

The Cracks, Bumps, and Dents of ‘Culture Collecting’: Examples from the Study of South American (Fire) Fans

As rachaduras, solavancos e amolgadelas da ‘coleta de cultura’: exemplos do estudo dos abanos (para fogo) sul-americanos

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Abstract: Ethnography, a means of representing the culture of a people graphically and in writing, as well as ethnographic museums, institutions devoted to conserving, contextualizing, and displaying indigenous heritage for wider audiences, strive to portray cultures adequately and on their own terms. However, given that the ethnographic enterprise has virtually always been carried out by and within non-indigenous scientific structures, its products are at a high risk of being tinged by the Western lens, in particular Western scientific theory and practice. This article focuses on the ethnographic record of South American fire fans – defined by ethnographers as tools for fanning cooking fires – to demonstrate how such biases can be removed by taking stock of the entirety of the relevant ethnographic heritage and analyzing it through the prism of the documented practices in which such objects are enmeshed, including the very practice of ethnography. In the light of such practices, the ethnographic record of fire fans deconstructs into a corpus of historical documents revealing the momentary, yet meaningful, technological choices made by the indigenous craftsmen who produced the objects and exposing Western categories, *Kulturkreise* mentality, and culture-area schemata imposed on them.

Keywords: collection; fire fans; Lowland South America.

Resumo: A etnografia, enquanto meio de representar a cultura de um povo graficamente e por escrito, bem como os museus etnográficos, instituições dedicadas a conservar, contextualizar e exibir o patrimônio indígena para um público mais amplo, se esforçam para retratar as culturas de forma adequada e em seus próprios termos. No entanto, dado que o fazer etnográfico quase sempre foi realizado por e dentro de estruturas científicas não indígenas, seus produtos correm o risco de serem tingidos pelas lentes ocidentais, em particular pela teoria e prática científicas ocidentais. Este artigo trata do registro etnográfico de abanos para fogo sul-americanos – definidos por etnógrafos como instrumentos para abanar fogueiras – para demonstrar como tais preconceitos podem ser removidos fazendo um balanço da totalidade do patrimônio etnográfico relevante e analisando-o através do prisma das práticas nas quais tais objetos estão enredados, incluindo a própria prática etnográfica. À luz de tais práticas, o registro etnográfico dos abanos para fogo se desconstrói em um corpus de documentos históricos revelando as escolhas tecnológicas momentâneas, mas significativas, feitas pelos artesãos indígenas que produziram os objetos e expondo as categorias ocidentais, a mentalidade *Kulturkreise* e os esquemas de tipo ‘áreas culturais’ impostos sobre eles.

Palavras-chave: coleção; abanos para fogo; planícies da América do Sul.

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To see ethnography as a form of culture collecting (not, of course, the only way to see it) highlights the ways that diverse experiences and facts are selected, gathered, detached from their original temporal occasions, and given enduring value in a new arrangement. Collecting – at least in the West, where time is generally thought to be linear and irreversible – implies a rescue of phenomena from inevitable historical decay or loss. The collection contains what “deserves” to be kept, remembered, and treasured.

The Predicament of Culture, James Clifford (1988, 231)

Introduction

Working with indigenous heritage amassed under the aegis of museums can be dangerous.¹ But what we need to be wary of is not only the residual biocides applied to objects before environmentally controlled spaces were invented. The dire peril of research on indigenous collections kept by the West that interests us is the ‘culture collecting’ enterprise that shaped them and that continues to underpin narratives about them (e.g. Lonetree 2012).² Sketched out in broad strokes, most such collections – or ‘selections’ to be precise – were created in the 19th and 20th centuries. They represent the choices of Western scientists, travelers, even businessmen, *ipso facto* strangers to the cultures they ventured out to ‘salvage’ from and for the colonial apparatus that methodically erased indigenous peoples from society while ‘rescuing’ their traditions. To contextualize the objects for Western publics and best represent the vanishing ‘Other’, the knowledge and practices that the objects were mired in were documented. In the process, indigenous cultures were passed through the prism of Western values, fragmented by Western disciplines, and catalogued by the Western science of the time, each adding to the decentering of their original arrangements. In an all too familiar scenario, the objects were little more than tagged for exonyms, functions, and collector’s credentials, in the end becoming representations of collectives stripped of their individual artistry. To boot,

1 I am greatly indebted to the curators of the museums listed in footnote 3 for providing me with images of and additional data about fire fans. I also wish to acknowledge the colleagues who shared with me their knowledge and observations included in this paper, in particular, Adolfin Ebencilio, Catrine Benjamin, and Jens van Gysel, as well as Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac which funded a part of the research.

2 I use the term ‘indigenous’ to write in general about populations native to a particular place who live in an interconnected relationship with the local environment for generations. Aware that some individuals and communities that fit this description prefer terms such as but not limited to ‘First peoples’, ‘First Nations’, ‘Aboriginal peoples’, ‘Native peoples’, specific auto- or exonyms, or, on the contrary, the more general terms ‘people’ or ‘human’, I hope that my use of ‘indigenous’ does not offend the reader.

even the better-described and documented acquisitions may be open to interpretation as 'transgressive acts', on the construal that they were as a rule made under a power imbalance that continues to have a purchase on the lives of indigenous peoples (Sarr and Savoy 2018, 8). Today, online and offline, the selections form narratives that often fail to address their colonial legacies and run a risk of essentializing indigenous cultures as irreconcilable with internal complexity, not to mention contradictions, forever fixed in distant exotic spacetimes, yet paradoxically impossible to preserve endogenously, and incapable of reinventing themselves without losing authenticity. As such, they may legitimize indigenous heritage as how and what the West wants to treasure and force a tone of normalcy into what remains an unbalanced *status quo*, eerily echoing its colonial 'culture collecting' genealogy.

