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# COSMOLOGICAL DEIXIS AND AMERINDIAN PERSPECTIVISM

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This study discusses the meaning of Amerindian 'perspectivism': the ideas in Amazonian cosmologies concerning the way in which humans, animals and spirits see both themselves and one another. Such ideas suggest the possibility of a redefinition of the classical categories of 'nature', 'culture' and 'supernature' based on the concept of perspective or point of view. The study argues in particular that the antinomy between two characterizations of indigenous thought – on the one hand 'ethnocentrism', which would deny the attributes of humanity to humans from other groups, and on the other hand 'animism', which would extend such qualities to beings of other species – can be resolved if one considers the difference between the spiritual and corporal aspects of beings.

*... la reciprocité de perspectives où j'ai vu le caractère propre de la pensée mythique ...*
(Lévi-Strauss 1985: 268)

## *Introduction*

This article deals with that aspect of Amerindian thought which has been called its 'perspectival quality' (Århem 1993): the conception, common to many peoples of the continent, according to which the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human and non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view. This idea cannot be reduced to our current concept of relativism (Lima 1995; 1996), which at first it seems to call to mind. In fact, it is at right angles, so to speak, to the opposition between relativism and universalism. Such resistance by Amerindian perspectivism to the terms of our epistemological debates casts suspicion on the robustness and transportability of the ontological partitions which they presuppose. In particular, as many anthropologists have already concluded (albeit for other reasons), the classic distinction between Nature and Culture cannot be used to describe domains internal to non-Western cosmologies without first undergoing a rigorous ethnographic critique.

Such a critique, in the present case, implies a redistribution of the predicates subsumed within the two paradigmatic sets that traditionally oppose one another under the headings of 'Nature' and 'Culture': universal and particular, objective and subjective, physical and social, fact and value, the given and the instituted,

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necessity and spontaneity, immanence and transcendence, body and mind, animality and humanity, among many more. Such an ethnographically-based reshuffling of our conceptual schemes leads me to suggest the expression, 'multinaturalism', to designate one of the contrastive features of Amerindian thought in relation to Western 'multiculturalist' cosmologies. Where the latter are founded on the mutual implication of the unity of nature and the plurality of cultures – the first guaranteed by the objective universality of body and substance, the second generated by the subjective particularity of spirit and meaning – the Amerindian conception would suppose a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity. Here, culture or the subject would be the form of the universal, whilst nature or the object would be the form of the particular.

This inversion, perhaps too symmetrical to be more than speculative, must be developed by means of a plausible phenomenological interpretation of Amerindian cosmological categories, which determine the constitutive conditions of the relational contexts we can call 'nature' and 'culture'. Clearly, then, I think that the distinction between Nature and Culture must be subjected to critique, but not in order to reach the conclusion that such a thing does not exist (there are already too many things which do not exist). The flourishing industry of criticisms of the Westernizing character of all dualisms has called for the abandonment of our conceptually dichotomous heritage, but to date the alternatives have not gone beyond the stage of wishful unthinking. I would prefer to gain a perspective on our own contrasts, contrasting them with the distinctions actually operating in Amerindian perspectivist cosmologies.

*Perspectivism*

The initial stimulus for the present reflections were the numerous references in Amazonian ethnography to an indigenous theory according to which the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world – gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants, occasionally even objects and artefacts – differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves.

Typically, in normal conditions, humans see humans as humans, animals as animals and spirits (if they see them) as spirits; however animals (predators) and spirits see humans as animals (as prey) to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators). By the same token, animals and spirits see themselves as humans: they perceive themselves as (or become) anthropomorphic beings when they are in their own houses or villages and they experience their own habits and characteristics in the form of culture – they see their food as human food (jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting meat as grilled fish, etc.), they see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers, claws, beaks etc.) as body decorations or cultural instruments, they see their social system as organized in the same way as human institutions are (with chiefs, shamans, ceremonies, exogamous moieties, etc.). This 'to see as' refers literally to percepts and not analogically to concepts, although in some cases the emphasis is placed more on the categorical rather than on the sensory aspect of the phenomenon.

In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is

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a mere envelope (a 'clothing') which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the 'soul' or 'spirit' of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable, let us say, in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask. At first sight then, we would have a distinction between an anthropomorphic essence of a spiritual type, common to animate beings, and a variable bodily appearance, characteristic of each individual species but which rather than being a fixed attribute is instead a changeable and removable clothing. This notion of 'clothing' is one of the privileged expressions of metamorphosis – spirits, the dead and shamans who assume animal form, beasts that turn into other beasts, humans that are inadvertently turned into animals – an omnipresent process in the 'highly transformational world' (Rivière 1994: 256) proposed by Amazonian ontologies.[1]

This perspectivism and cosmological transformism can be seen in various South American ethnographies, but in general it is only the object of short commentaries and seems to be quite unevenly elaborated.[2] It can also be found, and maybe with even greater generative value, in the far north of North America and Asia, as well as amongst hunter-gatherer populations of other parts of the world.[3] In South America, the cosmologies of the Vaupés area are in this respect highly developed (see Århem 1993; 1996; Hugh-Jones 1996; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1985), but other Amazonian societies, such as the Wari' of Rondônia (Vilaça 1992) and the Juruna of the Middle Xingu (Lima 1995; 1996), also give equal emphasis to the theme.

Some general observations are necessary. Perspectivism does not usually involve all animal species (besides covering other beings); the emphasis seems to be on those species which perform a key symbolic and practical role such as the great predators and the principal species of prey for humans – one of the central dimensions, possibly even the fundamental dimension, of perspectival inversions refers to the relative and relational statuses of predator and prey (Århem 1993: 11-12; Vilaça 1992: 49-51). On the other hand, however, it is not always clear whether spirits or subjectivities are being attributed to each individual animal, and there are examples of cosmologies which deny consciousness to post-mythical animals (Overing 1985: 249 sqq.; 1986: 245-6) or some other spiritual distinctiveness (Baer 1994: 89; Viveiros de Castro 1992*a*: 73-4). Nonetheless, as is well known, the notion of animal spirit 'masters' ('mothers of the game animals', 'masters of the white-lipped peccaries', etc.) is widespread throughout the continent. These spirit masters, clearly endowed with intentionality analogous to that of humans, function as hypostases of the animal species with which they are associated, thereby creating an intersubjective field for human-animal relations even where empirical animals are not spiritualized.

