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SÉRIE ANTROPOLOGIA

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**MACUNAIMA: TO BE AND NOT TO BE
THAT IS THE QUESTIONS**

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MACUNAÍMA: TO BE AND NOT TO BE, THAT IS THE QUESTION¹

Gustavo Lins Ribeiro

"I am three hundred".
Mário de Andrade

Macunaíma is widely considered to be the Brazilian hero, the most illustrative description of Brazilian national identity. It is a well-known story amongst educated Brazilians who believe that Macunaíma is in all aspects a product of Brazilian cultural imagination synthesized by the celebrated work of the modernist writer Mário de Andrade (1893-1945).

Macunaíma provides an opportunity to interpret the intricacies of construction of "national symbols" in ways that are comparable to the interpretation Eric Wolf (1958) made of the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico. The Virgin represents a condensed but multifaceted system of meanings, a fusion of pre-Hispanic and Christian elements. Its transformation into a powerful representation of Mexican society shows how certain symbolical phenomena, generated in interethnic systems, allow for fusions that neutralize differences and produce coherence, in spite of the obvious persistence of diverse positions and viewpoints. Anchored in two powerful religious systems, with different mythologies and cosmologies, the Virgin was historically capable of being appropriated in different ways by different segments of Mexican society.

Macunaíma is not as important a "national symbol" of Brazil as the Virgin of Guadalupe is of Mexico. But both are typical representations of contact culture and results of colonialism as well as of the formation of nation-states in the New World, processes in which the radical differences between the several ethnic segments integrated by Western expansion were always an issue. In this sense, Macunaíma and the Virgin address and respond a central question, a fundamental problem for all nation-states: what is it that makes a Mexican a Mexican, or a Brazilian a Brazilian? What is my/our national identity?

Symbolic systems are important means of unifying differentiated people under the general umbrella of nation-states. Benedict Anderson (1983) has shown, for instance, the

¹ I thank my colleague Dr. Júlio César Melatti for his information on the Taulipang and Arekuná Indians. Although they do not appear at length in the text, they were crucial for my own understanding of Makunaima's area. I also thank Dr. Italo Moriconi Jr., from the State University of Rio de Janeiro (UERJ), who shared with me his knowledge on Mário de Andrade and the Brazilian Modernist Movement. Paul E. Little, of the Joint FLACSO/University of Brasilia Doctoral Program in Comparative Latin American and Caribbean Studies, helped me with this English version. I dedicate this work, finished in 1993 in a modern city that Mário de Andrade could not imagine would one day exist, to the one hundredth anniversary of his birth.

important role language played in the formation of "imagined communities" that would evolve into nation-states. Indeed, linguistic signs are the most important means to give individuals and groups a sense of membership in a common socio-cultural and political unit of any scale. Sharing meaning is a pre-condition of culture and society. In a sense, all communities are imagined. Individuals can only realize they are members of a collectivity via symbolic means. Symbols and signs are social entities that invade individuals.

The most pervasive and effective everyday life systems of meanings are the linguistic ones. They create what may be called a "linguistic illusion," a source of individual anxiety and of much misunderstanding concerning the individual/social relationship. The linguistic illusion is the core of the contradiction expressed in the consciousness that one is an irreducible individuality that can only exist in social life. Language carries in itself the contradictory quality of being simultaneously an overtly social phenomenon and a radically intimate individual experience. This is the very source of the feeling of being one and, at the same time, of being many, of being and not being.

But language is obviously not the only way to achieve a feeling of membership. Totems, rituals, historical characters and events (Jeanne D'Arc, the Revolution), tradition (the Queen), merchandises (Coca-Cola), cultural traits (Tango), epitomize different collectivities. Social life is, in a sense, a forest of classificatory symbols and markers that refer to more or less inclusive categories.

Anthropologists have always dealt with these questions. The many definitions and interpretations of culture try, in lesser or greater degree, to understand how a person or a group acknowledges (or is acknowledged) to be a member of a given socio-cultural unit. Cultural patterns, identity, interethnic systems, ethnic segmentation, and kinship studies are representative of the endeavor to understand how people simultaneously obey general and particular categories that make sense of their positions and possibilities in social life. In other words, homogeneous representations do not imply the absence of heterogeneity.

Edmund Leach's Political Systems of Highland Burma, first published in 1954, is a powerful critique against the hypostatizing of cultural boundaries and stability. His analysis of the Kachins and Shans refers to an ethnically segmented setting where positions undergo constant change. For Leach the problem was the existence of "ethnographic fictions," such as tribes, and the models social scientists had². Leach considered that societies are not coherent wholes. Instead they are full of inconsistencies which provide the alternatives through which individuals may achieve social advancement and collectivities may provoke social change (Leach 1968: 8).