Accordingly, as many public and academic debates have stressed (e.g. Lonetree 2012; Onciul 2015; Sarma 2015; Catlin-Legutko 2016; Colwell 2017), the publics, researchers, and museum staff, whether indigenous or not, need to face several foundational problems when interacting with 'indigenous collections' and negotiate appropriate forms of redress. Depending on which aspect of 'culture collecting' is at stake, coping with it may require different approaches, including repatriating objects, developing partnerships between indigenous peoples and museums to co-create or co-curate heritage, as well as more structural changes in the academic and museum world. All imply building a plurivocal environment that supports indigenous peoples in balancing the Western selections of and narratives about indigenous cultures with those constructed on their own terms. The existing external narratives in their turn, whether part of the museum or the broader scientific and public discourse, should be revisited with the goal of revealing their inherent legacies of bias. My modest contribution to the latter approach is exemplified in this paper.

My tactic involves harnessing the fragmentation of knowledge definitional of most Western science. The idea that knowledge can be compartmentalized underpins Western disciplinarity and its attendant scientific fields that began emerging in the Enlightenment (McKeon 1994). It hints, too, that if the pieces described by the disciplines – the 'intellectual cartels' whose "audience for and the set of auditors of knowledge production consist of a limited group of peers" (Frodeman 2014, 35) – were put back together, they should reveal the original discipline-free whole, much like a jigsaw puzzle. The moves from disciplinarity to multi- and interdisciplinarity even suggest new levels of knowing can be reached by reassembling the pieces. Yet, they are also symptomatic of the growing recognition of the gaps that disciplinary divides create or even the limits they impose on scientific production (Mittelstrass 2011, 330). The optimism of disciplinarity must also be curbed by acknowledging that the particular disciplinary structure some take for granted is but a currently accepted take on science. Mittelstrass (2011, 330) gives a simple example of its arbitrariness: 'heat' (coincidentally, a phenomenon related to museum objects we shall look at) was successively, an object of physics, chemistry, then physics

again. Knowledge produced by indigenous peoples through the process of making sense of the lands they inhabit may be organized in yet different ways, requiring approaches that draw on the disciplines but can transcend their limits. Such transdisciplinary approaches must further tackle not only problems that do not sit squarely with specific disciplines, but also problems “that are created ‘in the world’, that is, in the course of social, scientific or technologically shaped developments” (Mittelstrass 2011, 336). The colonial ‘culture collecting’ enterprise is a blatant example thereof (in fact, decolonial thinking has contributed to the development of transdisciplinarity, see Leavy 2011). By forcing together the pieces of Western knowledge about indigenous heritage I hope to bring out the cracks, bumps, and dents in their Western apperception and unite them into more balanced argumentative narratives. To this end, I shall move rather quickly through examples from a study of tools used by South American indigenous peoples to fan cooking fires and dubbed ‘fire fans’ in English, a label I adopt for the purpose of questioning it.

Ubiquitous and multifarious, fire fans afford informative inroads into quotidian life across South America. Our point of departure is a database of over 1000 museum objects, expanded with information about fire fans found in the literature (e.g. Figure 1).³ To tap into the fragmentation of Western knowledge about the tools and shake the narratives about them, I explore the structural, functional, and spatial variation in the database as the cumulative effect of indigenous practices, from learning, to making, and using, practices that involve materials, skills, language, events, and actors, organically bringing together data and methods from several disciplines. As such, my methodology draws heavily on the tradition of *chaînes opératoires* (or production chains) of objects (e.g. Dietler and Herbich 1998; Stark 1998; Gosselain 2000; 2018; Buob, Gosselain, and Chevallier 2019). In short, the objects were first categorized by the better-known attributes of the practices they were enmeshed in, particularly, those usually reported by the collectors (e.g. the community from which they originate, materials used, uses of the tools), those decipherable from the objects themselves due to their post-manufacturing visibility (e.g. plaiting techniques employed), and those reported by other sources, including researchers working with particular indigenous peoples (e.g. indigenous

3 The study is based mostly on high-resolution images of the objects and the information about them provided by a number of institutions, namely, the Bernisches Historisches Museum, Bonner Altamerika-Sammlung, Museum Natur und Mensch Freiburg im Breisgau, British Museum, Burke Museum, Etnografiska Museet Stockholm, Ethnologische Sammlung der Universität Göttingen, Fowler Museum, Historisches und Völkerkundemuseum, Instituto Colombiano de Antropología e Historia, Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Musée d’Ethnographie Neuchâtel, Museum Fünf Kontinente, Museum für Völkerkunde Dresden, Museum der Kulturen Basel, Milwaukee Public Museum, Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac, National Museum of American Indian, National Museum of Natural History, Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, Peabody Museum, Phoebe A. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Penn Museum, Världskultur Museerna, and Völkerkundemuseum der Universität Zürich, Weltmuseum Wien.

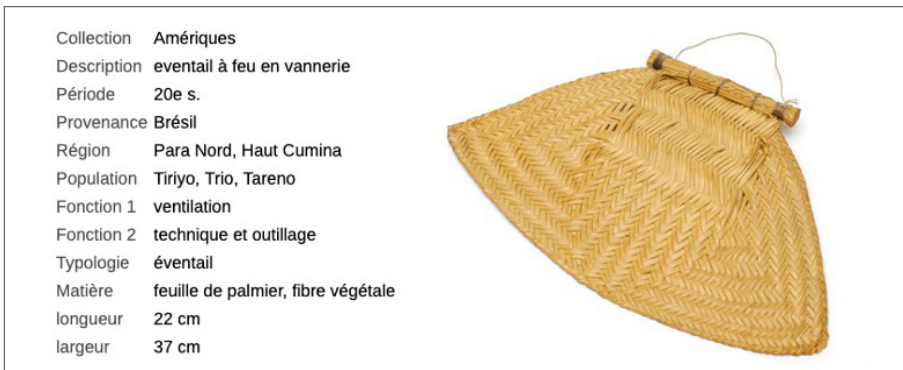


Figure 1. A screenshot of an online entry of an object collected in the 20th century among the people of the Upper Cumina in Brazil who call themselves *Tarëno* (http://www.ville-ge.ch/meg/musinfo_public.php?id=051580). The object is described as “fan for fire in basketwork” made from unidentified palm material, functionally tagged for “ventilation” and “technique and tools”. The description is in French, the dominant language of the canton of Geneva where the object is stored at the Musée d’Ethnographie de Genève (ETHAM 051580).⁴

names of the tools). The database was coded, quantified (e.g. etymologically), and mapped with a GIS program against other data relevant to the practices in question (QGIS Development Team 2020). The locations of the peoples, taken from Hammarström, Forkel, and Haspelmath (2019), do not represent indigenous lands but serve merely as analytical approximations. The maps thus produced open up for discussion the axiological, epistemological, and ontological biases that creep in through the ‘culture collecting’ enterprise and mediate shape narratives about heritage, including fire fans, one of the more functionally and structurally simple tools. Or so you would think.

