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CENTRO DE PESQUISA APLICADA À EDUCAÇÃO E CULTURA

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## AMONG THE TIKUNA: ART AND EDUCATION IN THE AMAZON

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# AMONG The TIKUNA

ART AND EDUCATION IN THE AMAZON — BY MARCELO LIMA

From the window of the airplane I saw the Amazon River like an enormous serpent slowly passing, gently moving across the land,

## IN THIS ISSUE:

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THE WORK OF BETTY KANO  
COMING EVENTS IN THE UIS  
VISUAL ARTS GALLERY**

cutting the forest below. The waters of the river changed colors as the plane descended towards Manaus: blue, blue-purple, purple, sepia, earth. The city appeared on the other side of the river as an island in the vast green extensions of the forest, an island of buildings, houses, roads,

and streets, with the familiar sights and forms, the hard angles of man-made constructions, the grid of streets below, and the common signs of metropolitan life: the smoke of factories, the steel arms of the port, the large transport

ships in the river.

From Manaus a smaller plane took me to the city of Tabatinga in the frontier of Brazil and Colombia. Early next morning I took the large passenger boat up the Solimões River toward the curve of the Javari River and the town of Benjamin Constant. From there, there was

another 15- or 20-minute trip down the Javari River on the small transport boat that the people of the place use as their local taxi-cab. The lands of the Tikuna Reservation are very close to

**TIKUNA continues on  
next page...**



Benjamin Constant, the town that marks the frontier between Brazil, Peru, and Colombia, deep in the heart of the Amazonian West.

Up the bank of the Javari River, you cross a strip of vegetation, walking the trail that

the daily affairs of the several Tikuna communities in the High Solimoes Region. One of their main organizations is the APTB – Associação dos Professores Tikuna Bilingues (Bilingual Tikuna Teachers Association) – headed by

After the long and arduous years of conflict (including violent ones that took the lives of many Tikunas) for the defense of their land, the Tikuna have legally secured their rights to their present territory. They now turn their efforts to

"Multiculturalism" is for the Tikuna, as well as other native peoples in Brazil and around the world, not just an "idea" or a slogan (that is, a present-day commodity in the ideological market place of global capitalism), but a pressing necessity, a real life question that directly relates to their individual and collective survival. Globalization or, more precisely (from the viewpoint of the vast majority of the peoples of the planet), subordinated integration into the new structures of the World Market, produces also the integration in people's consciousness of past and present challenges, a renewed perspective and critical look at things past, present, and future.

The Tikuna's focus on education as one of the key elements for

globalization proves that there is nothing "primitive" in the categories they employ to understand the challenges of the present-day local, national, and international realities in their interdependence. These categories were born of the centuries-old experience of "otherness," domination, and exploitation that – by aggregating memories of the past and intuitions of the future, by integrating the histories of others – produces the present-day counter-hegemonic perspective (real, no matter how tentatively or differently articulated at this time) of the future, the synthesis of many histories and realities.

The occasion of my visit was the meeting of the Tikuna teachers promoted and coordinated twice a year by the APTB with the assistance of our host in Benjamin Constant, artist Jussara Gruber, who has worked with the Tikuna for the past 20 years. Although the meeting was a professional and administrative en-



cuts the bushes inland to reach the Aldeia (native village) Fildelfia. The name itself, as one can easily guess, is a legacy of past times when American missionaries worked among the Indians.

