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European Vegetal Gods: A Wayana Theory¹

Resumen: En la visión religiosa de los wayana de Surinam se equipara a Cristo con el dios Kuyuli. La muerte violenta de éste es considerada como requisito para el surgimiento de las plantas cultivables. De los cadáveres en estado de descomposición de Cristo/Kuyuli surgieron las primeras plantas alimenticias. Este trabajo describe las relaciones múltiples entre deidades, putrefacción, plantas e incesto, tal como existen en la ideología de los wayana, las que influyen decididamente en la percepción y la comprensión de la visión divina europea.

Summary: Within the religious concepts of the Wayana of Surinam Christ is equalized with the god Kuyuli. His violent death is understood as the prerequisite of the origin of cultivable plants. From the putrid body of Christ/Kuyuli resulted the first edible plants. This paper describes the multiple relations between gods, putrification, plants and incest, how they exist within Wayana ideology, and how they exert an important influence on their perception and understanding of the European concept of God.

European gods are apparently represented as vegetal deities among the Wayana of Surinam. Native theories associate the origin of cultivated plants and of gardens generally to the violent death of Christ at the hands of sceptical Indians: from the putrid corpse of this European god emerged the first edible plants. This apparently bizarre episode connects the Wayana perception of European deities with incest as Christ kidnaps his sister to accompany him in the sky.

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Indian representations of European personages defy interpretation. The Wayana rendering of Christ as a trickster seems to be far removed from missionary ideologies and even from South American popular religious beliefs. Yet, some elements are present in both systems: Christ, a shaman, is a lesser, benevolent god; a giver of life and death, and almost a fish.

The writing of non-European histories of Amerindians should also entail a serious effort to engage in reflecting on ideological constructs like the one under discussion. In this paper I would like to explore the relationships the Wayana establish between gods, putrefaction, plants and incest, and the way in which this ideological constellation affects perception of European personages.

The Wayana Indians associate Kuyuli, the main character of several narratives, with Jesus. According to the indigenous theories, Kuyuli taught the Indians to cook, but was then killed by his brother-in-law who suspected him of having eaten all the food. After beating him with a war club, he put Kuyuli/Jesus' body in a hole in the earth. Some time later Kuyuli got out of the hole and explained that he had just been cooking when his brother-in-law killed him. Even after being caught, his killer continued to deny he had anything to do with Jesus' death.

Though the association of European gods with indigenous deities seems a fairly well-known ideological construct, the Wayana representation of Jesus would defy any commonsensical account of it. There is no material illustrating missionary efforts to replace these personages: in the Wayana translation of the New Testament (Schoen 1979) there is no evidence to support any such identification, and Jesus is not referred to as Kuyuli. Also it would seem indeed bizarre to imagine missionaries teaching the Wayana that Jesus was killed because he was a good cook. On the other hand, besides being the name of a mythical character, "kuyuli" also means deity or semi-deity (Schoepf 1987: 134). As Kuyuli is a powerful shaman, a real kuyuli, who is also a creator, one could likewise see Jesus as a shaman, a deity who can return from death, but this rendering of the Wayana interpretation is not convincing. Several personages appear in their narratives with shamanistic powers, including animals, but only Kuyuli and/or one of his brothers is referred to as Jesus. There must, therefore, be some other reason why these characters in particular seem more appropriate in Wayana ideology to translate European gods. More importantly, this thesis would assume that European and Wayana ideologies share some basic propositions on the nature of experience which at this stage of our knowledge of Wayana culture is untenable.

The narrative is in fact more intricate than it would appear from this fragment. It tells of a jaguar which marries a Wayana woman. She gets pregnant and leaves her village to visit Jaguar. On the way her child talks to her from her womb and advises her to give in to Opossum. Opossum appears and demands to have sexual intercourse with her in exchange for directions. She is subsequently helped by

Woodpecker, but to no avail. Her child keeps asking her to gather fruits until some wasps attack her and she gets angry. From then on thinking that she is angry with him, the child refuses to talk to her. She arrives at last at the jaguars' village, but meets only grandmother Frog. Old Frog puts her in a pot to protect her from the jaguars, but the jaguars arrive and immediately smell the presence of strangers. The woman turns into a turtle, but they take the pot and eat the turtle they see. The woman has turned her child into four embryos. The jaguars eat two of them and Old Frog succeeds in keeping the other two.

