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The Songs of My Grandparents, the Heritage of My People

The Creation of a Huni Kuin Song Archive between the Sacred Secret and the Struggle of Remembering

The idea of commoning evokes notions of openness, of transparency, sharing and solidarity. Often, we anthropologists share these ideals as we work together with our project partners and interlocutors who have their own commoning projects. This blog post intends to show the complex negotiations and the concurrent ethical stakes involved in the creation of a musical commons among the Huni Kuin, an indigenous people of Western Amazonia, as they present themselves during my ongoing doctoral research project with several Huni Kuin communities in the Brazilian state of Acre. My project is concerned with Huni Kuin traditional songs, which, for the Huni Kuin, are powerful prayers that call forth the forces of various cosmic entities. In the spirit of partnership and co-creation, my research project is not only about understanding the way in which processes of forgetting, remembering, documenting and revitalizing traditional music shape Huni Kuin efforts to create indigenous modernities, but also about contributing to their initiatives that try to record and preserve songs they consider important to pass to future generations. This contribution could possibly be an archive maintained by Huni Kuin for Huni Kuin, which would transform songs remembered and practiced by the families involved in the project into a commons usable by inhabitants of other villages as well. Naturally, complicated questions arise about which song knowledge should or should not be shared, of who or who should not be admitted access to the archive as a musical commons, and how the notions of cultural heritage as patrimony and the commons relate to each other. Inevitably, the ongoing debate is about who owns culture in which way.

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To understand the different viewpoints in the discussion, it is important to trace Huni Kuin history. Whereas Huni Kuin live on both sides of the border between Brazil and Peru, I will focus on the Brazilian communities with which I currently work. The Brazilian Huni Kuin have organize their history as comprising five eras, all characterized by different relations to non-indigenous people. The first era, the Time of the Longhouse, is understood to be the time before first contact with non-indigenous people probably at the end of the 19th century, when villages consisted of one large house, powerful shamans were still alive and the Huni Kuin maintained fully their knowledge in relation to the forest and the spiritual means to interact with it, including rituals, songs, and prayers.

This era ended when the Amazonian rubber boom led to an influx of rubber tappers into Acre around 1900, starting the Time of the *Correrrias*. *Correrrias* were either expeditions by rubber bosses and their employees to trap indigenous people as peons in the rubber economy through the advance of “gifts” which turned into lifelong debts or punitive expeditions to kill those who resisted becoming part of the system.[1] This era was a catastrophe for the Huni Kuin: Many elders, the living memory of their relatives, died, and families were torn apart during the efforts to flee the invasion from Peru and Brazil. Roughly one hundred years ago, however, all the Huni Kuin in Brazil had become peons of the Acrean rubber barons, starting the Time of Captivity, in which the practice of many rituals and sometimes the usage of their language in front of non-indigenous persons was forbidden. This led to many cultural losses and thus is remembered as a time of violence, injustice, slavery, and cultural loss, which lasted well into the 1970ies.

Only with what they call the Time of Rights did the Huni Kuin gain officially demarcated territories from the 1980ies onwards, due to partnerships with anthropologists, political movements and NGOs. This Time of Rights also coincided with increased efforts of cultural revitalization. The achievement of land rights for the Huni Kuin is the beginning of the present, in which the Huni Kuin strive towards

empowerment, improvement of living conditions and strengthening “culture” through their own organizations, often with the help of NGOs and/or state agencies.

That revitalization and, with it, cultural heritage started to become an issue in the fight for territorial rights is not a coincidence. In this regard, Huni Kuin history reflects the rise of Latin American indigenous movements from the 1970ies onwards. Since the self-identification of some Latin American states as plurinational and the formulation of constitutions that acknowledge indigenous peoples’ rights to cultural difference, cultural heritage has become central in the development of a self-confident stance that is essential in indigenous peoples’ negotiations with non-indigenous actors.[2] In the Time of Rights, revitalization also served the end of proving to be an indigenous people, central to the possibility of demarcating an indigenous territory. Cultural heritage in the context of relations between indigenous peoples and nation states is an inherently political idea and tied to strategies to strengthen, in one way or the other, the position of indigenous peoples thus conceptualized as defined unities with a common heritage.