We must remember, above all, that if there is a virtually universal Amerindian notion, it is that of an original state of undifferentiation between humans and animals, described in mythology. Myths are filled with beings whose form, name and behaviour inextricably mix human and animal attributes in a common context of intercommunicability, identical to that which defines the present-day intra-human world. The differentiation between 'culture' and 'nature', which Lévi-Strauss showed to be the central theme of Amerindian mythology, is not a process of differentiating the human from the animal, as in our own evolutionist

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mythology. The original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality but rather humanity. The great mythical separation reveals not so much culture distinguishing itself from nature but rather nature distancing itself from culture: the myths tell how animals lost the qualities inherited or retained by humans (Brightman 1993: 40, 160; Lévi-Strauss 1985: 14, 190; Weiss 1972: 169-70). Humans are those who continue as they have always been: animals are ex-humans, not humans ex-animals. In sum, 'the common point of reference for all beings of nature is not humans as a species but rather humanity as a condition' (Descola 1986: 120).

This is a distinction – between the human species and the human condition – which should be retained. It has an evident connexion with the idea of animal clothing hiding a common spiritual 'essence' and with the issue of the general meaning of perspectivism. For the moment, we may simply note one of its main corollaries: the past humanity of animals is added to their present-day spirituality hidden by their visible form in order to produce that extended set of food restrictions or precautions which either declare inedible certain animals that were mythically co-substantial with humans, or demand their desubjectivization by shamanistic means before they can be consumed (neutralizing the spirit, transubstantiating the meat into plant food, semantically reducing it to other animals less proximate to humans), under the threat of illness, conceived of as a cannibal counter-predation undertaken by the spirit of the prey turned predator, in a lethal inversion of perspectives which transforms the human into animal.[4]

It is worth pointing out that Amerindian perspectivism has an essential relation with shamanism and with the valorization of the hunt. The association between shamanism and this 'venatic ideology' is a classic question (for Amazonia, see Chaumeil 1983: 231-2; Crocker 1985: 17-25). I stress that this is a matter of symbolic importance, not ecological necessity: horticulturists such as the Tukano or the Juruna (who in any case fish more than they hunt) do not differ much from circumpolar hunters in respect of the cosmological weight conferred on animal predation, spiritual subjectivation of animals and the theory according to which the universe is populated by extra-human intentionalities endowed with their own perspectives. In this sense, the spiritualization of plants, meteorological phenomena or artefacts seems to me to be secondary or derivative in comparison with the spiritualization of animals: the animal is the extra-human prototype of the Other, maintaining privileged relations with other prototypical figures of alterity, such as affines (Århem 1996; Descola 1986: 317-30; Erikson 1984: 110-12). This hunting ideology is also and above all an ideology of shamans, in so far as it is shamans who administer the relations between humans and the spiritual component of the extra-humans, since they alone are capable of assuming the point of view of such beings and, in particular, are capable of returning to tell the tale. If Western multiculturalism is relativism as public policy, then Amerindian perspectivist shamanism is multinaturalism as cosmic politics.

## *Animism*

The reader will have noticed that my 'perspectivism' is reminiscent of the notion of 'animism' recently recuperated by Descola (1992; 1996). Stating that all conceptualizations of non-humans always refer to the social domain, Descola

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distinguishes three modes of objectifying nature: totemism, where the differences between natural species are used as a model for social distinctions; that is, where the relationship between nature and culture is metaphorical in character and marked by discontinuity (both within and between series); animism, where the 'elementary categories structuring social life' organize the relations *between* humans and natural species, thus defining a social continuity between nature and culture, founded on the attribution of human dispositions and social characteristics to 'natural beings' (Descola 1996: 87-8); and naturalism, typical of Western cosmologies, which supposes an ontological duality between nature, the domain of necessity, and culture, the domain of spontaneity, areas separated by metonymic discontinuity. The 'animic mode' is characteristic of societies in which animals are the 'strategic focus of the objectification of nature and of its socialization' (1992: 115), as is the case amongst indigenous peoples of America, reigning supreme over those social morphologies lacking in elaborate internal segmentations. But this mode can also be found co-existing or combined with totemism, wherein such segmentations exist, the Bororo and their *aroe/bope* dualism being such a case.[5]

These ideas form part of a theory which I cannot discuss here as fully as it would merit. I merely comment on the contrast between animism and naturalism but from a somewhat different angle from the original one. (Totemism, as defined by Descola, seems to me to be a heterogeneous phenomenon, primarily classificatory rather than cosmological: it is not a system of *relations* between nature and culture as is the case in the other two modes, but rather of purely logical and differential *correlations*.)

Animism could be defined as an ontology which postulates the social character of relations between humans and non-humans: the space between nature and society is itself social. Naturalism is founded on the inverted axiom: relations between society and nature are themselves natural. Indeed, if in the animic mode the distinction 'nature/culture' is internal to the social world, humans and animals being immersed in the same socio-cosmic medium (and in this sense 'nature' is a part of an encompassing sociality), then in naturalist ontology, the distinction 'nature/culture' is internal to nature (and in this sense, human society is one natural phenomenon amongst others). Animism has 'society' as the unmarked pole, naturalism has 'nature': these poles function, respectively and contrastively, as the universal dimension of each mode. Thus animism and naturalism are hierarchical and metonymical structures (this distinguishes them from totemism, which is based on a metaphoric correlation between equipollent opposites).

In Western naturalist ontology, the nature/society interface is natural: humans are organisms like the rest, body-objects in 'ecological' interaction with other bodies and forces, all of them ruled by the necessary laws of biology and physics; 'productive forces' harness, and thereby express, natural forces. Social relations, that is, contractual or instituted relations between subjects, can only exist internal to human society. But how alien to nature – this would be the problem of naturalism – are these relations? Given the universality of nature, the status of the human and social world is unstable and, as the history of Western thought shows, it perpetually oscillates between a naturalistic monism ('sociobiology' being one of its current avatars) and an ontological dualism of nature/culture ('culturalism' being its contemporary expression). The assertion of this latter dualism, for all

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that, only reinforces the final referential character of the notion of nature, by revealing itself to be the direct descendant of the opposition between Nature and Super*nature*. Culture is the modern name of Spirit – let us recall the distinction between *Naturwissenschaften* and *Geisteswissenschaften* – or at the least it is the name of the compromise between Nature and Grace. Of animism, we would be tempted to say that the instability is located in the opposite pole: there the problem is how to administer the mixture of humanity and animality constituting animals, and not, as is the case amongst ourselves, the combination of culture and nature which characterize humans; the point is to differentiate a 'nature' out of the universal sociality.