In the new times, in the present, the Tikunas are one of the few Brazilian tribes that are self-administered, having their own organizations in charge of

the Tikuna Francisco Juliao Ferreira. The APTB is in charge of organizing, directing, and supporting the education of the Tikuna children. In fact, one of the main concerns of the Tikuna people presently is with the education of children and adults as a key to self-determination, economic self-sufficiency, and cultural survival.

maintaining and enlarging their autonomy, to improving and preserving the Tikuna culture and ways of life. They are facing the challenge that confronts native cultures all over the globe in this final period of the present century: to adapt and respond to a changing world while preserving their autonomy and cultural identities.



confronting the historical riddle and the new threats of



counter as well as a cultural and social event, it was primarily dedicated to the professional development of the Tikuna teachers with workshops and courses led by visiting professors from various educational institutions and universities in Brazil. Brazil is a vast country with a large, young population and great socioeconomic disparities among regions. These disparities are reflected in the structural deficiencies of the public system of education that is unable to serve with equal effectiveness the most needed areas and social groups. One great problem is the lack of certified teachers in many regions, resulting in people who themselves have incomplete degrees assuming the professional role of educators. These are the so called "lay teachers," the great majority of them conscientious and dedicated workers, dedicated to the communities and children they serve but struggling with enormous difficulties, ranging

from the lack of assistance and the lack of pay to the lack of basic materials and sometimes the lack of a classroom in which to teach.



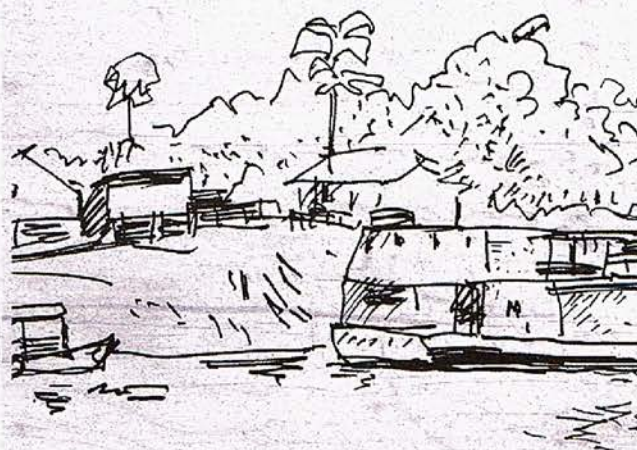
To address the professional development of those teachers, many innovative in-site educational programs have been developed by educators and specialists (both independent and university based) in collaboration with local public education offices. Programs such as the Projeto Inaja (1) in central Brazil take into account the experiences and cultural practices of local teachers and the populations they serve to promote cultural and professional development and education for participation and social change. The point is to integrate local education efforts into the national public effort, to promote the certification of practicing teachers so

they can develop professionally, to guarantee better wages, and to empower communities to create educational models adapted to their cultural specificities and develop a critical awareness of their own realities. These objectives directly relate to the Tikuna educational project.

The various courses taught this year at the Aldeia Filadelfia were organized to provide the teachers with all the elements of the official program for teacher's certification. At the same time, for some of the most experienced participant educators and specialists it was clear that to promote the mastery of new knowledge across cultures it is necessary to reformulate educational practices, taking into account the cultural tools available in the learners' context. Such a reformulated practice of education implies, in the case of native education, exchanges *between* cultures, so to speak, in which the traditional role of the educator is trans-

formed into one of co-participation in the student's development. My own experience with the Tikunas convinced me that "the master is educated by his pupils" in the sense that educational practice as a specific human relation develops in exchange and *as ex-*

The course on graphic design served as a complement to the use of the book as a cultural artifact and cultural tool explored earlier in the unit on psychology related to education taught by Brazilian psychologist and educator Elvira Souza Lima, from



**Above: Scene along the Rio Javari. Opposite page: View of the Port of the town of Benjamin Constant. Both sketches by the author.**

change. To the old question "Who educates the educator?" we can therefore answer: the student as a committed and active subject in the educational relation.

I had been invited to teach a course on graphic design and to develop a mural project with the community of teachers.