Axiology

Axiology, or the valuation we apply to the world around us, stands central to the constitution of museum collections. From the collectors’ choices to acquisition committees and museum visitors, monetary, emotional, aesthetic, and other values are imposed, negotiated, and felt at the various stages of the musealization of heritage. To illustrate how Western values have been imposed on indigenous cultures, let us visualize the database by the primary raw material from which fire fans are made and revisit the interpretation this pattern was

⁴ I on purpose chose to illustrate the paper with actual information displayed online about the objects, rather than the information that may be additionally found in the offline catalogues, since this is the easiest way in which the publics, including indigenous people, can access the collections.

given. In Figure 2, the dots represent indigenous peoples whose members have produced fire fans from plants (circles, 54 %), feathers (or wings) of birds (squares, 13 %), and those who make both plant- and feather-based fire fans (small triangles, 14 %). Applying such broad categories to the cornucopia of fire fans found in one of the global biodiversity hotspots, ethnographers saw borrowing as the mediator of the rather contiguous area where feather fire fans occur (more on categories and areas later). Julian Steward, the editor of the monumental *Handbook of South American Indians*, for instance, claimed that feather fire fans originated with the ancient peoples of the Andean highlands and spread into the lowlands. Thus, the feather fire fans of the Arawakan peoples of the Andean foothills became “indisputably attributable to Highland influence” (Steward and Métraux 1948, 509). Similarly, Nordenskiöld (1919, 236), known for his work in the Chaco, claimed that the peoples of the area borrowed such fans from the Andes.

Why such claims must be contested is discussed in detail elsewhere (see Rybka, forthcoming). Suffice it to note the main inconsistencies that arise when knowledge about indigenous practices from other disciplines, most of it familiar to Steward and Nordenskiöld, is reviewed. First, the highland Quechua and Aymara peoples, whose ancestors allegedly invented feather fire fans, do not actually use them. The dictionaries of their languages list instead tubes to blow fire with the mouth, which may have a long

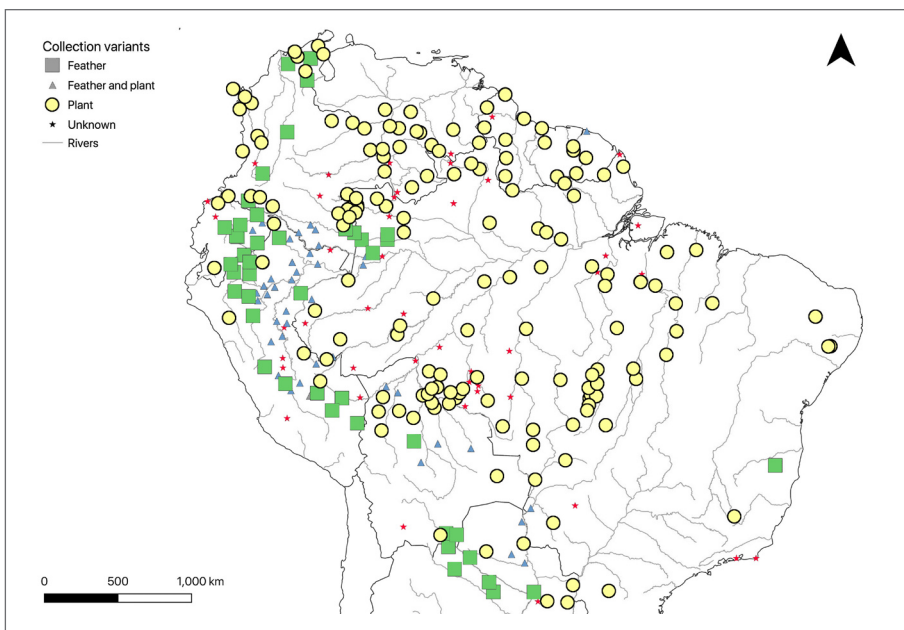


Figure 2. Fire fans by primary raw material.

history given similar archaeological finds (e.g. Bennett 1946, 120; Rowe 1946, 303; Herrero and Lozada 1983, 134; Carranza 2003, 170; Gutiérrez Camacho, Mantilla Gutiérrez, and Huaman Jullunila 2007, 46). Moreover, while historians report that until the 19th century birds were traded between the lowlands and highlands – speaking to the contacts between the areas and the role of avifauna therein – the birds were moved uphill and were mostly of vibrant hues (Métraux 1946, 210; Block 1994, 24; Church and von Hagen 2008, 917; Eriksen 2011, 46-47, 81). The feathers of such birds are used in ritual and festive featherwork in both areas (e.g. Yacovleff 1933; Reina and Kensinger 1991; Antes *et al.* 1994; Giuntini 2006; King 2012; Betancourt 2015). By contrast, 86 % percent of the production chains of fire fans in which the bird species used are known are made from commonly consumed dark-feathered cracids. Expectedly, there is no overlap between the techniques used in fire fans and in ritual attire. Finally, albeit some techniques of assembling such fans spread locally, forming patches that embrace some lowland Quechua peoples, there is no reason to believe this occurred downhill. Even less credible is the claim that the preference for avian resources is a highland trait, not least since there is a sharp drop in bird-species richness above 1000 m (Herzog, Kessler, and Bach 2005).