However, can animism be defined as a projection of differences and qualities internal to the human world onto non-human worlds, as a 'socio-centric' model in which categories and social relations are used to map the universe? This interpretation by analogy is explicit in some glosses on the theory: 'if totemic systems model society after nature, then animic systems model nature after society' (Århem 1996: 185). The problem here, obviously, is to avoid any undesirable proximity with the traditional sense of 'animism', or with the reduction of 'primitive classifications' to emanations of social morphology; but equally the problem is to go beyond other classical characterizations of the relation between society and nature such as Radcliffe-Brown's.[6]

Ingold (1991; 1996) showed how schemes of analogical projection or social modelling of nature escape naturalist reductionism only to fall into a nature/culture dualism which by distinguishing 'really natural' nature from 'culturally constructed' nature reveals itself to be a typical cosmological antinomy faced with infinite regression. The notion of model or metaphor supposes a previous distinction between a domain wherein social relations are constitutive and literal and another where they are representational and metaphorical. Animism, interpreted as human sociality projected onto the non-human world, would be nothing but the metaphor of a metonymy.

Amongst the questions remaining to be resolved, therefore, is that of knowing whether animism can be described as a figurative use of categories pertaining to the human-social domain to conceptualize the domain of non-humans and their relations with the former. Another question: if animism depends on the attribution of human cognitive and sensory faculties to animals, and the same form of subjectivity, then what in the end is the difference between humans and animals? If animals are people, then why do they not see us as people? Why, to be precise, the perspectivism? Finally, if animism is a way of objectifying nature in which the dualism of nature/culture does not hold, then what is to be done with the abundant indications regarding the centrality of this opposition to South American cosmologies? Are we dealing with just another 'totemic illusion', if not with an ingenuous projection of our Western dualism?

## *Ethnocentrism*

In a well-known essay, Lévi-Strauss observed that for 'savages' humanity ceases at the boundary of the group, a notion which is exemplified by the widespread auto-ethnonym meaning 'real humans', which, in turn, implies a definition of strangers as somehow pertaining to the domain of the extra-human. Therefore, ethnocentrism would not be the privilege of the West but a natural ideological

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attitude, inherent to human collective life. Lévi-Strauss illustrates the universal reciprocity of this attitude with an anecdote:

> In the Greater Antilles, some years after the discovery of America, whilst the Spanish were dispatching inquisitional commissions to investigate whether the natives had a soul or not, these very natives were busy drowning the white people they had captured in order to find out, after lengthy observation, whether or not the corpses were subject to putrefaction (1973: 384).

The general point of this parable (from which Lévi-Strauss derived the famous moral: 'The barbarian is first and foremost the man who believes in barbarism') is quite simple: the Indians, like the European invaders, considered that only the group to which they belong incarnates humanity; strangers are on the other side of the border which separates humans from animals and spirits, culture from nature and supernature. As matrix and condition for the existence of ethnocentrism, the nature/culture opposition appears to be a universal of social apperception.

At the time when Lévi-Strauss was writing these lines, the strategy of vindicating the full humanity of savages was to demonstrate that they made the same distinctions as we do: the proof that they were true humans is that they considered that they alone were the true humans. Like us, they distinguished culture from nature and they too believed that *Naturvölker* are always the others. The universality of the cultural distinction between Nature and Culture bore witness to the universality of culture as human nature. In sum, the answer to the question of the Spanish investigators (which can be read as a sixteenth-century version of the 'problem of other minds') was positive: savages do have souls.

Now, everything has changed. The savages are no longer ethnocentric but rather cosmocentric; instead of having to prove that they are humans because they distinguish themselves from animals, we now have to recognize how *in*human *we* are for opposing humans to animals in a way they never did: for them nature and culture are part of the same sociocosmic field. Not only would Amerindians put a wide berth between themselves and the Great Cartesian Divide which separated humanity from animality, but their views anticipate the fundamental lessons of ecology which we are only now in a position to assimilate (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976). Before, the Indians' refusal to concede predicates of humanity to other men was of note; now we stress that they extend such predicates far beyond the frontiers of their own species in a demonstration of 'ecosophic' knowledge (Århem 1993) which we should emulate in as far as the limits of our objectivism permit. Formerly, it had been necessary to combat the assimilation of the savage mind to narcissistic animism, the infantile stage of naturalism, showing that totemism affirmed the cognitive distinction between culture and nature; now, neo-animism reveals itself as the recognition of the universal admixture of subjects and objects, humans and non-humans against modern *hubris*, the primitive and post-modern 'hybrids', to borrow a term from Latour (1991).

Two antinomies then, which are, in fact, only one: either Amerindians are ethnocentrically 'stingy' in the extension of their concept of humanity and they 'totemically' oppose nature and culture; or they are cosmocentric and 'animic' and do not profess to such a distinction, being models of relativist tolerance, postulating a multiplicity of points of view on the world.

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I believe that the solution to these antinomies[7] lies not in favouring one branch over the other, sustaining, for example, the argument that the most recent characterization of American attitudes is the correct one and relegating the other to the outer darkness of pre-post-modernity. Rather, the point is to show that the 'thesis' as well as the 'antithesis' are true (both correspond to solid ethnographic intuitions), but that they apprehend the same phenomena from different angles; and also it is to show that both are false in that they refer to a substantivist conceptualization of the categories of Nature and Culture (whether it be to affirm or negate them) which is not applicable to Amerindian cosmologies.