This can be exemplified by this year’s inclusion of Huni Kuin graphemes, called *kene*, into the *Instituto do Patrimônio Histórico e Artístico Nacional*’s (IPHAN) list of Brazilian intangible cultural heritage. According to the project booklet, published by the IPHAN itself[3], the process of patrimonialization of kene was sparked in 2006 by the increasing commercialization of *kene* and their appropriation by state institutions and companies in Acre. Thus, the idea was to delineate *kene* as a property of the Huni Kuin. However, contrary to the Huni Kuin’s understanding of the term, the status of immaterial cultural heritage does not imply intellectual property rights, which was central to the Huni Kuin’s endeavour. Still, the process of patrimonialization went forward with the development of plans for the preservation and promotion of teaching of *kene*. As *kene* are a traditionally female art, a cultural exchange programme was instated that foresaw the travel of several Huni Kuin weavers to an elder on the Purús river who could teach the visiting women designs

long forgotten on their territories. But these efforts for preservation did not go unchallenged. The regional male leaders expressed their discontent about the programme, because they perceived a lack of reciprocity for the sharing of their river's knowledge with weavers from others. Thus, knowledge about weaving techniques was at first glance for those male leaders heritage of their river, and and only in the second instance as of their people. This example demonstrates as well that comprehension of cultural heritage and its commoning can be gendered.

Very similar to the case of the *kene*, the efforts of my project partners and me to set up an educational Huni Kuin song archive has met conflicting views of what heritage is and which claims can be laid on it. In heritage debates like these, many layers are at work. First, there is the layer of legally recognized cultural heritage, tied to its definition in the Brazilian constitution of 1988 in article 216 as "goods of natural and immaterial nature, that individually or taken together are referential carriers in relation to identity, action, and memory of the different groups that form the Brazilian society."[4] Then, there is the level of the FEPHAC, the Federation of the Huni Kuin in the State of Acre, an NGO which was founded in the wake of the patrimonialization of the *kene* in 2006, and which has since acted as a movement to link the political, educational and other officials of the various Huni Kuin territories, to defend what Huni Kuin consider their cultural heritage, and, among other things, to supervise activities in which Huni Kuin knowledge might be shared. The latter includes review processes of proposals of Huni Kuin who want to travel outside of their territories to engage in intercultural exchange or the review of research proposals by non-Huni-Kuin academics. Thus, the FEPHAC rests on a conceptualization of the Huni Kuin as a unified people with collective rights to cultural heritage, which has to be protected from appropriation by non-indigenous peoples. This strong protective stance is intended to strengthen the position of the Huni Kuin and averting *divide-et-impera* tactics that use one territory of the Huni Kuin against the interests of another.

Next, there are the 12 legally recognized territories in which the Brazilian Huni Kuin live and which have their own administrations, which are not supervised by the FEPHAC. As in the case of the male leaders of the Purús who were critical of the sharing of their territory's graphic knowledge, these regional administrations sometimes highlight the cultural distinctions between the territories when they feel that commoning projects don't follow the principle of reciprocity.

Then, there's the level of villages and their inhabitants, those who are involved in the recordings, interviews and other research activities in our project. The four villages that form the project group since now have been rarely included in academic research and thus less successful in registering their knowledge. They are strongly interested in the idea of an archive, mainly because their elders are worried about who will have access to the songs they learned from long deceased family members. Whenever I talk to my friends and research partners among these villages about the songs they know, they first relate who it was that taught them about this song or that musical genre. They narrate how their grandfather, grandmother, uncle, aunt or other relative would sing, how they listened intently during moments of healing, of clearing a plantation, or of weaving a hammock. In indigenous Amazonia, knowledge is embodied in substances and passed from one body to another through various practices, making the bodies of relatives and teachers and students consubstantial (Santos-Granero 2012). Thus, knowledge is intimately tied to personal memories, identities, and family ties. In practice, because teaching happens mostly through oral transmission and personal teaching and because of the historic separation of the Huni Kuin among different territories, there is no consensus about what should be considered common cultural heritage such as songs that belong to the people in general and what denotes specific repertoires whose owners would be families and chiefly the experts who teach them.

