

Using ethnographic examples from the course, explore the value of Viveiros de Castro's theory of Perspectivism.

Eduardo Viveiros De Castro (1998) researched over a hundred ethnographic studies of Amerindian tribes across South America and formed his theory of Perspectivism. On the surface this theory challenges the idea of 'personhood' and examines what exactly a 'human' is in comparison to the notion of nature and touches on the debate between 'culture' and 'nature.' This essay will explore Viveiros De Castro's theory of perspectivism using ethnographic examples and will also explore it's value in a world suffering from environmental destruction and global warming.

Viveiros de Castro's theory of perspectivism became the foundation of understanding the concept of 'personhood' through ethnographic studies of the Amerindian Tribes in the Amazon rainforest of South America. It is the understanding in which 'the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, human or non-human, which apprehend reality from distinct points of view' (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, p.469). In Vieviros de Castro's article 'Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism' (1998), Castro explores a perspective carried by such tribes that animals see themselves as people and humans as animals. By looking over a hundred ethnographic studies, he found that all tribes saw 'personhood' through different lenses that vastly contrasts that of the global north. To begin with, perspectivism falls upon a cosmology that some may argue was once a universal belief. This being the idea that at the beginning of time there was only human. Every living thing was human as everything was born from the same substance. It was only then over time that these 'shapes' of human differentiated. For example, animals were created as human but are wrapped in a different skin but through the theory of perspectivism, they are still argued to be human; just in a different form from you and I. Castro recognised that because of this thread of cosmology that ran through Amerindian tribes, he recorded how these tribes treat animals, plants and other aspects of nature, similarly to how they would treat humans; with an emphasis of gratitude and respect. Tribes such as the Yanomami or the Kogi do not see a separation between themselves and nature. They are all one. Castro would argue that fundamentally it is at its heart a spiritual thesis, which is shown through the Amerindian tribes cosmologies and belief that everything within nature has a 'soul' or 'spirit.' 'This internal form is the 'soul' or 'spirit' of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materialized, let us say, in a human bodily schema concealed behind an animal mask' (Viveiros de Castro, 1998, p.553). One could argue then that therefore this theory demolishes human exceptionalism and if understood universally could be transformative in our understanding of the world; possibly allowing for a more sustainable and protective perspective towards our environment.

Viveiros de Castro's research has also proven to show that these cosmological beliefs differ between amerindian tribes. Ethnographic studies suggest that tribes have their own perspectives of the theory of perspectivism in itself. For example, various groups believe that plants are 'natural teachers' as well as 'human' and that by consuming the plant into your body and digesting it, they in turn teach your body internally how to function and stay healthy. These groups attribute beliefs and spirits to something from within nature and treat them with utmost respect and in return seek guidance from them. 'In Amerindian perspectivism, local residents comprehend the world as inhabited by many species of beings endowed with conscience and culture' (Rasmussen, 2011, p.165). Furthermore, 'for Amerindians, more-over, some non-humans can actualize the potential of being human in ways that make their humanity more evident' (Rasmussen, 2011, p.165). This suggests that what many societies would call and recognise as non-human, namely animals, through the theory perspectivism, they appear as more humane because it challenges the notion that animals and humans are seen as separate. To these tribes, they simply are not; in the same way that animals view us as other animals than humans. These groups recognise animals as humans and themselves as humans. This counters popular beliefs upheld by many societies that we as homosapians are above animals and plants and nature in general, when perspectivism challenges these ideas, and sees all of nature as equals.

The Yanomami uphold a cosmology that helped form Viveiros de Castro's theory of perspectivism. As a tribe that lives in the Amazon Rainforest in the south of Venezuela, the Yanomami have a special relationship with the jaguar. To them, the jaguar is human and this is something that was evident through the language they used when discussing a jaguar. For example, they may say that "the jaguar likes to drink beer". They use their language to personify the jaguar as much as possible because to them, the jaguar is a human. The jaguar however still views the humans as animals as Castro would argue that animals naturally do. The Yanomami also believe in animals such as the jaguar having spirits and this is an important concept to them when performing rituals. For example in Lizot's 'Tales of the Yanomami' (1985), a shaman calls the spirits of the animals whilst performing a ritual of inhalation; 'here are the puma spirit... here are also the Taisinakawe, son of thunder, and the Jaguar spirit' (Lizot, 1985, p.122-123). Lizot also records that the Yanomami do not have domestic animals, but that they raise animals as if they were humans and an extension of the tribe. For example, 'dogs are cultural animals, even more so than other animals; like human beings they have names' (Lizot, 1985, p.15). An important ritual to the Yanomami is the burning of humans when they die and the burial of the ashes. Lizot explains to the reader that dogs like human beings are also burned and that 'their ashes are buried, and dogs that were good

