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An initial illustrative interpretation of the Kagwahiva myth *Anhağa'avukuhua* from Indigenous oral accounts

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ABSTRACT

Among the Kagwahiva (Tenharim) people of the Brazilian Amazon, beings commonly classified in Western discourse as “fantastic” or “supernatural” are understood as part of an expanded and lived reality. This article presents an initial interpretive illustration of *Anhağa'avukuhua*, a mythical non-human entity described in Indigenous oral narratives collected during ethnographic fieldwork. Based on interviews conducted with community members recognized for their knowledge of cosmological and symbolic domains, the study explores how descriptive, affective, and symbolic elements converge in the visual translation of this being. The illustration discussed here is not intended as a literal depiction, but as an interpretive ethnographic artifact, grounded in interlocutors' accounts and shaped through reflexive analytical procedures. By articulating oral narratives, thematic analysis, and visual mediation, the article examines how Indigenous cosmological knowledge may be communicated through visual forms while respecting its relational and experiential dimensions.

Keywords: Indigenous cosmology, visual anthropology, oral narratives, ethnographic illustration

1. INTRODUCTION

During fieldwork among the Tenharim people in the interior of the Brazilian Amazon, narratives about non-human beings repeatedly emerged in conversations concerning the forest, bodily vulnerability, and everyday vigilance. These accounts were not framed by interlocutors as distant myths, but as forms of knowledge embedded in lived experience, shaping how people perceive and relate to their environment. Among the entities mentioned, *Anhağa 'avukuhua* appeared with particular consistency and narrative density.

Interpretive approaches in anthropology have long emphasized that ethnographic knowledge is produced through engagement rather than detached observation. Following Geertz's interpretive perspective, ethnography may be understood as an "interpretation of interpretations," in which cultural meanings are accessed through situated narratives and symbolic action rather than through claims of objectivity [1]. From this viewpoint, understanding Indigenous cosmologies requires attention to how meaning is experienced, narrated, and transmitted.

Within visual and sensory anthropology, this interpretive stance has been extended to images, objects, and performances, which are understood not merely as illustrations but as active modes of knowing. Visual practices shape perception, organize attention, and participate directly in the production of ethnographic understanding [2-4]. Similarly, visual methods scholars have argued that images function as epistemological events rather than passive representations.

Experimental and observational approaches in visual anthropology further emphasize the analytical potential of visual production. Grimshaw and Ravetz [5, 6] demonstrate that visual practices — such as film and drawing — can generate forms of anthropological thought that exceed the limits of textual description, engaging the researcher in processes of sensory, aesthetic, and conceptual experimentation.

It is within this theoretical landscape that the present study approaches the illustration of *Anhağa 'avukuhua* as an interpretive ethnographic artifact. Rather than serving as a literal depiction of a mythical being, the image emerges from a process of translation in which oral narratives, analytical categories, and visual decisions intersect. The artifact is therefore inseparable from the ethnographic process that produced it, mediating between interlocutors' descriptions, the researcher's interpretation, and the visual language through which these meanings are communicated.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The research was conducted with the Tenharim Indigenous people, who identify as Kagwahiva, and who inhabit the Tenharim Marmelos Indigenous Land in the state of Amazonas, Brazil. Fieldwork took place in October and November 2014, following authorization from the Indigenous community and the Brazilian National Indigenous Peoples Foundation (FUNAI).

The Tenharim Marmelos Indigenous Land is located between the municipalities of Humaitá and Manicoré, approximately between 7°48' and 8°53' south latitude and 61°35' and 62°10' west longitude (Figure 1). Prior to the construction of the Trans-Amazonian Highway,

the community lived in a single village along the Marmelos River, an area now intersected by the road.



Figure 1. Map of Brazil with the approximate location of the Indigenous land studied and of some cities as reference.

Data collection was conducted through open and semi-structured interviews [7], allowing for greater flexibility and a more natural dialogue [8]. Interviews were conducted with Indigenous participants of different genders and age groups, addressing themes related to cosmology, environmental perception, and everyday practices. This diversity of interlocutors allowed for the documentation of multiple perspectives within the community.

Within the broader corpus of narratives, several non-human and mythical entities were identified. *Anhağa'avukuhua* emerged as a recurring figure, frequently associated with subterranean spaces, bodily decay, and forms of vigilance related to movement through the forest. Once this recurrence was established, additional interviews were conducted with individuals recognized locally for their familiarity with cosmological knowledge. These conversations focused on eliciting detailed descriptions of the entity's physical characteristics, behavior, and symbolic significance.

