residents as well as New Age customers. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha sees this contemporary flowering of shamanism in contexts of social change as the latest manifestation of a long-standing pattern: “The extraordinary growth of shamanism has been observed many times in situations of colonial domination, or more exactly when peoples are caught in the gears of the world system” (1998:8).³

In Native Brazilian societies, shamans have always been mediators par excellence, negotiating relations between human society and the spirit world. Today, those skills are moving into new realms of interethnic politics as shamanic knowledge, perspectives, and imagery are being put to new uses in mediating relations with the state. In several recent Brazilian court cases, shamanic knowledge (of animals and plants) has been introduced in litigation over rights to indigenous lands filed by the Suyá, Kayapó, Kayabi, and Juruna peoples (Ferreira 2002:43). Shamans such as Davi Kopenawa are bringing Native cosmologies into conversation with Western viewpoints, drawing on indigenous ideas and perspectives to develop innovative critiques of state policies, political economy, and Western attitudes toward nature (Albert 1993; Turner 1993).

Shamans in Brazil have begun to organize at the national level only recently. In 1998, the national government Indian agency Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI), organized the first National Encounter of Pajés (*pajé* is the widely-used Tupian term for shamans) near Brasília, the national capital (ISA 2000c; Krippner 1999). The threat of "biopiracy"—the unethical appropriation of biogenetic resources for commercial purposes—has been the major rallying point for this recent national-level mobilization. The congruence of indigenous and state interests around the biopiracy issue has opened new bases for Indians to claim a national identity as citizens within the Brazilian nation-state. The reformulation of indigenous identity around ideas about shamanism and the value of indigenous knowledge repositions Native causes in ways that may help circumvent two problematic issues that have plagued indigenous rights movements in Brazil during the past decade: tensions between the discourses of globalism and nationalism and divergences between the agendas of local indigenous struggles and the international environmental movement.

The Brazilian Amazon has been a kind of testing ground for some of the positive possibilities foreseen by the more optimistic theorists of globalization. Counterbalancing the view that global economic and cultural integration serves primarily to exacerbate social ills and vulnerabilities, some theorists have seen globalization as a potentially democratizing and empowering force, creating a more "connected" world in which marginalized groups have more freedom to establish political presence and leverage (Brysk 2000:286; Wriston 1992:170, 176). One factor contributing to this political enfranchisement is technological and pragmatic: "Informational empowerment" through access to global communications systems can give formerly isolated peoples new means to make their voices heard and new channels for solidarity and partnership with other, nonlocal groups (Annis 1992; Halleck 1994). Another factor is experiential and psychological: "Complex connectivity" (Tomlinson 1999) brings information, images, and perspectives about distant peoples close to home, creating the possibility for more direct moral engagement across national boundaries. Especially

important in fostering such empathetic cosmopolitan sensibilities is the visual imagery conveyed by television, video, and film, and experiences of direct participation in the "virtual community" of interactive computer-mediated communication (Rheingold 1994).

In the past two decades in Latin America, transnational connections have been enormously productive. Historically marginalized Native people have found means to establish "a transnational civil society, attempting to bypass state mediation" by articulating "local struggles for community sovereignty with an agenda of universal human rights in the economic, political, social, cultural, and environmental fields" (Varese 1996:132). This has involved the convergence of two major developments: identity politics and internationalization (Brysk 2000:18).⁴ Political scientist Alison Brysk emphasizes the empowering effects of local-global linkages, with many advances gained through "the coordinated activities of local activists and an international Indian rights network working from above and from below" (2000:19) that have helped indigenous peoples make impressive progress and achieve greater legal protection on many fronts, particularly in the area of cultural rights. Transnational nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) create alternatives to national and local government control of resources for subsistence and justice. NGO networks, as well as the new technologies of fax, Internet, and e-mail communications, create possibilities for bypassing the state's mediation or surveillance and, thus, create new forms of communication and new communities of imagination and interest that enhance local groups' capacities to be "context-producing, not context-driven" (Appadurai 1996:190).

Especially in countries in which Native populations are numerically small and have little electoral clout, the ability to mobilize international support and bring external political pressure to bear on national and local policymakers has transformed the political landscape of many indigenous struggles. In Brazil, Native peoples constitute less than one percent of the population, numbering some three hundred thousand in a national population of 173 million—the smallest percentage in any country in the continental Americas. Brazilian Indians only recently gained the right to vote, and new definitions of their citizenship rights had to be established with the rewriting of the national constitution in 1988. Yet despite (or, perhaps, because of) their small numbers, Brazil's Native activists have been in the global vanguard of the new transnationalism, pioneering the politics of "thinking globally, acting locally" (Varese 1991) by developing strategies and organizational structures that connect local indigenous causes to international movements and NGOs.⁵ Transnational partnerships began to proliferate in the mid-1980s, when new scientific information about global warming, deforestation, and the fate of the Amazonian rain forest created new rationales for the international environmental movement to support indigenous peoples' struggles for rights to land and resources. Technologies such as portable cassette

players and video cameras, as well as the growth of communication and transportation infrastructures, played a major role in facilitating cooperation among Indian groups and between Indians and non-Indians, both within and outside Brazil. This has been especially important in the Amazon region, where new roads, airstrips, telephone systems, fax, e-mail, and satellite communications allow Native communities to convey information about local situations and stay in touch with distant supporters in ways never before possible (Conklin 1997:712).

