

Indigenous craft practices, such as ceramics, are on the decline, yet they play a critical role in remembering and enriching heritage, strengthening identity, and promoting the sustainable management of local natural resources and biodiversity.

Rekindling the Indigenous practice of pottery in Guyana is a collaborative sketchbook created through a collaboration between ceramic artist Jay Mistry and six potters from Fly Hill in the Rupununi region of Guyana. It tells a story of the creative potential of Indigenous pottery and shows how revalorising Indigenous craft can strengthen Indigenous identity and livelihoods.

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A collaborative sketchbook  
ISBN n°: 978-1-8381171-0-8

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September 2020

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To Combrencent, Latea, Nico, Everisto, Janet and Timmy

## **Rekindling the Indigenous practice of pottery in Guyana**

**A collaborative sketchbook**

by Jay Mistry

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With special thanks to Wabbani, Caiman House and Yupukari Village, Guyana

Supported by the British Council and the Crafts Council UK.

ISBN n° 978-1-8381171-0-8

Published by COBRA Collective CIC



[cobracollective.org](http://cobracollective.org)

# Tiwa



# Prologue

Throughout the world, there is increasing recognition that Indigenous knowledge and the practices that it supports, such as traditional farming, fishing, and hunting, are critical for sustaining local livelihoods, biodiversity as well as for mitigating and adapting to climate change<sup>1</sup>. Traditional craft practices are intimately linked to these everyday practices, whether it is the making of bows, arrows and spears for fishing and hunting, the weaving of baskets to collect, store and process crops, or the coiling of clay pots for cooking. Traditional craft also plays a fundamental role in maintaining cultural identities that connect craft makers with nature and its materials<sup>2</sup>.

This close relationship with the landscape means that craft makers are continuously monitoring and adapting to an inherently variable and sometimes unpredictable environment. In this sense, we can

see traditional craft not as a representation of the past, or a rejection of technological progress, but as an evolving, dynamic and responsive practice. Yet as in the past, Indigenous peoples today continue to face processes of colonisation, resource extraction, state governance, and rapidly changing socio-environmental conditions that label them as 'backwards', 'poor' and 'uncivilised'. These terms and their implicit association with 'traditional' has led to a dualism in Indigenous identity between being perceived as 'traditional' or 'modern' peoples. This can be seen in craft practices, such as pottery, where there is a tension between making 'traditional' earthenware (low fired) unglazed wares for local consumption, and more 'modern' high fired glazed pieces for outside markets. Thus, the challenge for Indigenous craft practice, including ceramics, is to innovate to a high level of aesthetic potential and communicative power, while not losing

local distinctiveness and self-reliance on local resources in pursuit of technical proficiency.

The 'traditional' and 'modern' dichotomy is something I have struggled with myself as a brown woman academic and potter of British nationality and South Asian heritage. This is exemplified in the fact that despite doing research dedicated to empowering Indigenous communities in the Rupununi region of Guyana for 20 years and being a potter for 30 years, it is only now, in 2020, that I have felt the confidence to combine the two. What's taken so long, you may ask? Reflection on this question brings me to my own journey of empowerment. Growing up and living in inner city London, pottery was a necessary distraction from the everyday encounters of white, male dominance, and institutional racism. Within academia, the institution was different but the challenges were the same, and I





was careful to limit who I shared my creative work with. Within my British Asian circles, pottery was seen as something I did to express my Gujarati identity and my Indian potter caste of Kumbhar, and the traditional female virtues of humility, respect for elders and obedience. So when in 2016 I started a diploma in 3D Design (Ceramics), undertaken part-time over two years, I was suddenly thrown into a world of artistic opportunities and a chance to climb out of the box that had to that point kept those two identities - potter and academic - separate.

Over the last five years, my ceramic practice has allowed me to explore, communicate and challenge how authority functions within society, and how dominant discourses - white, male, cultural - shape specific knowledge about places, landscapes and objects. I have become more confident in applying my ideas in developing and completing ambitious pieces to a high technical quality, while pushing the limit of what can be creatively communicated through form, texture, material, colour and words. This, together







with my long-term experience in field-based, co-designed, participatory research with Indigenous communities, meant that when the possibility to work with Indigenous potters in the Rupununi arose, I felt it was exactly the right moment to become an 'acapotter'.

