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Superstitions of Amazonian Indigenous people about some birds

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ABSTRACT

Superstitions have their origins at the beginning of human civilization and makeup part of the very essence of human intellect. Indigenous peoples, due to their ethnic diversity, contributed in different ways with many cultural aspects. Religious beliefs and superstitions play an important role within Indigenous culture. The objective of this study was to accomplish a survey of the superstitions of some Indigenous peoples of the Amazon about certain species of birds. The method for collecting the data was used open and semi-structured interviews with Indigenous people from the Arara, Tenharim, Kayabi, and Apiaká ethnic groups.

Keywords: Indigenous, birds, superstitions, Amazon rainforest, Brazil

1. INTRODUCTION

When people hear bird sounds, they understand them on various levels that are interpreted according to cultural context. Among Indigenous cultures of Latin America, avian voices are understood as a group identity, kinship affiliation, and personal experience, such as dreams and vision quests. Birds are recognized as social actors with their own voices that express intentions, desires, needs, and responsibilities [1].

For many cultures around the world, birds are viewed as seers who can foretell the future. The meanings conveyed by the appearance and behavior of bird species vary from one culture to another and can be interpreted in contrasting ways depending on the details of the birds' behavior and the personal history of the observer [2].

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The studies were carried out with Indigenous people living in the Brazilian Amazon, from the Arara, Tenharim, Kayabi, and Apiaká ethnic groups, after authorization by the Indigenous communities and National Indigenous People Foundation (FUNAI is a Brazilian governmental protection agency for Amerindian interests and their culture). Interviews with the Kayabi and Apiaká were conducted in June 2011; with Tenharim in October and November 2014; and with the Arara in 2019.

One of the study regions is known as “Volta Grande do Xingu” (Xingu River’s Big Bend), situated in the State of the Pará, Brazil, located at latitude 03°23' S to 03°38' S and longitude 51°33' W to 52°00' W, a 130 km stretch of rapids and braided channels on the Xingu River, which is an important tributary of the Amazon River and where the Indigenous people of the Arara ethnic group live [3].

Other areas of study are Kayabi and Apiaká Indigenous territories. The Apiaká territory studied is located in the Mato Grosso State, Southern Brazilian Amazon Rainforest, at the left edge of Teles Pires River, in the Apicás municipal district. It lies between 07°39'S to 08°32'S latitude and 57°50'W to 58°21'W longitude. The Kayabi territory studied is located between the states Pará and Mato Grosso, covering part of the municipalities Jacareacanga (Southwest of the Pará) and Apicás (North of the Mato Grosso), on the edge of the Teles Pires River. It lies between 07°54'S to 09°13'S latitude and 56°39'W to 57°54'W longitude [4].

Indigenous people of the Tenharim ethnic group live in the Tenharim Marmelos Indigenous Land, located entirely in the State of Amazonas, in the municipalities of Humaitá and Manicoré, between geographic coordinates 7°48' and 8°53' south latitude and 61°35' and 62°10' west longitude [5]. In the past, before the opening of the Trans-Amazonian Highway, these Indigenous lived together in a single village on the banks of the Marmelos River, in the area where the Trans-Amazonian Highway currently crosses the river [6].

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The birds mentioned in the interviews can be associated with various symbolic subcategories: birds that supposedly bring good fortune, those that are considered bad omens, and still those that can predict events related to the climate and the weather.

For the Indigenous people of the Arara ethnic group, who live in the region known as “Volta Grande do Xingu” (Xingu River’s Big Bend), State of Pará, Brazil, some birds play an important role in the superstition of this people.

Among the many types of ethno-zoological connections that exist between humans and animals are symbolic ritualistic relationships that, in the case of birds, refer to omens culturally associated with these animals [7]. The American Barn Owl (*Tyto furcata*), which the Arara call

“idoroé”, is a very mysterious bird. The Arara does not like it very much when the “idoroé” sings close to their homes because is “ominous” and the Indigenous are distressed by its singing.

This bird sings at night. “When she sings on a moonlit night, it's fine, but when there's no moon, it's dangerous”.

Bird vocalizations are often considered presages of natural or supernatural occurrences. The Indigenous attribute to the singing of some birds the power of predicting disagreeable events. The Potoo (*Nyctibius* spp) brings joy to the Arara people. When she sings on a moonlit night, the Indigenous stand listening, because it is a moment of great joy. However, there is a lot of superstition surrounding this nocturnal bird with its nostalgic and wailing song, and some people, due to lack of knowledge, end up rejecting it for fear of bad omens or bad luck.

The Nighthawk (family Caprimulgidae), when it sings in the moonlight, the Arara stands listening until it stops. Other birds arouse great interest among the Arara: The Gray-winged Trumpeter (*Psophia crepitans*) which sings at night, until three in the morning; the Gray Tinamou (*Tinamus tao*), what the Arara call “maoré”, is a bird that sings until three in the morning. It sings and gives a loud scream.