Two boys emerge from the two eggs and begin walking immediately. They grow with the river. As a flood seems imminent, the twins and the old woman climb a palm. The twins are called Kuyuli and Letukani. They descend when the flood is over and start creating people, animals and plants again. They go hunting in the forest and meet a bird which thinks they are going to shoot him and tells them that their own Jaguar father killed their mother. They go back home and reproach Old Frog for keeping secret the killing of their mother. Old Frog confesses.

Kuyuli plans to avenge his mother's death. He builds a ceremonial house and invites the jaguars to take part in a festival. While they are dancing Kuyuli makes rain and forces the dancers to go inside. Then he makes the roof fall. Except for Weasel all the other jaguars die.

Kuyuli goes away but keeps close to Old Frog because she makes fire. He tries to steal her secret by turning into a bird and going to her place to watch her. He sees that Old Frog makes fire by winds. He succeeds in stealing some firebrands and goes away.

Kuyuli starts trying to help people. He makes knives and teaches them to cook, but is then killed by his brother-in-law. Later on, when the men are in the gardens, he asks the women to prepare manioc beer for the men. He goes to the gardens and offers his help. But because he is laughed at, he cuts down a tree that kills all the men. Using their blood he succeeds in bringing them back to life. However, the other Indians kill him.

Letukani remains in the village. After his seclusion he goes to the river and sees Kuyuli. The second time he goes, a big fish catches him and prevents him from walking. His mother tries to free him but Kuyuli, the big fish, is stronger. Three days later the boy appears in the middle of the ceremonial house and asks for food. The villagers try to send him away but all their efforts are useless. He then tells them that he will go with Kuyuli to the sky and will remain there to be seen with him. He laughs at them and tells them they will die. He, on the contrary, is immortal (Magaña 1992: 174 - 182).

From this it would appear that the Wayana associate gods with putrefaction, cultivated plants and incest. In Wayana ideology, gods' death precedes cultivation. Cultivated plants originate from the rotten body and blood of a god who has been

killed by an affine. Cultivated plants also initiate the division of labour between men and women, establish war and hunting as a masculine domain and agriculture as a feminine one, and lead to the establishment of a complex pattern of ceremonies including the exchange of women and war; in addition, for reasons as yet obscure, agriculture is connected with incest and blood. The central thesis in this paper is that all these ideological segments are integrated into a whole, and that every segment is necessarily connected with the others. Every segment is considered as a proposition with a necessary place in a greater ideological system. If the Wayana establish a relationship between putrefaction and agriculture, between blood and plants, and between blood, plants and women, it will remain for us to show the reasons for such an association.

Originally there were no cultivated plants. These resulted from the mutilated and rotten body of a god. Though this is not immediately evident in the myth quoted, other versions are quite explicit. In a second version of the myth, Kuyuli asks a friend to kill him. His friend kills him with a club and goes away. Later on he visits the place where he killed Kuyuli and finds a large garden full of all kinds of cultivated plants (Magaña 1992: 192; myth 25). In another myth a man makes a tree fall on his mother-in-law. When he and his wife go a year later to the place where the woman died they find it full of all cultivated plants (Magaña 1992: 213; myth 31). Kuyuli is not mentioned in this myth. The man and his wife try to eat the raw plants and become ill. The mother-in-law appears to him in a dream and teaches him how to cook. Two other myths tell that two friends made a hole in the earth and decided to kill each other. One of them fell with his feet outside the hole and became Orion, the other became the Pleiades (Magaña 1992: 136; myth 11). In another myth a man asks a friend to kill him. Later on when his friend visits the place he finds a large garden (Magaña 1992: 140; myth 12). Further evidence on the origin of cultivated plants from a rotten body is not necessary: the association is known from several other South American tribes (see Lévi-Strauss 1996).

The association between agriculture and the stars, in particular with Orion and the Pleiades, is also well known in South America (see Magaña 1988). The Pleiades announce the dry and the rainy seasons. When the Pleiades rise with the sun in mid-June they signal the end of the rains and the beginning of the dry season when men have to select sites for gardens and start clearing them. But, in addition, the Pleiades are also almost everywhere connected with the moon — thereby forming a pair with Orion which is associated with the sun. Among several tribes it is considered dangerous to look directly at the full moon or at the first appearance of the Pleiades (Magaña 1992: 116 - 117).

