

Exchanging Words

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Exchanging Words

Language, Ritual, and Relationality in Brazil's
Xingu Indigenous Park

Christopher Ball

SCHOOL FOR ADVANCED RESEARCH PRESS • SANTA FE

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Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-
Publication Data

Names: Ball, Christopher Gordon, author.

Title: Exchanging words: language, ritual, and
relationality in Brazil's Xingu Indigenous
Park / Christopher Ball.

Description: Albuquerque: University of New
Mexico Press/SAR Press, 2018. | Series:
School for Advanced Research resident
scholar series | Includes bibliographical
references and index. |

Identifiers: LCCN 2017056955 (print) | LCCN
2018015915 (e-book) | ISBN 9780826358547
(e-book) | ISBN 9780826358530 (pbk.: alk.
paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Waura Indians—Brazil—
Parque Nacional do Xingu—Language. |
Waura Indians—Brazil—Parque Nacional
do Xingu—Rites and ceremonies. |
Intergroup relations—Brazil—Parque
Nacional do Xingu. | Parque Nacional do
Xingu (Brazil)—Social life and customs.

Classification: LCC F2520.1.W38 (e-book) |
LCC F2520.1.W38 B35 2018 (print) |
DDC 981/.72—dc23

LC record available at [https://lcn.loc.
gov/2017056955](https://lcn.loc.gov/2017056955)

The writing of this book was generously funded
by a Christopher Smeall Summer Scholar
Fellowship at the School for Advanced Research.

Cover photograph courtesy of the author
Composed in Minion Pro and Gill Sans fonts

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Kamala has died. His brother, my grandfather, told me just now. I have come by boat, arriving tired and hopeful, to his house in the village of Piyulaga. As soon as I saw him I could see the tears in his eyes. Inside his house, beside the room he had prepared for me for years, he greeted me as usual. He asked if I was “*awojotai*” (OK).

I said, “Yes” (*nawojotai*), “I’m fine. *Pawojotai atu?*” (Are you OK, grandfather?)

“*Nawojotai.*”

“*Kamalajo?*” (Really?)

He went right to it. Kamala has died. Today. Far away in Brasilia, from where I had just come by plane and car and bus and truck and outboard motorboat. I walked into the same place, but now hundreds of people cried all night, cried for days. I sank.

You see, it was all over. Years of work, years of learning, years of something like friendship, something like family, and something like awe ended. My grandfather held me. I did not cry. He did not stop crying.

A few days later his sons talked of debt. What had I promised Kamala and not delivered? What did I owe? Like any real chief, he was humble. He asked of me beads, some money for food, for fish while living in the city on doctor’s orders, a mosquito net, a tarp. I had also promised a new project, an initiative to document and map one of the most important places in Kamala’s and many Wauja people’s lives: Kamukuwaká. This project, the work I had been doing since the completion of the research on which this book is based, had just been approved for funding in the United States, and we had convened Brazilian researchers as well. I had come with good news about our many conversations over the years, and I missed him by hours.

Kamala is referred to by the pseudonym Sepí in this book. *Sepí* is the Wauja word for “stool”; it is a marker of chiefly authority to have one’s own seat. It means “throne” in his case. You will get to know him as he was when he was active and powerful, and I am happy about that. This book could not have been written without Kamala and his generous spirit. The next chapters of Wauja social, linguistic, and cultural life, of Wauja activism for their territorial rights, will have to continue without him. I owe it to him to do all I can to help.

— May 25, 2017

This book could not have been written without the hospitality and companionship of the Wauja people. So many individuals in the Wauja community taught me, laughed with me, and guided me. I cannot thank them enough for allowing me to develop what remains an evolving understanding of only some of the complexities, predicaments, and joys of their lives. First and last, I thank you, *waujanau*; I hope I can return my debt and that you will allow me to continue to incur more.