In the Rupununi, and throughout Guyana, Indigenous craft practices are on the decline. From my own academic research, following language, craft making has been identified by Indigenous communities as one of the most important indicators of Indigenous knowledge and heritage. Men, women, and

youth identify loss of knowledge and skill related to craft making from different perspectives: women from a point of view of food security, men in terms of livelihoods and income generation, and youth with regards to intergenerational knowledge transfer.

There are only a small number of potters still active in the Rupununi, principally in St. Ignatius and Toka<sup>3</sup>. In Yupukari village and its sister satellite communities, there has been a revival in craft making spearheaded through a local social enterprise, Wabbani<sup>4</sup>. Besides basketry, cotton weaving and furniture making, Wabbani is in the early stages of reviving the use of an ancient clay source to develop livelihood opportunities for remote villages through ceramics. Located at a place called Seawall on the banks of Lake Ararikru, Makushi potters from the satellite village of Fly Hill have been digging clays from Seawall Landing and its surrounds, as well as from nearby swamps and termite mounds in the savannas.

In 2019, I was awarded a British Council Crafting Futures grant to collaborate with the Fly Hill potters on a project focused on Indigenous ceramics, traditional knowledge and empowerment. I was particularly interested in how Indigenous ceramic practice could be enhanced to promote collective identity, self-worth and economic development. In February 2020, I spent two weeks

in Yupukari and Seawall with the Fly Hill potters: Combrencent Ernest, an experienced potter and brick maker with an innate curiosity for experimentation; Latea Hendricks, another experienced potter and young mother who was accompanied by her three-month year old daughter. The baby didn't have a name as yet, so we all called her Tiwa (clay in Makushi) and she was a wonderful asset to our making in the pottery; Timmy (John) Hendricks, Latea's husband, a thoughtful and gentle man with minimal previous handling of clay, but a keen determination; Everisto Thomas James, a potter with an astounding visual literacy and eye for detail; Nicodemus Lawrence, a young man with limited pottery experience and a wealth of artistic talent; Janet Charles, the youngest and quietest member of the group who steadily showed her creative skills as each day passed.

A mention must be made here to Shamir Khan, the coordinator of Wabbani in Yupukari village. He is an Indigenous man with a passion for Indigenous craft, and a driving force for improving the lives of his fellow

villagers. During my work with the potters, Shamir organised obtaining food and fuel, cooking arrangements with our wonderful cook Asha Melville, and transported me every day from Yupukari to Seawall on his motorbike. One day I mentioned that the pottery needed more table space and the next day he had found materials and put together an extra table top! He helped with the long firing after which at midnight we had an exhilarating and cooling down ride through the savanna back to the village.

During our time together, we explored traditional ceramic forms and cultural symbolic visual representations linked to Indigenous identity. We went canoeing on Lake Ararikru digging clays and sands, and searching for materials in the savannas amongst the termite mounds. We tried out new techniques of making, burnishing and decorating using coloured slips. We fired the finished pieces in the wood kiln for 16 hours! We curated an exhibition in Yupukari village and had a celebration with roasted fish. All the activities were recorded by

the potters in visual and written form in their own sketchbooks.

This collaborative sketchbook represents the first phase of what I hope will be a long-term alliance between myself, the Fly Hill potters and Wabbani. It shows that maintaining and promoting Indigenous knowledge through pottery and craft in general, can strengthen Indigenous identity

and support self-determination in development that benefits both people and nature. My own journey of ceramic practice has allowed me to reflect on what identity means to me, while at the same time building my self-belief, confidence and resilience, and I aim for this initiative to begin the same process for the Rupununi potters, and other Indigenous craft makers in Guyana.

*and*









# Introduction

Guyana is the only English-speaking country in South America and the smallest country of the continent. I first went there in 2000 as a young academic with my husband and fellow researcher Andrea Berardi, and our friend and colleague Matt Simpson. We spent a month in the North Rupununi based in the Indigenous village of Surama from where we travelled on foot, donkey and boat to rivers, lakes and creeks to test the quality of the water. The community were concerned about the potential impacts of illegal gold mining along their waterways, and our aim was to see whether there were any discernible impacts. Despite having been lucky enough to travel widely as a child with my family, and to live and work in Brazil during my PhD research, this was the first time I had direct contact with Indigenous people and their culture, and the start of a relationship with the country and

its peoples that has spanned my academic career.