But if the Pleiades are associated with agriculture, it should also be possible to further elucidate this relationship by examining the association of agriculture with the moon.

In Wayana cosmology there was originally no moon. They tell that the women of a village had a lover, a big penis in the garden which was killed by the men. When the women discovered the crime they ran after their lover. It became the moon (Magaña 1992: 110; myth 3). In the version of the Kuyuli cycle published by Schoepf the sun was then stationary in the sky: the movement of the stars and the alternation between day and night [sun and moon] began when Kuyuli committed incest with one of his aquatic sisters and went to the sky (Schoepf 1987: 131). According to Schoepf, the incest caused the origin of darkness: the alternation of day and night was established when the gods exiled themselves to the sky (Schoepf 1987: 136).

The intervention of the moon throws more light on this segment of Wayana ideology. As everywhere in South America, the moon is considered to be a man who visits the human women and has sexual intercourse with them. According to the native theories, moon becomes the husband of the women by visiting them. The moon is also held responsible for vegetal growth because moon affects all bodily fluids, and therefore also the sap or "blood" of the plants. In Wayana sociology moon is responsible for the gardens in exchange for his union with women. Therefore, the Wayana ban sexual intercourse during menstruation and in the gardens. Whenever moon is conceptualised as being active, men have to pretend they are not married to the women and even that they are, in fact, their children. Because the moon would not tolerate the presence of strangers or men in his gardens, only women can be fully responsible for agriculture. From this also follows that Wayana men should avoid going to the gardens to work especially during phases considered active, i. e. during full and new moon. During this period women do not cook and even avoid touching cooking utensils to avoid being discovered by Moon.

The representation of men as children of their wives and of Moon as the men's father is intimately connected to the Wayana representation of agriculture. All men [and women] are children of Moon simply because Moon is married to the women. It therefore follows that all women share consanguineal ties and are also daughters of their celestial husband. Moon provides women with cultivated plants and takes care of their growth in order to satisfy women's needs. Every woman in Wayana sociology owns her own garden which can only be cultivated by herself and by women who share the same vegetal food, i. e. by those women we would call "consanguines" [consanguineal relatives]. In fact, it is women's sharing of blood that makes agriculture possible.

Moon also affects the conceptualisation of sociological categories. Because it makes the "blood" of the plants, all those who eat from the vegetal products of the same garden are considered to be united by consanguineal ties. When people stop sharing the food they in fact stop being consanguineal relatives. Affines also become consanguineal relatives by sharing the food provided by the women of a domestic unit. Indeed, following the same proposition, in order to partake of the vegetal food of a same garden men have to become a kind of consanguineal relatives of their women; that is to say, in order to become affines [in order to marry] people must first be made consanguineal relatives. It follows from this representation that agriculture is conceived of as an incestuous affair carried out by the daughters/wives of Moon in order to maintain their own children/men. In a way this kinship has more to do with gardens and food than with anything else in Wayana society.

The idea that sharing blood constitutes the basic principle of social and cosmological relationships can also be found in other domains of Wayana culture. The relationship between manioc plants and manioc tubers is thought of as homologous to that between women and children; and, given the relationship between women and plants, manioc tubers are as much the women's children as those of "mother plants" in the gardens. As has been shown for other regions in South America (Descola 1986; Magaña 1988), the consumption of manioc tubers is conceptualized as a cannibalistic act. It is through the culinary processing of vegetal food that tubers are deprived of their sociological relatedness and become edible food. This symbolic process implies transforming tubers by the way they are processed into a product susceptible of being conceptualized as pertaining to an affinal category, that is to say, processing vegetal food as if it were animal food. As among many other tribes in South America, manioc tubers are processed in homology to the processing of meat: the bread is cut into portions assimilated to the parts of animals, and the "blood" of the tubers is thoroughly and carefully extracted. In addition, men and tubers are similarly conceptualized in other domains. Manioc plants have to be fed with "blood" which the Wayana replace by offering the red sap of bixa. Likewise, children and plants are given the sap of a liana to further their growth (Veth 1990).