The first point to be considered is that the Amerindian words which are usually translated as 'human being' and which figure in those supposedly ethnocentric self-designations do not denote humanity as a natural species. They refer rather to the social condition of personhood, and they function (pragmatically when not syntactically) less as nouns than as pronouns. They indicate the position of the subject; they are enunciative markers, not names. Far from manifesting a semantic shrinking of a common name to a proper name (taking 'people' to be the name of the tribe), these words move in the opposite direction, going from substantive to perspective (using 'people' as a collective pronoun 'we people/us'). For this very reason, indigenous categories of identity have that enormous contextual variability of scope that characterizes pronouns, marking contrastively Ego's immediate kin, his/her local group, all humans, or even all beings endowed with subjectivity: their coagulation as 'ethnonyms' seems largely to be an artefact of interactions with ethnographers. Nor is it by chance that the majority of Amerindian ethnonyms which enter the literature are not self-designations, but rather names (frequently pejorative) conferred by other groups: ethnonymic objectivation is primordially applied to others, not to the ones in the position of subject. Ethnonyms are names of third parties; they belong to the category of '*they*' not to the category of '*we*'. This, by the way, is consistent with a widespread avoidance of self-reference on the level of personal onomastics: names are not spoken by the bearers nor in their presence; to name is to externalize, to separate (from) the subject.

Thus self-references such as 'people' mean 'person', not 'member of the human species', and they are personal pronouns registering the point of view of the subject talking, not proper names. To say, then, that animals and spirits are people is to say that they are persons, and to attribute to non-humans the capacities of conscious intentionality and agency which define the position of the subject. Such capacities are objectified as the soul or spirit with which these non-humans are endowed. Whatever possesses a soul is a subject, and whatever has a soul is capable of having a point of view. Amerindian souls, be they human or animal, are thus indexical categories, cosmological deictics whose analysis calls not so much for an animist psychology or substantialist ontology as for a theory of the sign or a perspectival pragmatics (Taylor 1993*a*; 1993*b*; Viveiros de Castro 1992*b*).

Thus, every being to whom a point of view is attributed would be a subject; or better, wherever there is a point of view there is a subject position. Whilst our constructionist epistemology can be summed up in the Saussurean formula: *the point of view creates the object* – the subject being the original, fixed condition whence the point of view emanates – Amerindian ontological perspectivism proceeds along the lines that the *point of view creates the subject*; whatever is activated

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or 'agented' by the point of view will be a subject.[8] This is why terms such as *wari'* (Vilaça 1992), *dene* (McDonnell 1984) or *masa* (Århem 1993) mean 'people', but they can be used for – and therefore used by – very different classes of beings: used by humans they denote human beings; but used by peccaries, howler monkeys or beavers they self-refer to peccaries, howler monkeys or beavers.

As it happens, however, these non-humans placed in the subject perspective do not merely 'call' themselves 'people'; they see themselves anatomically and culturally as *humans*. The symbolic spiritualization of animals would imply their imaginary hominization and culturalization; thus the anthropomorphic-anthropocentric character of indigenous thought would seem to be unquestionable. However, I believe that something totally different is at issue. Any being which vicariously occupies the point of view of reference, being in the position of subject, sees itself as a member of the human species. The human bodily form and human culture – the schemata of perception and action 'embodied' in specific dispositions – are deictics of the same type as the self-designations discussed above. They are reflexive or apperceptive schematisms by which all subjects apprehend themselves, and not literal and constitutive human predicates projected metaphorically (i.e. improperly) onto non-humans. Such deictic 'attributes' are immanent in the viewpoint, and move with it (Brightman 1993: 47). Human beings – naturally – enjoy the same prerogative and therefore see themselves as such.[9] It is not that animals are subjects because they are humans in disguise, but rather that they are human because they are potential subjects. This is to say *Culture is the Subject's nature*; it is the form in which every subject experiences its own nature. Animism is not a projection of substantive human *qualities* cast onto animals, but rather expresses the logical equivalence of the reflexive *relations* that humans and animals each have to themselves: salmon are to (see) salmon as humans are to (see) humans, namely, (as) human.[10] If, as we have observed, the common condition of humans and animals is humanity not animality, this is because 'humanity' is the name for the general form taken by the Subject.

## *Multinaturalism*

With this we may have discarded analogical anthropocentrism, but only apparently to adopt relativism.[11] For would this cosmology of multiple viewpoints not imply that 'every perspective is equally valid and true' and that 'a correct and true representation of the world does not exist' (Århem 1993: 124)?

But this is exactly the question: is the Amerindian perspectivist theory in fact asserting a multiplicity of representations of the same world? It is sufficient to consider ethnographic evidence to perceive that the opposite applies: all beings see ('represent') the world in the same way – what changes is the world that they see. Animals impose the same categories and values on reality as humans do: their worlds, like ours, revolve around hunting and fishing, cooking and fermented drinks, cross-cousins and war, initiation rituals, shamans, chiefs, spirits. 'Everybody is involved in fishing and hunting; everybody is involved in feasts, social hierarchy, chiefs, war, and disease, all the way up and down' (Guédon 1984: 142). If the moon, snakes and jaguars see humans as tapirs or white-lipped peccaries (Baer 1994: 224), it is because they, like us, eat tapirs and peccaries, people's food. It could only be this way, since, being people in their

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own sphere, non-humans see things *as* 'people' do. But the things *that* they see are different: what to us is blood, is maize beer to the jaguar; what to the souls of the dead is a rotting corpse, to us is soaking manioc; what we see as a muddy waterhole, the tapirs see as a great ceremonial house.

(Multi)cultural relativism supposes a diversity of subjective and partial representations, each striving to grasp an external and unified nature, which remains perfectly indifferent to those representations. Amerindian thought proposes the opposite: a representational or phenomenological unity which is purely pronominal or deictic, indifferently applied to a radically objective diversity. One single 'culture', multiple 'natures' – perspectivism is multinaturalist, for a perspective is not a representation.

A perspective is not a representation because representations are a property of the mind or spirit, whereas the point of view is located in the body.[12] The ability to adopt a point of view is undoubtedly a power of the soul, and non-humans are subjects in so far as they have (or are) spirit; but the differences between viewpoints (and a viewpoint is nothing if not a difference) lies not in the soul. Since the soul is formally identical in all species, it can only see the same things everywhere – the difference is given in the specificity of bodies. This permits answers to be found for our questions: if non-humans are persons and have souls, then what distinguishes them from humans? And why, being people, do they not see us as people?