CEPAOS Research Center (Sao Paulo, Brazil), who approached the teaching of psychology from the Vygotskian notion of cultural and semiotic mediation of psychological functions. The making of books in Portuguese and in the Tikuna language served as an exploration of writing





of opportunities for all," an ideological construct aimed at diverting attention from the deep structural divisions of class in modern society, is realized in "primitive" societies by the relatively equitable distribution of social tasks and rewards which accompany the distribution of knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary for survival and for active and full membership in the society. The "educational process" of such societies aims at forming an active and full member of the social group. Relatively speaking, the individual is therefore the complete embodiment of social knowledge; he/she is equipped with all the available and necessary knowledge for contributing to material survival as well as the moral or spiritual well-being of the group. From this point of view we can observe that it is only the individual as a member of a supportive community who can be considered truly free, able to develop to his/her full

potential. In modern class-divided societies the high development of the few is paid for by the imposed underdevelopment of the many. This contradiction marks like a shadow modern culture and its products. And it marks also, in more or less conscious ways, our relationship with cultural and artistic products and practices.

As an artist and art teacher working in different educational contexts, a common response to art activities that I encounter is "I am not an artist, I cannot do it, I don't have any ability," which may express intimidation and/or a certain indifference in relation to art. Nothing could be further from the responses I encountered among the Tikunas, to whom art — that is the making of beautiful things and the telling of stories that speak to our hearts and minds about the meaning of our lives — is not a specialized activity in the modern sense but part of what is necessary to know and to do

as a participating, productive member of the community, and especially as teachers devoted to the unfolding of children's potentialities, to the community of the future.

There were aspects of the community's common cultural fund

color combinations, and a specific sense of story-telling in the unfolding of successive images.

From illustrated page to the wall, the transition was unproblematic for the teachers. In the mural workshop they dis-

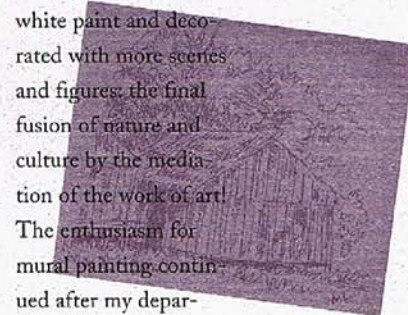
image function. The solutions varied according to the individual painters or group of painters who worked different panels: from depictions of animals and plants or fruits related to the local moieties, to mythological creatures and heroes, to panoramic creations of images of the forest. With energy and enthusiasm the work soon crossed the external wood walls of the ladies' dormitory, in the open courtyard-like space of the school building where it had begun, to include the classroom's external walls and other adjacent walls and buildings, and even the trunks of nearby trees, which were given a coat of white paint and decorated with more scenes and figures: the final fusion of nature and culture by the mediation of the work of art! The enthusiasm for mural painting continued after my departure. As other groups of teachers arrived for the continuing program of workshops, they were briefly in-



**Tikuna teachers painting a mural on the side of the schoolhouse.**

of artistic abilities that I could see in the books produced in the course: a strong sense of design in a two-dimensional surface, pattern creation and the use of line in composition, a beautiful sense of color and

played a similar mastery of design and color using common oil-based house paint colors on a much larger scale and on a different surface. Size and surface raise also in mural work the problem of space and





structed by the student-teachers in my original group and would immediately start to create their own murals, which I plan to see and to record in my next visit.

I left Benjamin Constant for Tabatinga early one afternoon. After a rainy morning the temperature was mild, the river was calm. From the "recreio" (passenger boat) I waived farewell to Jussara Gruber and my Tikuna friends in the port: Francisco Juliao, Jaime Custodio, Constantino, Deodato, Bernardo, Santo, and the others in the Aldeia: Delia, Hilda, Joao Otaviano, Edmundo, Claudionor, Jose Custodio, Adelmo, Osman, and

their fellows, too numerous to name, to whom I owe a debt of hospitality and friendship. Their generosity, friendliness, and kind attitudes are marked traits of their personalities and behavior. One can only admire a culture that, in spite of centuries of hardships



and suffering, has succeeded in developing those individual characteristics. The Tikuna of today, with their long history of contact with civilization, are different in many ways from the Tikuna of yesterday. However, for a people to oppose and survive the enormous pressures for

submission, adaptation or assimilation (such as the Tikuna and other native peoples have faced and still face today), to resist injury and insult, the diseases of civilization and the crimes committed against native peoples, it is necessary that in one's own life and in the life of the community (that is, in its history), a basic core of identity be experienced and understood as the condition that separates human life from the inhuman, a "center" or "source" of meanings, feelings, and actions that give form and purpose to experience, that give expression to the experience of the self, and in so doing resists the dehumanization of man by man.