The history of Guyana is a complex array of local communities committed to self-determination and elites aspiring to dominate them<sup>5</sup>. Before the arrival of Europeans, Indigenous societies living in the diverse savanna, forest and wetland landscapes were characterised by relatively isolated semi-nomadic communities focusing their subsistence on small-scale agriculture, hunting, gathering and occasional trade with and raids on adjoining communities. Many practiced rotational farming in the forest, growing a diversity of crops including the staple cassava or manioc, which was used to produce a variety of edible products, and remains a central component of the Indigenous diet and culture.

The Dutch arrived in Guyana in the 1500s and quickly took advantage

of trading opportunities in natural resources with Indigenous people. Once trading posts had been established, the extraction of resources, such as timber, minerals and, eventually, cash crops on plantations in coastal areas, began to be exported to Europe. This required a large force of labourers initially supplied by allied Indigenous communities raiding rival communities for slaves. However, imported disease and the changing relationship from one of trade to one of subjugation began to decimate Indigenous communities living in close proximity to European settlements, and many were either wiped out or retreated inland. The Dutch West Indian Company turned to importing enslaved Africans who rapidly became a key element of the colonial economy in the second half of the 18th century. Their control over the colony ended following thirty years of conflict between the



Dutch, British and French, and British Guiana was inaugurated in 1814. However, the abolition of slavery in 1838 left British plantation owners with a labour gap and resulted in waves of immigration from Europe, Africa, Barbados and China, as well as over 200,000 indentured labourers from India.

Throughout the colonial period, territorial expansion into Indigenous land was justified on the pretext of protecting the rights of Indigenous subjects, either by becoming 'honoured' as British subjects or through making 'poor', 'backwards' Indians 'civilised', spearheaded by colonial charitable enterprises and religious missions. This gradual appropriation of land rights meant that Indigenous people had increasingly restricted access to former traditional resource-use areas. As a result, many became reliant on the interior industries of ranching, logging and mining, and the complex familial and commonly exploitative nature of these relationships with non-Indigenous landowners.

This was particularly true of the Rupununi region, located in the south-west of the country and inhabited mostly by people of the Indigenous Makushi and Wapishana nations. Known for its complex mosaic of savanna, forest and wetlands, it has been the target for many explorers, the most famous being Sir Walter Raleigh, who in 1595 set out to find the mythical El Dorado city of gold, in what is now known as Lake Amuku, close to Yupukari village. The boom and bust of cattle ranching in the savannas and balata (latex) bleeding in the forests, together with the proliferation of Catholic and Anglican missionaries in the Rupununi, resulted in a slow decline in Indigenous culture and practices during the twentieth century, punctuated by disease and land conflict<sup>6</sup>. Even after independence, the removal of colonial 'oppression' only resulted in its replacement by another form of centralised control and exploitation, which did little to help maintain Indigenous traditions.

In recent times, there has been growing recognition that rather



than 'backwards' and 'ignorant,' Indigenous peoples actively maintain and promote biodiversity through their traditional practices and knowledge, and that they have a crucial role to play in the fight against climate change. The Rupununi is the location of a crucial link between the Amazon and Essequibo basins, known as the 'Rupununi Portal,' which allows species from both basins to intermingle and is thought to account for the region's high biodiversity<sup>7</sup>. It has more than 450 fish species, which in turn supply a food chain to endangered species such as the black caiman (*Melanosuchus niger*), giant river otter (*Pteronura brasiliensis*), giant river turtle (*Podocnemis expansa*), and recovering populations of the largest scaled freshwater fish in the world, the arapaima (*Arapaima spp.*). These species are not only important for conservation but also supply local people with a range of livelihood activities, including subsistence fishing and ecotourism. In fact, over 60% of the Makushi diet comes from fish living in the creeks, lakes and rivers<sup>8</sup>.