What the reassembling of knowledge from various disciplines reminds us of is a painful axiological legacy. The *Handbook of South American Indians* (among others), to which Nordenskiöld and Steward contributed, directly or indirectly, perpetuated the idea that in South America only Andean peoples “were ‘civilized’ and the most privileged were the ‘Central’ Andeans, or the Incas and their ancestors, conceptualized as donors to simpler South American culture areas or culture types” (Silverman 2008, 8). *Andean Civilizations*, as the title of the second volume reads, were the “high-culture, farming peoples of the Andean Highlands and the Pacific Coast”, whose “rich archaeological remains, and [...] strong survival, both numerically, and culturally” set them apart from “Tropical forest”, “Marginal” and “Circum-Caribbean tribes” (Steward 1946, xxv). The four-fold split speaks to the values behind the concept of civilization: A lasting anthropogenic footprint, large-scale farming, and booming population defined an indigenous metropole surrounded by ‘tribes’, strangers to civilization. It is these pseudo-evolutionary beliefs that permitted claims of ‘borrowing’ to pass peer review matter of factly without presenting evidence or against counterevidence, including that published in the *Handbook*. While such ideas are now cited with caution (e.g. Lyon 2004), the privileging of Central Andeans, as “the only societies to achieve pristine civilization in the southern hemisphere” (Isbell and Silverman 2002, ix), still creeps in.⁵

5 The idea that there was but one ‘pristine civilization’ in South America will have hopefully changed by now, as we begin to learn about the 400 000 km² covered with agricultural earthworks in southern Amazonia that sustained large fortified villages (de Souza *et al.* 2018).

More generally, inventorying such objects privileged definitions of indigenous peoples in terms of technology rather than worldview, language, or history, homogenizing them into neat ‘culture areas’ with diffusive boundaries.

Looking more closely, fire fans, as a form of featherwork, speak to another axiological bias. What does it mean that “the primary use of feathers in South America is in the fabrication and/or ornamentation of festive and ritual attire” (Kensinger 1991, xx), if objects such as fire fans and fletchings are used daily and are just as widespread? The number of publications about such attire or exhibitions showcasing examples thereof (some cited above), and the relative invisibility of other feathered goods are conspicuous. We need therefore to look at this contrast through the values ascribed to the concepts of ritual and utility (for a constructive critique of the dichotomy with reference to material culture, see Gazin-Schwartz 2001). Ritual objects are traditionally thought of as symbolic, unique, incomparable, esthetically exotic, and contextually anomalous, while utilitarian objects are deemed culturally less invested, common, mundane, and borrowable. It is not surprising then that no diffusion of ritual attire was proposed, even though the only common denominator between the highland and lowland featherwork – the birds used to make it – lends more support to such a scenario than to the proposed spread of feather fire fans. Conversely, despite the diversity of materials and techniques, it was perfectly imaginable to lump feather fire fans into one category peripheral to the Western gaze. In sum, the scrutinized narratives may speak more to the Western values attached to the concepts of civilization and utility than to the indigenous practices and societies they speak of.

Epistemology

Epistemology, the theory of knowledge, especially with regard to its methods, validity, and scope, permeates ‘culture collecting’, an enterprise devised to ‘discover’ and share knowledge about the ‘Other’. And much like axiology, Western epistemology can misrepresent indigenous cultures. Attributing a ritual function to an object, for instance, assumes that the notion resonates with the people using it and that their understanding thereof maps onto ours. But the assumption is legitimately questionable, not least since indigenous specialists may combine roles of artists, intellectuals, scientists, and (spi)ritual leaders. To give an example, ritual practices are an important step in the production of fire fans and other tools plaited from a specific plant among the Warao people of Venezuela, whose makers boast a status comparable to that of (spi)ritual leaders (Wilbert 1975). To pigeonhole them and their attributes as (spi)ritual (or not), a domain that in the West has a specific position within and outside academia, is to neglect, and perhaps discredit in the eyes of the publics, ways of producing knowledge other than the methods endorsed by the disciplinary grid. More importantly, as Galván-Álvarez (2010, 12) puts it,

[...] epistemic violence, that is, violence exerted against or through knowledge, is probably one of the key elements in any process of domination. It is not only through the construction of exploitative economic links or the control of the politico-military apparatuses that domination is accomplished, but also and, I would argue, most importantly through the construction of epistemic frameworks that legitimize and enshrine those practices of domination.

Given their position as one of the most trusted knowledge outlets (e.g. BritainThinks 2013), few institutions perpetuate such frameworks more effectively than museums.

While what counts as science in academia is central to deconstructing 'culture collecting' and the narratives it has engendered, scientific theory and method pose additional threats to the integrity of indigenous heritage. To illustrate how they may have affected narratives about fire fans, let us return to Figure 2. Early approaches to large-scale cultural patterns crystalized as the *Kulturkreise* approach, whose advocates aimed to identify the 'high-culture' centers from which innovations would have diffused to 'lower races'. To M. Schmidt (1904) and W Schmidt (1913, 1082), for instance, Amazonian plant-based fire fans belonged to the Malayo-Polynesian *Kulturkreis*. As the approach was criticized, for instance, for its resistance to the idea of independent development, some critics turned to the concept of culture area, a region within which populations share numerous cultural traits. Crucially, as Steward (1955, 35) put it, "cultural and natural areas are generally coterminous because the culture represents an adjustment to the particular environment". The contrast between plant- and feather-based fans befitted such theorizing. Nordenskiöld claimed (1930, 8:143) thus that "no tribe uses [...] fire-blowing fans of feathers and the same articles made of palm leaves" because "members of the same tribe, provided they are similarly environed [...] only possess one form of implement for each practical purpose". Similarly, underlying Métraux's claim that (1946, 211) "it seems only natural that a people [of the Chaco] without basketry should fan their fires with feathers" lies the causal link between natural and culture areas; to Métraux, Chaco plants afforded the production of crude technology only. What about peoples who produce both plant- and feather-based fans (Figure 2, small triangles)? These were evidence of adaptations caught red-handed, adaptations to ancestral lands that for some reason held still for the West to take a picture.