Within the symbolic perspective of the Arara, Toucans (family Ramphastidae) are associated with the power of presaging the weather and climatic events. According to some Arara interviews, when a toucan flies to a “bacaba” (*Oenocarpus bacaba*) to feed on the fruits of this palm tree, if it sings it is because it is going to rain.

The sounds birds make include calls and songs, but there are other ways that birds are heard beyond these utterances. When Hummingbirds (Trochilidae) enter a Arara's house, brings news and generally not good news. Any bird that enters the house, if it enters and is startled, it takes the evil with it, but if it enters and remains calm inside the house, the Arara keep sad, because they keep thinking that a relative is going to die. According to the Arara, the hummingbird brings the worst news.

There are many superstitions related to hummingbirds in popular culture, with those with darker feathers being related to the bad omen and warning of death and those with green feathers, when they enter houses, they bring good things, that is, only good things happen during the day.

Birds communicate through calls, songs, feather vibrations, and tapping patterns. They also communicate through silences. Bird silences can indicate danger, disapprobation, and loss. The Red-throated Caracara (*Ibycter americanus*), which the Arara call “pancaricá”, when it sings near the house can mean three things: if it sings by the side of the river, it is because within three days the Indigenous will have many pigs to hunt; if he sings on the tree called “amarelão”, it is because a visitor is coming; if he sings a lot, it's because there will be a lot of people, and if he sings a little, it's because there will be few people or just one person.

The Arara says that when the Black-bellied Cuckoo (*Piaya melanogaster*) sings excitedly, is because the Indigenous people will have many animals to hunt. The Hoatzin (*Opisthocomus hoazin*), a species found in swamps and riparian forests, according to the Arara, is “a vision” and no one dares to kill her.

The Laughing Falcon (*Herpetotheres cachinnans*), according to information from the Arara, sings a little before the rain and also sings a little before the sun comes out. When it sings “It's going to rain”, shortly after it rains. And when it sings “It's sunny”, it's been a lot of sunny days.

The chant of the Laughing Falcon (*Herpetotheres cachinnans*) is a bad omen in every sense for the Apiaká and Kayabi Indigenous people. In interviews among the Kayabi, the fact

that this falcon is a voracious eater of snakes was highlighted on several occasions, and that “snakes flee in fear when they hear the makawā's cry” (the name of this bird in the Kayabi language, makawā, is onomatopoeic, which describes the sound made by the bird itself).

