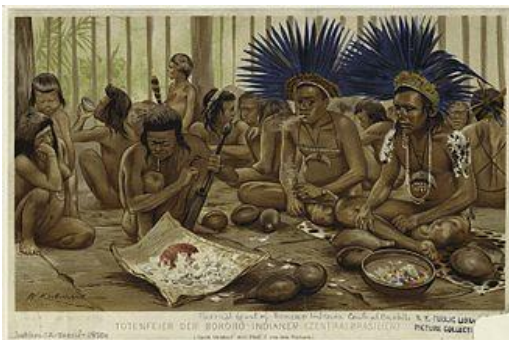




In 1894 a man named Karl von den Steinen (you can see him in the middle of the black and white picture) returned from an expedition and announced to a stunned European audience that a small group of people in Brazil, who called themselves the Bororo, thought they were red macaws.

For Steinen, this presented evidence that people who lived hunter gatherer lives had what would later be described as 'primitive mentality' (Lévy-Bruhl 1923) because they were unable to distinguish between humans and other animals properly.



At this time scholars were very interested in why some peoples appeared to have failed to develop or advance in the same way as others. Why, they asked, were some groups much more technologically sophisticated than others? It was as if – they speculated - some societies had simply stopped developing and existed almost stuck in the past continuing to live in the ways all of us had once done.

These kinds of puzzles alongside the type of information that people like Steinen brought back encouraged European scholars to imagine that the people they couldn't understand had lesser cognitive abilities to themselves. In short, conclusions reached, without exception by white privileged males, imagined that peoples from different cultures to their own were unable to think in the same way as intellectuals in European populations could.

Obviously, this was proved to be patently untrue and enormously patronising. Sadly, it demonstrates just how shockingly racist the roots of scholarship are, but thankfully these kinds of ideas have been heavily criticised and utterly rejected as a result. People around the world have similar capacities to think; we have all simply arrived at different conclusions about the meaning of life. For now, we need to understand how Steinen's claim has been thought about since he first published his findings and ask ourselves - How then can one understand someone else's claim that they are a bird?

Smith (1972) cautions about jumping to any conclusions.

'The statement, "I am a parrot," is a different statement than it appears... to be. A literal understanding of "I am a parrot" has led to two consequences: they mean it and they are wrong, or they mean it, but we can never understand what they mean.' (Smith 1972: 11)

And he quotes Polyani to show that these kinds of claims are no more irrational than those made by intellectuals and elites.

"What the Bororo mean by identifying themselves with red parrots may be difficult to fathom, but I see no reason to say that it is anymore absurd than the view of many scientists and philosophers that they are machines' (Polyani, 1970 cited by Smith 1972)

Therefore, it is not that people are less able to think clearly or rationally; it is that they understand the world in different ways.

However, this doesn't help us understand what the Bororo mean when they make the claim that they are birds.

By the time the discipline of anthropology had been born - around the beginning of the 1900s - knowledge about the way people see their worlds started to be more readily shared. Evans Pritchard (1940), a famous anthropologist (with Welsh heritage) who worked in the Sudan region of Africa reported that the Nuer, a group he was getting to know, had explained that, to them, twins are birds. They explained that twins, while not feathered, are associated with the spirit world as other flighted creatures are too, and therefore, it was logical to say that twins are birds.

