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LABRETS: PIERCING AND STRETCHING ON
THE NORTHWEST COAST AND IN AMAZONIA

Abstract

This article examines the practice of piercing and stretching the lip in order to accommodate a labret in two regions: the North American Northwest Coast (with historical examples from Tlingit groups) and lowland South America (utilizing ethnographic writings on Suya and Kayapo communities). Drawing on the recent 'sensorial turn' within anthropology, I suggest an approach which goes beyond considerations of the symbolism of body ornaments and analyses how the infliction of pain they involve can be manipulated to serve processes of social maturation and instil values such as the importance of flamboyant oratory. Labrets are seen here as efficacious devices for producing different kinds of social bodies.

Keywords: *body ornaments; Northwest Coast; Suya; Kayapo; Tlingit; sensorial anthropology.*

ADORNOS LABIALES: PERFORACIÓN Y ESTIRAMIENTO EN LA
COSTA NOROESTE Y EN LA AMAZONIA

Resumen

Este artículo examina la práctica de perforar y estirar el labio con el fin de acomodar un adorno labial en dos regiones: la Costa Noroeste de Norteamérica (con ejemplos históricos de los grupos tlingit) y las tierras bajas de Suramérica (utilizando etnografías de los suya y kayapó). Con base en el reciente "giro sensorial" en antropología, se propone una aproximación que va más allá de las consideraciones simbólicas de los ornamentos corporales y analiza cómo el dolor causado por esos ornamentos puede ser manipulado para servir a procesos de maduración social e impartir valores tales como la importancia de la oratoria fastuosa. Los adornos labiales son vistos aquí como artefactos eficaces para producir diferentes clases de cuerpos sociales.

Palabras clave: *ornamentos corporales; costa noroeste de Norteamérica; suya; kayapó; tlingit; antropología sensorial.*

The practice of piercing the lower lip and stretching it to accommodate a plate or plug occurs with 'impressive frequency in archaeological and ethnographic contexts throughout the Americas' (Rubin 1988: 179)—notably in the Northwest Coast region of North America, Mesoamerica, and parts of lowland South America. Early accounts by Europeans who encountered labret-wearers on the Northwest Coast are almost universally filled with disgust, speaking of their barbarity, ugliness and impracticality (Jonaitis 1988: 191;

Lisianksi in Dall 1884: 87). Twentieth-century popular representations of lip-plug wearers in the Brazilian Amazon and in certain African contexts have often been characterized by a certain voyeuristic and ghoulish fascination, aptly summed up by the title of a 1962 *National Geographic* article, 'Brazil's big-lipped Indians' (Schultz 1962). David Turton (2004: 5) has described the encounters between Ethiopian Mursi women and the tourists who come to ogle and take photographs of their large lip plates—a 'depressing and disturbing sight' for the anthropologist-observer.

By contrast, the small amount of recent scholarly work discussing lip plugs (e.g. Jonaitis 1988; Seeger 1975; Turner 1980) has tended to focus on the *meaning* attributed to them in specific cultural contexts. These authors have provided valuable insights regarding the connection of lip plugs with ideas about speech, sociality, food and marriage. However, what I would like to propose here is that by restricting ourselves to the elucidation of the labret's place within a particular 'symbol system' (Seeger 1975: 211), we miss something important. The evident pain and impracticality, which shocked early European visitors to the Northwest Coast—and made 20th-century lip plug wearers into icons of exoticism in global visual media—may be pivotal to an understanding of how these ornaments produce change in their wearers. I suggest that through the medium of socially structured pain and other sensations, labrets effect a transformation in embodied experience and a shift in *habitus* (in Mauss' 1935 sense). This capacity can be harnessed in multiple ways, for example in the instilment of values such as the importance of eloquent oration, in gendering processes and in life cycle rites to transfer persons from one social state to another.