The idea of adaptation frozen in time is not the only problem. Indigenous peoples surely and actively make the most of their surroundings; in fact, fire-fan production reflects the composition of the environment through subsistence practices. On the whole, feather fire fans are made from commonly consumed birds while most plant-based fans are made from hyperdominant, semidomesticated, and highly exploited palms (Rybka, forthcoming). The rub is that complexity had no place outside civilization, even if it came down to producing fans from two different materials. Taking the Chaco as an

example, its ‘nomadic hunter-gatherers’, as its inhabitants were described, were as far from the ideal of civilization as one can get; as noted above, some even credited aspects of their culture to faraway (Andean) influences. But let us ask instead what it means to inhabit the Chaco (Figure 3). If we zoom in on the area and overlay environmental data, the Chaco reveals two ecoregions, the Dry Chaco with few palms, but also the Humid Chaco and the riverbanks of the whole area that abound in *Copernicia alba* palms (Gauto, Spichiger, and Stauffer 2011, 2720). Further, as Métraux himself noted, for most of the year, the peoples of the Chaco roamed the area and exploited avian resources for various purposes, including the production of fire fans of the type in Figure 4a, but during the fishing season, they settled along the rivers. There, for up to three months they could thus readily tap into palm resources valued locally as a food source and plaiting materials (Schmeda-Hirschmann 1994; Jens van Gysel p.c., 2019). *Ergo*, given such seasonal movements across ecoregions, plant-based fire fans are in fact expected.

Digging deeper, it turns out plant-based fans are made in the area (e.g. Arenas 1995). In fact, the spatiotemporal variation in fire-fan production that follows from the ‘nomadic hunter-gather’ label itself is reported by indigenous people. As Silio Recalde, a Sanapaná elder recounts: “Where these palms [*Copernicia alba*] are rare, people made fire fans from the wings of various kinds of birds” (van Gysel *et al.* 2020). In fact, the complex technique with which the fire fan in Figure 4B is plaited, is not uncommon in the Chaco and neighboring areas. That said, such variation has been cramped by colonial structures. Most indigenous land is now occupied by settlers, who introduced a sedentary lifestyle (Stunnenberg 1963). Looking at the same area at the time of contact, we find the Toba people, who call themselves *Qom*, throughout the ecoregions (Figure 5); today, they live in two enclaves (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2019). This applies to numerous other peoples. Comparing the maps through time shows, too, that indigenous peoples were removed from the Humid Chaco, more favorable to European settlement and the production of plant-based fans. The seasonal variation in fire-fan production, if not limited by European encroachment by then, could have thus been overlooked by Nordenskiöld’s (1910) expedition that collected feather fire fans in the Dry Chaco (Figure 6), concluding that they are the only type made in the area. Outside the Chaco, technological variation can, of course, have other correlates. Among some Arawakan people of the Andean slopes, for example, men and women use different fire fans and even call them differently (Weiss 1975, 534; 1994, 35-36); so much for the ‘Highland influence’ scenario. Yet, such possibilities escaped the theory and practice of ‘culture collecting’.

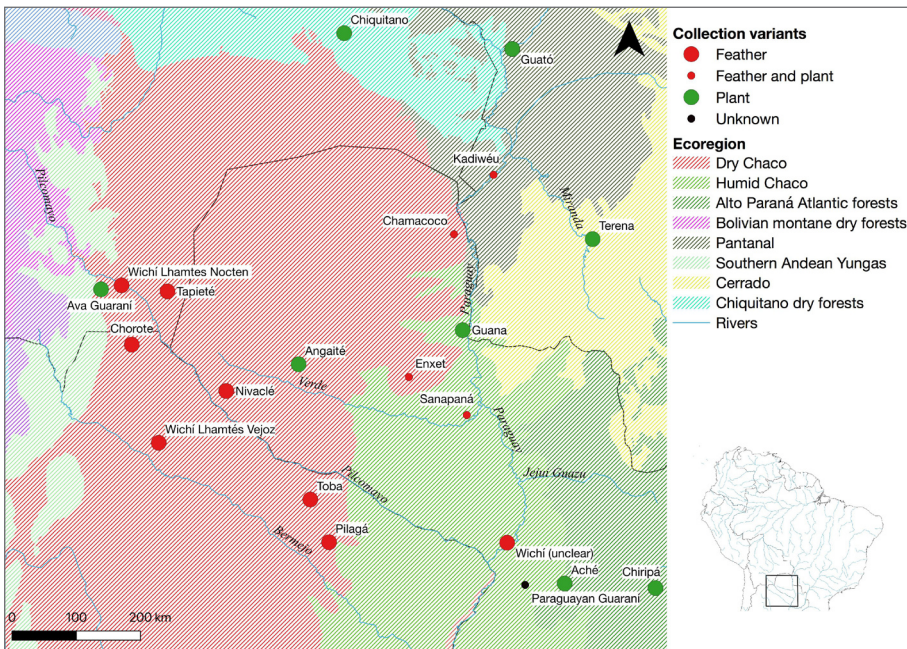


Figure 3. Fire fans by primary raw material mapped against the ecoregions of the Chaco (underlying map: courtesy of World Wildlife Fund 2005).

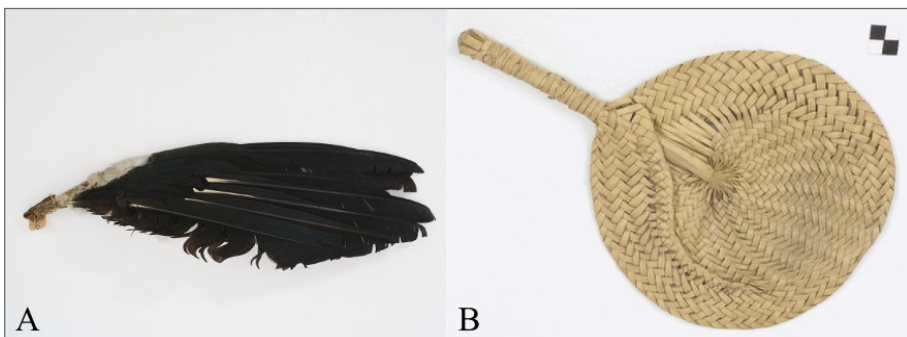


Figure 4. A. Fire fan made from a whole wing of a bird collected among the Toba people from Laguna Pora in Paraguay, who call themselves *Qom*, dated 1974, currently in the collection of Museum der Kulturen Basel (Ivc 16701). B. Fire fan collected among the Guana people [a generic term that can refer to several people], collected in the Chaco region, Paraguay, currently in the collection of National Museum of American Indian (124868.000).