Animals see in the *same* way as we do *different* things because their bodies are different from ours. I am not referring to physiological differences – as far as that is concerned, Amerindians recognize a basic uniformity of bodies – but rather to affects, dispositions or capacities which render the body of every species unique: what it eats, how it communicates, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary, and so forth. The visible shape of the body is a powerful sign of these differences in affect, although it can be deceptive since a human appearance could, for example, be concealing a jaguar-affect. Thus, what I call 'body' is not a synonym for distinctive substance or fixed shape; it is an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitute a *habitus*. Between the formal subjectivity of souls and the substantial materiality of organisms there is an intermediate plane which is occupied by the body as a bundle of affects and capacities and which is the origin of perspectives.

The difference between bodies, however, is only apprehendable from an exterior viewpoint, by an other, since, for itself, every type of being has the same form (the generic form of a human being): bodies are the way in which alterity is apprehended as such. In normal conditions we do not see animals as people, and vice-versa, because our respective bodies (and the perspectives which they allow) are different. Thus, if 'culture' is a reflexive perspective of the subject, objectified through the concept of soul, it can be said that 'nature' is the viewpoint which the subject takes of other body-affects; if Culture is the Subject's nature, then *Nature is the form of the Other as body*, that is, as the object for a subject. Culture takes the self-referential form of the pronoun 'I'; nature is the form of the non-person or the object, indicated by the impersonal pronoun 'it' (Benveniste 1966*a*: 256).

If, in the eyes of Amerindians, the body makes the difference, then it is easily understood why, in the anecdote told by Lévi-Strauss, the methods of investigation into the humanity of the other, employed by the Spanish and the inhabi-

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tants of the Antilles, showed such asymmetry. For the Europeans, the issue was to decide whether the others possessed a soul; for the Indians, the aim was to find out what kind of body the others had. For the Europeans the great diacritic, the marker of difference in perspective, is the soul (are Indians humans or animals?); for the Indians it is the body (are Europeans humans or spirits?). The Europeans never doubted that the Indians had bodies; the Indians never doubted that the Europeans had souls (animals and spirits have them too). What the Indians wanted to know was whether the bodies of those 'souls' were capable of the same affects as their own – whether they had the bodies of humans or the bodies of spirits, non-putrescible and protean. In sum: European ethnocentrism consisted in doubting whether other bodies have the same souls as they themselves; Amerindian ethnocentrism in doubting whether other souls had the same bodies.

As Ingold has stressed (1994; 1996), the status of humans in Western thought is essentially ambiguous: on the one hand, humankind is an animal species amongst others, and animality is a domain that includes humans; on the other hand, humanity is a moral condition which excludes animals. These two statuses co-exist in the problematic and disjunctive notion of 'human nature'. In other words, our cosmology postulates a physical continuity and a metaphysical discontinuity between humans and animals, the former making of man an object for the natural sciences, the latter an object for the 'humanities'. Spirit or mind is our great differentiator: it raises us above animals and matter in general, it distinguishes cultures, it makes each person unique before his or her fellow beings. The body, in contrast, is the major integrator: it connects us to the rest of the living, united by a universal substrate (DNA, carbon chemistry) which, in turn, links up with the ultimate nature of all material bodies.[13] In contrast to this, Amerindians postulate a metaphysical continuity and a physical discontinuity between the beings of the cosmos, the former resulting in animism, the latter in perspectivism: the spirit or soul (here not an immaterial substance but rather a reflexive form) integrates, while the body (not a material organism but a system of active affects) differentiates.

## *The spirit's many bodies*

The idea that the body appears to be the great differentiator in Amazonian cosmologies – that is, as that which unites beings of the same type, to the extent that it differentiates them from others – allows us to reconsider some of the classic questions of the ethnology of the region in a new light.

Thus, the now old theme of the importance of corporeality in Amazonian societies (a theme that much predates the current 'embodiment' craze – see Seeger *et al.* 1979) acquires firmer foundations. For example, it becomes possible to gain a better understanding of why the categories of identity – be they personal, social or cosmological – are so frequently expressed through bodily idioms, particularly through food practices and body decoration. The universal symbolic importance of food and cooking regimes in Amazonia – from the mythological 'raw and the cooked' of Lévi-Strauss, to the Piro idea that what literally (i.e. naturally) makes them different from white people is 'real food' (Gow 1991); from the food avoidances which define 'groups of substance' in Central Brazil (Seeger 1980) to the basic classification of beings according to

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their eating habits (Baer 1994: 88); from the ontological productivity of commensality, similarity of diet and relative condition of prey-object and predator-subject (Vilaça 1992) to the omnipresence of cannibalism as the 'predicative' horizon of all relations with the other, be they matrimonial, alimentary or bellicose (Viveiros de Castro 1993) – this universality demonstrates that the set of habits and processes that constitute bodies is precisely the location from which identity and difference emerge.

The same can be said of the intense semiotic use of the body in the definition of personal identities and in the circulation of social values (Mentore 1993; Turner 1995). The connexion between this overdetermination of the body (particularly of its visible surface) and the restricted recourse in the Amazonian *socius* to objects capable of supporting relations – that is, a situation wherein social exchange is not mediated by material objectifications such as those characteristic of gift and commodity economies – has been shrewdly pinpointed by Turner, who has shown how the human body therefore must appear as the prototypical social object. However, the Amerindian emphasis on the social construction of the body cannot be taken as the culturalization of a natural substract but rather as the production of a distinctly human body, meaning *naturally* human. Such a process seems to be expressing not so much a wish to 'de-animalize' the body through its cultural marking, but rather to particularize a body still too generic, differentiating it from the bodies of other human collectivities as well as from those of other species. The body, as the site of differentiating perspective, must be differentiated to the highest degree in order completely to express it.