This article draws on theory from the emerging 'sensorial turn' within anthropology (e.g. Howes 2004; Hsu 2005, 2008) and the paradigm of embodiment (Csordas 1990, 1994; Jackson 1989; Sharma 2007). Critiquing existing work on the body which treats it as a mere 'object or theme of analysis', Csordas has called for the recognition of embodiment as the 'existential ground of culture and self' (Csordas 1994: 4). With this in mind, I submit that through renewed attention to the pain and stretching sensations which accompany labret-wear, the possibility emerges of understanding these and other body ornaments from the perspective of the embodied subject. Elisabeth Hsu's work, discussed below, on acute pain infliction in therapeutic procedures (Hsu 2005) has been particularly stimulating in this respect.

Although I utilise ethno-historical material from the Pacific Northwest Coast (Dall 1966 [1884]; Jonaitis 1988; LaSalle 2008) to draw out certain aspects of lip plug use, my focus is on the Gê-speaking Suya and Kayapo people of Central Brazil. Until the practice declined around the mid-20th century, adult males in both these societies wore wooden plugs in their lower lips (Turner 1980, 1991; Seeger 1975, 1981).¹ This paper is not based on original ethnography and as such must remain essentially speculative; rather than presenting new data, I attempt to marry existing ethnographic and ethno-historical writings on lip plugs in the Americas (Jonaitis 1988; Seeger 1975, 1981; Turner 1969, 1971, 1980) with current theory in order to suggest future directions for the study of body ornamentation.

Below, I first describe the practice of ‘labretifery’ (Dall 1966: 77) among the mid-20th century Suya and Kayapo and the pre-20th-century Tlingit. Accepting Seeger’s (1975: 212) suggestion that lip ornaments are associated with the cultural elaboration of orality, I then move on to think about the labret as experienced by its wearer over the process of piercing, insertion and continual stretching. What are we to make of these painful and permanent interventions on the body? I suggest that a common structure of *separation* and subsequent *incorporation* is discernible on multiple levels, i.e. both physiologically and socially.

Lip discs in Amazonia

Among the Suya of northern Mato Grosso, Brazil, both men and women formerly wore large wooden discs or rolled palm-leaf spirals painted with white clay in their ears (Seeger 1975: 212). The incision was made at the first sign of sexual activity (Ibid.: 218), and the adolescent Suya proceeded to insert larger and larger pieces of wood into the perforation (Seeger 1981: 159). Only the men wore the large, elliptical, wooden lip discs, however (Seeger 1975: 212), which rested directly against the lower teeth and gums (Seeger 1981: 81). These discs were painted bright red on the top and sides, using *urucum* (a pigment made from the seeds of the *Bixa orellana* shrub). The underside was left unpainted save for a small circular design called the *ngroro*, which represented the Pleiades constellation and was done with purple-black pigment from the fruit of the *Genipa americana* (Seeger 1975:

212, 1981: 159). Men never appeared in public without their lip discs and when there was an 'important social event', they would spread more *urucum* pigment on them and congregate in the village plaza (Seeger 1981: 82). On ritual occasions, new, elaborately decorated lip and ear discs were sometimes made and inserted.

Lip piercing happened later in the life course than ear piercing. When a boy was deemed to be 'big', usually in late adolescence, his lip was pierced with a sharpened bone (Seeger 1981: 158-9). The boy continued to live in his mother's house until the following year, when he was initiated into the men's house. In the meantime, he made larger and larger lip discs to wear. When the disc was big enough to paint the *ngro* on the bottom, he would feel 'ashamed (*whiasàm*)' to stay in his mother's house (Ibid.: 159) and initiation would take place. He became a *sikwenduyi*—the name given to young men in the transitional age grade—and thereafter spent his time in the men's house, making lip discs and singing (Ibid.: 161).