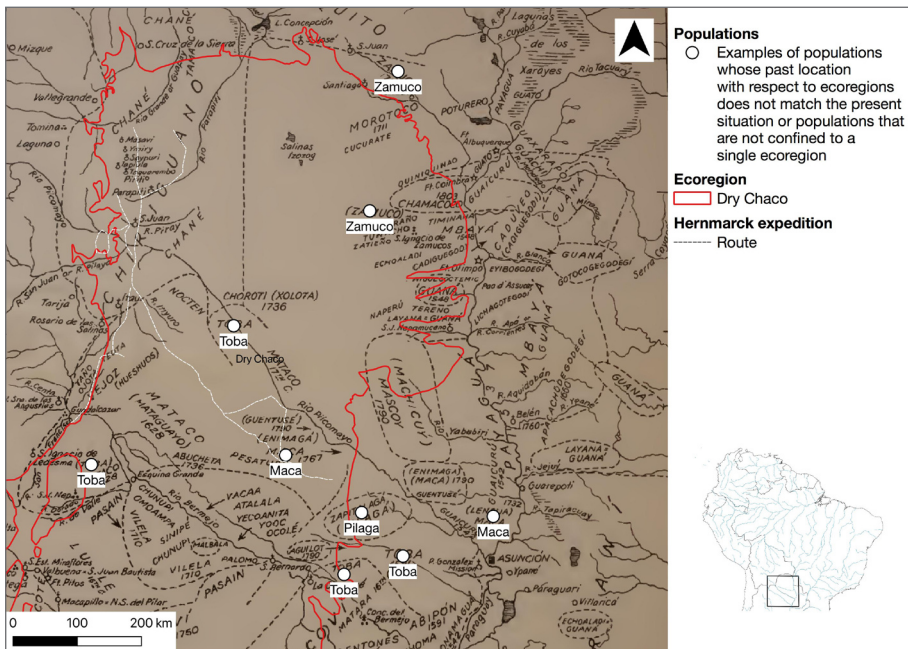


Figure 5. Locations of the Chaco peoples at the time of contact in given in Figure 3 (Métaux 1946, map 4), mapped against the Dry Chaco and Nordenskiöld's (1910) expedition.

Ontology

Ontology deals with what entities exist and how they are grouped, related, subdivided. In the museum context, it applies most concretely to how and why objects are organized, whether with regard to display, content, storage, or the catalogue, including collection-management systems such as the widespread TMS, 'The' Museum System, and their public interfaces. Turning to plant-based fire fans, such as those of the Tarëno people in Figure 1, 'basketry', or *vannerie* in French, may serve as one example of a seemingly straightforward category to use in a museum context. This assumption becomes questionable once indigenous perspectives are reckoned with, as Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff succinctly summarized in his work on the material culture of the Desana people from northwestern Amazonia:

In the first place, what we call "basketry" is not a native category of phenomena; the local languages have no generic term for it and the Indians do not think in the neat terms of a Museum inventory. To the Indians, a tray and a cylindrical basket are two very different things, and it would never occur to them to put a plaited storage box in the same category with a sieve. To suggest to an Indian that a palm frond mat and a pepper basket might belong to the same class of artifacts would not make any sense because what they understand to be a common denominator is not what we would take it to be (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985, 1).

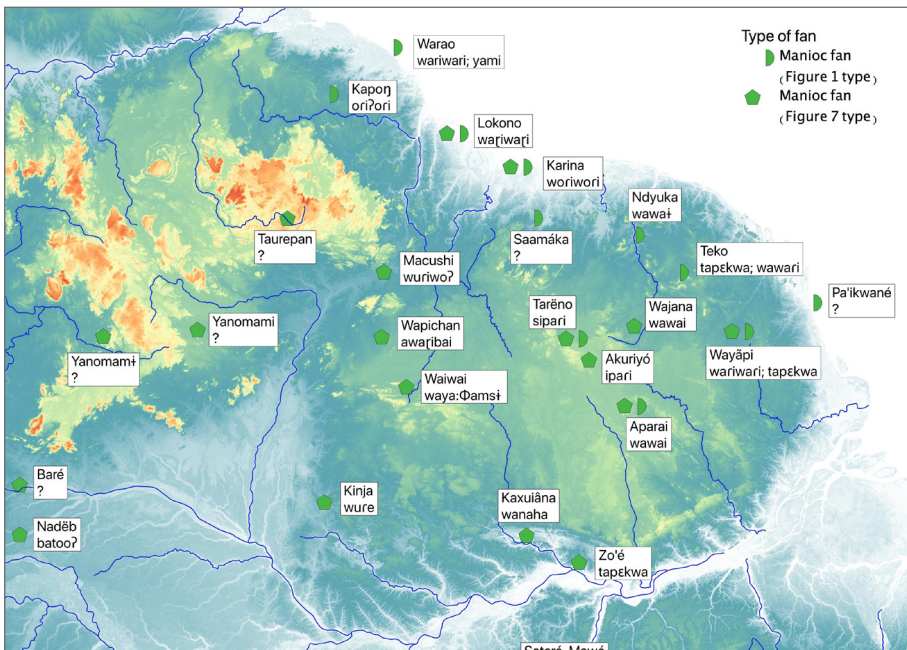


Figure 6. Distribution of fans made with a technique similar to those of the Tarëno people as well as the names of such fans in phonemic transcription (where known, autonyms were used).