As well as hunting and gathering, farming is a subsistence activity that takes place in the forests. Fruits such as watermelons and bananas, and vegetables such as beans and pumpkin are all grown in the small farms, but the tuber root, cassava, is the main crop. It is used to produce farine and cassava

bread (made from the meal of the grated cassava after the juice is squeezed out); cassareep (a dark brown to black viscous liquid made from the cassava juice boiled down); starch and tapioca, (made from part of the liquid which is squeezed from the grated cassava and settles out when the liquid

is allowed to stand); and various alcoholic drinks, such as parakari and kasiri (made from fermented cassava)<sup>9</sup>. Cassava cultivation and processing is more than nutrition for Makushi and Wapishana people. Indigenous identity, culture and social organization are all integrally linked with the daily practices of





cassava farming and transformation into food and beverages, as is the making of craft. For example, the processing of cassava depends on the use of different basketry products, including the matupi squeezer, and a variety of farine sifters.

Although there has been a decline in the use of pottery, the Rupununi is rich in its culture and history of ceramics. During the prehistory period, people began the practice of preferential treatment of the dead, and the use of ceramic burial urns, found particularly in caves and rock shelters. Petroglyphic and pictographic rock art also appeared at this time, the most important remains being petroglyphs associated with fisheries management in the Aishalton complex in the South Rupununi. From 3500 B.P. onwards, and with the cultivation of several varieties of wild cassava, people began to produce a broad range of polychrome ceramics and ceramic griddles that were used in the processing and preparing of cassava<sup>10</sup>. This pottery, in a variety of surface colours from orange to

reddish orange to reddish brown, was made by coiling. Vessel forms varied depending on use for eating, drinking, cooking and storage. They included: shallow to deep bowls with outsloping to almost vertical walls, and rims direct, flattened or rounded; globular bowls or jars with walls rounded and incurving with direct rim with rounded or thickened lip; bowls or jars with a ridge forming a sharp to rounded shoulder, above which the walls curve inwards before expanded to a flattened or rounded direct rim; flat, circular griddles with slightly upturned rims; globular jars or bowls with everted rims; jars with rounded body and constricted neck<sup>11</sup>.

Different materials, or tempers, were added to the clay to prevent shrinkage and cracking during

drying and firing of vessels, and typically included quartz sand, decomposed granite and caraipé (the bark ash of the tree *Licania octandra*). Although the majority of wares were undecorated, there is evidence of finishing and decoration techniques including smoothing, burnishing, painting, modelling, incising, brushing, scraping, stamping and fingertip impressions.

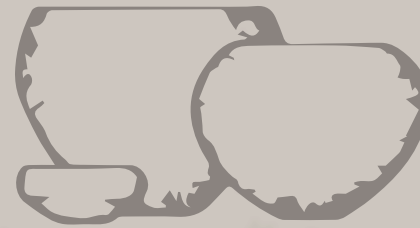
Today, most pottery making is happening around St. Ignatius, south of the border town of Lethem, and in Toka village, in the North Rupununi. Pots are generally handbuilt from red earthenware clay and fired in wood or pit kilns. Here, the main vessels being made are 'gobis' or goblets to store water, flowerpots and a range of eating bowls and cooking pots. They include the

traditional pepperpot and tuma pot, where meat or fish is cooked in cassareep or cassava water. Here, again, we see how craft is tied into Indigenous knowledge and identity; although tuma is now more commonly cooked in aluminium and metal pans, it is widely acknowledged that it tastes much better cooked in clay, and thus there is a growing demand for clay tuma pots both within Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities. Growing ecotourism to the Rupununi region also provides potential customers looking for pieces that evoke the place and its peoples, as well as local tourism enterprises requiring functional ware in its premises. Thus, there is considerable scope to develop pottery as an

economic livelihood activity in the Rupununi, and specifically through Wabbani in Yupukari and Fly Hill.

The core purpose of this collaborative sketchbook is to let the images, drawings and words tell a story of how the Fly Hill pottery can be economically and environmentally sustainable through transforming locally abundant, sustainably extracted materials into high-value products. It aims to show how ceramics can contribute to reviving, maintaining and strengthening Indigenous identity and self-worth, while promoting a collective sense of community. It will also hopefully motivate young people to come forward to be part of the venture and the future of craft.

*and*





## Pottery Exhibition

This exhibition shows the work of the  
potters from a two week workshop. All the pieces  
were made by hand and represent the American  
way of life. We hope you enjoy it!