The Northern Kayapo studied by Terence Turner also wore lip and ear ornaments, though by the time of Turner's arrival in 1962, 'most men had removed their lip plugs' (Turner 1991: 289). Unlike the Suyá, the Kayapo pierced their children's ears as infants and inserted reddened wooden plugs for them (Turner 1995: 153). After weaning, these were replaced by decorated loops of cotton, which both sexes continued to wear throughout life. Male children also had their lips pierced before weaning, but the hole was left small until after initiation (Turner 1995: 153, 1980: 120; Vidal and Verswijver 1992: 38). After leaving their mothers' houses for the men's house in the plaza, boys began to stretch their lips, just as Suyá boys did, inserting wooden pins until the 'saucerlike' ornament of a mature Kayapo man could be accommodated (Turner 1969: 57). The process continued throughout early adulthood, accelerating when a man progressed to the age grade known as 'fathers-of-many-children' (Turner 1980: 121).

Labrets on the Northwest Coast

Before the arrival of European travellers, missionaries and traders on the northern Pacific coast, labret-use was a widespread cultural trait and had been practiced for over 5000 years (Cybulski 1991: 7 in LaSalle 2008: 7). I

focus on the Tlingit here, but labrets were also found among the Tsimshian, Haida, Aleut and Alaskan Eskimo (Jonaitis 1988: 204, n. 3). The ornaments were made in a variety of shapes (LaSalle 2008: 22) and of materials including stone (soapstone, slate, steatite), bone and wood. They were sometimes inlaid with shell or copper (Ibid.: 23-4).

In contrast to labret-use among the Suyu and Kayapo, in the early historic period, Tlingit women were the labret wearers. This appears to have been linked to coming-of-age and the prospect of marriage: most 18th-19th century writings by Europeans who encountered the Tlingit agree that a girl's lip was initially cut following her first menstruation, and that it signified her marriageability (Jonaitis 1988: 191). The piercing formed part of a lengthy rite of passage from asexual childhood to sexual maturity. The girl was first isolated from her family and made to sit as still as possible in a dark hut for up to a year (Ibid.: 196). At the start of her seclusion, a woman from the moiety of her future husband—preferably her father's sister in this matrilineal society—cut a slit into her lower lip and inserted a small pin. There followed a period of fasting and abstention even from drinking water, and finally the young woman was 'reborn' from the hut, and her first real labret was inserted at a 'sumptuous feast' (Ibid.: 191).

Labrets and orality

What does the practice of piercing and stretching the lip among the Tlingit, Suyu and Kayapo have in common? As well as their instrumental role in social maturation, which I discuss below, I argue that lip plugs have been associated in both Amazonian and Northwest Coast contexts with the cultural elaboration of the mouth, speaking and/or eating. Seeger has convincingly demonstrated a link between the ear spools and lip discs common among Suyu until recently and the importance, respectively, of hearing and speaking as 'eminently social faculties' (Seeger 1981: 83). 'Hearing'—*kumba* or *mbai*—has a much broader meaning in the Suyu language than in English (Seeger 1975: 213). It is effectively indistinguishable from 'understanding' and 'knowing', and from following Suyu stipulations for moral behaviour—things required of both adult men and women. Public speaking or 'exhortation', however, is chiefly the prerogative of mature men. Suyu speech is divided

into an everyday variety, called *kaperni*, and ‘plaza speech’, *ngaihogo kaperni*, spoken only by adult men (Seeger 1975: 214). For the Suyá, the ‘height of oral expression’ is singing, and they define themselves as a group partially through their possession of *akia*, high-pitched individual songs sung only by men (Ibid.: 215).

It is this identification of hearing with good moral conduct, and songs and forceful public oration with masculine sociality, which explains the gendered distribution of Suyá ear and lip ornaments. Both men and women should *añi-mbai bechi*, ‘hear-understand-know well’, so they both traditionally pierced and stretched their earlobes to accommodate a plug. However, public speaking and singing are male privileges and duties: only mature men’s mouths are ornamented with a lip disc. A similar situation obtains among the Kayapo. Turner (1980: 120) discusses their ear and lip plugs as means of the ‘socialisation [...] of the faculties of understanding and active self-expression’—i.e. hearing and speaking (Ibid.: 121). For the Kayapo, as for the Suyá, ‘public speaking, in an ornate and blustering style, is the most characteristic attribute of senior manhood’, and the largest lip-discs were in the past worn by the most senior men, ‘fathers-of-many-children’ (Ibid.: 121).