In the "recreio" on the center of the Solimoes River the vastness of the waters mirrored the vastness of the sky and the enormous extensions of the forest. All was humid and vigorous and calm. I saw the beauty of the land reflected in the faces of the multiracial peoples of the Amazon as they went on with their daily affairs. They had the same calm vigor, the patience of the forest and the river reflecting the composure of those who have faced all the storms and know their own strength. They point to the future of this planet in the unity of our multiple histories reflected in their very lives and beings. The river is there today as

in the past, the forest is there and also the Tikunas. Which is enough motive for hope.

*My trip to the High Solimoes Region was partially funded by a Faculty Summer Research Award from UIS. The materials for my course were provided by CEPAOS (Brazil).*

*(1) For a discussion on Projeto Inaja and the methodological issues of culturally based educational practices see: Souza Lima, Elvira and Gazzetta, Marleneusa, "From Lay Teachers to University Students: The path to empowerment through culturally based pedagogy." — Anthropology and Education Quarterly, Volume 25, No. 3, September 1994.*

All photos and sketches by the author.



## Visual Arts Gallery

November 12-29, 1996  
**Reflections of Black Illinois**  
Reception: November 12, 5:30-7:30

December 3-13, 1996  
**Ruthann Mazrim — Shibori**  
Reception: December 3, 5:30-7:30

January 14-24, 1997  
**Three UIS Artists**  
Reception: January 21, 5:30-7:30

January 28 - February 14, 1997  
**Holly Rittenhouse**  
Reception: January 28, 5:30-7:30  
Gallery Talk: January 28, 6:30-7:00

February 18-March 7, 1997  
**Beyond Women's Work**  
Reception: February 18, 5:30-7:00

March 17-19, 1997  
**Silent Auction Fund Raiser**  
Reception and Final Bidding: Wednesday, March 19, 1997

March 25-April 11, 1997  
**Senior Portfolio Exhibit**

April 21- May 9, 1997  
**Juried Student Exhibit**



## BETTY KANO'S



## WEAVES SPIRITUALITY WITH POLITICS

by *Sheila Nopper* The profound impact that Cuba has had in the life and art of Betty Kano, whose exhibit/installation *TRANSFORMATIONS* was displayed in the Visual Arts Gallery at UIS during January and February, cannot be ignored. It began in the early 1980s in San Francisco. While organizing "Art Against Apartheid" as part of the effort to free

Nelson Mandela, Betty decided to do something about the connections to the apartheid she witnessed in San Francisco. This led her to work with homeless people and to investigate more thoroughly the Cuban situation "because of its policies on shelter," she says. With minimal first-hand information about Cuba available in the U.S. she felt compelled to go there. What she saw was "a very different society. Access to housing, food, education and health care makes a *huge* difference; people are relieved of a lot of stress."

Another "eyeopener" Betty experienced in Cuba was the predominance of the practice of the Yoruba religion. Known in Cuba as Santería, this religion—one of the oldest in the world—has its roots in Nigeria. Based in earth divination, it emphasizes the importance of maintaining a physical, spiritual, and emotional connection with the earth. "You feel it; it's alive!" she says with passion. Through her own initiation into the faith, Betty learned of the power and wisdom that can be gained through patience, perseverance, and observing with all your senses what is going on around you. "Certain patterns emerge in nature that show you what is important; that's the basis of divination," she says, implying that you have to be open to receive the information, surrender yourself to the process and let it flow. She has now integrated the concept of impermanence into her work. "You can't always say what [the painting is] going to be. You might have an idea and when you start painting, it changes."