The analysis of a well-established symbol of a national identity, Macunaíma, allows me to discuss the impossibility of defining clear-cut identities in modern situations that reflect the expansion of the world system and the resulting complex articulation of segments with different cultural backgrounds (Wolf 1982). The search for authenticity and essence is here understood as an inevitable simplification of a highly complex historical process, much more powerful in modern and cosmopolitan settings but also present in

² "My conclusion is that while conceptual models of society are necessarily models of equilibrium systems, real societies can never be in equilibrium. The discrepancy is related to the fact that when social structures are expressed in cultural form, the representation is imprecise compared with that given by the exact categories which the sociologist, *qua* scientist, would like to employ. I hold that these inconsistencies in the logic of ritual expression are always necessary for the proper functioning of any social system" (Leach 1968: 4).

situations of ethnic diversity such as the one Leach analyzed.

Authenticity and a common essence are part of the symbolic endeavor of constructing differences and similarities that are necessary for the processing of conflicts and the emergence of cooperation through alliances. Being a member of a socio-cultural unit is as an inevitable condition of human beings as ethnocentrism. In this connection, Evans-Pritchard's analysis of Nuer segmentation also provides important insights towards understanding the mechanisms underlying the search for authenticity and essence as well as the need of a sense of membership. According to Evans-Pritchard (1969), when a segment X1 confronts X2, both behave as corporate groups. However, if a Y antagonist enters the scene, X1 and X2 fuse into a single X segment to face the challenge the common outsider represents.

The discussion on socio-cultural and political units - how they are represented, differentiate, and are incorporated into a larger entity or disappear as distinct segments - is highly related to another topic of classical anthropological concern: cultural diffusion. The intricate ways through which "things" (objects, technologies, ideologies, myths, political systems, etc.), originating from the practices of a certain people, become part of the lives of others, have to do with peaceful assimilation, forced incorporation, long distance trade, exchange of women, and with the admiration of other people's achievements. In fact, the trajectories of these "things" occur in historical processes highly structured by: (a) political and economic phenomena involving exchange or relationships of domination; and (b) cultural and communication phenomena such as the circulation of information and objects.

The greater the number of different segments in co-presence over time, the more complex diffusion is. In modern societies there are many situations marked by the overall presence of diverse ethnic segments. These are articulated by the process of capitalist expansion with the increased integration of the world system that is a result of the extensive development of the communication, transportation and information industries. The latter create countless webs of communication between the segments, independent of their physical location, thereby greatly increasing the circulation of information. In such situations, social actors are exposed to an enormous quantity of information, the origin of which is practically impossible to trace. In consequence, the fragmentation of culture and identity tends to increase, creating, for some, a sense of loss of wholeness and organicity. Fragmentation is presently a reality with which modern men and women have to cope in order to locate themselves in a transnational world (Ribeiro 1992). Undoubtedly, in modern advanced capitalist areas, the pre-industrial feeling of pertaining to an organic community (defined as the relationships between a certain people, their territory, history and culture), can no longer exist.

Deterritorialized cultural information is fostered by planetary integration. The remarkable growth of this kind of information has as a by-product the clear demonstration that the search for bonds between territory and culture cannot be based upon the supposition of sui generis and exclusive relationships. To trace definitive and irrevocable links between those two entities is an artificial undertaking made possible, to repeat Leach, by ethnographic fictions.

But books, such as Macunaíma, are closed objects that, at least hypothetically, are capable of being scrutinized with the aim of reconstructing the different cultural perspectives that compose them³. Macunaíma is certainly amongst the best examples of

³ Books are also open objects, in the sense that they allow an undefined quantity of readings. Macunaíma is a case in point.

this kind of literature. Mário de Andrade himself intended to make a fusion of what he understood were the main characteristics of Brazilians. He is highly recognized as having pictured the portrait of the Brazilian people in a work that, according to Darcy Ribeiro is "the most Brazilian book" (Ribeiro 1988: xxi).

It is not my goal to reconstruct the many influences and sources that came together in Macunaíma. Furthermore, I have no intention of presenting myself as a specialist in Brazil's Modernist Movement, one of the richest artistic events of Brazilian history. Mário de Andrade is among the main figures of this movement that, since the famous "Week of Modern Art of 1922", in the city of São Paulo, became a hallmark of a radical change for writers and painters. Nor do I pretend to be an expert in Mário de Andrade, a notable writer, intellectual and interpreter of Brazilian reality. Fortunately, there already are works such as the ones by Proença (1969), Ancona Lopes (1988) and Morse (1990). In reality, my own effort, in tune with this introductory part, is to explore the transformation of Makunaima, a Taulipang myth, into Macunaíma, a symbol of Brazilian national identity.