Moving north to the historical Tlingit, Jonaitis (1988: 193) has also argued that their labrets reflected ‘a general emphasis [...] on orality’, which is also visible in their art and mythology. As for the Suyá and Kayapo, speech was certainly a component of this: the Pitt Rivers Museum’s page on Haida labrets notes that women’s speech had the power to ‘mediate or agitate relations’ between clans of different moieties (The Pitt Rivers Museum 2011). Both Haida and Tlingit societies were matrilineal but virilocal, giving women an intermediate social position: they were physically located with their opposite-moiety husbands, yet still bound to their old clan through matrilineal ties. The labret may have been a public expression of the danger potentially attached to the speech of married women, perhaps a physical reminder to the wearer to think carefully before speaking. However, Jonaitis’ analysis highlights a theme, which is not explored in the literature on Gê-speaking lip disc wearers: the importance of eating. During the pubescent girl’s seclusion, she abstained from both food and drink, and by the time of her emergence, she was weak and unsteady on her legs (Jonaitis 1988: 196). A great feast to celebrate her imminent marriage, at which a larger ornament was inserted into the new orifice, followed this. At present, it is unclear what the precise conceptual relationship was between female labrets and food, but we can say that in

comparison to the Suyá and Kayapo, historical Northwest Coast piercing and stretching processes were more closely bound up with a structure of fasting and feasting; hunger and its satisfaction.

In these cases at least, Seeger's (1975: 221) rather tentative suggestion that 'the alteration of the lip may often have something to do with the importance of speech' seems vindicated. However, what is the nature of the relationship between ideas about speech and eating and the physical, painful modification of the lip? What the writers discussed above are doing is demonstrating a *symbolic* connection, something evident even from the titles of their articles: Jonaitis speaks of the 'symbolism' of Tlingit lip plugs, Turner (1969, 1971) repeatedly refers to the 'language' of Kayapo body adornment, and Seeger frames his 1975 article as a foray into the 'meaning' of Suyá body ornaments. The approach typifies a quasi-linguistic, structuralist conception of culture, in which things like labrets appear as word-like signs within the broader 'text' to be interpreted by the anthropologist.

The inadequacies of this view become especially apparent, I would argue, when it comes to things like labrets—ornaments which are inserted painfully into the body and which modify it permanently. As Michael Jackson (1989: 122) has forcefully argued, 'the subjugation of the bodily to the semantic is empirically untenable'. Below, I suggest that labrets (and, by extension, other body ornaments) do not merely 'symbolise' a change in social status or the development of certain faculties, but work to bring those changes about. These thoughts resonate with Viveiros de Castro's assertion that for the Yawalapiti of the Upper Xingu, bodily transformations and shifts in social status are 'one and the same thing' (1979: 40-41, my translation).

Even within Seeger's article, there are hints of a causal connection between ear plugs and hearing-understanding-knowing well; lip plugs and powerful masculine oration. The Suyá themselves apparently say that the ear is pierced 'so *that* people will "hear-understand-know"' (Seeger 1975: 217, my emphasis). However, on the next page, Seeger returns to a semiotic view of culture, maintaining that the ornaments are 'physical representations of the conceptual elaboration' (218). Likewise, in Turner's later writings on Kayapo body adornment, he concedes that there is a 'performative' as well as a 'symbolic' aspect to the piercing and stretching of the lip and ear (1995: 154). He sees the plugs as 'mimetic devices for appropriating, activating, and enlarging the bodily powers of hearing and speaking'. This is a welcome change, but what is still missing is a consideration of sensory experience:

where is the room for the body as experienced internally? In the following section, I consider the importance of pain and other sensations for the efficacy of labrets among the Suya, Kayapo and historical Tlingit.