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Fig. 1 *Documentation of songs by community members during the life cycle ritual Nixpupima on the river Jordão. Copyright by the author.*

The issue is further complicated by the fact that, apart from the discussion who is allowed to provide access to cultural heritage, the Hui Kuin revitalization movement

is simultaneously acting for instigating documentation and learning opportunities, turning exclusive knowledge into a common resource. Consequently, calls to restrict access in order to safeguard unity across territories as well as regional, local, or personal claims are countered by calls for exchange and for loosening the former restriction that limited teaching to the relationship between a single teacher and a few students. With the fact that Huni Kuin culture changed dramatically in the last 100 years and many songs exist only in the memory of a few elderly people, sometimes well into their 80ies or 90ies and in fragile health, the question of what can and should be recorded to be accessible for future generations is urgent. In order for revitalization through commoning to function, conceptions of the exclusivity of heritage have to be set aside, because successful revitalization entails joining the musical traces that were separated through territorial dispersal of Huni Kuin. Some Huni Kuin express their worries about the possible loss of what they, conceive of as heritage of their people. Revitalization among the Huni Kuin arises out of a sentiment that lies at the heart of heritage practices, and, according to Rodney Harrison[5], is tied to caring for the future by caring for that which is deemed valuable and should be protected for the generations to come.

It is difficult then to navigate between these different levels of caring for heritage. On one side, there is the stance which seeks to protect heritage by not exposing powerful songs to curious non-indigenous people. On the other side, communities, considering the knowledge in their villages to be intimately their own, wish to share their heritage with outsiders who they deem beneficial to their own projects of revitalization.

Commoning the knowledge of powerful ritual songs in the form of an archive openly accessible to Huni Kuin has certainly advantages as well as risks. For revitalization efforts, it would be helpful to have a resource for musical education, that stores knowledge safely and potentially across generations. Some young Huni Kuin believe that the former secrecy of ritual experts to pass their knowledge only to certain

individuals served its purpose, but that in times of rapid sociocultural change, a more open attitude towards sharing knowledge with interested Huni Kuin students should be developed. This would also combat a tendency in which some songs that were once more common became a specialty of a few experts. On the other hand, an archive in the form of song recordings would inevitably shape the form of how this musical knowledge is engaged, learned and taught. Heritagization always has the potential to make memory stale, or, in this case, to influence the Huni Kuin social institution of transmission by elders to their selected students. Thus, the scepticism towards the idea of an archive is not unfounded. Consequentially, any future form of a song archive has to respect both the wish to store and amplify song knowledge deemed valuable to maintaining alive cultural memory and ritual practice *and* the wish to save living musical practice from transforming into a folkloristic heritage which would be disruptive to the essential ties between music, ceremony, humans, and the other-than-human beings implicated in singing. When practice is to become heritage and then commons, profound shifts are happening. Commoning through archives can democratize and facilitate revitalization practices, but all the same, it has to be done with care, lest to destroy the very thing it seeks to protect and disseminate.

Footnotes

[1] Taussig, *Shamanism and Colonialism*, 45-46, 50.

[2] Cortés Ferreira, „Identidad y pueblos indígenas", 187-189.

[3] IPHAN, FEPHAC et al., "Kene xarabu miyui".

[4] "Constituição da República Federativa do Brasil", translated by the author.

[5] Harrison, "Beyond ‚Natural' and ‚Cultural' Heritage, 34.

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