The human body can be seen as the locus of the confrontation between humanity and animality, but not because it is essentially animal by nature and needs to be veiled and controlled by culture (Rivière 1994). The body is the subject's fundamental expressive instrument and at the same time the object *par excellence*, that which is presented to the sight of the other. It is no coincidence, then, that the maximum social objectification of bodies, their maximal particularization expressed in decoration and ritual exhibition is at the same time the moment of maximum animalization (Goldman 1975: 178; Turner 1991; 1995), when bodies are covered by feathers, colours, designs, masks and other animal prostheses. Man ritually clothed as an animal is the counterpart to the animal supernaturally naked. The former, transformed into an animal, reveals to himself the 'natural' distinctiveness of his body; the latter, free of its exterior form and revealing itself as human, shows the 'supernatural' similarity of spirit. The model of spirit is the human spirit, but the model of body is the bodies of animals; and if from the point of view of the subject culture takes the generic form of 'I' and nature of 'it/they', then the objectification of the subject to itself demands a singularization of bodies – which naturalizes culture, i.e. embodies it – whilst the subjectification of the object implies communication at the level of spirit – which culturalizes nature, i.e. supernaturalizes it. Put in these terms, the Amerindian distinction of Nature/Culture, before it is dissolved in the name of a common animic human-animal sociality, must be re-read in the light of somatic perspectivism.

It is important to note that these Amerindian bodies are not thought of as given but rather as made. Therefore, an emphasis on the methods for the continuous fabrication of the body (Viveiros de Castro 1979); a notion of kinship as a process of active assimilation of individuals (Gow 1989; 1991) through the sharing of

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bodily substances, sexual and alimentary – and not as a passive inheritance of some substantial essence; the theory of memory which inscribes it in the flesh (Viveiros de Castro 1992*a*: 201-7), and more generally the theory which situates knowledge in the body (Kensinger 1995: ch. 22; McCallum 1996). The Amerindian *Bildung* happens in the body more than in the spirit: there is no 'spiritual' change which is not a bodily transformation, a redefinition of its affects and capacities. Furthermore, while the distinction between body and soul is obviously pertinent to these cosmologies, it cannot be interpreted as an ontological discontinuity (Townsley 1993: 454-5). As bundles of affects and sites of perspective, rather than material organisms, bodies 'are' souls, just, incidentally, as souls and spirits 'are' bodies. The dual (or plural) conception of the human soul, widespread in indigenous Amazonia, distinguishes between the soul (or souls) of the body, reified register of an individual's history, site of memory and affect, and a 'true soul', pure, formal subjective singularity, the abstract mark of a person (e.g. McCallum 1996; Viveiros de Castro 1992*a*: 201-14). On the other hand, the souls of the dead and the spirits which inhabit the universe are not immaterial entities, but equally types of bodies, endowed with properties – affects – *sui generis*. Indeed, body and soul, just like nature and culture, do not correspond to substantives, self-subsistent entities or ontological provinces, but rather to pronouns or phenomenological perspectives.

The performative rather than given character of the body, a conception that requires it to differentiate itself 'culturally' in order for it to be 'naturally' different, has an obvious connexion with interspecific metamorphosis, a possibility suggested by Amerindian cosmologies. We need not be surprised by a way of thinking which posits bodies as the great differentiators yet at the same time states their transformability. Our cosmology supposes a singular distinctiveness of minds, but not even for this reason does it declare communication (albeit solipsism is a constant problem) to be impossible, or deny the mental/spiritual transformations induced by processes such as education and religious conversion; in truth, it is precisely because the spiritual is the locus of difference that conversion becomes necessary (the Europeans wanted to know whether Indians had souls in order to modify them). Bodily metamorphosis is the Amerindian counterpart to the European theme of spiritual conversion.[14] In the same way, if solipsism is the phantom that continuously threatens our cosmology – raising the fear of not recognizing ourselves in our 'own kind' because they are not like us, given the potentially absolute singularity of minds – then the possibility of metamorphosis expresses the opposite fear, of no longer being able to differentiate between the human and the animal, and, in particular, the fear of seeing the human who lurks within the body of the animal one eats[15] – hence the importance of food prohibitions and precautions linked to the spiritual potency of animals, mentioned above. The phantom of cannibalism is the Amerindian equivalent to the problem of solipsism: if the latter derives from the uncertainty as to whether the natural similarity of bodies guarantees a real community of spirit, then the former suspects that the similarity of souls might prevail over the real differences of body and that all animals that are eaten might, despite the shamanistic efforts to de-subjectivize them, remain human. This, of course, does not prevent us having amongst ourselves more or less radical solipsists, such as the relativists, nor that various Amerindian societies be purposefully and more or less literally cannibalistic.[16]

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The notion of metamorphosis is directly linked to the doctrine of animal 'clothing', to which I have referred. How are we to reconcile the idea that the body is the site of differentiating perspectives with the theme of the 'appearance' and 'essence' which is always evoked to interpret animism and perspectivism (Århem 1993: 122; Descola 1986: 120; Hugh-Jones 1996; Rivière 1994)? Here seems to me to lie an important mistake, which is that of taking bodily 'appearance' to be inert and false, whereas spiritual 'essence' is active and real (see the definitive observations of Goldman 1975: 63). I argue that nothing could be further from the Indians' minds when they speak of bodies in terms of 'clothing'. It is not so much that the body is a clothing but rather that clothing is a body. We are dealing with societies which inscribe efficacious meanings onto the skin, and which use animal masks (or at least know their principle) endowed with the power metaphysically to transform the identities of those who wear them, if used in the appropriate ritual context. To put on mask-clothing is not so much to conceal a human essence beneath an animal appearance, but rather to activate the powers of a different body.[17] The animal clothes that shamans use to travel the cosmos are not fantasies but instruments: they are akin to diving equipment, or space suits, and not to carnival masks. The intention when donning a wet suit is to be able to function like a fish, to breathe underwater, not to conceal oneself under a strange covering. In the same way, the 'clothing' which, amongst animals, covers an internal 'essence' of a human type, is not a mere disguise but their distinctive equipment, endowed with the affects and capacities which define each animal.[18] It is true that appearances can be deceptive (Hallowell 1960; Rivière 1994); but my impression is that in Amerindian narratives which take as a theme animal 'clothing' the interest lies more in what these clothes do rather than what they hide. Besides this, between a being and its appearance is its body, which is more than just that – and the very same narratives relate how appearances are always 'unmasked' by bodily behaviour which is inconsistent with them. In short: there is no doubt that bodies are discardable and exchangeable and that 'behind' them lie subjectivities which are formally identical to humans. But the idea is not similar to our opposition between appearance and essence; it merely manifests the objective permutability of bodies which is based in the subjective equivalence of souls.