Agriculture is also connected with marriage and war. Later on in the myth Kuyuli installs the ceremonial house and all the rituals that we now refer to as the initiation ceremony [the episode when the jaguars are invited to dance]. From these two episodes it becomes apparent that the exchange of women and initiation ceremonies are conceived of as a modality of war. In another version of the myth the woman marries a jaguar to save her brother: he had laughed at the sight of the vain efforts of a jaguar to catch his shadow in the river [he had climbed to the top of a tree by the riverside]. To convince the jaguar not to eat him, the man had

offered his sister to the stranger. Afraid to tell his sister about his offer, he starts making people of wax. But the wax women melt. He makes women of reeds, but they get old and lack teeth. He makes them of wood, but they fall and break. Finally he paints his sisters so that the jaguar will not recognize the one offered, but his trick fails (Magaña 1992: 166 - 167; myth 23). The myth refers here to the complex patterns of body paintings used at the festivals during which alliance or war is decided and during initiation ceremonies.

Wayana initiation ceremonies have often been taken for marriage festivals (Roth 1915: 308). Though both marriage and initiation are intimately linked [a man cannot marry if not initiated], the relationship between marriage and initiation is usually explained away in anthropological theories. The Wayana theory is far more intricate. In fact, one of the main purposes of initiation is to turn marriageable men, i. e. affines, into pet animals and women. Though I cannot go into the subject in more detail here, a few notes will suffice. All the ceremonies surrounding initiation are based on the offer of manioc beer to the guests in exchange for women to the visitors, i. e. vegetal for animal food. The symbolism derives from a widespread conceptualization of sexual intercourse as the equivalent of hunting. During the ceremonies the visitors sing and dance "kanawa", a song whose text consists of demanding women; the guests sing and dance "maipuli" where they ask for manioc beer. The most important aspects of the ritual, for the purposes of this paper, take place at a later stage. When the dancing ends the men who have taken part in the initiation are secluded in an oval house which the men have built especially for this purpose. The Wayana compare this house to a pot and to the womb. The secluded men are then subjected to a long period of linguistic, visual, sexual and alimentary restrictions. During the first days they may only be fed with manioc pap and a little fish and are usually referred to as pet animals, mostly as dogs (Hurault 1968: 65). The men are treated in the same way that women treat the animal sucklings that men bring back from hunting. As hunting is conceived of as a union between men and animal females, sucklings cannot be killed, and the hunters have to take them to the villages where they are delivered to the women. These animals are then secluded [put in an inverted pot or in a covered cage], fed with manioc pap, and referred to as "sons" or "children". Pet animals, even if edible, may never be eaten. In the initiation ceremony then, men are represented as animal sucklings and treated accordingly. The main purpose behind this symbolism seems to be that in order to be made marriageable, men [strangers to the local village] have first to acquire a minimal degree of belonging to a same class of beings, i. e. to become one of the class to which women belong.

This symbolism is reinforced by other aspects and stages of the initiation. During the rituals men are usually scarified, i. e. made to lose the blood that betrays their belonging to another category. Hunted animals are treated likewise:

they have to be thoroughly bled and then subjected to a long process of cooking. According to the report by Coudreau, in the ceremonies he could attend, the men were whipped and after seclusion they were brought to the gardens. They had to go back to the village and prepare the manioc they had brought (1893: 254). Considering the dangers attached to the presence of strangers, and particularly of men, in the gardens, it cannot sound too queer that men had first to be integrated into the category of "women" so that the local women could marry them.

There is another reason why agriculture is connected with war and death. When Kuyuli was alive, death was unknown. As in Wayana conceptions, death is part of an overall sociological and cosmological process. Marriage, agriculture and hunting were not known either. Men and women were born in gourds that had previously been impregnated by men: at that time women did not menstruate nor did they bear children (Magaña 1992: 333; myth 74). Kuyuli/Moon had to die so that people could have access to cultivated plants made of his blood so that people could engage in sociological alliances. The Wayana theory of death is similar to those known from other South American tribes: death is a process that results from the relationships between men, animals and plants. Hunting, usually conceptualized as a union between men and animal women, is considered to be possible by permission granted by animal shamans and/or by habitat shamans. The Wayana consider that all habitats in the forest or in the river are the domain of specific, local, non-human shamans who grant the Indians permission to hunt in their territory. In addition, hunters must also obtain permission from animal shamans, those who lead animal societies, in exchange for cultivated and other food. All transactions with animal societies involve death: in Wayana theory animal societies are constantly looking for human souls in order to have access to cultivated food, and they can obtain it through their shamans who let men prey on them. Men on their own behalf periodically offer vegetal food to animals — mostly manioc and other products of the gardens. In fact, old gardens are explicitly left as gifts to animal societies. But the animals lost their ability to be replaced: animal shamans are constantly looking for human souls to reproduce the species and capture every man who transgresses the rules of hunting. A man who has been captured by an animal shaman first presents symptoms of illness. His subsequent death represents his passage to an animal state. The relationship between death and agriculture is here evident: without agriculture men would have nothing to offer in exchange, and society would eternally remain closed, if Kuyuli's people did not have cultivated plants. Several myths offer a powerful metaphor: Kuyuli, who lived alone with his grandmother, decided to die after he saw how she made bread with her own bodily fluids (Magaña 1992: 192, 212; myths 25 and 31).