Tiwa ke ikonikasa' kon yemosa'

Sene' Fly Hill Ponkon asenyaka'mata'

tiwapi sakine shuntaka kaishiri. Tawiniwiron

miriri miyake ikonnikasa' sene' kon miriri

urikon yeseru ke yenmunusa'

yapuripai nikon se!





# The potters





Combrencent Ernest



“I enjoyed making the tiles the most. I could draw and create patterns and designs, mix colours and use the slips”.

*“Pottery can promote traditional knowledge through stories. The plate I made tells you about the trees that were growing where Fly Hill was started”.*









Latea Hendricks

*"I think about them traditions when I was making designs for my wares. I made them to tell the young generation what was happening before. Looking at the designs will show them our traditions in the past and our traditions today".*



“ I enjoyed making the pepperpot because I like to put designs of peppers, fish, cassava, from traditional ways of cooking, on my pots. I want to make more for people, for them to buy, and to make a little money for me”.



## FOOD PREPARATION

How to Prepare a pepper pot  
These are the menue.

Pepper  
Cassava water  
fish  
salt  
Casarep  
Pepper leaves.





Nicodemus Lawrence





*"I chose the spider design because my grandfather told me that in the past people used the big spider web as cotton. I find the spider web a beautiful thing because when this place is cold, you see dew on the web, and with the sun shining through it, it has rainbow colours".*

*"The designs I made were for people to see the messages. Amerindian people made them pots, and my pots show I am an Amerindian.*

*I chose the tapir design because we Amerindian people use the tuma pot to cook the tapir meat".*

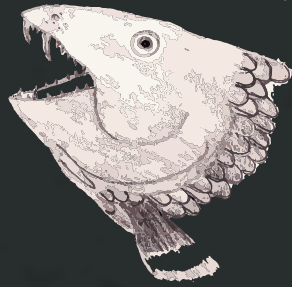




Everisto T. James

“ When I draw the designs, I think about hunting. Like the deer design what I drew, I was thinking about how I hunt and kill this animal, and I remember that this is one of my favourite foods”





*"The fish that I drew on my tuma pot is the houri that I catch in the pond in the dry season when the water is getting low. When you roast and cook it in the clay pot, it taste more nice than the pot that we buy from the shop".*



My goal for the next two weeks is to learn how to make some nice things with the clay and to have them fired, glazed and painted. So that everyone will take a look at them or someone will want to buy them and these are the things I want to make:







Janet Charles



*"The pepperpot was my favourite thing to make because I wanted to improve my skills in making big pots, and pots I could sell in the future".*

“

*Doing the pottery made me think about the ancestors, what they made, how we could improve by doing these things more, and by making back the wares we have lost".*





I would like to make one of the  
above with a Red Clay





Timmy J. Hendricks



*"If other villagers ask me a question, I would tell them that this design on my tiles symbolises an Amerindian or Indigenous person, boy or girl, woman or man, who is pulling out cassava in a traditional way. Because most of us today in the Rupununi are living that same life".*



“Many things come in my vision and ideas, so it's just to have time to myself to sit and sketch them out. This made me think about the way we live, our lifestyles and our ancestors before and the way they used clay. It was more serious before, and I can make more use of it too now”





















# Conclusion

For Indigenous communities, craft is not a hobby or a recreation to do in their spare time. It is a practice intimately tied into the everyday activities of life, and helps them to remember and enact their identity. It is clear from my time with the Fly Hill potters, that cooking vessels such as the tuma and pepperpots play a central role. Not only are they used for making a traditional dish, but their ingredients – cassava products, vegetables, fish, meat – are all linked to Indigenous livelihoods of farming, fishing and hunting. Using clay pots to make traditional dishes can in turn promote nutritious Indigenous diets based on cassava, vegetables and wild meat, which in recent years have moved more towards industrially produced, imported factory-farmed chicken, sugar-based drinks, and rice grown in vast sterile monocultures. Thus reviving ceramics, as well as other crafts such as basketry, can contribute towards and reinforce a more holistic idea of health; wellbeing

that intrinsically combines culture and the environment.