Moreover, though she previously used huge awkward canvases, although the size of her work varies, her current paintings are all easily packed and transported. "I started utilizing materials from nature that reflect impermanence, reflecting time as a process." And the presentation of her work also changed. "I don't like frames, glass, molding, and all of that heavy stuff. I like people to be able to experience the painting, the immediate situation, more freshly, rather than through these devices, which are basically separators or filters."

The interweaving of her spirituality with her politics is evident in

"Che's Revolution," where a cloth portrait of the Cuban revolutionary Che Guevara hangs above a painting with the brilliant yellow, green, and black colors of the ANC. "When there's repression, colors become potent," she says, "so these colors reflect my relationship to that political activity." On either side of the painting a seed pod from a eucalyptus tree is hung horizontally, like open arms as if to welcome the viewer. Red clay earth from Springfield rises up from the baseboard into the blended shades of reddish-brown-painted walls. On the floor below, there are some branches. At the opening when Betty spoke of her inspiration and paraphrased Che Guevara, saying, "At the risk of sounding utterly ridiculous, the main point of the revolution is an act of love," a man from the audience shouted sarcastically, "The Bolsheviks loved their fellow Russians didn't they?" Betty paused a moment and replied, "I'm not really able to talk much about the Bolsheviks but I think that what Che Guevara said needs to be looked at as the idea that it represents—and the possibilities for that idea."

A more subtle way that her Cuban experience permeates her art is in "Grandmother's Mirror," which, Betty says, "is a mirror for yourself." An old mirror she received from her grandmother who died at 98, hangs above a painting with two sea grape leaves from Cuba attached to it. "In Yoruba there is an important emphasis placed on ancestors, who are seen as intermediaries between deities and human life," she explains. If you are open to hear their voices, "the ancestors will guide you in your life [and offer] a way to prepare for the future. They may be family role models, ancestors from your culture, or worldly ancestors; recognizing and acknowledging them helps them to become more present in your life."

Politics in Art, and Politics and Art are pervasive. Politics is, after all, about our (in)actions, ways of expressing who we are and what is important to us. Art, like anything else, reflects whether we critique or condone the status quo. All art is political, even though it's the art that challenges the status quo that's referred to as politi-

*TRANSFORMATIONS continues on next page...*



cal. So it's interesting that Betty's opening was, perhaps inadvertently, scheduled to coincide with the opening at the Illinois State Museum of "Conservation By Design," an exhibit by woodworkers to ostensibly demonstrate ways we can better manage and use wood products and consequently sustain the forests from which they are derived. While many people in the community who frequent openings at the Visual Arts Gallery chose instead to attend this seemingly environmentally responsible art show, it is ironic that this exhibit was sponsored by the World Bank. The World Bank is one of the primary institutions responsible for the extensive destruction of "Third World" rainforests—and the potential genocide of the indigenous people who depend on them for survival.

When asked how she felt about the double booking, Betty responded, "It happens all the time." While her 25 years of work is highly regarded within the art community, she has been perceived by the mainstream art world as a marginalized Japanese American

artist. Having been a cultural activist for many more years, however, she recognizes this as just part of the struggle that will one day, hopefully, transform.

Revealing her commitment to continue the struggle with her own transformation, Betty concludes, "I think as an artist you're really more of a messenger. It's not just that ideas come from me; I'm a conduit and I want to make myself resistance-free as a conduit."

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Marcelo Lima

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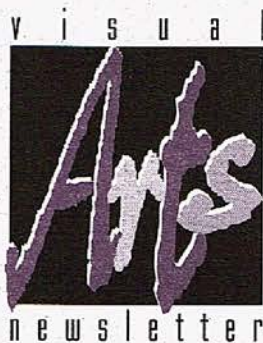
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