Among my professors at the University of Chicago, Michael Silverstein was both mentor and committee chair, and he deserves special thanks for his patience, support, and wisdom. Other committee members Amy Dahlstrom, Jerrold Sadock, Susan Gal, and Manuela Carneiro da Cunha each mentored me in their own ways. The diversity of their interests and expertise pushed me to incorporate new perspectives throughout my career at Chicago, and their marks remain on this book. I also had the opportunity to learn from a host of excellent faculty during my training there, including Michel-Rolph Trouillot, Elizabeth Povinelli, Paul Friedrich, Robert Moore, Jessica Cattelino, Danilyn Rutherford, and Victor Friedman.

Funding for the research on which this book is based came through a Fulbright-Hays fellowship, a Tinker Field Research Grant from the Center for Latin American Studies at the University of Chicago, and a Doolittle-Harrison Fellowship from the University of Chicago. Official Brazilian institutional sponsorship for the research came through the Linguistics Department of the Museu Paraense Emílio Goeldi in Belém, and I thank Vilacy Galucio and Denny Moore for their support. My research in Brazil was also helped by the assistance, hospitality, and intellectual inspiration provided by Carlos Fausto, Kristine Stenzel, and Bruna Franchetto.

Colleagues in linguistic anthropology at Chicago helped immensely at various stages of this project with intellectual and moral support. James Slotta, Courtney Handman, Shunsuke Nozawa, Paul Kockelman, Alejandro Paz, and Mary Andronis deserve special mention. Our conversations and exchanges were formative for me in developing the approach represented in the following pages, and our mutual support and interest in each other's work buoyed the preparation and writing of what would become this book. After leaving Chicago, I was fortunate to have a McKennan Postdoctoral Fellowship in the

Department of Anthropology at Dartmouth College from 2007 to 2012. Besides the generally warm and constructive advice of many Dartmouth faculty, I was lucky to receive focused attention on an early draft of this book through the college's John Sloan Dickey Center for International Understanding Manuscript Review Program. The center brought John Watanabe, Sienna Craig, Lisa Valdez, Laura Graham, and Daniel Suslak together to provide invaluable feedback on the draft in a collegial and intense roundtable. I thank them all for helping to push this book in positive directions.

In the summer of 2012 I received further support in the preparation of the manuscript as Christopher Smeall Summer Scholar of anthropological linguistics at the School for Advanced Research in Santa Fe. Then-president James F. Brooks, along with my fellow SAR summer scholars Sharon DeWitte, Rachel Ama Asaa Engmann, Khalil Anthony Johnson Jr., Peggy Levitt, Nancy Owen Lewis, and Lawrence Rosen, provided the most welcoming and constructive forum for group writing and discussion one could hope for. Thanks are due as well to the anthropology faculty at MacEwan University, where Hugh McKenzie, Franca Boag, Paul Prince, and Cynthia Zutter all supported me in my first regular faculty appointment in 2012 and 2013.

Since coming to the Department of Anthropology at the University of Notre Dame in 2013, where the long road to completing *Exchanging Words* has ended, I have benefited from the immense warmth and collegiality of the faculty and students. The faculty in cultural and linguistic anthropology warrant special thanks for their contributions to refining many of the ideas and arguments here. Susan Blum, Rahul Oka, Vania Smith-Oka, Catherine Bolten, Maurizio Albahari, Alex Chavez, Carolyn Nordstrom, and Gabriel Torres have each inspired me to think about the issues raised in the manuscript from novel perspectives, and they provided invaluable advice on the writing process. The positivity and attitude of sharing among all of the Notre Dame anthropology faculty, including Agustin Fuentes and Jim McKenna, has been a great inspiration.

Many colleagues have responded with feedback on themes and materials featured in *Exchanging Words* in fora including graduate workshops, conference presentations, academic talks, written correspondence, dinner conversation, and barroom banter. These scholars include Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruce Mannheim, Salikoko Mufwene, Webb Keane, Judy Irvine, Alaina Lemon, Erin Debenport, Rupert Stasch, Nicholas Harkness, Tania Granadillo, John Haviland, Jack Sidnell, Alan Rumsey, Francesca Merlan, Pierre Déléage, Mike Cepek, Shane Greene, Jeremy Campbell, and Marina Vanzolini, among others.