In an article published in the *American Anthropologist* in 1995, Laura Graham and I traced the emergence of this transnational cooperation between Amazonian Indians and environmentalists (Conklin and Graham 1995). We emphasized how the synergistic coordination of Native rights and ecological causes brought enormous benefits to indigenous peoples, especially in Brazil where Native activists won a series of important victories in their struggles for constitutional rights and for the protection of certain indigenous territories. The 1990s also brought the establishment and expansion of regional, national, and international panindigenous organizations, and a flood of NGOs poured into virtually every corner of the Brazilian Amazon, bringing new personnel, financial resources, and information. One of the most positive developments was the emergence of the new generation of Native activists like Davi Kopenawa: articulate, politically astute, and able to move back and forth across ethnic and cultural boundaries to relate to, and mediate among, diverse constituencies and political discourses at the local, regional, national, and international levels (Albert 1993; Graham in press).

Connecting the local to the global has been empowering for otherwise politically marginalized peoples, and anthropologists and human rights advocates have justly celebrated the benefits of such linkages. Less attention has been paid to the downside of local-global alliances. In particular, navigating among the disparate realms (local, regional, national, global) of multicentric politics can be difficult (Appadurai 1996:196). Good global politics do not always make good local politics; it may be easier to celebrate the idea of negotiating among a multiplicity of cultural and political contexts than to actually carry it off. As Alison Brysk notes, "the very factors of identity politics that facilitate transnational appeals often complicate domestic alliances" (2000:281). One common manifestation of this is the tendency for international criticism and political pressure to collide with notions of national sovereignty, especially when economic resources are at stake (Kirsch 1996). In Brazil, disjunctures and contradictions between the national citizenship discourses and transnational discourses based in the universalism of human rights or the quasi universalism of environmental principles have been a major focus for attacks by critics who are hostile to indigenous rights.

Although the merging of environmentalist and indigenous human rights discourses had enormous appeal for international audiences, it met with a rocky reception

on the domestic Brazilian political landscape, in which environmentalism has been widely represented as a new form of international imperialism (Conklin and Graham 1995:705; Maybury-Lewis 1991:225). Politicians, military leaders, and media commentators have routinely represented Brazilian Indians who pursue environmental causes as unpatriotic and potentially subversive, accusing them of being the dupes and pawns of foreigners seeking to take control of the Amazon's biological riches (Bonalume Neto 1989a, 1989b; Neves 1994). One reason why shamanism's debut on the political stage has been warmly received and even promoted by government Indian agency officials is that indigenous opposition to biopiracy helps shift the political discourse about Indians' relations to environmentalism, blunting the nationalist backlash and repositioning Indians as patriotic citizens of the nation-state.

My analysis here focuses mostly on how reformulating indigenous identities in order that they emphasize shamanic knowledge helps Native peoples stake their claim to a place as citizens in Brazil's newly democratic civil society. This is not to discount the influence of the many transnational political and cultural trends and organizations that also contribute to this process; indigenous healers are organizing and growing in political self-consciousness throughout the world. In Brazil these days, international support for Native causes is relatively solid, and much of the battle for a claim on global attention and support from transnational agencies has been won, at least in the short run. The major ongoing struggles mostly involve domestic policies and politics at the national and local levels, in which turning constitutional rights from mere written affirmations into actual practiced realities depends on implementation and enforcement (Ramos 1998:117). Native peoples continue to fight an uphill battle against hostility and indifference.

In talking about the politicization of shamans' images and activities, I am focusing not on the local rituals, healing practices, or internal community politics in which shamans engage, but, rather, on shamanism's public face. Shamans' new prominence in interethnic politics is a development that both grows out of and diverges from their community roles. Shamans exist or previously existed in almost all Native Brazilian societies; in dealing with sorcery and diagnosing the causes of illness, shamans have always played key roles in intergroup relations. This has not necessarily translated into political leadership, however. In some communities, political roles have been reinforced by shamanic power, but in many Native groups, shamanism is not a prerequisite or common accompaniment to political authority. Indeed, where shamanism is closely associated with the practice of sorcery, it may even be a political disqualification. In Brazil's neighboring country of Guyana, for example, shamanism and sorcery are considered so closely linked that Native leaders take care to distance themselves from any association with mystical knowledge or practices (Mary Riley, personal communication, December 1, 2001). In Brazil, however, shamanism has a somewhat

more attractive public image, on which activists are drawing in order to construct new discourses about indigenous peoples' identities.

The construction of public identities takes place in the murky realm of interethnic relations that Alcida Ramos (1998) calls "pulp indigenism." This is the realm of media representations of Native peoples and their causes, in print and electronic journalism and advocacy publications through which non-Indian publics within and outside Brazil develop images of Brazil's Native peoples. Throughout the world, wherever indigenous peoples' rights and resources are in question or under assault, the continual need to validate the legitimacy of Native concerns makes it necessary to frame Native causes in terms of metaphors and images that draw support from influential nonindigenous supporters. The production of such representations is a collaborative process to which individual indigenous actors contribute by presenting themselves and their messages in certain ways. Contribution does not mean control, and which messages get heard most clearly and broadcast most widely depends partly on wider cultural trends and political settings. In Brazil, the construction of shamanic knowledge as a new axis for Native identity is the latest development in the long-term struggle over the problem of "Indianness," its relation to national identity, and the question of how to define indigenous peoples' place in the nation-state.