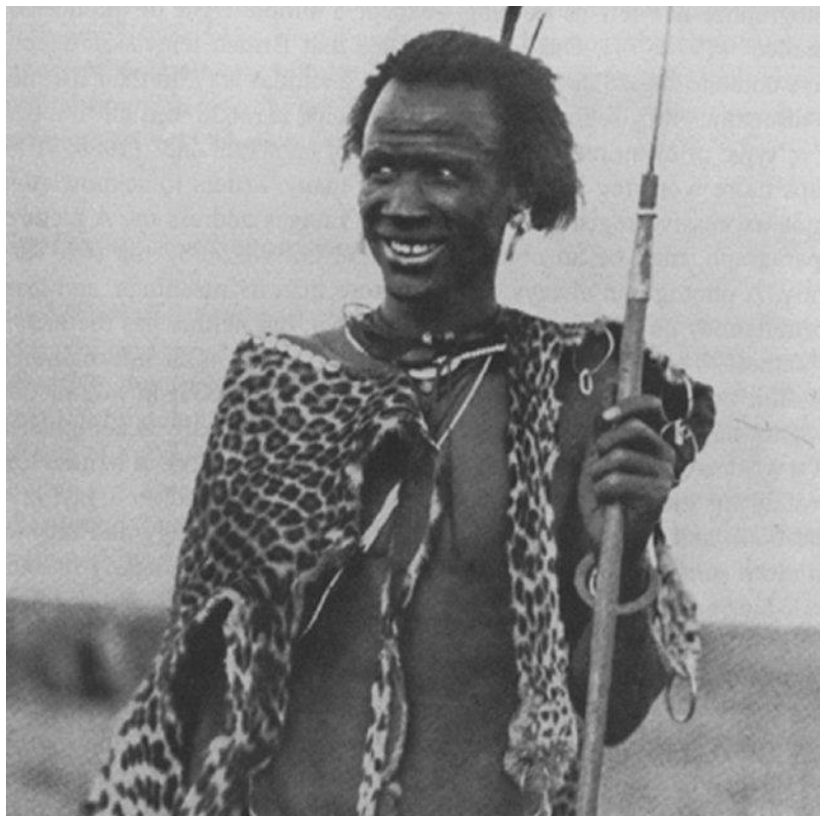


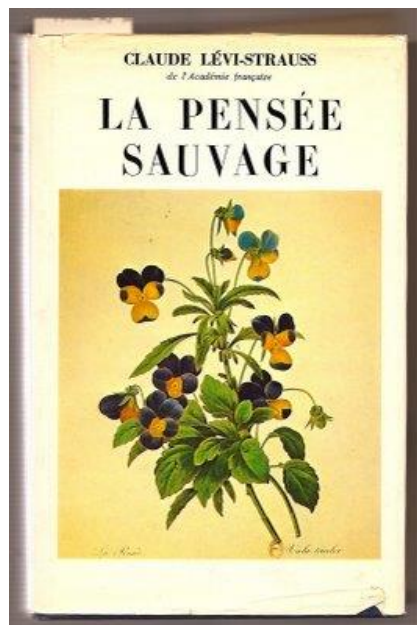
Image: A Nuer Priest

As more puzzling examples than these two came back for inspection, people struggled to understand how to explain them – should they be understood at face value (literally) or are these symbolic expressions? Does it show alternative

standards of rationality at work that use different forms of logic? Or are there other social meanings to find?

In Smith's (1972) article (in the Readings Folder on Moodle), he continues to show how anthropologists settled on finding the **function** of such statements in a bid to understand them for the speaker's perspective and avoid translating other people's important ideas away. Instead, anthropologists turned their attention to focusing on what saying "I am a red macaw" *does* to the way the Bororo can live together – their social lives. This method means it doesn't matter if it is true; what matters is what the statement *does* in context.

Over the years several suggestions have been offered.



In 1966, Levi Strauss said that 'being red macaws' allowed the Bororo to think about themselves in relation to their world. More specifically, he showed, it provided a mechanism to think about death. In other words, imagining that one *transforms* into a bird on dying allows this group to think about death as a time where one's way of being changes dramatically but doesn't end. Instead of death being a finality, one's form is able to shift from one manifestation to another, and so dead relatives persist but just in another form. This is a comforting thought (Dario 2020) and, clearly is not that different from ideas of going to heaven or reincarnation that other cultures have manufactured to clarify life and death. Levi Strauss (1966) also explained that a likely other benefit of holding on to this belief, is that the Bororo have found a way to differentiate themselves from other local groups in the area.

Using Levi Strauss' (1966) ideas shows that thinking one is simultaneously human and bird might feel absurd initially but thinking that one becomes a bird after death is much easier to understand and by adopting this approach the statement stops appearing odd or even misguided. Moreover, if we look at how nature functions these kinds of transformations regularly occur. For example, a caterpillar changes into a butterfly and an acorn into a tree and therefore imagining that one can change from a human to a bird echoes these processes.

For Fernandez (1991), however, Levi Strauss' explanation needed more development. He noticed that the Bororo performed many ceremonies in which feathers were always used

and that the word 'feather' also means ancestor or spirit in Bororo. He also informs us that these ceremonies would often need to be delayed if enough feathers hadn't been collected.

'By detaching plumes from their original source...and applying the plumes to themselves ... Bororo men empower themselves as spirit actors.
(Fernandez 1991: 139)



Image: Bororo men with ritual feather head-dress

This was not only about death then, this is also about people's ability to link to and know the spirit world through shared social ceremonies that shape the annual calendar while alive. To be red macaws allows the Bororo to connect with the birds even before they die.

Crocker (1985), however, took another route to explain the phrase. On recognising that the Bororo women kept red macaws as pets, Crocker (1985) claimed that men called themselves red macaws because they were expressing how much like women's pet they were in this matriarchal society where on marriage a man moves to live with the woman's family. Yet, as Crocker (1985) himself acknowledges, a family's red macaw is not simply a caged animal or property held and controlled by women but is an important family member who represents part of the family's social identity and can move around the village without restriction – rather like the sacred cow in India. Consequently, damaging or hurting a red macaw causes serious social upset because one's dead relative might live in the bird (Crocker 1985). Of more interest than using the expression "we are red macaws" to grumble about marriage and dominant females, is the fact that these birds live with and alongside people in a state of co-habitation with animals and the dead.

Dario's (2020) explanation moves away from gender to talk about local knowledge of the environment. Dario (2020) illustrates how detailed Bororo knowledge of the local fauna and flora is. He notes that they are able to name and describe nearly 100 different birds in their territory in profound detail; not only the names of the species, but also each group's requirements and detailed description of how and why their feathers are used for different ritual adornments. Dario (2020) shows how these birds are raised by the Bororo to ensure there are enough feathers for their rituals, and rather than thinking of them as pets, they are described as *xerimbabos*, which translates as 'dear things'. Their feathers, therefore, signal and prepare one for death and the shift from human to bird form that death allows.

If we are to gather these ideas together, what can we say we now know about human-animal relationships?

From this one example, it becomes clear that people around the world have profoundly important relationships with different creatures and use their conclusions about other species to understand the meaning of life. So profound are these ideas that the boundaries between human and animal blur and blend when explanation of what animals mean to them are given. On a more practical level, this example illustrates how much time and energy people put into their friendships with animals – which, I hope you have noted is no different from the way pets or companion animals are understood in Euro-American cultures.

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