Painful ornaments

Santos-Granero (2005: 147) notes that pain infliction was, and in some cases still is, very common in connection with initiation rites across Amazonia. By way of ethnographic examples, he recites a string of monographs, many of which date from the middle of the last century (e.g. Gregor 1977; Huxley 1956; Murphy and Quain 1966; Nimuendajú 1939). We learn that among the Urubu (also known as the Ka'apor) of Northeast Brazil, the ritual following a girl's first menstruation required her to endure the bites of ants until they became 'too weak to bite her any more' (Huxley 1956: 155). Urubu men who had killed in battle induced their companions to scratch their bodies with sharp dogfish teeth (Huxley 1956: 147). Several decades later, among the Mehinaku of the Upper Xingu, Thomas Gregor witnessed the use of a gourd set with dogfish teeth for such purposes as disciplining children, treating illness and increasing the muscular strength of boys in ritual seclusion (Gregor 1977: 288). Although McCallum (1996: 349) does refer to the blood-letting, scarification and treatment with emetics often endured by adolescents in seclusion in the Upper Xingu—she sees them as 'part of the process of growing a strong, skilful and beautiful adult'—there is a general lack of recent anthropological attention to pain in Amazonia.

Undoubtedly the most famous contribution to the subject is Pierre Clastres' essay 'Of Torture in Primitive Societies' (1977 [1974]). Clastres argues that in stateless and egalitarian societies, the pain inflicted during initiation rites is a way of 'laying hold of the body' (1977: 151) and *inscribing* society's 'law' onto the bodies of its members. It teaches them that '*you are worth no more than anyone else; you are worth no less than anyone else*' (Ibid., emphasis in original). Santos-Granero (2005) has taken issue with Clastres' assumption that Amerindian ritual torture is always an 'inclusionary mechanism at the service of social integration' (Santos-Granero 2005: 419), giving three historical examples of 'slaving societies' that marked their captives in order to permanently set them apart as inferior. However, I would like to focus instead on Clastres use of the idiom of *writing*. Familiar from the work of

Foucault (e.g. 1977 [1975]), ‘inscription’ as a model of the social control of individuals can be criticised for construing the body as a passive surface and neglecting sensory experience. I do not think Clastres’ discussion of pain adequately accounts for the transformative effects of painful initiation rites and modifications such as the piercing and stretching of the flesh. As Csordas (1994: 12) asks, ‘what about the body as a function of being-in-the-world?’.

It is useful to turn to current medical anthropology here, which places embodied experience at the forefront of its enquiries into sickness and healing. Elisabeth Hsu’s 2005 article ‘Acute Pain Infliction as Therapy’ uses her ‘participant experience’ at the Yunnan Traditional Chinese Medicine Centre, China (Hsu 2005: 79) in order to explore how pain can be therapeutic in Chinese acupuncture and in other contexts. She rejects the usual biomedical explanation of ‘counter-irritation’—the idea that pain infliction may distract a patient from their original affliction and lessen their suffering—and looks to the ethnography for clues (Ibid.: 81-2). For instance, Robert Desjarlais (1996) describes a healing ritual among the Yolmo of Nepal in which a shaman treats a woman for soul loss. Through a ‘cacophony’ of ‘music, taste, sight, touch, and wild, tactile images’, Desjarlais argues that he ‘activates’ the woman’s senses and brings about a state of intense embodied attentiveness (cf. Csordas 1993) that she experiences as the restoration of her lost spirit. He dubs this state ‘presence’. Hsu argues that acute pain is particularly effective at bringing about ‘presence’, a state which ‘can be understood as an alertness that opens up the patient to a potentially positive input from the social environment’ (Hsu 2005: 84). It is this ‘embodied experience of sociality’, which may have a curative effect (Ibid.: 78).