Macunaíma: a Taulipang, German, Venezuelan, Brazilian story.

Here a distinction must be made. When I refer to Macunaíma (with "c" and accent) I will mean the character and the book created by Mário de Andrade (1988). When I refer to Makunaima (with "k") I will mean an indigenous myth. This distinction is not an exercise of preciousity. It is an index of a substantial difference. Mário de Andrade's Macunaíma is a far more complex symbolical condensation than the Taulipang's Makunaima. The Taulipang story provided the structural mythical basis, upon which Andrade worked, and the hero's main characteristics. Andrade's Macunaíma condenses, besides an Indian perspective, urban and rural visions of Brazil in the early century and the author's own understanding of a literary and artistic mission.

There are many reasons for the generalized belief that Makunaima is a Brazilian character. First, and the most immediate one, is the reception of Mário de Andrade's Macunaíma: the hero without any character, a work that became, since it first came out in 1928, a classic of Brazilian literature. The first edition of 800 copies paid by the author, was not exactly an editorial success (Santiago 1988: 184). Fifteen years after its publication there were only 1,800 copies circulating (*ibidem*). But the fact that, in 1928, Mário de Andrade was already a distinguished intellectual in São Paulo, granted the book visibility amongst literary critics and a growing interest in Macunaíma. In a country where the editorial market is a small one, Macunaíma has been published in many different editions⁴.

Andrade's book also became an enormously successful theater play, especially when performed by one of the most creative Brazilian theater groups, itself named the Grupo Macunaíma. According to Almeida Castro (1992: 15) "the play Macunaíma opened in its four and a half hour long original version, in São Paulo, on September 15th, 1978. Its last presentation was July 5th, 1987, in Athens. There were, in all, 876 shows since that

⁴ According to Silviano Santiago (*ibidem*) in 1978 there were 20 editions of Macunaíma. It was also translated to English, Spanish, French, Italian, German and Hungarian. There are three English versions but only one was published. Entitled Macunaíma, it was translated by E.A. Goodland and published by Random House, New York, in 1984.

original version and a more synthetical three hour long performance toured thirty Brazilian cities and sixty seven foreign centers, sometimes more than once, in seventeen countries. It was a fabulous critique and public success in Brazil and abroad".

In 1969 Macunaíma was made into a movie, directed by Joaquim Pedro de Andrade. During the seventies, this was one of the most popular films of the New Cinema (Cinema Novo), a highly creative movement of Brazilian film makers. In the recent past, it was broadcasted by a nation-wide Brazilian TV network. It can be found in video rental stores. In 1974, one of the most famous Samba Schools of Rio de Janeiro's carnival, Portela, chose Macunaíma as its theme. Macunaíma was, then, in the center of one of Brazil's most popular and famous cultural arenas: Rio's Samba Schools parade. Indeed, "today, Macunaíma (the hero or the book) is part of the minimum cultural repertory of any high school or university student concerned with reflections of a nationalist kind. It frequents newspaper and magazine articles, intrudes cultural conversations of Bohemian daily life and is even quoted by stereotyped characters of TV soap operas" (Santiago 1988: 193).

But there are deeper reasons to understand why Macunaíma became a well-known item in Brazil's cultural universe. After all, one of Brazil's strongest ideologies is the equal participation of the "three races" - Blacks, Indians and Whites - in the formation of Brazilian culture. In the words of Roberto da Matta (1987: 68), "the fable of the three races" is "an ideology that allows to reconcile contradictory impulses within our society, without creating a plan for its profound transformation". And more, it "constitutes the most powerful cultural force in Brazil, allowing for a conceptualization of the country, an ideal integration of its society and an individualization of its culture" (ibidem: 69).

Macunaíma is a man that undergoes racial transformations and who is radically involved in interethnic conflictive situations and ideological disputes. He was born an Indian, but a Black Indian of the Tapanhumas tribe⁵. In the midst of his adventures Macunaíma magically turns into a white man. Born deep in the jungle, his first words, already as an adult, were: aw, how listless I feel!⁶ Furthermore, "the hero without any character" is a migrant being exposed to processes of rapid modernization, experiencing dramatic new changes in a urban context dominated by strange machines. He is taken by a flow of changes so intense and fantastic that he does not have the time to process and understand the sequence of events. In this whirlpool Macunaíma is in a constant struggle against the obvious symbol of outward oriented modernization: a rich capitalist foreign migrant, a giant who has captured the muiraquitã, an essence of his world and a powerful

⁵ Tapuy'una may designate a "legendary pre-colombian tribe", "Black Africans who found refuge in the jungle" (Ancona Lopes 1988: 460); "the children of Africa who lived in Brazil; civilized Blacks" or "Black barbarians" (Proença 1969: 379).