All interviews were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using thematic analysis, following the procedures outlined by Braun and Clarke [9]. Through repeated readings and coding,

patterns of meaning were identified and organized into three analytical axes: (i) morphological and aesthetic attributes; (ii) behavioral and dispositional characteristics; and (iii) symbolic and relational dimensions.

These analytical axes informed the construction of a visual correspondence matrix linking narrative elements to graphic features such as form, texture, and spatial arrangement. This procedure resembles interpretive mapping approaches used in visual and object-oriented analysis, in which relationships between narrative categories and material forms are analytically articulated [10]. Throughout this process, analytical decisions and interpretive reflections were documented in a field diary, ensuring reflexive transparency.

The following narrative synthesis exemplifies the type of descriptions provided by interlocutors and served as a reference point for the visual translation:

“Deep beneath the earth, where the roots twist like veins of the world, dwells the Anhağa’avukuhua — a being older than memory, born of shadow and decay. His hair spills over his small frame like a living forest, crawling with life and death alike. Within its tangled strands slither snakes, scuttle cockroaches, and stir the legs of a thousand unseen things — lice, scorpions, lizards, all bound to his curse. Though no taller than a child of three, he is no child. His eyes hold the weariness of centuries, and his breath carries the scent of earth long sealed from light. He walks the land beneath the sun, unseen by mortal eyes. Only the pajé — the shaman — can pierce the veil and behold him. Those who do say his form flickers like smoke, a shadow made flesh. His hair never ceases to grow, its length unknowable, as if each strand were a measure of the lives he has consumed. He feeds upon the creatures of the earth — anything that walks, crawls, or burrows — for the ground itself is his hunting field. Beware the rustle beneath your feet, traveler. For when the Anhağa’avukuhua stirs, even the soil remembers fear.”

Based on this material, an illustration was produced through a process of interpretive translation, in which verbal descriptions were transformed into visual signs. Methodological rigor was maintained by explicitly linking visual elements to analytical categories derived from the interviews, while acknowledging the interpretive nature of the process.

The illustration was produced by Belgian artist Nestor Aprile Mureșan (@thebusinessfrog), employing fineliner and watercolor on handmade paper (Figure 1). While informed by ethnographic data, the artist was granted full interpretive autonomy, allowing his technical expertise and stylistic approach to shape the visual outcome.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The illustration resulting from this study may be understood as a visual synthesis of recurrent elements emphasized across interviews rather than as a definitive representation of *Anhağa’avukuhua*. Attributes such as reduced stature, excessive hair growth, association with subterranean spaces, and the presence of insects and reptiles were consistently highlighted by interlocutors and incorporated into the visual composition.

From an interpretive anthropological perspective, such an image operates as an extension of the analytical process. As Geertz [11] suggests, ethnographic understanding emerges through forms of engagement that convey symbolic density rather than empirical completeness. In this sense, the illustration contributes to a process of “thick description,” translating narrative and affective dimensions into visual form.