Another classic theme in South American ethnology which could be interpreted within this framework is that of the sociological discontinuity between the living and the dead (Carneiro da Cunha 1978). The fundamental distinction between the living and the dead is made by the body and precisely not by the spirit; death is a bodily catastrophe which prevails as differentiator over the common 'animation' of the living and the dead. Amerindian cosmologies dedicate equal or greater interest to the way in which the dead see reality as they do to the vision of animals, and as is the case for the latter, they underline the radical differences *vis-à-vis* the world of the living. To be precise, being definitively separated from their bodies, the dead are not human. As spirits defined by their disjunction from a human body, the dead are logically attracted to the bodies of animals; this is why to die is to transform into an animal (Pollock 1985: 95; Schwartzman 1988: 268; Turner 1995: 152; Vilaça 1992: 247-55), as it is to transform into other figures of bodily alterity, such as affines and enemies. In this manner, if animism affirms a subjective and social continuity between humans and animals, its somatic complement, perspectivism, establishes an objective

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discontinuity, equally social, between live humans and dead humans.[19]

Having examined the differentiating component of Amerindian perspectivism, it remains for me to attribute a cosmological 'function' to the trans-specific unity of the spirit. This is the point at which, I believe, a relational definition could be given for a category, Supernature, which nowadays has fallen into disrepute (actually, ever since Durkheim), but whose pertinence seems to me to be unquestionable. Apart from its use in labelling cosmographic domains of a 'hyper-uranian' type, or in defining a third type of intentional beings occurring in indigenous cosmologies, which are neither human nor animal (I refer to 'spirits'), the notion of supernature may serve to designate a specific relational context and particular phenomenological quality, which is as distinct from the intersubjective relations that define the social world as from the 'inter-objective' relations with the bodies of animals.

Following the analogy with the pronominal set (Benveniste 1966*a*; 1966*b*) we can see that between the reflexive 'I' of culture (the generator of the concepts of soul or spirit) and the impersonal 'it' of nature (definer of the relation with somatic alterity), there is a position missing, the 'you', the *second person*, or the other taken as other subject, whose point of view is the latent echo of that of the 'I'. I believe that this concept can aid in determining the supernatural context. An abnormal context wherein a subject is captured by another cosmologically dominant point of view, wherein he is the 'you' of a non-human perspective, *Supernature is the form of the Other as Subject,* implying an objectification of the human I as a 'you' for this Other. The typical 'supernatural' situation in an Amerindian world is the meeting in the forest between a man – always on his own – and a being which is seen at first merely as an animal or a person, then reveals itself as a spirit or a dead person and speaks to the man (the dynamics of this communication are well analysed by Taylor 1993*a*).[20] These encounters can be lethal for the interlocutor who, overpowered by the non-human subjectivity, passes over to its side, transforming himself into a being of the same species as the speaker: dead, spirit or animal. He who responds to a 'you' spoken by a non-human accepts the condition of being its 'second person', and when assuming in his turn the position of 'I' does so already as a non-human. The canonical form of these supernatural encounters, then, consists in suddenly finding out that the other is 'human', that is, that *it* is the human, which automatically dehumanizes and alienates the interlocutor and transforms him into a prey object, that is, an animal. Only shamans, multinatural beings by definition and office, are always capable of transiting the various perspectives, calling and being called 'you' by the animal subjectivities and spirits without losing their condition as human subjects.[21]

I would conclude by observing that Amerindian perspectivism has a vanishing point, as it were, where the differences between points of view are at the same time annulled and exacerbated: myth, which thus takes on the character of an absolute discourse. In myth, every species of being appears to others as it appears to itself (as human), while acting as if already showing its distinctive and definitive nature (as animal, plant or spirit). In a certain sense, all the beings which people mythology are shamans, which indeed is explicitly affirmed by some Amazonian cultures (Guss 1989: 52). Myth speaks of a state of being where bodies and names, souls and affects, the I and the Other interpenetrate, submerged in the same pre-subjective and pre-objective milieu – a milieu whose

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end is precisely what the mythology sets out to tell.

## NOTES

A shorter version of this article was presented as a Munro Lecture at the University of Edinburgh earlier this year. The article is the result of an extended dialogue with Tania Stolze Lima, who, in parallel with and synchronous to its earlier version (published first in Portuguese), has written a masterful article on perspectivism in Juruna cosmology (Lima 1996). Peter Gow (who, together with Elizabeth Ewart, translated most of the article into English), Aparecida Vilaça, Philippe Descola and Michael Houseman made invaluable suggestions at various stages in the elaboration of the materials I present here. Bruno Latour (1991) was an indirect but crucial source of inspiration. After this article had reached its present form, I read an essay by Fritz Krause (1931, mentioned by Boelscher 1989: 212 n.10) which advances ideas strikingly similar to some developed here.

[1] This notion of the body as a 'clothing' can be found amongst the Makuna (Århem 1993), the Yagua (Chaumeil 1983: 125-7), the Piro (Gow, pers. comm.), the Trio (Rivière 1994) the Upper Xingu societies (Gregor 1977: 322). The notion is very likely pan-American, having considerable symbolic yield for example in North-west Coast cosmologies (see Goldman 1975 and Boelscher 1989), if not of much wider distribution, a question I cannot consider here.

[2] For some examples see amongst many others: Weiss 1969: 158; 1972 (Campa); Baer 1994: 102, 119, 224; Renard-Casevitz 1991: 24-31 (Matsiguenga); Grenand 1980: 42 (Wayapi); Viveiros de Castro 1992*a*: 68 (Araweté); Osborn 1990: 151 (U'wa); Jara 1996: 68-73 (Akuriyo).

[3] See for example, Saladin d'Anglure 1990; Fienup-Riordan 1994 (Eskimo); Nelson 1983; McDonnell 1984 (Koyukon, Kaska); Tanner 1979; Scott 1989; Brightman 1993 (Cree); Hallowell 1960 (Ojibwa); Goldman 1975 (Kwakiutl); Guédon 1984 (Tsimshian); Boelscher 1989 (Haida). See also Howell 1984; 1996; and Karim 1981, for the Chewong and Ma'Betisék of Malaysia; for Siberia, Hamayon 1990.

[4] See Århem 1993; Crocker 1985; Hugh-Jones 1996; Overing 1985; 1986; Vilaça 1992.

