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Animism and perspectivism: Still anthropomorphism? On the problem of perception in the construction of Amerindian ontologies

Abstract: For more than a decade, a close continuity, rather than opposition, has linked Viveiros de Castro's "perspectivism" and Descola's "animism". Both theories are based on Amazonian ethnographic material and should be seen as theoretical constructions of the "Lowland" developed to explain the specificity of Amazonian ontologies. Today, both models exist independently of the south Amerindian data. In this paper, I will present some North-West Amazonian ritual and mythological material that illustrates the first, as well as the second theoretical point of view. The main aim of this paper is to show that general cognitive phenomena involved in the act of perception, such as anthropomorphism and analogical projection, are able to give an account of some Amazonian ontologies, especially if we draw iconographical expressions of past and present societies into the discussion.

Keywords: Perspectivism, animism, ontologies, Miraña, Amazonia, Colombia, 20th-21st centuries.

Resumen: Desde hace más de una década, el "perspectivismo" de Viveiros de Castro y el "animismo" de Descola han estado unidos, más que por una oposición, por una estrecha continuidad. Ambas teorías se basan en material etnográfico amazónico y deben ser consideradas como construcciones teóricas de las "tierras bajas" con el fin de explicar la especificidad de las ontologías amazónicas. Hoy día, ambos modelos existen independientemente de los datos amerindios sureños. En este artículo presentaré material ritual y mitológico del noroeste amazónico que ilustra tanto la primera como la segunda teoría. El objetivo principal de esta contribución consiste en mostrar cómo fenómenos cognitivos generales, que forman parte del acto de percepción –como el antropomorfismo y la proyección analógica–, pueden brindar información sobre algunas ontologías amazónicas, sobre todo si se tienen en cuenta expresiones iconográficas de sociedades del pasado y del presente.

Palabras clave: Perspectivismo, animismo, ontologías, miraña, Amazonía, Colombia, siglos XX-XXI.

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1. Introduction

General discussions of distinct ontological constructions are mostly based on analysis of practices, discourses and classifications. When it reaches the point of figurative expression, or of ritual and mythological elaborations, the somewhat “evident” elements that are presented to the participant of a ritual, the listener of a myth or the spectator of images, are rarely questioned in terms of perception. How does this later mental ability enter into the cultural elaborations of myths, rituals and images?

One of the major cognitive modalities of understanding the environment uses anthropomorphism as a prism. Behaviours, species, shapes, artefacts are translated by applying a human *gestalt* to them, thus rendering the world intelligible for a human subject.

In this paper, my purpose is to question the two major interpretative trends currently prevalent in Amazonian studies, namely Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s “perspectivism” (1992) and Philippe Descola’s “animism” (2005) (this latter being one of the four ontological modalities recognised by him in human cultures), putting them to the test via analysis of an ethnographic case. I will take a close look at a musical instrument made out of a deer skull by the Miraña Indians of the Colombian Amazon, and at the myth linked to it. I will compare the data with other ethnographical and ethnohistorical sources where the same instrument was played to reveal the parallels and oppositions that exist between them. Although made out of a deer skull, this instrument does not make any reference to deer, nor to its “spirit”, but has to be seen as an artefact for an imaged ritual construction based on anthropomorphism that refers to a true being. The same treatment of “deer” images will be found in other areas such as the Andes, Mesoamerica, or the North-American Indians (actual and past: Mimbres and Zuni Indians).

The theoretical aim of this article is to show that anthropomorphic ability offers a good modality for understanding the figurative process that arises in “analogical” ontologies. This ability occurs as much in present and past Amazonian cultures, but also elsewhere on the continent, and my purpose is to show that it offers a central modality for bringing together the “perspectivism” of Viveiros de Castro and the quadripartite division of human cultures according to the four types of ontologies developed by Descola, in which the “animism” type is held by the Amazon area.

2. Viveiros de Castro’s “perspectivism”

In his development of the Amerindian – here Amazonian – description of how human/non-human relations are conceived, Viveiros de Castro focuses on the point of view that, ultimately, sees the relational definition of a being and subsequently his

identity. This concept of the relational definition of a being has several implications for the author. First of all, there is no concept of “absolute nature”, which means that Viveiros de Castro had to create the concept of “multinaturalism” to explain the relationship the Amerindian have to the plurality of bodies that appear before them (as they do not exist outside of a point of view). In perspectivism, each body expresses a particular “nature”, while at the same time, there is only one “culture”, which is the predatory relationship between living beings. So while predation implies antagonistic relations (enemies), it also creates affinity (and *vice versa*). Carlos Fausto completes the construction by adding commensality (Fausto 2007) which implies peaceful relations (close relatives), but also the ethos of consanguinity in opposition to predation (ethos of affinity).