ARE INDIANS CITIZENS?

"Are they citizens?" is the question at the crux of Brazil's ambiguous relation to its Native inhabitants, says Ramos. "One might suppose that being born in Brazilian territory automatically confers Brazilian citizenship, but the matter is not so simple when it involves Indians," she observes: "Living according to their own norms, which not only differ from those of the Brazilian state but can actually collide with them, indigenous peoples find themselves in the odd position of being internal outsiders" (Ramos 1998:94, 95).

A fundamental feature of the nation-state is the need to assert the homogeneity of its citizens and their shared acceptance of a narrative of national identity (Appadurai 1996:177). In Brazil, cultural difference bars Native peoples from membership in the idealized social body of the nation imagined as a harmonious blend of the European, the African, and the Native. In a country that, relative to many others in Latin America and elsewhere, "has been mercifully free from ethnic disputes and racial or religious conflict throughout its modern history," Brazilian treatment of Indians has been the glaring exception to a general picture of racial tolerance (Allen 1989:148, 149; and see Warren 2001:234–279). Assimilation has been the long-time goal of Brazil's national Indian policy, and the explicit precondition for citizenship. Indians are seen as wards of the state, and, until 1988, "Indianness" was defined as a temporary condition, out of which Native peoples were expected to grow in order to become Brazilian

like the rest of the idealized population (Ramos 1998:96). The official government policy of "integration" (promoting acculturation) was

a way of not recognizing the Indian nations and . . . of precluding their self-determination and their capacity to establish their own pace and means of development within their territories. It is, in fact, a way of not recognizing the Indian as a citizen, while considering his land as Brazilian territory. [Marés 1983:44]

The new constitution gave Indians expanded rights of citizenship, including the right to vote, and recognized their legal right to maintain distinct identities, languages, and cultural practices. Nonetheless, Indians remain wards of the state, legally defined as "relatively incapable" of managing their own affairs (Ramos 1998:98). In popular stereotypes, even the more sympathetic imagery portrays indigenous peoples as childlike, innocent, and "natural" but unprepared to cope with the complexities of modern life.

Another dimension of ambiguity in the question of Native peoples' citizenship revolves around questions of sovereignty and patriotism. There is a long-standing view that Indians are not fully Brazilian, but, instead, that they are individuals of uncertain loyalties and suspect allegiances (Conklin and Graham 1995:705). Brysk notes, in the 1980s and 1990s, "the Brazilian military saw Amazonian Indians as a potential strategic threat and local elites resented the Indian presence as an obstacle to rapid 'development' of the region" (2000:134–135).

Much of the battle fought by Native Brazilian activists over the past two decades has been a fight to establish their agency and adulthood, their ability to speak and negotiate on their own behalf (cf. Graham in press; Ramos 1998). Indigenous activists project a vision of a multiethnic national civil society in which Indians may participate as citizens without surrendering their distinct identities. In staking Indian claims to citizenship, the discourses and strategies of indigenous activism have utilized several key metaphors, including the tropes of warfare, stewardship, and, most recently, shamanism, to carve out political spaces for Native causes and garner support among the non-Indian citizenry.

FROM WARFARE TO STEWARDSHIP

The recent politicization of the shaman's identity coincides with a corresponding shift away from earlier images of indigenous leadership dominated by warriors and chiefs (*chefes* or *caciques*). Under the military dictatorship that ruled from 1964 until early 1985, indigenous militancy was widely seen and appreciated by much of the general public as a symbol of opposition to the government (Ramos 1994). In the 1980s, certain politically active groups—most notably the Xavante and Kayapó of central Brazil—developed brilliantly effective, media-savvy techniques of staging public events choreographed around metaphors of war, with press conferences and protest demonstrations at which

dozens of warriors painted in war paint brandished war clubs and shouted war cries.

Warrior imagery dominated pulp indigenist representations of Indian activism through the 1980s, and a number of groups, including the Xavante and Kayapó, continue to employ it effectively to assert their demands. As a general tactic, warlike postures began to lose some of their power after the new constitution recognized Indians as citizens with the right to vote. Brazil's geographically dispersed and numerically tiny Native population can build electoral clout only by aligning itself with local political parties, which typically are dominated by non-Indians. Over the past decade, the growth of political parties in Native communities, with their frequent factionalizing influence, has been one of the major, largely untold, new stories in Brazilian Indian affairs. In electoral politics dependent on patronage and cooperation with nonindigenous interest groups, the war imagery and aggressive postures that worked so well to embody opposition to the military dictatorship have become less tenable. The need for less militaristic tactics is reinforced by the other major change of the past decade, namely the proliferation of new foreign and domestic NGOs working on Native causes throughout the country. In the bureaucratic logic of NGOs dependent on the tolerance of the host country and largesse of contributors, positive imagery may be more useful than direct confrontation and threats. Indigenous activists increasingly need to position themselves as advocates of national (not just Native) interests.