My editors at SAR Press have been unflaggingly attentive, fair, and patient. Lisa Pacheco saw the narrative develop and made the book possible through her rigorous engagement with the manuscript. Lynn Baca and later Sarah Soliz aided in its completion. Thank you for believing in the book.

Some of the material in *Exchanging Words* has appeared in modified form in journal articles. A version of chapter 3 appeared in 2011 in the *Journal de la Société des Américanistes* 97, no. 1: 87–117 under the title “As Spirits Speak: Interaction in Wauja Exoteric Ritual.” A version of chapter 5 was published in 2011 as “Inalienability in Social Relations: Language, Possession, and Exchange in Amazonia” in *Language in Society* 40, no. 3: 307–41. Chapter 7 appeared in a revised form in 2012 as “Stop Loss: Developing Interethnic Relations in Brazil’s Xingu Indigenous Park” in the *Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 17, no. 3: 413–34. A French-language essay in the journal *Gradhiva*, “Le commerce de la culture, la médecine rituelle et le Coca-cola,” coauthored with Marcelo Fiorini, offered a starting point for thinking through what later became chapter 7, and I thank him for thinking, talking, and writing through problems with me.

I could not have written this book without the encouragement of my mother, Linda Ball, and my father, Greg Ball; the support of my wife, Kyoko Magari-Ball; and the inspiration of our daughter, Wasa Ball. Thank you.

Introduction

When seen from the sky, the southern border of central Brazil's Xingu Indigenous Park (*Parque Indígena do Xingu*, or PIX) is a straight line separating starkly brown ranchland outside the park from vividly green forest within. In March 2006 several small planes carried visitors across this border en route to the village of the Arawak-speaking Wauja people. They ran the last leg in an international journey that had brought a dozen shamans and medicine people from Canada, the United States, Surinam, and Colombia for a meeting of traditional healers held inside the park and cosponsored by the Wauja and an American NGO. The planes settled down amid clouds of dust, entering the village due west on the straight and wide main entrance road as is required of all ceremonial visitors in the Upper Xingu.

Many of the Wauja hosts and their indigenous guests appeared to have taken the Portuguese name of the event, *Encontro de Saberes* (Meeting of Minds), quite literally. Wauja shamans, responsible for cosmological equilibrium between humans and *apapatai* (spirit-monsters), sat in the central men's house in their circular village and spoke through a bevy of translators with fellow medicinal specialists about the importance of breaking down borders between indigenous groups worldwide through trance. Each group presented and exchanged their distinctive medicinal vehicles, including sage, tobacco, *ayahuasca*, and other rainforest botanicals. The conference was centered around coparticipatory use of these medicines that individuated the groups at the same time as they united them all as indigenous people. During the closing ceremony, visiting Colombian ayahuasca specialists remarked that "our spiritual knowledge does not have barriers, is not limited by borders. So we will be in contact in our dreams, because Indians always communicate with one another through dream and ritual." A Lakota medicine man said in English (as I translated into Wauja and others into the Tiriyo, Portuguese, and Spanish languages) that his ancestors had also traveled long distances to establish "spiritual connections" and to trade with others. This occasion was possible and generally successful for Wauja participants because they are, by and large, interested and engaged

in making spiritual and economic connections with other people, Indians and non-Indians.

And yet it was not without some tension that Wauja people identified with their indigenous visitors at this meeting. One Wauja chief, observing the dress and complexion of the North American Indian guests, commented to his younger compatriots in a Wauja utterance that I declined to translate: *yunupa kala muteitsi, akajaopatapai, itsawé aitsu yekitsa* (“Look at those [non–Upper Xinguan] Indians. They have become whites; this is what we will be like in the future”).¹ Here was a negative, or at least ambivalent, evaluation of what many Wauja imagine as a real trajectory of their own identity, one that is linked to the very kinds of outreach that characterized this meeting and that highlights the risks many Wauja perceive in the various cultural projects through which they attempt communication and exchange with the outside.