The indigenous languages spoken in the Guianas, the region where the Tarëno people that I have worked on, namely, Lokono, Warao, and Kali'na, live, also lack a comparable term, and as Reichel-Dolmatoff's research shows, even if they do have it, there is no guarantee that its semantic content maps well onto that of English 'basketry', given the variation in how languages carve out their categories (e.g. in the domain of plants and landscape, see Fleck 2007; Burenhult *et al.* 2017). If the categorization of objects in a museum seems a somewhat superficial ontological problem or one justifiable by, say, practical considerations such as conservation protocols, we should consider the following example. The observations above raise the question whether fire fans are in fact tools for fanning fires to their users. Many surely are, but some, I argue, may be something else. To explore this possibility, let us summarize what museum objects and publications in the field of linguistics, ethnography, and ethnobotany say about the fans of the Guianas, such as the Tarëno one.⁶

6 The main written sources include: Ahlbrinck (1927; 1931); Kloos (1977); M. Schmidt (1904); Detering (1962); Friel (1966; 1973); Farabee (1918; 1924); Pereira (1954); Goeje (1906); Milliken (1992); Milliken, Albert, and Gomez (1999); Bruno (1996); Yde (1965); Becher (1960); Kästner (2007); Nimuendajú (1926); Wilbert (1975); Müller (1990).

First, the production chain followed by the Tarëno people is not unique. Numerous indigenous peoples are familiar with largely the same procedure. This suggests that the skills and knowledge required at the various steps of production have diffused. The diffusion is in fact echoed by the names of the fans, with *wariwari* and its phonologically adaptations being the most common names, passed both from generation to generation and from language to language (Figure 6). Before we continue, we should note that Figure 6 does not show all types of fans made in the area: It visualizes the range of this specific production chain only, which among some peoples may be of marginal importance.

Let us first establish what similarities justify the proposed spread. To begin, the fans are always made from the locally available *Astrocaryum* palms. Second, as opposed to most other palm-based fans, their production does not involve whole leaves, but single leaflets removed from them, which are split, dried, and flattened prior to plaiting, assuring the fan does not age quickly. Third, the leaflets are plaited with some of the most complex twill techniques attested in fans, which produce various patterns on their surface. Changing the kind, number, and size of the leaflets likely engenders some of the variation in the shapes and colors they assume, while retaining unmistakable structural similarity. The two main variants, represented in Figure 1 and Figure 7, differ in how the surface used to drive the air is finished to form a handle. That said, since both variants often co-appear, in which case they are referred to with the same name, they are best considered variations on the same theme. The Tarëno people, for example, plait both variants (cf. Figure 1 and Figure 7), and call both *sipari*, though they can be differentiated with more specific terms (*yuyuñkōrō* and *pakuputúpō*, respectively, according to Friel 1973, 135-136). Fourth, the fans often have a cord to hang them. Crucially, the processing of the material, the complex plaiting patterns, and the cord result in a sturdy, dense, durable, and non-disposable fan. This, however, entails extra effort for the maker; as opposed to fire fans made from whole leaves, also common in South America, which are made in minutes, their production takes up to a week.

Two more things. As opposed to many other fire fans, all such fans are also used in tasks related to the processing of bitter manioc, such as scooping manioc flour onto the baking pan, flipping manioc bread while baking it, and handling hot manioc bread. In some cases, it was, in fact, taboo to use them for purposes other than those they were made for (e.g. the fans of the Lokono people, Roth 1915, 303). Moreover, as opposed to many other palm-based fire fans, they are made by men, though it is women who use them. In fact, men produce most of the tools for processing manioc among these peoples, a division of labor that can be related to the fact that women spend much of their time on the actual processing of the crop. We can rephrase the above similarities and differences in terms of what the fans afford to their users. All fire fans afford fanning cooking fires. That said, some peoples who rely on bitter manioc invest more time and effort in producing sturdy, complex, durable, and non-disposable fans which afford optimizing their main subsistence activity, not merely fanning cooking fires. This is the



Figure 7. A screenshot of an online accession entry of an object collected in the 20th century among the indigenous people of Mission Tirió who call themselves today *Tarëno* (http://www.ville-ge.ch/meg/musinfo_public.php?id=037388). The object is described as “fan for fire in palm leaves”, made from *Astrocaryum murumuru*, functionally tagged for “ventilation” and “technique and tools”. The description is in French, the dominant language of the canton of Geneva where it is stored at the Musée d’ethnographie de Genève (ETHAM 037388).



Figure 8. *Warhiwarhi* used by Adolfinia Ebecilio, a Lokono woman from Matta, Suriname (photo: Konrad Rybka, 2009).

case in northeastern Amazonia where bitter manioc is staple. Given such systematic differences in form, functions, and even the gender of the makers, the question whether in northeastern Amazonia such fans are fire fans to their users becomes less straightforward than it might have seemed. To answer it properly requires the involvement of their users. While it is impossible to revisit each case, let us look at the recordings created as part of language-documentation projects to listen to how indigenous women speak about such tools. Crucially, when discussed, the fans trigger narratives about processing manioc. The following fragment comes from a conversation with the late Adolfina Ebecilio, a speaker of Lokono from Matta in Suriname, during which she demonstrates how *warhiwarhi*, as the fan is called in Lokono, is used (Figure 8). I highlight the tasks in which the fan is verbally or visually implicated (hesitations and repetitions were removed from this version; the original video can be accessed online).

To aboda wawada. Daitin bena to wayorodosa khalida [...], to manarhi lokhodida wanifa shibidinda. Ken kida to watheretada no. Wakhôta ikikhodo aboda. Ken ki warharosada no. Thanin bena mimidonwa [...] to budalida, dan kida to aboda washilakufada no thudiakon. Kenki todi wafa san to budali diako shikinda no, to khali. Ken ki waburhutufa todinda no, todin wakhabobo [...], sanbia thushibo to khali. Ken kida thanin bena anida tharidin to khalida, urukudan to khalida [...] Todi wa shifudunda no to budali diakoda no, idenbiada no. Kenda [...], warhukâka todin, todin yadwala abo [...] Ken ki washifuda kikadaba no, thaninbia tatadonwa, [...] san bena idenda no, dan kida warubuta to khali shikin kêke diako, todin san shikin thudiakoda no. Kidia wa ki marbitin to khali.