How can the insights of Desjarlais and Hsu be applied to the practice of piercing and stretching the lip in Amazonia and on the Northwest Coast? I would suggest that the pain caused by the initial piercing of the lip—tissue damage which, to speak in biomedical language, will typically cause ‘increased muscle tension’, ‘an increase in pulse rate’, ‘palmar and plantar sweating and escape behaviour’ (Sternbach 1984: 174 in Hsu 2005: 91)—momentarily transforms the subject’s sensory world and causes ‘presence’. In this state, the Suya boy or Tlingit girl is receptive to the inculcation of new inclinations and ideas.² In the context of labrets, this means that the cultural rationales given for piercing (to produce eloquent speech, to make the wearer into an adult man or woman, and so on) can be experienced corporeally whilst in this heightened state. This process has been described by Janice Boddy for female

circumcision rites in Northern Sudan: ‘through this operation and other procedures involving pain or trauma, appropriate feminine dispositions are being inculcated in young girls’ (Boddy 1989: 57). The rite simultaneously transforms their bodies and their ‘mental inclinations’—the two are in fact inseparable. Likewise, I suggest that for the Suya adolescent (for example), having his lip pierced and stretched does more than signify his intended transformation into a mature man who orates and sings as he should—it is instrumental in causing those changes in him.

Additionally, we should not forget that wearing a labret requires not only a single piercing event, but a drawn-out process of progressively widening the orifice to accommodate a plug or plate. The receptors responsible for the sensation of ‘stretch’ are called muscle spindles, and are found lying parallel to muscle fibres (Wells 1971: 164). The lip plug, forcing apart the flesh from its position beneath the mouth, would stimulate both this stretching sensation and twinges of pain due to the tissue damage. *Urban Piercings*, the website of a piercing studio based in Reading, U.K., describes the feeling as a ‘hot stinging sensation’ (UrbanPiercings 2008). Thus, though the wearer may not be in a permanent state of ‘presence’, the gradual transformation of his or her face is constantly perceptible and serves to further instil the culturally contingent values associated with the use of labrets.

Though neither Turner nor Seeger discuss the importance of pain in the modification of boys’ lips, Aldona Jonaitis does devote a small section of her essay to the subject (1988: 197-8), lamenting the lack of historical material on how Northwest Coast women ‘viewed the painful process of piercing’ (Ibid.: 205, n. 15). The point at which I would depart from her analysis would be when she interprets the act of piercing and filling the hole with a hard object as ‘a manifestation of psychosexual symbolism’ referring to the future consummation of the girl’s marriage. It may well be that piercing the lip and taking a wife’s virginity had some resonance with each other—both in terms of sensory experience and of the general structure of conflated sex/aggression perpetrated by the girl’s affines (Ibid.: 197); however, I would question why we need to abstract from the painful experience itself by analysing it in terms of symbolism. Talal Asad (1983: 239) has criticised Geertz’s (1973) view of culture as a system of symbols used by people to communicate ‘about’ life—he claims that it results in a ‘distanced spectator-role’ for the actors in our analyses. This critique could certainly be levelled here at Jonaitis—by reducing the very corporeal, very ‘present’ experience of pain to just another

sort of symbol, she misses the mechanism through which the pubescent Tlingit girl was transformed into a wife and potential mother.

I would argue that the seclusion, darkness, fasting, and the piercing and insertion of the labret produced persistent changes in the girl's embodied experience and initiated her into the 'complex system of alliances, hostilities, and exchanges' that characterised Tlingit inter-moiety relations. We need to take the rite of passage as a whole—its unfolding process as bodily and emotionally felt by the girl—in order to understand the efficacy, rather than mere symbolism, of the labret. Nevertheless, Jonaitis' discussion of the tensions that structured Tlingit society—emerging from the conjunction of moiety organization, virilocal marriage and matrilineally reckoned descent (1988: 193-4)—lead me to my next point. I would like to explore what appears to be a common structure wherever the labret is worn: *separation* followed by *incorporation*, in multiple senses of those terms.