hunters are honoured through a little funeral meal' (Lizot, 1985, p.15). It is clear therefore that the Yanomami do view animals as equal to themselves which is why eating certain animals is viewed as cannibalism. 'The Indians do not eat the animals they raise, and when this possibility is suggested to them, they declare that only true cannibals are capable of such an action' (Lizot, 1985, p.15). This becomes a real danger to the Yanomami because of the supernatural fear of eating one's spirit- a human one. 'If such a crime were committed, it would be subject to the same supernatural sanctions and the same illnesses that would punish a murderer' (Lizot, 1985, p.15). Viveiros de Castro also recognises this danger of cannibalism; '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- hence the importance of food prohibitions' (Viveiros De Castro, 1998, p.561).

The Kogi are another tribe from the Amazon Rainforest that one could argue view nature and have a cosmology that is similar to that of Viveiros de Castro's theory of perspectivism. In perspectivism there is the underlying cosmology that everything in nature was created as human in the beginning of time. Likewise the Kogi believe that everything came from the darkness of the 'mother.' It is not clear whether this concept of the mother is exactly human but women are seen as the mother more than men which suggests a human similarity in characteristics. Kogi myth also states that the plant coca was once a beautiful, sexually excessive woman. The Kogi also believe that the driving force behind nature is 'Aluna'- a nine layered egg and that one should try and balance the forces of nature to bring in, for example, a good harvest. The Kogi believe in connecting to a cosmic consciousness that is 'Aluna' and to uphold this deep connection, they must keep everything in the natural world in balance. Therefore they are big believers in sustainability and conserving the environment. After observing the destructive effects of global warming, the Kogi contacted the BBC in 1990 and produced a documentary stressing the importance of protecting nature and the environment. However as more natural disasters have occurred more frequently over the past twenty years, the Kogi reached out to filmmaker Alan Ereira and produced the film 'Aluna' which re-stresses their message that protecting the environment needs to become a universal priority.

'They want to show urgently that the damage caused by logging, mining, the building of power stations, roads and the construction of ports along the coast and at the mouths of rivers- in short expressions of global capitalism that result in the destruction of natural resources- affects what happens at the top of the mountain' (The Guardian, 2013).

Here, the top of the mountain refers their sacred holy mountain which is a common idea amongst many indigenous tribes. One could argue that this divine connection between the Kogi and nature is similar to Viveiros De Castro's theory of perspectivism because it emphasises being one with nature- as if viewing animals and plants as human or divine and therefore it eliminates human exceptionalism and teaches of having a respect for nature that is lost across so many cultures today. The Kogi however put more emphasis on the protection and duty that this equality to nature brings and for them any kind of perspectivism is shown through a more sacred lense. One could argue that by having an understanding of Viveiros De Castro's theory of perspectivism and the basic knowledge of ethnographic studies such as those on the Kogi, it shifts one's view on the environment. By viewing it as human, sacred or equal to us then it calls for a greater personal conviction to nurture it and work with the land affectively.

To conclude, Viveiros De Castro's theory of perspectivism is a relevant understanding that if grasped across societies, may become a beneficial lesson universally to recognise nature as equal to us; to challenge human exceptionalism. Perspectivism creates an understanding that animals and plants are the same as us and therefore one could argue that this can shift a common universal view that animals and the environment is for our consumer use only. It challenges the notion of materialism and aimlessly using natural resources to create produced goods without giving second thought to the destruction this has on our environment. Viveiros De Castro recognises the drive for consumerism this as an 'illness' upon humanity. Perspectivism and the beliefs of the Kogi can make one see that there is a wider value attached to such an understanding that if used more could begin to start conserving and become more sustainable in how we live out our lives. 'Humans are those who continue as they have always been: animals are ex-humans, not humans ex-animals' (Viveiros De Castro, 1998, p.554). Instead we were socialised into a behaviour that favours culture over nature. Levi-Strauss summarises this well; 'culture therefore relates to the specific differences between men and animals, thus leading to what has ever since been the classic antithesis between *nature* and *culture*' (Levi-Strauss, 1967, p.354). Humans created a perspective of difference between us and nature allowing us to take authority over the environment when one could argue the authority was never ours to begin with. Therefore perspectivism can change our understanding and socialise us from this universal socialisation in order to protect nature and make it a priority again. 'The common point of reference for all beings of nature is not humans as a species but rather humanity as a condition' (Descola, 1986, p.120).

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