[5] Or, as we may add, the case of the Ojibwa, where the co-existence of the systems of *totem* and *manido* (Lévi-Strauss 1962*a*: 25-33) served as a matrix for the general opposition between totemism and sacrifice (Lévi-Strauss 1962*b*: 295-302) and can be directly interpreted within the framework of a distinction between totemism and animism.

[6] See Radcliffe-Brown 1952: 130-1, who, amongst other interesting arguments, distinguishes *processes of personification* of species and natural phenomena (which 'permits nature to be thought of as if it were a society of persons, and so makes of it a social or moral order'), like those found amongst the Eskimos and Andaman Islanders, from *systems of classification* of natural species, like those found in Australia and which compose a 'system of social solidarities' between man and nature – this obviously calls to mind Descola's distinction of animism/totemism as well as the contrast of *manido/totem* explored by Lévi-Strauss.

[7] The uncomfortable tension inherent in such antinomies can be gauged in Howell's article (1996) on Chewong cosmology, where the Chewong are described as being both 'relativist' and 'anthropocentric' – a double mischaracterization, I believe.

[8] 'Such is the foundation of perspectivism. It does not express a dependency on a predefined subject; on the contrary, whatever accedes to the point of view will be subject ...' (Deleuze 1988: 27).

[9] 'Human beings see themselves as such; the Moon, the snakes, the jaguars and the Mother of Smallpox, however, see them as tapirs or peccaries, which they kill' (Baer 1994: 224).

[10] If salmon look to salmon as humans to humans – and this is 'animism' – salmon do not look human to humans (they look like salmon), and neither do humans to salmon (they look like spirits, or maybe bears; see Guedon 1984: 141) – and this is 'perspectivism'. Ultimately, then, animism and perspectivism may have a deeper relationship to totemism than Descola's model allows for.

[11] The attribution of human-like consciousness and intentionality (to say nothing of human bodily form and cultural habits) to non-human beings has been indifferently denominated 'anthropocentrism' or 'anthropomorphism'. However, these two labels can be taken to denote radically opposed cosmological outlooks. Western popular evolutionism is very anthropocentric, but not particularly anthropomorphic. On the other hand, 'primitive animism' may be characterized as anthropomorphic, but it is definitely not anthropocentric: if sundry other beings

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besides humans are 'human', then we humans are not a special lot.

[12] 'The point of view is located in the body, says Leibniz' (Deleuze 1988: 16).

[13] The counterproof of the singularity of the spirit in our cosmologies lies in the fact that when we try to universalize it, we are obliged – now that supernature is out of bounds – to identify it with the structure and function of the brain. The spirit can only be universal (natural) if it is (in) the body.

[14] The rarity of unequivocal examples of spirit possession in the complex of Amerindian shamanism may derive from the prevalence of the theme of bodily metamorphosis. The classical problem of the religious conversion of Amerindians could also be further illuminated from this angle; indigenous conceptions of 'acculturation' seem to focus more on the incorporation and embodiment of Western bodily practices (food, clothing, interethnic sex) rather than on spiritual assimilation (language, religion etc.).

[15] The traditional problem of Western mainstream epistemology is how to connect and universalize (individual substances are given, relations have to be made); the problem in Amazonia is how to separate and particularize (relations are given, substances must be defined). See Brightman (1993: 177-85) and Fienup-Riordan (1994: 46-50) – both inspired by Wagner's (1977) ideas about the 'innate' and the 'constructed' – on this contrast.

[16] In Amazonian cannibalism, what is intended is precisely the incorporation of the subject-aspect of the enemy (who is accordingly hyper-subjectivized, in very much the same way as that described by Harrison [1993: 121] for Melanesian warfare), not its desubjectivization as is the case with game animals. See Viveiros de Castro 1992*a*: 290-3; 1996: 98-102; Fausto 1997.

[17] Peter Gow (pers. comm.) tells me that the Piro conceive of the act of putting on clothes as an animating of clothes. See also Goldman (1975: 183) on Kwakiutl masks: 'Masks get "excited" during Winter dances'.

[18] '"Clothing" in this sense does not mean merely a body covering but also refers to the skill and ability to carry out certain tasks' (Rivière in Koelewijn 1987: 306).

[19] Religions based on the cult of the ancestors seem to postulate the inverse: spiritual identity goes beyond the bodily barrier of death, the living and the dead are similar in so far as they manifest the same spirit. We would accordingly have superhuman ancestrality and spiritual possession on one side, animalization of the dead and bodily metamorphosis on the other.

[20] This would be the true significance of the 'deceptiveness of appearances' theme: appearances deceive because one is never certain whose point of view is dominant, that is, which world is in force when one interacts with other beings. The similarity of this idea to the familiar injunction not to 'trust your senses' of Western epistemologies is, I fear, just another deceitful appearance.

[21] As we have remarked, a good part of shamanistic work consists in de-subjectivizing animals, that is in transforming them into pure, natural bodies capable of being consumed without danger. In contrast, what defines spirits is precisely the fact that they are inedible; this transforms them into eaters *par excellence*, i.e. into anthropophagous beings. In this way, it is common for the great predators to be the preferred forms in which spirits manifest themselves, and it is understandable that game animals should see humans as spirits, that spirits and predator animals should see us as game animals and that animals taken to be inedible should be assimilated to spirits (Viveiros de Castro 1978). The scales of edibility of indigenous Amazonia (Hugh-Jones 1996) should therefore include spirits at their negative pole.

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## Deixis cosmologique et perspectivisme amérindien

*Résumé*

Cet article discute la signification du 'perspectivisme' amérindien, c'est-à-dire les idées qui concernent la façon dont les humains, les animaux et les esprits se perçoivent eux-mêmes et se perçoivent les uns les autres dans les cosmologies amérindiennes. Ces idées suggèrent la possibilité de redéfinir les catégories classiques de 'nature', 'culture' et 'supernature' sur la base des concepts de perspective ou de point de vue. L'article soutient plus particulièrement que l'antinomie entre deux caractérisations de la pensée indigène – d'une part l''ethnocentrisme' selon lequel les attributs de l'humanité seraient refusés aux humains appartenant à d'autres groupes, et d'autre part l''animisme', qui appliquerait ces qualités humaines par extension à des êtres appartenant à d'autres espèces – peut être résolue si l'on considère la différence entre les aspects spirituels et corporels des êtres.

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