⁶ Although in the American edition, Macunaíma's first words were "aw, what a fucking life!", I decided to make a literal translation for two reasons. First, the Portuguese expression ai! que preguiça! is a leitmotiv repeated several times by the hero in the book and it denotes stereotypes about Indian indolence. Secondly, there are strong indications that the first two words "ai que" were a pun that Andrade made with the Tupi word aiç that designates the sloth, a marsupial mammal that moves very slowly and is known in Portuguese as preguiça (see Ancona Lopes 1988: 6). This Portuguese word also designates listlessness, laziness, sloth. The pun thus fuses stereotypes with Tupi and Portuguese expressions, representing a unique literary tour de force.

magic object, the repossession of which becomes Macunaíma's obsession.

The muiraquitã was a gift that Ci, an Amazon woman who was Macunaíma's only true love, gave him after the death of their son. In deep sorrow, Ci, Mother of the Forest, goes up the sky and becomes Beta Centauri. While escaping from a monster in the jungle, the hero loses the muiraquitã stone. Later a bird tells him that the stone was swallowed by a turtle. The man who captured this turtle sold the muiraquitã to Venceslau Pietro Pietra, a merchant who became rich and moved to the city of São Paulo. Macunaíma and his two brothers travel to São Paulo where they get in touch with Brazilian urban life, in the country's largest and most modern city. There were migrants from different countries and states of Brazil. But above all machines, many machines: taxi machine, car machine, newspaper machine, telephone machine, airplane machine, electricity machine, London Bank machine.

The story unfolds mainly in São Paulo where the hero engages himself in magical and physical struggles against Pietro Pietra, also a man-eating giant. But, in his adventures, Macunaíma travels in fantastic ways - most of the time escaping from mythological enemies. He may go from Amazonian towns to others in the extreme south of Brazil, or Argentina, passing by Rio de Janeiro, covering distances of several hundred miles as if they were nothing. Real space and distance do not exist for him. In many places he passes, he meets local mythological figures or legendary popular characters. In Rio he attends an Afro-Brazilian ritual in order to magically spank his opponent who almost dies of the violent strokes received in São Paulo.

After several episodes, Macunaíma finally defeats the rich giant. In a fierce fight he kills Pietro Pietra by pushing him into a huge boiling pot of spaghetti that his wife, a Caapora (a malign elf of the jungle), was cooking. Macunaíma recovers his beloved muiraquitã and goes back, with his brothers Jiguê and Manaape, to the jungle where they lived. Disputes, intrigues and misunderstandings lead Macunaíma to kill Jiguê. Manaape soon dies attacked by the eating shadow that Jiguê had become. Depressed, with a parrot as his only company, Macunaíma loses his will to live. The hero without any character, the last man of the Tapanhumas tribe, goes up the sky and becomes the Great Bear⁷.

In an epilogue, the author visits the country where the Tapanhumas lived and meets a parrot. It was Macunaíma's companion. The parrot tells Mário de Andrade the adventures of the hero without character. This is why Brazilians know the story of Macunaíma.

But what most Brazilians do not know, unless they are literary critics or anthropologists who are connoisseurs of Brazil's exuberant Modernist Movement, is that the character Macunaíma, the "Brazilian hero" is radically and consciously based upon Makunaima, a Taulipang myth. Recognized interpreters of Mário de Andrade, and particularly of Macunaíma (see, for instance, Proença, 1969, a work that won a prize in 1950 and still is one of the most complete on this subject), and Andrade himself constantly called the attention to Macunaíma's origin.

It could not be differently. Makunaima, the Taulipang myth, was first read by Mário de Andrade in Theodor Koch-Grünberg's book Vom Roraima Zum Orinoco (From Roraima to the Orinoco). Koch-Grünberg (1872-1924) was a German geographer and

⁷ All characters that die are reintegrated into an organic cosmology. The only exception is the rich capitalist Pietro Pietra, a way of marking, again, the giant's foreign nature. See Ancona Lopes (1988) comments on page 135.

ethnologist who travelled, between 1911-1913, through northern Brazil, southern Venezuela and Guyana, an area practically unexplored. Strongly influenced by the German intellectual tradition, and following the path of ethnologists such as Karl Von Den Steinen of whom he was a student, Koch-Grünberg was highly interested in the description of material culture and the collection of myths. For him Indian myths were a window to the "primitive asset of humankind." Koch-Grünberg (1981: 13) wrote down "myths and tales in hours of idleness, by the camp fire, during travels in unsteady canoes, when passing by quiet stretches of river using tents as sails, while seated on rocks bathed by roaring waves of the waterfalls, or under the crisp foliage of the virgin jungle."