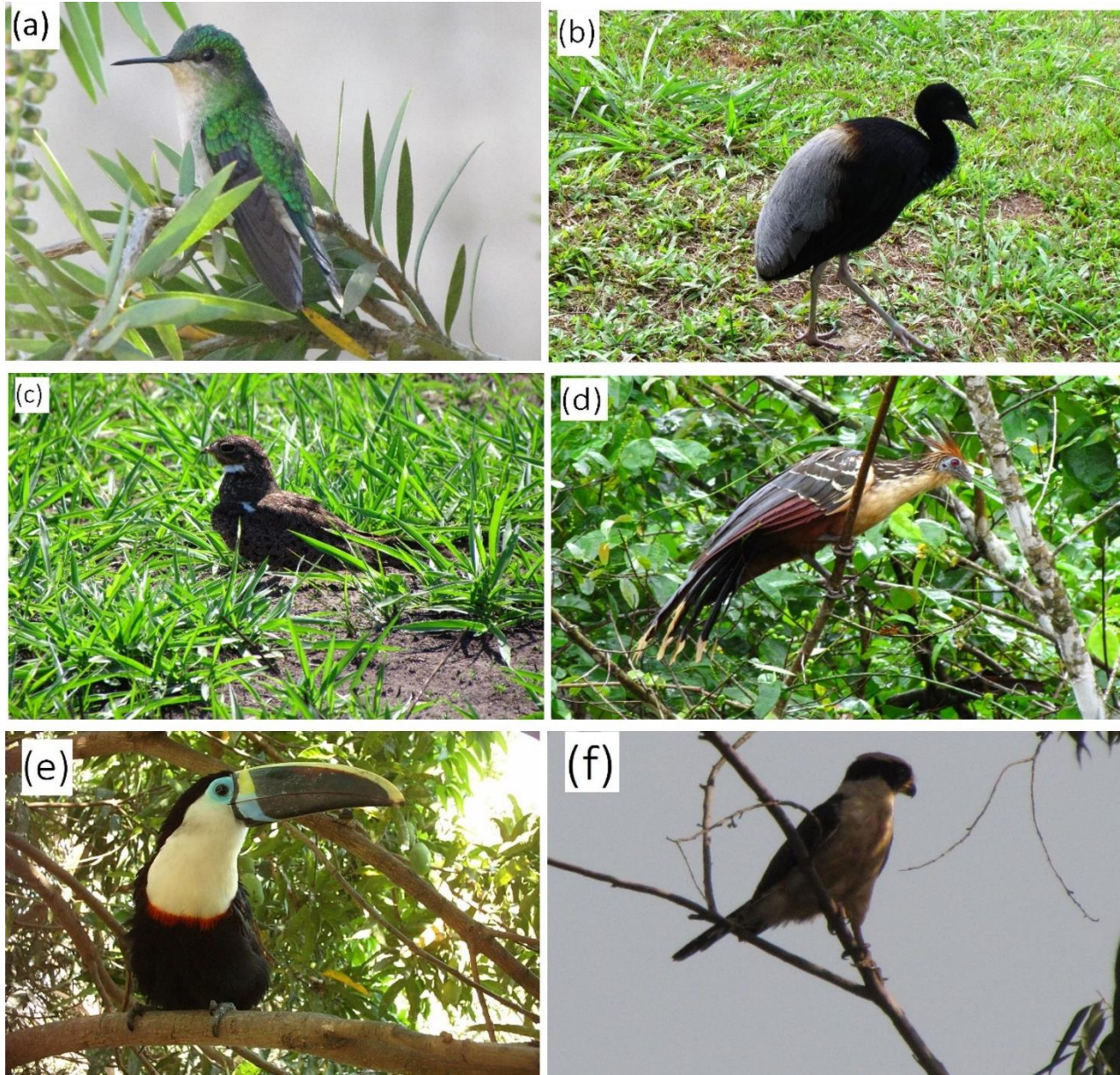


Figure 1. Some birds mentioned in the text: (a) green feathered hummingbird *Thalurania glaucopis* (♀); (b) Gray-winged Trumpeter (*Psophia crepitans*); (c) Nighthawk *Podager nacunda* (family Caprimulgidae); (d) Hoatzin (*Opisthocomus hoazin*); (e) toucan *Ramphastos tucanus curviere*; (f) falcon *Herpetotheres cachinnans*. Photos by Fabio Rossano Dario.

Therefore, when the Kayabi goes hunting, especially at night, they imitate the cry of the “makawā” and, in this way, they have less chance of being bitten by the snakes, which flee from

them. A story very similar to this one was described by priest Manuel Aires de Casal in his book “Corografia Brazílica” or “Relação Histórico-Geográfica do Reino do Brazil”, which was the first book published in Brazil, in 1817.

Certain bird species are associated with the underworld, while others are connected with specific spirits. Something really fascinating, among the many stories told by the Kayabi Indigenous people, is that of a nocturnal bird, called “anham”, whose “spirit enters the soul of the person who is sleeping, and he tries to scream, but he doesn't let him”. According to the descriptions, it seems to be a species similar to the Great Potoo (*Nyctibius grandis*), a nocturnal bird with a nostalgic and wailing song, to which numerous myths are attributed. This demonstrates how much Kayabi knowledge about avifauna species must be understood within a broader process of knowledge of natural species, involving their symbolic meanings in the daily life of the village for food, rituals, myths, and dreams. The Screaming Piha (*Lipaugus vociferans*), popularly known as the “cricrió” and “capitão-do-mato” is possibly the one that draws more of the indigenous’ attention by vocalizing constantly in the dense forests in the Indigenous territory. The name “capitão-do-mato”, literally, bush captain, is an allusion to the person responsible for capturing runaway slaves, because, according to oral tradition, when blacks fled and entered the forest, the “cricriós” started singing and the blacks were located.

According to the mythology of the Tenharim, it was a bird called “urukureai” that saved the jaguar. It challenged the lightning, saying that it was the master of the jungle and that it was superior to the lightning. When lightning struck, could not get it, as it hid in the hollow of a tree and managed to survive. It was hidden inside these trees and what saved it was the bird, which sustained the jaguar with food. According to the natives, it is a bird with yellow feathers, which sings at night. The “tangará pyainhi” (Family Thraupidae) is a bird that is highly respected by the Tenharim because if someone has a disease it will seek a cure. It lives at the headwaters of the Marmelos River, it is black in color with blue stripes. He is the one who tells where the medicine is and points with his beak where the medicine is for the cure of certain diseases. One of the plants indicated by this tanager was the “tymoatã” (*Senna* sp, tree species widely used in the medicine Tenharim).

4. CONCLUSION

It is observed that in the culture of these studied Indigenous peoples, the relationship between birds and humans has enduring meanings that are transmitted over generations because they resonate with an Indigenous communities’ history and values. Meanwhile, individual human experiences continue to enter oral traditions and writings. When birds are recognized for their spiritual significance, the powers they embody can transmit a sense of ongoing presence and protection. The knowledge concerning these beliefs is acquired from older people or shared among friends. Although many Indigenous people might doubt these beliefs, they are considered traditional by the Indigenous communities studied.

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