By the early 1990s, public images of Native Brazilians had expanded to include the idea of environmental stewardship, the image of Indians as guardians of the tropical forest ecosystem. A plethora of scientific studies had shown the sophistication and sustainability of indigenous resource-management techniques, and both within Brazil and abroad, there was widespread new appreciation for the fact that Native peoples had lived in the forest for centuries without destroying it. In that new equation of indigenous cultures with environmental principles, the emphasis was on Native peoples' resource management *practices*, the collective actions of local communities. In the 1980s and early 1990s, there was widespread optimism that the best way to protect the integrity of the environment was to secure Native land rights, thereby keeping the control of environmental resources in the hands of the Native peoples who had protected those resources for centuries. Such optimism was manifest in popular imagery of what Kent Redford (1990) called the "ecologically noble savage." By 1992, when the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa and other Native Brazilian leaders traveled to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Native peoples in general, and Native Amazonians in particular, had come to be widely recognized as natural conservationists whose ecologically sensitive behavior flowed from enduring cultural traditions and primordial identity. In part, it has been such notions of naturalness and cultural continuity that distinguish indigenous claims from those of other ethnic minorities (Conklin 1997:725),

grounding the claim to primacy voiced in Kopenawa's statement, "We are the first world."

The evidence that traditional Native Amazonian resource management practices have maintained the integrity of the tropical forest ecosystem is so clear that it can be observed from space: In satellite photos many indigenous territories appear as green oases in a denuded landscape produced by non-Indian settlement and commercial activities. However, any easy assumption that indigenous control automatically equals environmental protection has been undermined over the past decade in Brazil and elsewhere, by incidents in which Native leaders or communities promoted environmentally destructive commercial activities.

Terence Turner has chronicled one of the most dramatic stories of an indigenous South American group's struggles over environmental management. The Kayapó of central Brazil, Gê speakers, who number some four thousand people, are "by any standard one of the most politically successful Amazonian peoples" (Turner 1995:99). In just the years between 1987–92, their skill at developing and deploying highly effective blends of mass mobilization, ecoactivism, and media politics helped Kayapó fight powerful state and corporate interests; they prevented construction of what would have been the world's biggest hydroelectric power-generating dam, blocked the dumping of radioactive waste on their land, and won legal rights to a territory approximately the size of Scotland (Fisher 1994; Turner 1992:14). In the late 1980s, Kayapó leaders were among the earliest and most visible Brazilian Indians to develop high-profile collaboration with international environmentalists. The elderly chief Rop ni (Raoni) accompanied the British rock singer Sting on a highly publicized concert tour. Two young leaders, Kube'i and Payakan, traveled to the United States to participate in an environmental symposium and spoke to officials in Washington, D.C., at the World Bank, U.S. Congress, and U.S. Treasury Department (Hecht and Cockburn 1989). Payakan then went on speaking tours of Europe and North America, met with heads of states and officials at the European Union, and received international awards for environmental activism.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the militancy of Kayapó activism and the support of Brazilian and foreign NGOs forced the Brazilian government to legally recognize Kayapó rights to a series of reserves. "Environmentalists hailed the proclamation of these reserves in the expectation that the formidable Kayapó would defend their territory against invasion by agents of deforestation such as ranchers, settlers, miners, and loggers" (Turner 1995: 103–104). Turner describes how, beginning in 1990, the expectation that indigenous control would guarantee environmental protection was shattered:

A steady trickle of reports in the Brazilian and international media disclosed that Kayapó leaders were entering into contracts with logging and mining companies to operate on Kayapó lands, in return for a percentage of the

proceeds, in effect acting as collaborators and profiteers in the destruction of their own forests and rivers. [1995:104]

Subsequently, in 1994–95, men in some Kayapó communities revolted against the corrupt leadership, expelled loggers and miners from their territory, and tried to promote more sustainable, less environmentally damaging forms of economic development (Turner 1995:110–117), with mixed results.

The gap between rhetoric and action in the Kayapó saga complicated relations with the environmental movement.

The defense of the Indians' right to control, and exploit, their own land and resources, it now appeared to many [environmentalists], had to be seen, at least in the Kayapó case, as in contradiction rather than support of the defense of the tropical forest ecosystem. From heroes of the environmentalist movement, the Kayapó thus became villains. [Turner 1995:104]

The Kayapó are not alone among Brazilian Indians in experimenting with environmentally degrading commercial activities; a number of other groups have tried or wanted to try similar ventures in commercial logging or mining. To the dismay of myself and other outsiders who work with the Wari' of western Rondônia, the first-ever media event organized by the Wari' was a press conference called by one faction to protest the government's refusal to allow them to engage in commercial timber sales.

Most Native Brazilian communities have not embarked on environmentally destructive commercialization of their resources; on the contrary, many continue to fight to protect the integrity of their forests, rivers, and local environments. Reports of indigenous collusion in ecological destruction have provided convenient ammunition for opponents of indigenous rights. Hostile journalists and conservative politicians have had a field day trumpeting tales of Indian chiefs who talk of ecosensitivity but enrich themselves selling off their tribe's timber and mineral resources (e.g., *Economist* 1993; *Veja* 1993; Viana 1992). In Brazil and elsewhere, critics have exploited any evidence of divergences between behavior and ideals whenever Native leaders or groups failed to live up to the idealized images that their supporters ascribe to them.

