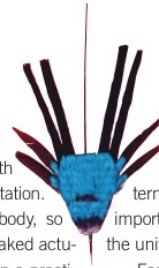


*The animals who attended the first Xoroviko festival took on human form but still could not hide their ugliness until they donned costumes painted with abstract animal designs and adorned themselves like the species they represented. The bird people who were truly beautiful were those who had human souls. But they did not become proper birds until they bathed in a river of blood and someone bespelled them. As they slowly sprouted wings and tails, they got caught in a rainstorm that changed their colours; they then experimented with each other's feathers until they achieved a pleasing appearance. WAIWAI MYTH*



The use of feathers, common to all native South American peoples, is a social and cultural manifestation. Feathers transform a naked body into a social body, so much so that in some dialects the word for being naked actually stems from the words 'without feathers'. But, on a practical level, what are the reasons for donning this colourful plumage? Kenneth M. Kensinger, in his essay 'Why Feathers?' proposes four major reasons: feathers are beautiful; they provide the wearer with an identity; they permit the wearer to emulate physical and behavioural aspects of their animal source; and they give spiritual strength and protection.

Woven into caps and diadems, headdresses, earrings, armbands, hairpins, lip ornaments and many other forms, feathers are the Indians most important source of colour. The two fundamental colours of the Bororo tribe of Brazil are black and red. Black represents death and the spiritual realm while red symbolises life, fertility and the physical realm. Black feathers from the Harpy Eagle are used for high-ranking members of society, while the red macaw plumes mixed with black are for the lower the social rank. The feathers function like an identity card: they are specific to position, family and tribe, not unlike the tartans of Scottish clans. The Bororo believe that they are essentially red and green macaws themselves, and the rituals trace the similarities between bird and man.

Birds are thought to be messengers between the earth and the heavens where spirits and ancestors of shamanic costume and rites. When there is little sun, the shaman might offer a diadem of radiant yellow toucan feathers and armbands of fiery red macaw feathers, expounding 'Behold sun, here are your adornments so you may shine'.

The most brilliant and iridescent of feathers are reserved for shamans, and it is the flight feathers of the wing and tail that are the most prized, allowing shamans to be transported into other realms. Indeed, when creating an ornament, the

placement of these feathers must follow the same pattern as on the bird's body. Colour harmony is of great importance, as is symmetry, which reflects the native view of the universe.

Feathers are obtained from a small number of bird species, only about 1.6% of the total species in South America. Birds, such as Doves and Curassows, are hunted for their meat and the feathers are plucked into the bargain. Others, such as Harpy Eagles and Vultures, are hunted for their feathers only. Tribes such as the Waiwai, nurture and raise birds as they would children, naming them in elaborate ceremonies and spoiling them with delicacies. Only a few feathers are harvested at a time, so as not to harm the animal.

Blue feathers are taken from Dacnis, turquoise from Honeycreepers, reds from Scarlet Macaws, yellows from Toucans and patterned feathers from Curassows. The indigenous people also attempt to create new colours. They carry out a process called 'tapirage' on domesticated birds. They de-feather parts of a bird, for example a green parrot, and cover its body with the blood of a toad. The new feathers grow back in brilliant shades of yellow or red.

These feathery expressions of creativity and spirituality are still found in South America, but how long will this last? Tribespeople trade their ornaments for Western goods – outboard motors, guns and radios – and are rapidly stripped of their fortune. Increased demand places stress on bird populations already reduced due to deforestation. Though most traded ornaments are 'made for export', representing the style of a people but quite different from what they would make for themselves, it may not be long before feathered ornaments have become the stuff of legend. ●●● Catherine V. Howard

From 'Fragments of the Heavens' The Gift of Birds, published by the University of Pennsylvania, 1991

please note that most of the feathered items were made to be worn by men