The implications of this approach are, to give an example, that humans are seen as “jaguars” by peccaries, worms are the “peccaries” of ants, an Oropendola bird is the “hawk” of the beetle etc. There seem to be no stable identities in the world view of the “perspectivist subject”, as identity depends on the subject and that subject’s point of view.

Jaguars and humans are problematic as they sometimes kill each other (in fact, more jaguars are killed by humans than vice versa). But for Viveiros de Castro, those who eat humans (shamans, gods, masters of the animals, etc.) are described as “jaguars”, or more precisely, they look at us with jaguar’s eyes. For this author, defining an entity or a species is to give it a set of eyes – looking through these eyes creates a reality.

The main problem with this approach is that there is no absolute way of gaining access to the interiority of other beings: it is always an imputation of identities that occurs. What anthropology therefore addresses are the different ways in which cultures construct this imputation of interiority. And it is always a construction, not of one point of view concerning a particular being, but of the way in which the Amerindians regard a specific relationship between two beings or two entities. If a jaguar eats a man, there is absolutely no way of asking the jaguar whether it saw the human as a peccary or not. It is not possible to make an ethnographic study of the jaguar’s point of view – and much less of jaguars in general – the best we can do is a naturalist’s ethological description. Thus, in our naturalistic ontology, it is correct to present the same act saying that the human victim of a jaguar is his prey. In some Amerindian languages, the “predator” category can be named or labelled “jaguar” and the “prey” category can be presented as “peccary”. In this sense, a wasp is a jaguar: it is the “jaguar” – or, as it flies, the “hawk” – of caterpillars and others. The point is that if some Amazonian ontological systems say that jaguars see humans as peccary, they mean that humans are sometimes eaten by jaguars “as if they were”

peccaries (thus the assertion “humans are peccaries” is to be understood as “they are sometimes the ‘peccaries’ of the jaguar”, and perhaps always those of the Masters of Game and the Gods). It is therefore a definition given to a position and not to an identity.

In this relational definition, the Amerindians transform the position of humans into that of peccaries; factually, they are still humans in identity. To have it as a perspectivistic ontology as Viveiros de Castro claims is, in a way, to confuse the object with the category and to think that categories create the world although they just give a specific account of it whilst still creating a different relational world. If we go a little further in this direction, we could say that consciousness in different ontological systems will not make it possible for a subject that runs off the edge of a cliff, as in cartoons for example, to keep running in the air until he realises that there is no more ground beneath him: he will just fall like any other material element attracted by gravitation. The only place where such a possibility exists is in cartoons and tales.

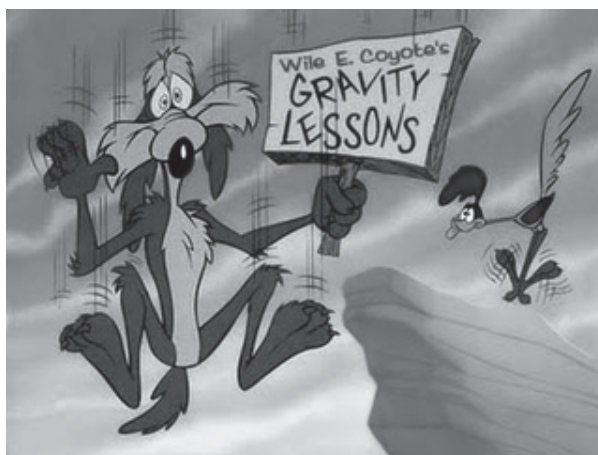


Figure 1. The perspectivist point of view. Anonymous (1996).

But these cases are relatively common in a multiplicity of cultural systems where there is a naming system. For example, the “antlion” (*Myrmeleontidae*) was named after the fact that for the ant, the larva of this insect acts as a lion would act with its prey: It is the ant’s “lion” (predating ants). Should we conclude from this relational definition that our ontological system is in some way also “perspectivistic”, similar to those of the Amazonians? If that is the case, then it is not necessary to debate these topics: Up to a certain point of view, both ontologies have the same capacity for relational definitions of entities.