The potential for opponents to exploit disjunctures between the public symbolism of ecologically noble savage imagery and the complex realities of real Native communities' economic situations and diverse approaches to resource management was another point of political vulnerability for Native activists who aligned themselves with the ideas and rhetoric of Western environmentalism in the early to mid-1990s (Conklin and Graham 1995:703–704). One factor contributing to the recent receptivity to discourses about shamans and shamanic knowledge is that these discourses redefine the basis of indigenous ecological consciousness and shift the focus from indigenous practice to indigenous knowledge.

KNOWLEDGE AS THE CENTER OF INDIGENOUS IDENTITY

The growing recognition of distinctive cultural knowledge as the basis for indigenous identity reflects a major redefinition of such an identity in international indigenous political discourses (see Ellen et al. 2000). Until the early 1990s, Native peoples' claims to land and resources relied mostly on arguments about the morality of their cause. Over the past decade, another powerful set of arguments has developed; these arguments shifted indigenous political discourses "from a politics of morality to a politics that frames morality in a new terminology consisting of the notion of valuable knowledge in the service of biodiversity" (Muehlebach 2001:418; and see Hannerz 1996). Andrea Muehlebach notes that this coincides with several developments at the international level. The reconceptualization of the indigenous in terms of knowledge is taking place at the historical moment described by Marilyn Strathern, when "Euro-Americans are starting to speak of their societies as 'information societies' and of 'knowledge' as industrial capital . . . and when genetic and biological materials come to be treated as 'information resources' " (1999:160). It coincides also with scientific developments in ethnobiology, anthropology, and other fields recognizing the connection between indigenous knowledge and biodiversity, and new legal instruments that define indigenous knowledge as cultural property (Muehlebach 2001). Affirmations of the value of indigenous knowledge also carry a powerful moral force. Brysk (2000:188) notes that, in today's "information society," indigenous movements "play a special role in closing the characteristic gap of modernity: between information, knowledge, and wisdom" (Melucci 1994:109–112).

The redefinition of knowledge as the center of indigenous identity has special resonance in Brazil because it points to a way out of some of the binds in which indigenous ecoadvocacy was caught in the early 1990s. The identity of the shaman avoids some of the problematic issues about indigenous leadership and the divergence between rhetoric and action that have confronted some activists. One side effect of the vitriolic media attacks on the Kayapó was that the terms *chefe* and *cacique* (both meaning "chief") became a bit tarnished. As journalists reveled in tales of chiefs so corrupt that they were no longer welcome in their own villages, they increasingly treated Indian "chiefs" as objects of ridicule, the unfit or illegitimate representatives of their people. "High-Class Indians: Brazilian Chiefs Who Got Rich Like Good Capitalists Exploiting the Riches of Their Reserves" was the headline of a particularly vitriolic attack in one of Brazil's major weekly new magazines (Viana 1992).

Whereas the figure of the "chief" can raise the empirically testable question of whether a certain individual has or deserves his people's support, the figure of the shaman circumvents such questions. A shaman is not necessarily a chief, although media representations such as the term *shamanchief* coined by one commentator recently, may seem to imply otherwise (Krippner 1999). The shaman's

authority is legitimized by claims to privileged esoteric knowledge and spiritual power. This circumvents the sticky problems “chiefs” face of media ridicule and faltering local political authority, for individual claims to traditional knowledge and spiritual agency are claims that outsiders are seldom in a position to judge.⁶ Shamanic knowledge is, by definition, esoteric, at least partially outside the purview of Western science and other Western knowledge systems, and therefore only partly open to evaluation by those Westerners who do not have it. Knowledge-based authority also has the advantage of being mobile, easily exported from local Native communities to a wider world where the question of how a certain individual is viewed back home is moot. In the mobile world of transnational indigenous political activism, individual activists are often far from home and no longer engaged in making a living from the land and resources of their home territory. The assertion that environmental knowledge is a core element of identity emphasizes that the special ties to the land that remain the essence of the definition of the “indigenous” can be expressed even by individuals whose own life trajectories and political work may take them to places distant from their homelands.

As long as indigenous peoples’ connection to environmentalism was conceived of in terms of the collective behavior of Native communities, then any special environmentalist credentials they have could be undermined by evidence that they do not use natural resources in a sustainable manner. There are, however, other ways to define environmental sensibility. Over the past decade, Native activists and their allies worldwide have redefined environmentalism to imply not just collective practices but also (or alternatively) cultural *knowledge* of environmental resources, species, and biodiversity. The discourse about indigenous ecological wisdom has shifted away from claims about the superiority of specific indigenous resource management practices and toward claims about the value of indigenous knowledge that transcends the limitations of Western scientific knowledge. Instead of focusing on what Native communities actually *do*, this discourse highlights the potential value of what indigenous individuals may *know*. Whereas Native peoples formerly were positioned as guardians of the forest itself, now they are positioned as guardians of *knowledge* of the forest.