Craft can also promote collective identity, self-worth and economic development. As the potters worked together over the course of the two weeks, there was a gradual transformation from individuals working on their own, being shy and reserved, towards a sense of group enterprise, where they were discussing and sharing ideas, browsing each other's

adjacent to the pottery, which Nicodemus was sketching in his book, and which started a conversation on how the leaves were once traditionally used as a container when grating cassava. This stimulated Nicodemus to decorate a plate he was making with imagery of grating cassava using a kokerite leaf. As Janet said *"The ancestors, what they made, we could improve by doing these things more, by making back the wares we have lost"*.

*"One thing that catches my eye is the tuma pots... It's not just focusing on the outside market, but it's within the community"*

sketchbooks and expressing opinions and comments on the work. They also had many discussions about their traditions and knowledge, especially during refreshments or lunch breaks, sparked by what they were making or decorating. For example, there is a stand of the kokerite tree

A shared sense of purpose also helped to build the potters confidence in their own abilities and their forms and designs. As Timmy said *"By having ideas more building up every day as I come, every day I come in these two weeks, is more ideas I getting, it keep building me to think,*





*not just for today but for the future". Their work was also being valued by others, as seen during the exhibition, and illustrated by Shamir, Coordinator of Wabbani "...it's portraying our identity on this pottery. This is something never really been done before, you know. Well, now we have an opportunity, whatever we make, now it's original. It's not copy from anywhere. This is ideas from the people of Yupukari, Fly Hill".*

*And the physical form of a sketchbook was very important for the potters as a memory of their progress, and a place to add further ideas, exemplified by Everisto "I love books, I love to write in it, to draw, I love drawing. So this sketchbook that you bring and share with us, I will not destroy it or lose it. It will keep me back and I will remember, if I forget, I will go back to my sketchbook".*

From the inspired drawings and reflections in the participants' own sketchbooks, we have produced this collaborative sketchbook. From the artwork represented in this collective, it's clear that there is a great potential to benefit economically by making traditional forms more decorative to cater for new markets. At the local level, there is a ready market of community members' eager for cooking pots; as Latea says *"I enjoy making the pepperpot because I want to make more for people to buy, to make a little money for me"*. Shamir goes on to say *"...one thing that catches my eye is the tuma pots. And the reason why is that because it's not just focusing on the outside market, but it's within the community. And I think those we will sell faster because we don't have to wait for someone to come from America to buy, right?"*. Making pots for the community to use can promote a virtuous cycle in that it can foster greater self-esteem and re-enforce Indigenous identity within the community as they are encouraged to cook using traditional clay pots and engage with the traditionally inspired designs and forms of the pots.

Many Indigenous friends and colleagues I know in Guyana have a high visual intelligence in the way they see and remember what's happening in their surroundings. I was struck by how Combrencent, the most experienced member of the Fly Hill potters, had really observed and analysed the things he was depicting on clay; he had catalogued all of the details and how they informed the larger picture. It's their everyday, close encounters with nature that form a solid visual baseline, and give Indigenous craft makers, such as the Fly Hill potters, the skills to represent and respond to the dynamic world around them.

Indigenous people of Guyana have a right to transform and develop in order to improve their wellbeing. What this project has shown is that it is possible to retain and reinforce traditional craft skills and culture while exploring new techniques and economic opportunities. In a thousand years, like a thousand years ago, our hope is that the Makushi of the Rupununi will still be making and cooking out of their tuma pots.





1. See <https://cobracollective.org/concepts/why-should-we-care-about-indigenous-knowledge-to-save-the-world>
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5. See for example, Daly, V.T. (1975). *A short history of the Guyanese people*. Macmillan Caribbean, Oxford; Colchester, M. (1997). *Guyana fragile frontier: loggers, miners and forest peoples*. Latin America Bureau, London; Mistry, J., Berardi, A. and McGregor, D. (2009). Natural resource management and development discourses in the Caribbean: reflections on the Guyanese and Jamaican experience. *Third World Quarterly*, 30(5): 969-989.
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7. See Berardi, A., Jafferally, D., Simpson, M., Holden, F., Albert, G. and Li, F. (2019). *Mapping the Rupununi-Ireng biodiversity corridor between Amazonian and Guiana Shield watersheds*. Final Report to the Woodspring Trust. Cobra Collective CIC, UK.
8. See Forte, J. (Ed.). (1996). *Makusipe Komanto Iseru. Sustaining Makushi way of life*. North Rupununi District Development Board, Annai, Guyana.
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This is a hunter going on his way