We immediately recognise that the difference between the two systems relies on the existence or absence of objectivity: For Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism, there is only subjectivity. There is no "third eye" that can give a holistic account of an event. Everything relies on the subject's point of view, humans and non-humans creating an endless chain of relational positions, depicted using the same "cultural" pattern that de Castro labelled "monoculturalism" – the predation schema – and accompanied by a variability of bodily expressions that he called "multinaturalism" (each species has its own "nature" just as each one has a different body).

It was whilst confronting this problem that Philippe Descola developed a more general quadripartite division of how human cultures conceive their ontologies, in which the Animistic one is represented by the Amazonian populations.

3. Descola's "animisms"

What characterises the construction of ontologies in human cultures can be seen in the different ways in which the continuity and discontinuity between what Descola has called "interiorities" and "physicalities" occurs in each system.

Naturalism characterised "our" system (at least from the beginning of "modernity", more or less after the Renaissance) in that it established a continuity of physicalities between, not only humans and non-humans, but, in the end, within the entirety of Nature. On the other hand, there is a discontinuity between "interiorities" as naturalism does not recognize any means of access to the interiority of non-humans – animals, objects, Gods, etc.

The two other ontological systems – the totemic and the analogical – are, briefly sketched, the continuity of interiorities and of physicalities (everything is connected with everything, as in the "dreamtime" of Australian aborigines) for the former (totemic), and a discontinuity of interiorities and of physicalities (these systems have to recreate new links between parts of beings with other beings, and with elements of the environment based on analogical links) for the latter (analogical).

Animism, that supposedly features Amazonian ontology, is therefore the opposite of the naturalistic way of perceiving how beings are: it is the continuity of interiorities and the discontinuity of physicalities (and here we can recognize, to an extent, a point of view that could be shared by Viveiros de Castro because what Descola calls physicalities is Viveiros de Castro's "nature", and Descola's interiority is Viveiros de Castro's "culture").

One of the problems involved in these approaches is that of figuration. This is certainly the reason why Descola has spent the last four years of his teaching at the Collège de France focusing on the topic of images (*ontologie des images*). This focus was also behind the exhibition held from February 2010 to July 2011 at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris (*La Fabrique des images*).

What we call “art” in this article is a graphical representation, or a dance, theatrical or ritual representation, of the images recognized in things and their surroundings (for Descola according to each ontological system). This is a mental process: Recognition gives an identity to the forms that are perceived by our senses (taste and odours therefore create mental patterns that are remembered when they are presented to the consciousness of a subject).

Going back to the Amerindian way of finding out what kind of interiority dwells within a body, the general shape of a plant or of an animal gives an important clue as it reveals an identity in the being that is not instantly apparent when it presents itself to a person. For example, a bat can be the “spirit” of a tree because the pattern of its leaves is reminiscent of the bat’s wings. This is something that an Amerindian subject, or at least a Miraña subject, experiences in his own consciousness (leaving out here the concept of “interiority”). It is exactly this mental process that occurs when the Miraña myth presents a human body that is made up of different kinds of fish. If we look closely at what kind of fish have been chosen, it appears that a close analogical relationship links each body part to a specific fish (for example, a hand *is* a crab, etc.).

This analogical construction is therefore experienced in the consciousness and makes it possible to fashion some inferences about the nature of the “spirit” that rests in that plant or animal. This first acknowledgment of an analogical ontology into the animism ontology is perhaps the way to build bridges between the different ontological systems.

For many actual ethnographers of the Amazonian populations, the iconographic domain is seen as being non-figurative, at least in the ornamental domain of bodies and objects. Or, to put it another way, it has no specific figurability, with one exception, namely ritual and myth.

4. Why a deer skull as an instrument? And why a myth?

The Miraña Indians of the Caquetá River are a small group of Amazonian slash and burn hunters living in the south of Colombia. Their traditional way of living is very similar to other North-West Amazonian populations like the Barasana, and other Tukanoan speaking groups from the Vaupés region. The Miraña language is not related to this linguistic macro-family; it pertains, with the Muinane and the Bora, to an isolated language-family. At the same time, the Miraña are culturally related to other neighbouring populations of the area like the Uitoto and Andoque from the Caquetá and Putumayo Rivers: They all refer to themselves as “People-of-the-Centre”, a macro-cultural designation that simultaneously opposes them to the Arawak speaking groups of the Miriti-Parana and Apaporis Rivers (Yukuna, Matapi, Tanimuka,

Letuama and Makuna: The latest two pertaining to the Tukano linguistic stock) and to the Tukanoan from Vaupés. A very schematic distribution of these groups according to three geographical areas is partially congruent with the linguistic blocs: The Caquetá-Putumayo Rivers region, the Miriti-Parana and Apaporis Rivers area, and the Vaupés area.