Shamans are assumed to be experts on esoteric environmental knowledge. The Brazilian public has had a long-running romance with the idea of the pajé as the possessor of mystical knowledge and spiritual power. In the realm of pulp indigenism, this romance blossoms around incidents that seem to attest to the superiority of shamanic power over the power of industrial technology and scientific or bureaucratic rationalism, as has occurred in a series of celebrated events in which non-Indian experts have turned to Native shamans for help with problems not resolved by Western science.⁷

The most dramatic recent example occurred during a prolonged drought in 1998, when wildfires raging in the

northern Brazilian state of Roraima had devastated huge tracts of rain forest. After the nation’s firefighters, forestry experts, and scientists had proved themselves incapable of containing the blazes, officials from FUNAI flew two Kayapó shamans from central Brazil to Roraima at taxpayer expense (ISA 2000b; Luis 1998). Kayapó have elaborate fire control knowledge and techniques that they apply to farming and forest management in the savannas and wooded areas of their home territory (Hecht and Cockburn 1989).

Arriving in Roraima amid great media fanfare, the Kayapó shamans were taken by FUNAI officials to a spot on the Yanomami Indian reservation, where they performed a rain dance. A few hours later, it began to rain—hard—for the first time in six months.

Back in Boa Vista, the state capital of Roraima, the Kayapó shamans danced in the streets in front of the television cameras. To the delight of a concerned public in Brazil and abroad, the rains grew into a regional storm front that put out most of the forest fires over the next few days.

Not everyone was quite so pleased. Some Brazilian media commentators accused FUNAI of spending taxpayer money on absurdity, “giving a scientific aura to a folkloric custom” (Luis 1998). The Yanomami Indians on whose territory the Kayapó had staged their rain dance were also less than enthusiastic. A Yanomami spokesman angrily pointed out that his people had shamans of their own, and that they are quite capable of managing their own cosmological affairs without the interference of foreign shamans and government bureaucrats (Luis 1998). Davi Kopenawa later recounted how Yanomami shamans also had performed rituals to put out the fires (Friend 1998; ISA 2000d).

GENERIC SHAMANISM

Yanomami spokesmen rejected the government officials’ view of shamanism as a generic practice composed of interchangeable parts detached from their local cultural and ecological moorings. It is, however, an increasingly generic shamanic image that has been emerging in the realm of pulp indigenism. This generic brand of shamanism diverges from actual Native Brazilian practices in two major ways. Shamanism is divorced from images of conflict, killing, and death; and medicinal plant use is represented as the core of shamanic practice and expertise (see Brosius 2000:305–311 on environmentalist preoccupations with medicinal plants).

The shamanic traditions of some groups may fit the image of shamans as beneficent, altruistic plant healers, but this stereotype does not fit the shamans of many other Native Brazilian societies. In Amazonia, shamanism is dominated by relations to animals and animal spirits; illness, curing, and shamanic initiation are permeated by metaphors of killing, hunting, and warfare. This is expressed in various ways, ranging from the inseparability of

shamanism from the practice of sorcery in some groups (Brown 1988, 1989; Greene 1998:645), to the images of hunting, taming, or being killed by animal spirits that other groups use to describe the shaman's relation to a companion spirit (Fausto 1999), to the ubiquitous equating of shamans with jaguars in lowland South American cosmology (Sullivan 1988:440–447). In many groups, shamans do not use plants much as the kind of orally ingested medicines highlighted in the new discourses about the value of shamanic botanical knowledge but, rather, use them largely as hallucinogens to induce visions. Shane Greene (1998:641) notes that the developing discourses about shamanism's contemporary relevance focus almost exclusively on the plants and medicines, ignoring other practices, with nonempirically testable effects, that constitute much of shamanic activity in indigenous community contexts. Jean Jackson (1995:313–314) describes the failure of a Tukanoan shamans' workshop to evaluate the objective efficacy of shamanic medicine outside of its specific social contexts.

While there clearly are lowland South American communities where it is the case, it is not a universal rule that shamans have privileged knowledge about the medicinal properties of plants (Frontiers 1996; Plotkin 1993). In many Native Brazilian societies, knowledge of medicinal plants is not the special province of shamans but, instead, is widely shared among adults, sometimes especially prevalent among women. (Like earlier popular enthusiasms for Indian warriors and chiefs, the current fashion for shaman-activists favors Native men, at least in Brazil where shamanism is mostly a male vocation.) However, it is specifically as medicinal plant specialists that shamans have gained a privileged position in the contemporary national and international political arenas.

PIRATES IN THE TREASURE CHEST

The politicizing link between shamans and plants is "biopiracy," which has become one of the hottest issues in Brazilian politics and media coverage and the unifying focus for Brazilian shamans' political mobilization. When FUNAI organized the first National Encounter of Pajés near Brasília, the national capital, in April 1998, the agency brought shamans from some forty Native groups to attend the gathering. The Manifesto the shamans issued in Brasília is a ringing denunciation of foreign piracy. It begins with the words, "The invaders, like animals of the night, have been coming to our land to steal our most precious possession. This precious possession is the knowledge that is stored inside the head of each *pajé* and in our tribal traditions" (Krippner 1999:1).