Separation, incorporation and transformation

Much of the discussion of pain above could equally be applied to other forms of body modification—scarification or tattooing, for instance. I would like to suggest here that the practice of piercing and stretching to accommodate a lip (or ear) plug constitutes a particularly powerful component of rites of passage involving social movement, a structure of separation and subsequent incorporation. Van Gennep's cross-cultural theory of rites of passage—that they can be broken down into the phases or sub-rites of 'separation', 'transition' and 'incorporation' (van Gennep 1960 [1909]: 11)—is well-known and relatively uncontroversial. Van Gennep himself discusses the widespread occurrence of 'mutilation' in initiation rites and its joint effect of separation from the 'common mass of humanity' and incorporation into a 'defined group' (Ibid.: 72). However, wherever labrets are worn, I want to stress that this process is *bodily felt*, through the painful parting of the lip flesh and the gradual incorporation of the ornament into the wearer's face as their skin heals, stretches and grows around a previously 'foreign' object.

Seeger (1981: 147) has characterised Suya rites of passage—from birth until marriage—as focussed around the 'attenuation' of the intense ties that bind the 'corporeal group, the "really kinsmen" (*kwoi-kumeni*)'. In short, these rites transfer boys from their natal household into uxrilocal marriage (Ibid.: 148),

via the men's house in the plaza. In the period of transition from *ngàtu* (a pubescent boy who still sleeps in his mother's house but spends his time playing and imitating adult men) to *sikwenduyi* (a young man who lives in the men's house and spends his time learning songs and making lip discs) (Seeger 1981: 160), the lip disc was instrumental, simultaneously separating the boy from his kin and incorporating him into the community of adult men. Seeger relates the story of Bentugarürü, a Suyu man who entered the men's house before the decline of lip-plug use and complete initiation ceremonies: Bentugarürü had his ears pierced when pubescent, then continued living in his mother's house until the age of about seventeen. Then his lip was pierced with a sharpened deer legbone, at which point 'his parents and sister cried' (Seeger 1981: 159). The intimate correspondence between the pain of the piercing and the pain of the imminent separation of the boy from his natal family is striking here, and the state of 'presence' (Desjarlais 1996; Hsu 2005) brought about by the sharp pain must surely have intensified the boy's emotional experience of his family's grief. Bentugarürü then spent his time making larger and larger dip discs, and when he could paint the *ngororo* (Pleiades) design on the underside, men came from the men's house to 'bring him out' (Seeger 1981: 159-60). At this stage, the men referred to Bentugarürü as a 'companion of ours' (Ibid.: 159). His social incorporation into their group was also physically enacted: the 'bravest, strongest' men chewed some food and put it in the initiate's mouth (Ibid.: 160): an example of the importance of sharing substances in the making of similar bodies in Amazonia (Vilaça 2002: 342).

Among the historical Tlingit, the insertion of the labret into a girl's mouth also accompanied a social passage: the ornament signalled her marriageability and nobility, and ideally she would be married off to an opposite-moiety man soon after emerging from ritual seclusion (Jonaitis 1988: 194-6). Separated from her natal home like the Suyu boy, she was incorporated into a new household (though only partially, given the persistence of matrilineal ties to her old clan) and a new role as wife and mother. Other rites of separation (e.g. the removal from her friends and family to a dark, isolated room) and incorporation (e.g. communal feasting) were undoubtedly important, but the modification of the lower face was the most immediate, permanent and visceral: a painful and strange bodily experience of the process of separation and incorporation. Significantly, among Suyu and Kayapo, where men traditionally moved in a system of uxorilocal or neolocal marriage, they were the lip-plug wearers. For the virilocal Tlingit, the reverse was true.