In a 2002 publication (Karadimas 2002), I presented an analysis of a Miraña wind instrument made from a deer skull. The Miraña myth related to it tells a story of two brothers, Deer-of-the-above and Deer-of-the-ground. Deer-of-the-above comes down to earth to take revenge for the death of his brother, who is killed and eaten by “the livings from earth” (supposedly humans). The stag goes unsuccessfully from *maloca* to *maloca* asking who has eaten deer, until he meets the inhabitants of a longhouse who confess that they have eaten such meat.

To be sure that it was from his brother’s body, he asks them to bring him the bones. He compares each bone with his own, until he reaches the head, saying, “this was my brother, he was the same size as me”. Deer-of-the-above takes all the young children of the longhouse, binding them together, one after the other, like prisoners and, grasping his whip, starts to rise to the sky by whipping the children. A mosquito woman tries to alert the parents but they tell her that, because they are such cowards, it is better to let them go. She then shouts to the children that if they bite the deer’s testicles he will release them. One of the children answers that he has already tried, but that it tasted too much of “tobacco”.

Arriving in the land of Deer-of-the-above, the children escape thanks to a parrot woman who changes some of them into young parrots by giving them feathers. The stag eats the rest in the tradition of the Miraña cannibal ritual (boiling them in a pot). Those who have fled have to climb a tree, peeling off the bark underneath them so that the deer cannot follow them up the trunk (this bark is used to make masks in the Miraña tradition).

In the second part of the myth, the stag returns to earth to eat a child that was left behind in the longhouse. Inflicted with a skin disease, the parents have hung his hammock on the central roof beam to keep him away of the rest of the children. As Deer-of-the-above enters the *maloca*, he asks the child why his hammock is hanging from the roof. And the young child tells him that he will only answer the question if the stag cuts away his own flesh. The myth ends with the “suicide” of the deer, and the creation of the wind instrument made out of the deer’s skull and antlers. Today, the Miraña blow this instrument to call the inhabitants of a *maloca* working in nearby gardens when a large amount of game arrives with returning hunters.



*Figure 2. Óúkò blowing instrument made out of a deer skull, here of a gray brocket deer skull (*Mazama gouazoubira*) (Miraña of Pt. Remanzo del Tigre, Amazonas, Colombia, 1993, personal collection, photo Philippe Blanchot).*

In my 2002 contribution, I proposed an analysis of the myth in terms of anthropophagy, but also in terms of an association between bats (predators) and deer (prey) – where the child hanging from the roof in his hammock was a visual metaphor of a bat and the deer was the same prisoner of the cannibalistic ritual of the Tupian groups (as for the Miraña). I left aside the first part of the myth, which is rather complicated, but still interpretable thanks to the history of the slavery that existed in the area as of the 17th century.

Two enigmatic elements of the narration were the identities of the two “brothers”, both deer, one of the “ground”, the other of the “above”, this last name being a designation of the upstream territory, but also a reference to the sky.

A comparative analysis can be undertaken with groups that play the same instrument in, for example, the Llanos de Colombia and Venezuela, but also in the Andes. The Sikuaní-Guahibo or Cuiva-Guahibo Indians of Venezuela use this wind instrument during secondary funeral ceremonies. After a year, the bones of a deceased person are unearthed to be cleaned and placed in a pot made especially for

the occasion. People play the deer-skull instrument during the ceremony (Ales & Chiappino 1997: fig. 32). This, obviously, has to be compared with the Miraña myth where the deer examines the bones of his brother who was eaten by the inhabitants of the ground.¹ The story of the myth and the collecting and comparing of the brother's bones can be seen in correlation with the Sikuaní ritual and the unearthing of a deceased person's bones, now discharged from their flesh. Contrary to the Sikuaní-Guahibo, the Miraña do not practice secondary funerals, but the idea still remains that the instrument is linked to death and, most of all, to bones.