Two primary interrelated metaphors have dominated Brazilian national rhetoric about the rain forest in the 1990s. One is the image of the Amazon as the "lungs of the world," the essential organ on which the whole planet depends. The other, the key metaphor in the controversy over biopiracy, is the image of Amazonia as a "treasure

chest" in which the national patrimony of biogenetic diversity of untold economic value is stored. The pirates out to steal this treasure are consistently portrayed as foreigners or Brazilians of foreign origin. By rallying against the threat of foreign pirates stealing from the treasure chest of Amazonia's biological riches, Native activists reposition themselves as true citizens of Brazil, patriotic guardians of the national patrimony.

Every nation-state has its special sites of sacredness, its special tests of loyalty and treachery (Appadurai 1996:190). In Brazil, the issue of theft of biological material is a prime arena for narratives of treachery. The most infamous example, known to every schoolchild, is the story of the theft of rubber tree seeds (*Hevea brasiliensis*) in 1876. Henry Wickham, a British adventurer employed by the Royal Botanic Gardens in London, smuggled 70,000 rubber seeds out of the lower Amazon to Kew Gardens, where botanists succeeded in cultivating the *Hevea* species, which formerly had propagated only in the wild (Weinstein 1983:219). Transported to Malaysia, this Brazilian rubber tree stock became the basis for the Asian rubber plantation industry whose explosive growth brought to Wickham a British knighthood and to Brazil the collapse of its rubber economy in the early 20th century (Smith 1990:280). The specter of Wickham's piracy looms in the background of contemporary scandals over the unauthorized export of biological materials from Amazonia.

In recent years, several cases have been reported involving the unauthorized export of Amazonian plants (cf. LaFranchi 1997) and the illegal acquisition of genetic material from blood samples of indigenous peoples (the Karitiana and Suruí of Rondônia) that were subsequently marketed on the Internet (ISA 2000f; Ramos 1998:220–221; Santos 1999:2–3). These cases have received a great deal of publicity in the Brazilian press, including front-page headlines and a special-issue news magazine on biopiracy published by Brazil's largest newspaper (*Caderno Mais, Folha de São Paulo*, June 1, 1997), NGO denunciations, legal complaints filed by indigenous leaders, and congressional investigations (Santos 1999:2–3). The controversy over issues raised by Patrick Tierney's *Darkness in El Dorado* (2000) has also involved questions about the ownership and disposition of blood samples taken from the Yanomami of Venezuela in the 1960s.

In the wake of the Suruí and Karitiana blood scandal and other complaints about biopiracy, the government Indian agency organized the 1998 National Encounter of Pajés. This came at a time when FUNAI, always unpopular and underfunded, was losing its control over indigenous affairs as the agency's responsibilities for indigenous education, health, and legal services had been, or were about to be, delegated to other sectors of the government. Bringing Native activists together to speak out collectively on the issue of biopiracy may have been partly an attempt shore up the beleaguered agency's credibility. It also responded to a deeply felt sense of violation, not just of Indian rights and bodies but also of the social body of the entire nation.

Brazilian politicians, elites, and the media outlets they control are solidly in agreement with the Indians on the issue of biopiracy. In one of the stranger bedfellow relations in recent political memory, military leaders and Indian shamans found themselves on the same side. The Brazilian military has been suffering an identity crisis since the end of the dictatorship in 1985 left a huge military establishment with little justification for its enormous budgets (Hunter 1997:116–138). Eager to identify a foreign enemy, the military has embraced biopiracy as the focus of its national security anxieties and claims about international conspiracies to take over Brazilian territory and undermine Brazilian sovereignty. Unlike conservation and resource management issues, biopiracy is an environmental issue that is perceived to be consistent with nationalism. The vocal stand against foreign biopiracy taken by indigenous activists and their NGO allies has blunted the earlier nationalist backlash against Indians as allies of foreign environmental imperialists, relocating indigenous identity squarely within the discourses of national citizenship.

Opposition to biopiracy and assertions about the value of indigenous knowledge also unite Brazilian Indians, who have been deeply divided on questions about communities' rights to commercialize environmental resources. Biopiracy is an external enemy against which Indians with different tribal affiliations and different political interests can come together; it allows various Indian groups to make resolutions and statements of solidarity at a time when there are few other clear-cut political positions behind which all Native groups can unite. Biopiracy and its discourse of the defense of national interests thus bring together an otherwise unimaginably broad range of Indian and non-Indian interests. On this issue (and this issue alone), all of Brazil's Indians are on the same side as the military, elites, politicians, media commentators, the patriotic public, and many scientific researchers.⁸ Biopiracy serves some of the same unifying functions as the notion of sorcerers or witches. As with witches and sorcerers, shamans are the front line of defense against biopirates.

In January of 2000, FUNAI hosted another gathering of Brazilian shamans from 17 tribal groups. The government agency brought them to the national capital to address the issue of foreign biopiracy, which resulted in the issuing of a document titled the "Letter of Principles of Indigenous Knowledge" (ISA 2000c). The shamans went considerably further, however, and took the opportunity to criticize the Brazilian government itself, denouncing the pending approval of a congressional bill to permit increased deforestation in Amazonia (ISA 2000e). In May of the same year, 21 shamans, including eight women, from 15 indigenous groups, marched on the Presidential Palace to deliver a letter to President Fernando Henrique Cardoso. The shamans demanded legislation to protect indigenous knowledge of natural medicines against biopirates and announced their opposition to a congressional bill that would reduce the protected areas of the Amazonian forest and central Brazilian savannas (ISA 2000a). Although FUNAI

seems to have had foreign biopirates in mind when the agency facilitated the national gathering of shamans, the growing mobilization of shamans may not be containable within the confines of a narrowly nationalist government agenda.