From Roraima to the Orinoco is composed of five volumes, the first of which was published in Berlin, in 1917⁸. It is a most representative piece of the work of a type of ethnographer that hardly exists today: a mixture of lonesome adventurer and highly trained scientist, capable of travelling years in the jungle listening to and registering myths, describing plants and mapping streams. Koch-Grünberg died in 1924 in the city of Rio Branco (today's capital of the Brazilian state of Acre) victim of a tropical fever.

He travelled in an area of ethnic diversity characterized by the presence of extended and old networks of intertribal and interethnic trade (Melatti 1992). Since the Eighteenth century, with the founding, in 1764, on the Orinoco river, of today's Ciudad Bolívar, indigenous populations in the area have experienced the presence of Europeans. Spanish, Dutch, British and Portuguese colonizers competed for hegemony in the area. There were military men, cattle ranchers, gold prospectors, Protestant and Catholic missionaries. Interethnic contact led Indians to "form new religions, amalgamating their magical, mythical and ritual knowledges with the doctrines of the missionaries. Thus, more than a century ago, there appeared a cult denominated Halleluiah, initially formulated with the contact of a Makuschi prophet with God. From the Makuschis, the cult diffused throughout all indigenous ethnies in the area, via other prophets, and lasts until today" (Melatti 1992: 8). Other cults appeared reflecting the contact with Anglicans and Catholics (ibidem).

Makuschi, Maiongong, Wapischana and Yekuana were some of the different ethnic groups Koch-Grünberg met. Interethnic contact is certainly the reason why in this area Makunaima is a hero whose accomplishments are known by different groups. The Taulipang (a group of the Karib linguistic family), together with the Arekuna and the Kamarakoto, comprise the Pemon.

According to Koch-Grünberg (1981: 14), Taulipang and Arekuna are so intimately related that "the tales of both tribes cannot be distinguished from each other." His two key informants were an Arekuna named Mõsecuaípu and a Taulipang called Mayuluaípu. The latter was not only the son of "the most famous narrator of his land" but also the German ethnologist's translator. Myths were translated by the Taulipang man to the Portuguese, a language Koch-Grünberg spoke, and thence to German (idem: 13).

Although Koch-Grünberg highlights Taulipang versions of Makunaima, since he also recorded Arekuna versions, in reality the story cannot be said to be exclusively Taulipang. In his own account on this hero, our author constantly uses Taulipang and Arekuna versions. Therefore, to classify Makunaima as a Taulipang story is in itself already a simplification. The same is true when it is stated that it is a "Venezuelan" story in

⁸ In the Spanish edition of this book (Koch-Grünberg 1979, 1981, 1982) only three of the five volumes were translated.

the sense that it was part of the cosmology of a people living within Venezuela's territory and recorded there. By the time the ethnographer was there, Taulipang and Arekuna lived in an area that included the then British Guyana. Makunaima could well have been collected as a myth in what was a part of the British Empire.

Makunaima means "the great mean one" in Taulipang⁹. He is tricky, dangerous, arrogant, troublemaker, traitor and the smartest of men, always involved with sex and power. He is the creator of animals and fish. He also created men. But above all he is the "great transformer" (*idem*: 19).

I will not reproduce the different versions or contents of the Makunaima story. But I wish to call the attention to characteristics which became central to Mário de Andrade's *Macunaíma*. More important than the features of the hero and its many mythological adventures, is the fact that the structure of a myth is the perfect basis for a literary piece where transformations abound. It is equally important to cope with ambiguous and volatile situations in multicultural contexts. A hero without character is a powerful metaphor to the melange of cultures and the sense of loss of identity. It is also a pathetic metaphor. The search for essences and authenticity cannot be satisfied by a hero without character. Who are we? There is no appeasing answer for that question when the flux of transformations is the only answer.

Macunaíma: Modernity and fragmentation of identities.

Modernism as an international artistic movement fused together elements from different cultural backgrounds. In Brazil it came fully into light with the Week of Modern Art of '22, in São Paulo. In the twenties, Brazilian modernism was highly influenced by the thought of Marx, Freud and of anthropologists such as Tylor, Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl¹⁰. It was also directed towards Brazil's cultural roots.