Figure 3. Cuiva-Guahibo death song played with a deer skull during a secondary funeral (drawing made by school-educated Indians (Ales & Chiappino 1997: fig.32).

Understanding why it seems important that an instrument made out of a deer skull is part of the Cuiva-Guahibo mourning ceremony is an interesting question, as is comprehending the importance of the deer-skull instrument in a myth where it is linked to both bones and flesh.² In some way, both groups link the deer-skull instrument with the flesh/bones of a dead person/animal. The “inhabitants of the ground” who ate the meat in the Miraña myth can be compared to the Cuiva-Guahibo “necrophages” who eat the flesh of a deceased person. Therefore, the vinculum between both groups is

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- 1 On a cosmological level, this can also refer to the infra-world where the dead are supposed to go before ascending into the sky.
 - 2 This is also the case in the Sikuaní ritual as it is the flesh on the bones that the living people are looking for.

equivalent to the two types of anthropophagy that exist in the Lowlands: exocannibalism – eating an enemy as the ancient Tupinamba did, but also as the Miraña did up until the 20th century – and endocannibalism – eating a dead person of one’s own group – as is practised by the Wari (Vilaça 2002) or by the Yanomami.³

A possible comparison between the two practices and between both groups may therefore result in describing them as an act of revenge for the killing of a brother. The murderers are rounded up like prisoners and the story ends in a cannibalistic-like ritual. In contrast, within the burial theme of the Sikuani-Guahibo, the devoration theme does not occur but the same instrument is blown when the bones of a dead person are presented devoid of flesh. Now, what is problematic about both occurrences is that the same instrument mediates two different practices. What is the exact mythological or ritual reference of a person playing the deer-skull instrument? And why should it be important to produce a sound if the reference to the deer could have been achieved with just the antlers, or antlers and skull, as, for example, in the deer dance by the North American Hopi population?

The use of the deer-skull instrument also exists in the Andes, where, in the 17th century, Guaman Poma de Ayala gave a description of the Chinchaysuyus feast, *wawku taki* (Figure 4). It was used in the *wawkutaki*, the feast of the *wawku*, the onomatopoeic name for the deer-skull instrument. At this feast, men and women faced each other, the women playing tambourine and the men blowing in the deer skull. The dialogue given by Guaman Poma relates that the women were looking for a “deer to dance with” and, if they were unsuccessful, they had to dance with the *wawku* on their noses (?). The men then responded by blowing the instrument saying that the women had children in their bellies (Guaman Poma de Ayala 1615/1616: 321 [323]). Contrary to the lowlands, the reference here is not linked to the dead or to the bones of the dead, but to some fertility rite (?) and, for Dedenbach-Salazar Sáenz (2003: 111), to the fertility of the game or hunted animals. In this sense, it is related to the game as in the Miraña myth.

The men playing the instruments were richly adorned and sections of their tunics were decorated with silver coins and other silver adornments. On their heads, at the front, was a crescent moon, accompanied by large, feathered diadems irradiating out of their heads. There is no more to say about this feast, but it seems necessary to go back to the Miraña myth to interpret the different practices linked to the use of this instrument. We will return to the Andes with some Mochica iconography which seems to be linked to this Chinchaysuyu feast.

3 In this case, the bones are burned and mixed to a beverage to be ingested.



Figure 4. The *wawku taki* dance of the Chinchansuyu using a deer-skull instrument (Guaman Poma de Ayala 1515/1516: 322).

5. A deer made out of bones

In the Miraña myth, the names of the two brothers are rather enigmatic. “Deer-of-the-above” is a designation that can be given to a “Sky-Stag” and “Deer-of-the-ground” is equivalent to “Earth-Stag”. Sky-Stag is also a deer that can rise into the air and, consequently, a deer that can fly. It is a “flying-deer” but real deer do not fly. In the same narration, when this deer goes from *maloca* to *maloca*, he enters into a strange dialogue with the children whom he will later take into the sky. When he enters the *maloca* where the children have eaten his brother, he asks for some *mananako*, which is a word that has no meaning in Miraña. The children present him with various liquid preparations which he declines, repeating *mananako mananako*, until a

little boy says to the other children, “some cockroaches are falling into my father’s pitch pot!” The stag responds immediately with “Yes! This is *mananako*! This is what I lick!”.⁴

Miraña pitch is made from the sap of various trees that is boiled down to form a mixture used for caulking canoes, and it is also used to form the faces of Miraña masks. To put it in other words, this flying deer licks tree sap and boiled sap looks like liquid tobacco to him. Furthermore, to escape this “deer”, the children, who have transformed into young parrots, have to peel the bark off the tree so he cannot follow them up the slippery tree trunk. By peeling off the bark, this “deer” is not able to hold on while he climbs, which implies that he normally does. But here again: what kind of deer climbs trees? (Especially if it can fly?). This question may seem unfair as everything is possible in myths, but a certain logic of narration needs to be respected, at least to prevent a slide into complete absurdity.