As adolescents in these three societies entered their new homes, so too was the ornament in their lips becoming incorporated (in the most literal sense) into their bodies. This had transformative effects on their 'habitus' (Mauss 1935), the constellation of bodily proclivities and sensations which is constructed differently according to gender, age, status, and so on. As mentioned above, Europeans who encountered the labret frequently commented on their impracticality, on the difficulties produced for activities such as speaking, eating and even walking. An early visitor to the Pacific Northwest Coast, Lisianski (1814 in Dall 1883: 87), claimed that 'the wearer can neither eat nor drink without extreme difficulty'. Similarly, the explorer Otto von Kotzebue (1830: 52) scathingly described his impression of a labret-wearer running: 'the lips flap up and down so as to knock sometimes against the chin and sometimes against the nose'. I would suggest that this effect may not have been an unwanted side-effect of labret use, but a culturally valued disincentive to inappropriate bodily comportment. I do not know of any research on culturally constructed ways of walking on the Northwest Coast or amongst Gê-speaking peoples, but African parallels suggest a relationship between these 'body techniques' (Mauss 1935) and the use of labrets. When Shauna LaTosky (2006: 384) was working with the Ethiopian Mursi, Bi Kalumi, her 'host mother', demonstrated for her the way a girl wearing a lip plate should walk: 'her head held high, her chin swaying back and forth in a very subtle, sensual manner'.

The way labrets move during bodily activities can also serve to encourage and emphasise, e.g. the faculty of speech. In a YouTube video (AFP 2010) of the Kayapo chief Raoni Metuktire (who famously continues to wear the lip disc), his large lip disc bounces up and down as he speaks, magnifying the movements of speech and drawing attention to what he has to say. The labret in motion stresses the significance of orating for both the wearer and his audience. The connection between bodily modifications such as labrets, and culturally shaped ways of moving, speaking and so on is complex and has received little anthropological attention. However, it could be an extremely fertile area for research, providing a window onto the cultural construction of the embodied subject in motion. Through their transformative effects—not only of the face but of the wearer's 'habitus' (Mauss 1935; Bourdieu 1977)—lip plugs are efficacious in the production of discernibly different kinds of social bodies.

Conclusions

Lacking original ethnography—and particularly the comments of labret wearers themselves on the process of piercing and stretching—this article can only make suggestions for the further anthropological treatment of body ornaments. I have highlighted the connection, noted by Turner (1980), Seeger (1975, 1981) and Jonaitis (1988) for disparate societies, of lip ornamentation with the cultural valuation of oral faculties like speaking, singing and eating. However, when Seeger's Suyá informants have explained the practice of piercing the ear and inserting a plug as intended to make the wearer 'hear-understand-know well' (Seeger 1975: 217), it seems to be missing the point to describe such ornaments as 'representations'. Rather, as Turner (1995: 154) later accepted for the Kayapo, lip plugs are more like 'devices' for producing belligerent adult men who orate publicly in the plaza, and for transferring boys from their maternal homes into uxorilocal marriage. A consideration of the sensory experience of pain and stretching—producing a bodily attentive mode of being-in-the-world termed 'presence' by Desjarlais (1996)—is important when thinking about the mechanism by which subjects are transformed into different kinds of social bodies. In sum, I have argued that, rather than representative signs floating unmoored in a system of symbols (Seeger 1975: 211) or even methods of 'inscribing' social law onto individual bodies (Clastres 1977: 156), labrets may be seen as potent tools for transforming embodied experience.

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Notes

- 1 The reasons for this are complex and beyond the scope of this article. In order to avoid the ahistorical connotations of the 'ethnographic present', I speak about Suyá and Kayapo labrets in the past tense.
- 2 The Kayapo tended to pierce their son's lips when they were still infants (Turner 1995: 153), but would still have experienced the more prolonged, duller pain from stretching the orifice as adolescents.

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