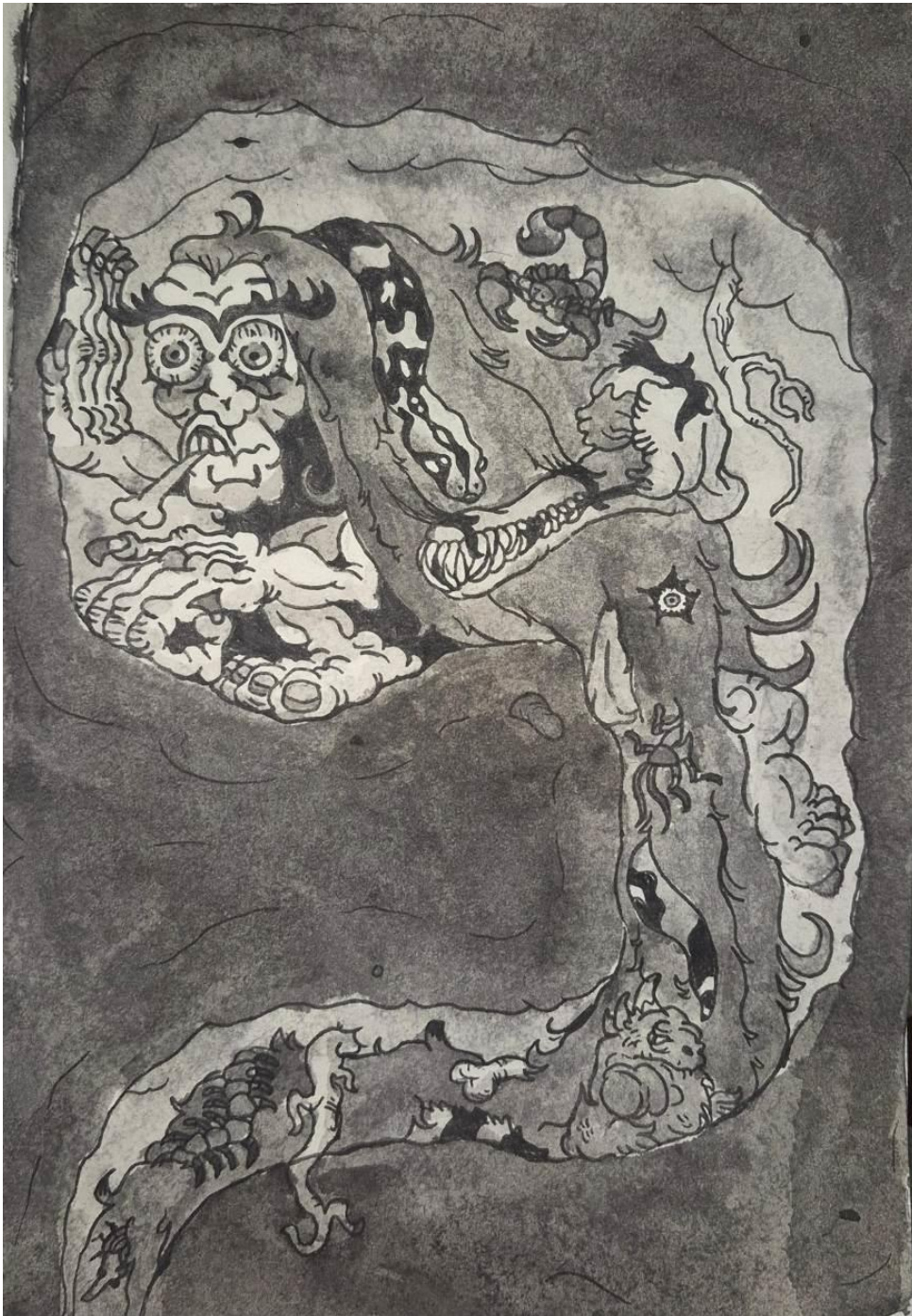


Figure 1. Illustration of *Anhağa'avukuhua* (created by Nestor Aprile Mureşan).

Visual artifacts produced within ethnographic contexts can also be approached as material sites of affect and relational meaning. Edwards [12-14] has shown that images do not merely represent cultural realities but carry sensory and affective traces of the encounters from which they emerge. This is particularly relevant when dealing with beings described as invisible or perceptible only under specific conditions, as was repeatedly emphasized by interlocutors in relation to *Anhağa'avukuhua*.

The researcher's engagement with these narratives involved a form of exposure to their symbolic force. This resonates with Favret-Saada's [15, 16] notion of "being affected," in which ethnographic knowledge arises through vulnerability to the forces mobilized by interlocutors' accounts rather than through analytical distance alone.

The illustration condenses multiple layers of meaning into a single visual configuration. Morphological features evoke decay and vulnerability, while the accumulation of animals within the figure's hair suggests an intimate relationship with the forest floor and processes of decomposition. These elements reflect broader Indigenous understandings of the forest as a living and agentive environment, inhabited by beings that exceed human categories.

From a relational perspective, the drawing may be understood as emerging through a process of correspondence between narratives, materials, and perceptual engagement [17, 18]. Rather than illustrating a fixed myth, the image materializes a set of relations, allowing cosmological narratives, oral transmission, and graphic practice to converge.

4. CONCLUSION

The illustration of *Anhağa'avukuhua* presented in this study should be understood as an integral component of the ethnographic process rather than as a supplementary aesthetic element. Grounded in oral narratives collected during fieldwork, the image functions as an interpretive ethnographic artifact through which cultural meanings are articulated and communicated. By translating descriptions of an elusive and often invisible being into visual form, the research engages with dimensions of Indigenous cosmology that are not easily conveyed through text alone. Visual mediation, when conducted reflexively, expands the expressive and analytical possibilities of ethnographic practice [19].

Ultimately, this study reinforces the view that ethnographic understanding emerges through relational engagement. As Ingold [17] argues, knowledge is generated through correspondence with the world rather than through detached representation. The illustration of *Anhağa'avukuhua* thus contributes to anthropological inquiry not as a final depiction, but as a situated and material form of knowing.

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