There is another myth on the origin of death: a man who was in fact an animal shaman [head of the wild pigs] told his wife he was going to die but would return

some time later. He asked her not to cremate his body. The woman, however, grew tired of waiting and set fire to the pyre. The shaman "woke up" and announced that from then on wild pigs would be scarce and that people would die (Magaña 1992: 264 - 265; myth 50). In another myth the shaman ordered his wife to process his body with peppers and hot water, but she merely threw some peppers and water on the pyre itself (Magaña 1992: 274 - 275; myth 51).

It is clear from these last two myths that death originated when people broke one of the rules that regulate the relationships between men and animals, namely that of killing animal leaders or animal shamans. As animal shamans are those who allow men to hunt, killing a shaman leaves animal societies without leaders and causes the animal groups to disband and abandon the hunting territory of the Indians. Killing a shaman would also entail some act of retaliation from related shamans. Death, as shown in these myths, forms a part of the process that makes life possible.

In our original myth Kuyuli is said to have become a big fish who kidnapped his brother. Therefore the big fish was Jesus. In fact, the association of Kuyuli or one of his brothers with European personages is found in several other myths. In another version of this narrative, where Europeans are explicitly mentioned, Kuyuli makes the Indians and tries to teach them to boil water. But, since the Indians are afraid of fire they refuse and only the Europeans succeed in boiling water. This explains why Europeans possess certain things which Indians do not have (Magaña 1992: 205; myth 30). In another myth, moreover, the main character [Mopo] turns into a fish and seduces a woman. When she goes with him she shakes hands with her parents just as Europeans do (Magaña 1992: 218; myth 32).

There is little information on the way the Wayana represent Europeans generally and European gods in particular. Europeans are said to come from the sea and are intimately associated with water. In a myth collected by Schoepf, the land of Europeans is described as being on the other side of the sea where they spend their time collecting beads. The Europeans themselves do not work: they have slaves who display bizarre physical anomalies [they have no legs or no ears, or the lack a nose or have no fingers on their hands] (Schoepf 1976: 65). But the association with water is not enough, in my view, to explain why European deities can occupy the place of native gods. Why would a celestial figure like Jesus be seen as a big, incestuous fish?

It would rather seem that aquatic and celestial personages present some similar characteristics. In Wayana cosmology, in fact, aquatic personages are directly linked to the sky. In native theories, the rivers which run from south to north flow into the sea, which is a kind of large reservoir, and then flow or continue into the sky as the Milky Way. The waters that flow into the sky then fall according to the seasons on the earth again as rain and add to the terrestrial rivers. The process

is then repeated. All shamans of aquatic habitats are therefore also sky shamans or can affect the flow of the waters into the sky [a water shaman can stop the flow so that rains would come late for the gardens]. A shaman who controls the rains is therefore also a shaman who controls the rivers. Europeans are then generally seen as inhabitants of a watery habitat whose shaman is Jesus.

On the other hand, our main personage becomes the moon and is therefore responsible for agriculture. But if so, then Jesus is also an incestuous hero and shares all the ambiguities of Kuyuli. As is often the case in the mythology of north-east South America, these types of personages are commonly said to be members of other, often neighbouring, tribes. The Kaliña, for instance, see the moon as an incestuous brother who is an Arawak. Because moon is married with Arawak women, the Kaliña prefer to marry with Arawak women to secure their access to cultivated plants and to pottery. Likewise, the Wayana pretend that Apalai women are better cultivators than Wayana women and prefer to marry them. If Kuyuli is made an European, it is to secure their access to fish and rains rather than to become an anomalous slave in the sky island. Our hero must, therefore, insist on being an ambiguous personage because ambiguity is the key to maintaining the current order of things.

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