Three themes from this shamans’ meeting provide a framework for the subject matter of this book. First is that Wauja people, like human groups everywhere, construct their own identity (who one is like) in relation to others (who one is different from). The social-scientific way of saying this is that identity is only possible in dialectic with alterity. This book traces a series of moments in Wauja self-identification that come from instances of interaction with others. By looking at how Wauja people define themselves through others, the analysis focuses on instances of interaction that occur at borders: those between the human and nonhuman, between Wauja people and members of neighboring Xinguan ethnic groups, between Amazonian Indians and non-Indians.

Second, this meeting characterized a Wauja cultural project of outreach and highlights some of the risks that Wauja people perceive in communication and exchange with the outside. On the one hand, there are good reasons to seek health care, environmental development projects, connection to indigenous spiritual and/or political causes, and the sale of Wauja art in craft or professional markets. On the other hand, as this ethnography shows, as Wauja people embark on these exchanges, they discover that they are fraught with difficulty and marked by interactional failures.

Third, the shamans’ meeting, like much in Wauja social life, was organized around ritual practice. I analyze language use in ritual settings throughout this book in order to understand how Wauja people construct relationships, and thus aspects of their own identity, with the powerful spirit-monsters, ancestors, and ethnic trading partners with whom they share their environment. What the term “ritual” means will develop as the chapters unfold, but for the time being,

it is meant to include collective action that yields connections between micro-cosmic scenes of performance and macrocosmic orders. What we recognize as ritual performance is often the result of delicate and complicated coordination of interaction among people, but it is important to remember that some ritual activity is less obviously explicitly organized. Indeed, to some degree all interaction is ritualized, but in different ways. Ritual provides a way to understand how something like talking to spirits generates frames of meaning and action that inform how Wauja people engage with outsiders in contexts (such as development meetings) that do not appear to have much to do with ritual at all. I suggest that ritual as an analytic category helps us to understand how interaction with spirits and Indian neighbors, for example, is connected to interaction with the Brazilian government, international NGOs, and museums in projects of development. Ritual is a contributing factor to relationships of development and it is also bound up with the politics of indigeneity.

One assumption that guides my analysis is that language and culture are interconnected along various scales. These include the level of grammar and semantic meaning, the level of ritual and pragmatic action, and also the level at which people pay reflexive attention to their own language use and that of others. The Upper Xingu is a great place to study questions of the relationship between language and culture, in part because the indigenous groups who live there share a cultural world constituted through myth, kinship, subsistence, politics, and economy but, by and large, all speak different languages and avoid learning the languages of their neighbors. Any anthropologist of the Upper Xingu is faced with the following question: How do ethnic groups integrate in such a system? I, like others before me, begin to answer this question by arguing that if this complex multilingual system is not integrated through shared grammatical languages, it must be integrated through shared interactional principles that are mobilized and reinforced in Upper Xinguan intergroup ritual.

Previous linguistic and anthropological research has consistently reinforced two important points about the Upper Xingu social system. First, it comprises a particular kind of multilingual area, wherein many genetically unrelated languages are found side by side, but where most people are monolingual in practice, a situation that reinforces an ideology of ethnolinguistic group distinctiveness (Basso 1973, Franchetto 2001). Second, anthropologists have shown that, despite such grammatical linguistic boundaries, the social system is actively maintained through intergroup ritual exchange (Franchetto 2001). Furthermore, ideas about how one should properly challenge, complain, demand,

or remain silent in speech are conventionally linked to how one should properly reciprocate, refuse, accept, and so on, tying linguistic behavior to social relationships as exchange relations in this cultural system. This ethnography builds on such insights to demonstrate how these central features of Upper Xinguan social life—language, ritual, and exchange—translate into Wauja engagements with outsiders, often in complicated and unexpected ways. What do the basic contours of the Upper Xinguan social system look like, and how do Wauja people fit into the system?