Mário de Andrade was - amongst intellectuals such as Rodrigo de Mello Franco and Lucio Costa (Brasilia's planner) - one of the most important articulators of the "new series of discourses" on Brazilian culture produced in the twenties, thirties and forties (Santos 1992: 239). Andrade engaged himself in cultural politics, helping to create federal and state level institutions to preserve landmarks, historical sites, archives. He "studied in depth the concepts of culture, symbol, art, aesthetics and folklore... conveyed and produced a definition of Brazilian culture, understanding it as a permanent process of creation, the dynamics of which was capable of universalization, of communion with the totality of civilization, that is, with the ensemble of processes of communication of the Western man" (*idem*: 245).

⁹ Koch-Grünberg (1979: 18) comments that it is strange to know that English missionaries translated the word for the Christian god as Makunaima. Maku is the root for "mean" in Taulipang. It is interesting to note that to these days the Maku, semi-nomad Indians of the Upper Rio Negro, are classified in the local interethnic system as bad people or non-humans (Oliveira 1992).

¹⁰ Mario de Andrade read Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life* and Freud's *Totem and Taboo* before publishing *Macunaíma*. In the twenties and thirties he also read Marx and Bukharin (see Morse 1990: 110). Mario de Andrade later became a student of Claude Lévi-Strauss, in 1934, at the then recently founded University of São Paulo.

In Andrade the relationship particular/universal is mediated by tradition and each cultural manifestation is a form of access to universals (*ibidem*: 293). This is why Mário de Andrade was far from constructing a chauvinist theory of Brazil. His is already a critical vision of a nationalist will that was present and more or less developed both by left and right oriented politicians and intellectuals. Andrade posited a cosmopolitan nationalism. The fact that he treated cultural diversity as an unsolved problematique was a guarantee against utopian formulations linked with the foundation of a new tropical civilization¹¹.

Andrade did not mechanically answer to a programmatic orientation of an artistic fad. He was embedded in a modern situation, in São Paulo, a metropolis that was undergoing dramatic changes in its form, architecture, lifestyles. These changes, provoked by intense industrialization and modernization, placed together migrants (Italians, Spanish, Japanese, Germans, etc.) from different parts of the world. Richard Morse (1990: 85-86), describes the ambience where the Paulistas (people born in São Paulo) worked: "The Paulistas were well located to produce explosive manifestos. They lived in a hectic industrial and financial capital of a nation with continental dimensions. They heard the voice of Brazil as a cacophony of Indigenous, African, Portuguese, French, Italian, Syrian, Japanese and many other sources. Like Caribbean people, they lived in a pot though contained within a single nation that was relatively free of the threat of the chess game of empires."

Modernity in São Paulo of the twenties meant the impact of foreign technologies and the changes they caused in local society (Sevcenko 1992). Cars, phonographs, movies, new drugs. Isadora Duncan, the Russian Ballet, Lasar Segall. New artists, musicians and painters presenting new forms of expression. An elite divided into those highly influenced by foreign aesthetics and those defending the entrance of Brazilian culture into the realm of the great art.

The transformations Macunaíma goes through - his exposure to an impressive bombardment of new information, his perplexity, the fragmentation of his cultural universe and means of interpretation - is what makes him a modernist hero constructed by a modernist writer. Macunaíma perfectly fits Marshall Berman's (1987: 15; my translation) ideas: "to be modern is to find oneself in an environment that promises adventure, power, happiness, growth, self-transformation and transformation of surrounding things - but at the same time threatens to destroy everything that we have, that we know, that we are. The experience of modernity annihilates all geographical and racial frontiers, of class and nationality, of religion and ideology...."

Mário de Andrade, himself a traveler, read From Roraima to the Orinoco, in German, in 1926 (Ancona Lopes 1988: 312) a fact that in itself is an index of Andrade's interest in ethnology and folklore. The edition of the first volume of Koch-Grünberg's work, a description of his journey, was published in Berlin in 1917, but the second volume

¹¹ However, influenced by Keyserling and Lévy-Bruhl, he wrote an éloge of indolence and "elaborated a justification of primitive life and of the tropical world as a form of therapy for a society dominated by technique and consumption. Civilization was the antidote of 'progress' and not its companion. The notion of listlessness expressed in part the idea that Brazilians still did not have a firm character, a 'national consciousness' and resisted discipline of modern life. But it also meant the idleness that permitted to cultivate artistic sensibility without any theological connotation of listlessness as spiritual aridity" (Morse 1990: 112).

(Myths and Legends) only came out in 1924 in Stuttgart¹².

In a letter to a friend Mário de Andrade said "I decided to write because I was in despair provoked by the lyrical commotion I felt when, reading Koch-Grünberg, I perceived that Macunaíma was a hero without any moral nor psychological character. I found this enormously moving. I don't even know why. Certainly because of the originality of the fact or because he is pretty much in accordance with our times" (in Ancona Lopes 1988: 401).