Figure 5. “Dawson said he was a Hammer Head Shark...”
(<http://davenjensfamily.blogspot.fr/2007/10/random-pictures.html>; 20.10.2012).

To find out the identity of this deer, it is necessary to have a quick look at naming processes, or at the analogical system that is sometimes used to name things, plants or animals, and how it enters into actuation. To do that, we will take an example from

⁴ Meaning “this is what I lick – like the Indians lick liquid tobacco”, a concoction made of freshly boiled tobacco leaves and mixed with vegetal salt and sticky plants as thickening agents: *maani’u* in Miraña.

an Internet page where a father posted a picture of his son holding a hammer on the top of his head and saying, “I’m a hammerhead shark”. The boy did just one thing: he did not imitate the hammerhead shark itself, but was acting out – or miming – its name. It is only at a second level that his “actuation” mimics the shark itself. And without the naming system and the culture that goes with it (if a hammer was not used in this cultural system then this name would not exist), it is not possible to interpret this actuation because it mimics as much the name as the salient element which provokes the name in the first place. On a secondary level, it is immediately possible to use an artefact like a hammer not to mimic a carpenter or, in French, to show that somebody is mad (*Il est marteau!*: “He is hammered!”), but to mimic an animal that has a hammer-shaped head, a perceptual salience that is a part of the animal’s name.

If this was done as part of a ritual to allow the hammerhead shark character to participate, then the visual simile had to accommodate the images involved in the name. And it would not be necessary to verbally name the figure being enacted: some spectators would grasp the visual pun and recognize the hammerhead shark, others would see a ritual where a dancer enters with a hammer on his head and would still wonder what this was all about.

Let us now return to our Amazonian ritual and myth. All the mythical and ritual elements we examined could correspond to the same process of visual description that points to a being in possession of all the characteristics. A being that climbs trees, licks sap, that can fly, and is a “deer”. In fact, it seems to correspond to the “flying-deer” or “stag-beetle”, an insect of the *lucanidae* family with hypertrophied mandibles that make him look like a miniature deer with antlers. And, as it has an exoskeleton, a being that has no flesh.

If we look at the various possibilities of figuration, there are basically two options according to Descola’s ontological quadripartition: A naturalistic portrait and an analogical representation of the name, as in the example of the hammerhead shark, that is to say, in our naturalistic ontology, what we call a visual pun. It is therefore possible to draw a deer with wings (a chimera⁵ that is motivated linguistically: “flying deer”), or a bug with the head of a deer. These are the modalities of representation in images and it is clearly an intrusion of an analogical modality into the naturalistic ontological system, which means they are not mutually exclusive. In today’s “naturalistic” ontology, artists’ compositions are the places where these expressions can find a reality: through an anthropomorphizing understanding of reality, it is possible to give a visual account of the analogical links created by the mental perceptual system. For

5 I use the term “chimera” in a completely different way from Carlo Severi’s so called *Principe de la chimère* (2007); for me, a chimera is a visual composition that describes an existing reality or that goes back to it (Karadimas 2010).

example, “deer” can be expressed in a visual composition, the multiplicity of the referents are created by combining a figure with different shadows – as illustrated by the artist Chrissie Cool in a representation of the analogical link. Obviously, it is a way to express, through images, the variety of links between different “deer”. The body of the human model serves as a structuring *gestalt* to demonstrate the artist’s understanding of both the insect and the deer appearing as shadows.⁶



Figure 6. Contemporary artistic photocomposition; anthropomorphic and analogical presence in a “naturalist” ontology. Stag Beetle by Chrissie Cool, photomanipulation, 2008 (<<http://chrissiecool.deviantart.com/art/Stag-Beetle-96598168>>; 20.10.2012).