The politicization of indigenous shamans and the "shamanization" of indigenous politics is a case study in how indigenous identities are being creatively reformulated in response to the need to negotiate among tensions and contradictions between multiple political discourses and constituencies. By mobilizing against the threat of foreign pirates stealing from the treasure chest of Amazonia's biogenetic riches, Native Brazilian activists have repositioned themselves as defenders of the national patrimony and suitably patriotic participants in the nation's new democratic party politics. The issue of biopiracy thus works simultaneously at several levels, from the global to the local, articulating concerns shared by local Native communities, Brazilian nationalism, and international environmental discourse. It speaks to the concerns of potential allies in the national arena without alienating key foreign supporters and affirms the legitimacy of Native peoples' privileged environmental knowledge. The emphasis on indigenous knowledge and the figure of the shaman-activist sidesteps or reconfigures some of the political liabilities engendered by merging international environmental discourses with indigenous politics, redefining indigenous environmentalism as well as Native peoples' place as citizens of Brazil's democratic society. As the voices of shamans like Davi Kopenawa are heard more clearly in the global public sphere, their perspectives and those of other Native peoples are changing the discourses of environmentalism itself, challenging and expanding Western understandings of human relations to nature.

The contemporary emphasis in indigenous activism on knowledge and metaphors of healing resonates with international trends in environmental advocacy and the postcolonial politics of panindigenous movements. Activists who are reimagining Native identities throughout the Americas and throughout the world are reformulating indigenous activist identities around images of a generic, plant-remedy-focused shamanism. As indigenous peoples renegotiate the political, cultural, and social spaces they occupy within the nation-state, they increasingly turn to metaphors and images of healing to validate their claims to legitimacy and construct new, positive images representative of the vitality, renewal, rebirth, and empowerment of indigenous communities and traditions (Adelson 2001:80). For Brazil's indigenous peoples, the metaphors of healing, knowledge, and guardianship of the Amazonian treasure chest are offering powerful symbolic tools for pursuing their political goals and rich possibilities for rethinking 21st-century indigenous identities.

NOTES

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1. The UN's Conference on Environment and Development brought heads of states and other representatives of 172 countries to Rio de Janeiro for discussions about the global environment and sustainable development. The quotation from Davi Kopenawa is from an interview published in the *Multinational Monitor* 13(9), September 1992.

2. The name "Kari-Oca" was a play on *carioca*, the term for inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro.

3. All translations of texts with foreign-language titles are my own, unless otherwise noted. On the growth of shamanic activities in situations of colonial domination and social change in Brazil and other Latin American countries, see Brown and Fernandez 1991, Carneiro da Cunha 1998, Ferreira 2002, Hugh-Jones 1996, Vainfas 1995, and Wright and Hill 1992.

4. In Brysk's definition, identity politics

involve an explicit appeal to identity for movement mobilization and external campaigns, the use of identity markers as symbols, and the politicization of cultural practices. . . . Characteristic (but not exclusive) mechanisms of identity politics include symbolic appeals, information campaigns, and legitimacy challenges to dominant institutions and regimes. [2000: 23]

5. In forging transnational alliances, Brazilian Indians were preceded by the indigenous federations of Ecuador and Peru, which have been far more successful in forming large regional pan-Indian organizations, in contrast to the more fragmented networks of indigenous organizations and advocacy groups in Brazil (Ramos 1998:175–176).

6. I do not mean to imply that Native communities are not interested in the legitimacy of individuals' claims to shamanic authority. On the contrary, in Colombia a group of 50 shamans recently drew up "a code of ethics and established a union to police themselves, complete with membership cards" (Boyle 2001:1). The three elders who head the union chose five younger shamans to serve as an operating committee for the Union of Yage Healers. In an innovative approach to professional credentialing, the litmus test to determine professional legitimacy was that an elder visited each prospective member of the union and drank the hallucinogen *yage* with him to determine who was a real shaman and who was not.

7. In the mid-1980s, one nationally famous incident of shamanic intervention involved a well-known ornithologist who was poisoned by a frog venom and sought treatment (albeit unsuccessfully) from a Kamayurá shaman, Sapaim. At the time, the media treated the shaman's efforts in a generally positive light, as an unusual human-interest story. The ambivalence in public attitudes toward Indians is manifest in a recurring pattern in which Native individuals who achieve favorable national prominence subsequently become objects of public derision or amusement. Recently, the press reported that Sapaim had set up a business in Brasília, the national capital, which the media labeled "Disque-Pajé," "Dial-A-Shaman" telephone consultations (ISA 2000g).

8. Brysk notes that the language of objections to biopiracy is largely the language of scientific discourse. "Appeals to some of the same values that enable or result from science-intellectual property, fair compensation, biodiversity, and religious freedom, have empowered the tribal village in the global epistemic arena" (2000: 244–245).

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