Andrade fused the work of the German ethnologist with classic descriptive and historical sources of Brazil's hinterlands, especially the Amazon region, such as Capistrano de Abreu and Couto de Magalhães. Mário de Andrade wrote Macunaíma in a week, from December 16 to 23, in the year of 1926 (Proença 1969: 7). He wrote in the preface of the first edition:

"What interested me in Macunaíma was undoubtedly the preoccupation I have to work and discover, to the best of my abilities, the national entity of Brazilians. Well, after a lot of struggles I verified that one thing is certain: the Brazilian has no character... The Brazilian has no character because he possesses neither a civilization of his own nor a traditional consciousness" (quoted by Santos 1992: 241).

This quotation is illustrative of a central tension in Andrade. He was aware of the fragmentation to which both modern and traditional Brazilians were increasingly experiencing but he was also interested in drawing a national character and a national culture. The solution of Brazilian modernists was to stress that re-creation, cultural cannibalism, was the marker of distinction. A marker that is founded upon a dialectic between the particular and the universal; a digestion of particularities within the realm of universalities.

In Macunaíma there is an incredible accumulation of "legends, superstitions, proverbs" (Proença 1969: 7). It is a "patchwork," a veritable fusion of the many traits that would synthesize the "common Brazilian." The fusion of many cultural fragments to express a Brazilian national character is widely indicated by Proença and merits two long quotations:

"Macunaíma presents as musical rhapsodies a variety of popular motifs, that Mário de Andrade organized in series according to the affinities existing amongst them, linking them to achieve a unity, with small parts of his authorship, in order to make smooth transitions from one motif to another" (*idem*: 11).

"The selection of the myths was not random, it was not oriented by poetical beauty nor to adjust to the narrative. The great majority are motifs existing in legends and myths of more than one tribe. Mário de Andrade chose one of them, or very often fused them. The material is of European, Amerindian and Black origin, since Macunaíma was born Indian-Black, and later will have blue eyes ... while one of his brothers will remain Indian and the other Black. And they continue to be brothers. However, Macunaíma does not acquire an European soul. Only his skin and habits are white. His soul is a mixture of everything" (*ibidem*: 27).

Macunaíma is also a Bolivian, a Chilean, a Venezuelan, a South-American, someone who speaks with regional expressions from the south of Brazil or from the Amazon, a traveller, a migrant exposed to many cultural variables. The fusion of many

¹² Volumes 3 and 5 were published in 1923.

particular cultural traits is what allows Macunaíma to be universal¹³. However, notes Alfredo Bosi (1988: 178), "there is not in Macunaíma the serene contemplation of a synthesis. Quite the contrary. The author insists in the incoherent and disjointed way of being of this 'character' who is so plural that he turns out to be 'none'. And that possible 'optimism' - that was a love for popular speech and deeds, with their free and instinctive contents - collides with the melancholic realization of an amorphous situation without backbone nor project."

In one sense, Andrade is a realist that is mirroring the situations he is describing, a "magic realist" *avant-la-lettre*. He approaches cultural diversity as a problematique, the solution of which is open. Since he is not anxious to solve paradoxes he does not build a utopian discourse. Here it is as if his psychoanalytical and anthropological readings had given him the tranquility to explore and live with perplexities. The hero of a land of uprooted people can only have as a destiny not to "assume any constant identity" (Bosi 1988: 181).

Mário de Andrade called Macunaíma a "desgeographized hero" (Proença 1969: 82). That certainly means he was conscious of the hero's fragmentation. Indeed, his book may be read as an attempt to express the incredible changes Brazilian society and culture were going through, changes that were much clearer in a metropolis such as São Paulo. The struggle of Macunaíma against the giant Piaimã, a foreigner in Andrade's book, represents the opposition of local knowledge to a different pragmatic instrumental reason born by outsiders. It is the struggle of local cultures against new waves of incorporation into the world capitalist system, against new waves of fragmentation under the hegemony of new actors and phases of the expansion of the Western political economy.

Mário de Andrade is a *bricoleur*-writer and a myth-maker. He constructs a heteroclit character that is not intended to show an easy and docile congruency so often sought by interpreters of social and cultural realities. Andrade, himself, is ambiguous. He is aware that his illogical hero reflects a national lack of logicity: "because just like other South American people, our national formation is not spontaneous, it is not, so to speak, logical" (quoted by Proença 1969: 36). But there is an underlying national problem that he is always addressing. The search for authenticity is clearly there: "a well defined trait of Macunaíma is the preoccupation with authenticity" (Proença 1969: 32). This may well be the reason why the story of Macunaíma has a pathetic overtone. At the same time that Andrade's book may be read as an *éloge* of Brazilian cultural diversity fused in a character, he perceived the power of fragmentation and ambiguity induced by modernization¹⁴. On the other hand, he felt that characters were losing authenticity. This is why the hero had to die in the end.