[We **fan with it**. After pounding the manioc that we pressed [...], inside the sieve we shake it. Then we heat up the baking plate. We rekindle the fire with firewood. And like this, we spread it out. When the baking plate is cool [...], **with this we scoop** [the flour] on top, like this we **put it** nicely on the baking plate. And, we make patterns on it like this, with your hand [...], so that the surface becomes nice. Then, after doing it, evening out the bread [...], we **flip it like this** on the baking plate again, so that it is cooked through. And then, [...], we make a cut like this, with a knife [...]. And so, we **flip it like this again**, so that it becomes hard. After it is cooked through, then we take the bread, putting it on top of a basket, like this, putting it nicely on top of it. This is how we make manioc bread] (Ebecilio 2009).

Our assumptions about the tools are clearly under fire. When asked about a fan made with a virtually identical technique, Catrine Benjamin, a Warao woman from Waramuri in Guyana, offers a similar manioc-centered response while demonstrating the uses of a *yami*, also known as *wariwari* in her community (Benjamin 2018). Notably, such fans (and the name) are found only among those Warao communities that rely on bitter manioc, which is not the ‘typical’ subsistence profile of the Warao people (Heinen 1973; Heinen and Ruddle 1974). Similarly, while most people speaking Yanomaman languages do not rely on bitter manioc, those in direct contact with manioc horticulturalists do; it is among these contingents only that we find such fans (e.g. Milliken, Albert, and Gomez 1999, 65). We also need to compare both responses to what we may call ‘manioc fans’ with those prompted by true fire fans. Victoria Martin Manchi, an Asháninka



Figure 9. A screenshot of an online accession entry of an *anapamoui* collected in the 20th century among the indigenous people of the Citaré River in Brazil who call themselves today *Wayana* (http://www.ville-ge.ch/meg/musinfo_public.php?id=036901). The object is classified as “fire fan, aruma fiber,” made from aruma, *wama* in Wayana, functionally tagged for “ventilation” and “technique and tools.” The description is in French, the dominant language of the canton of Geneva where it is stored at the Musée d’ethnographie de Genève (ETHAM 036901).

woman from the Perené River valley in Peru recorded by Mihás (2010), demonstrates the production of a fire fan made from a whole palm leaf and elaborates on its uses: fanning fire and fanning oneself. Notably too, the manioc fans described above are not the only manioc fans dubbed ‘fire fans’ in some museum collections. At the edges of their distribution, for example, several peoples, often speaking languages from the Cariban language family, also boast fans used by women for the same purposes and plaited by men with equally complex yet distinct techniques but from processed non-palm material. In fact, despite the structural differences, the names of such tools are often also phonologically adapted forms of *wariwari*, suggesting that name diffused together with the functions rather than techniques.⁷ The fans of the Wayana and Apalaí people inhabiting lands divided between Suriname, Brazil, and French Guiana are one example of such tools (Figure 9). It comes thus as no surprise that Wayana and Apalaí researchers re-grouped the Wayana and Apalaí *éventail à feu* in the collection of Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac. Thus, in the Wayana classification, *anapamüi*, as it is called by its users, is placed

⁷ While demonstrating the likelihood and directionality of lexical borrowing is far from easy, suffice it here to say that *wariwari* is most certainly of Arawakan origin. The root **(a)wa* found in numerous Arawakan terms for fans (e.g. Lokono *warhiwarhi*) suggests an etymological link with terms for wind, such as Lokono *awadoli* (Schumann 1882, 133), and is likely onomatopoeic for the sound of the wind, a common etymon for fans terms. In some names, **awa*, or a stem derived from it, is reduplicated, imitating the back-and-forth fanning movement (e.g. Lokono *warhiwarhi*).

under both *ëtuktop* ‘an ideal meal of animal and plant ingredients, especially manioc’ and *tihamo* ‘things related to food’, and tagged for *ulu* ‘manioc’ and *tikaphamo* ‘plaited things’, all centering on its manioc-related uses. This is just one result of the work done by a Wayana-Apalai team who are “actively participating in the conception of the portal (the tool of restitution) as well as defining selections, modalities of analysis, and conditions of access to the data” under the project *Wajana apalai tuwalon apëitpotpï uhpak* [Indigenous Wayana-Apalai knowledge], led by linguist Eliane Camargo (WATAU 2020). It is easy to imagine how such categorization could be included in a museum, while keeping the Western categorization of the objects for specific audiences (e.g. conservators). Finally, while we must acknowledge that the *éventail à feu* in the collection of Musée du Quai Branly – Jacques Chirac were well described in the first place, with some of their manioc uses even mentioned online, it is nevertheless telling that such ‘details’ of nomenclature did not escape the attention of the indigenous researchers. The difference that the change makes is perhaps best appreciated by imagining a picture of a woman standing in the kitchen with pancake ingredients on the counter described as ‘stove, a tool used to manipulate the intensity of fire’. Simply, this is not how indigenous people make or manipulate fire; as Adolfinia puts it: *kidia wa ki marhitin to khali*.

Conclusion

The examples from the study of fire and manioc fans – tools that after all should not have created that much confusion – show how Western axiology, epistemology, and ontology are implicated in ‘culture collecting’ and narratives about indigenous heritage, as well as highlight how inextricably connected they are to one another. Values creep into ideas and these materialize as practices. On the bright side, the examples also speak to the decolonization efforts that are underway. While we must remember that some collections and narratives represent past systems of values, concepts, and entities that linger in academia and society, by now these have been repeatedly challenged. While the Central Andes may still be privileged, today the work of Steward and his contemporaries is generally presented with caution. Similarly, the valuation, theorizing, and practices regarding functional dichotomies such as ‘ritual’ and ‘utility’, while still discernible in the content of Amazonian exhibitions, have been counterbalanced. The impact of Western disciplines and their attendant theories and methodologies came also under heavy scrutiny with the rise of poststructuralist, postmodern, decolonial and other approaches that abandon grand theories and absolute truths in favor of contextualized and silenced perspectives. Finally, the many projects that museums and indigenous peoples embark on together with the view to creating space for the recognition and use of their axiological, epistemological, and ontological systems, including the Wayana-Apalai research mentioned here, speak to the growing awareness among all parties involved of the delicate yet arduous work that still needs to be (un)done.

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