Conclusion

¹³ Mario de Andrade (quoted by Bosi 1988: 176) wrote: "A comic-hero poem, making fun of the psychological being of Brazilians, based upon a page of legend, in the mystical mode of traditional poems. Real and fancy fused in the same plane. Symbol, satire and fantasy freely fused. Absence of parochialisms through the fusion of regional characteristics. Only one Brazil and only one hero."

¹⁴ "...ambiguity was, to Mario, typical of the modern Brazilians - even more, of modern men that invented morals according to circumstances" (Morse 1990: 112).

The acceptance of the fragmentation of identities as a possibility of exploring, from a particular point of view, the diversity of cultural experience is not common when what is at stake is the discussion of national identities. In a moment of the world system in which there is an increasing exposure to deterritorialized cultural meanings, to face fragmentation as a fundamental issue for the understanding of the formation of new cultural and political identities is a major anthropological task.

In this sense, Macunaíma provides a rich example to discuss not only the intricacies of national identity formation, but identity in general in modern societies, especially in those areas subjected to intense processes of time-space compression (Harvey 1989). In a previous work, analyzing a group of skilled workers and technicians that live within the migratory circuits of the world system, I tried to distance myself from an essentialist approach. I came to the conclusion that:

"Identity fragmentation needs to be understood in a universe where there is a flow of growing acceleration of changes of the contexts of social and communicative encounters and a multiple exposition to socializing and normative agencies, themselves also travelling in an accelerated flow of changes. In this situation, identities can only be defined as being a synthesis of multiple alterities constructed from a great number of interactive contexts regulated, most of the time, by institutions. That is, instead of an irreducible essence, identity in modern/post-modern situations within some regions of complex societies can be conceived as a multifaceted flow subject to negotiations and rigidity, in greater or lesser degree, according to the interactive contexts that most of the time are institutionally regulated by a socializing and/or normative agency (for a similar position see Marcus 1990: 29). On the one hand, fragmentation is lived as a given, as a reality that structures the subject, on the other hand as a set that is characteristic of the subject but that undergoes constant change in a way that one of its multiple facets, or an aggregate of them, may be hegemonic in relationship to the others according to the contexts. Under conditions of extreme change, the defining arrangement of collective and individual identities may go through radical transformations, even leading to a redefinition, to a reconstruction of the general characteristics of the (open) totality and of the relationships of hegemony between its constitutive parts (facets)" (Ribeiro 1992: 33).

Macunaíma is an example of fragmentation in a modern and segmented context that is typical of many cultural dramas of the New World. Cultural contact and diversity together with ethnic segmentation generate, in greater or lesser degree, Macunaímas everywhere, independently of an interethnic system's particular ideology. This is especially clear in the Americas where confronting radical strangeness became a type of original historical sin commanded by foreign or domestic colonial centers. In this connection, the work of Mário de Andrade can also be understood as part of the effort of intellectuals of the New World that, expressing ambiguities historically constructed, locate themselves within the search for a national language that may differentiate their idiom from the metropolitan one. Andrade is thus member of a trend that includes Noah Webster, H.L. Mencken, Juan B. Alberdi, Domingo F. Sarmiento, Jorge Luis Borges, Octavio Paz, and many others (Morse 1990).

One of the many sources of Macunaíma's richness is that it can be read both as a search for a national character and as a recognition that there is not such a thing. Indeed, it represents the very inner drama of cultural realities that fuse pre-existing dominant systems (European, in this case) and new ones. Ambiguity installs itself. Fragmentation tends to

rise.

"Each one of us has a little of Macunaíma," said Proença (1969: 15). Indeed, the works of time-space compression (Harvey 1989) - especially of mass media - will entail a cultural dynamics that will produce countless Macunaímas around the world. People more and more dislocated from their initial cultural conditions and perceiving the world through a web of components whose origins are virtually impossible to trace. A web that will always be experienced through a variety of particular angles. This is what convinces me that the dilemma of present times is not "to be or not to be", a good synthesis of the need for clear-cut identities to establish alliances for cooperation and conflicts.

The contemporary conditions of integration of the world system lead us to explore the idea that the dilemma is "to be and not to be." A dilemma that perhaps can only be solved if we, like Macunaíma, go up the sky and become the Great Bear with its many prismatic lights.

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