Today, the majority of Amazonian societies do not use iconography in pictures, contrary to the naturalistic systems, but principally express it in rituals to depict beings that appear in mythology or in the belief system. They can use masks (Goulard & Karadimas 2011) or they can mimic the being using any artefact that represents the name or a recognisable analogical element.

⁶ In Greek mythology according to Pliny the Older, skiamorphing – drawing according to the outline of a shadow on a surface – is at the origin of art.

At this point, we must undertake an entomological description of the repartition areas of various beetles that could be possible candidates for the Deer-of-the-above character in the Miraña myth. *Aegognathus spitzi* and *Cantharolethrus sp.* are two stag-horn beetles that are located in the neotropical part of South America, and especially in the Andes. It seems that no equivalent beetle lives in the Amazonian part, and the whitetail deer (*Odocoileus virginianus*) from the myth is not found in this region. The whitetail deer is largely present in the Llanos and the Andes but rarely enters the Amazonian forest: it is also in the Andes and Llanos regions that the Sikuaní-Guahibo and, in the past, the Chinchansuyu Indians, who performed the ritual described by Guaman Poma, make and made the skull instrument from this particular species of deer. The Miraña instrument is made out of the skull of the red brocket deer (*Mazama americana*).

Miraña mythology seems to have made a few short cuts and assimilated a selection of beetles that could be linked or seen as a substitute for the “true” stag beetle of the Andes. For example, the longicorn *Macrodonia cervicornis* (“Large-toothed stag horn”) has the same analogical element as the *Lucanus cervus* “deer lucane” in Latin. Although both look frightening, neither is a true carnivorous beetle and cannot correspond to the cannibalistic behaviour of Deer-of-the-above.

But a similarity in the distinctive elytra patterns does suggest a correspondence between *Macrodonia cervicornis* and *Acrocinus longimanus*, also known as the “harlequin beetle”. This beetle is of some importance to the Miraña as it lives and nurtures itself on a variety of trees that produce a “lactating” sap, such as the Huan-soco *Couma macrocarpa*, and apparently, according to Miraña sources, it also feeds from trees that produce the bark used for masks (*Poulsenia armata*, *Castilla panamensis*, *Ficus gummifera Bertol*). The “faces” of the masks, as I have already mentioned, come from the pitch produced by those trees. For the Miraña, the harlequin beetle is a master of masks, which refers as much to the material as to the complicated designs present on the beetle’s wings.

Effectively, when anthropomorphized, the patterns displayed by the elytra reveal the image of an ugly face, a ferocious being with terrible teeth such as can be seen in a Moche fine line drawing of the back of a spider (Figure 7). But primarily, these beetles have a special relationship with pseudoscorpions (*Cordylochernes scorpioides*), a very small arachnid (2 to 8 millimetres long) that travels and lives in large numbers (as many as 40 individuals can be found in a single longicorn) beneath the elytra of the harlequin beetle. When the harlequin beetle flies away, they travel with him: This association and behaviour could correspond to the “raising” of the “children” to the sky by Deer-of-the-above.

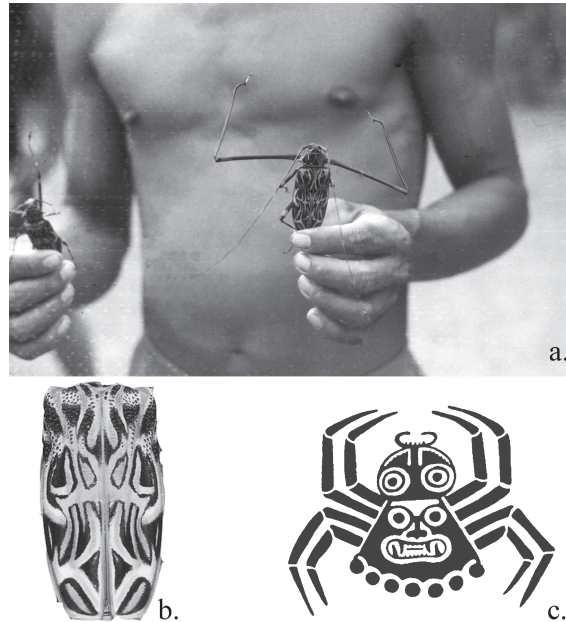


Figure 7. “Harlequin beetle” (*Acrocinus longimanus*) presented to me (a., b.) by a Miraña during fieldwork (Puerto Remanzo del Tigre, Caqueta, 1993: Photo by the author), the “ugly face” pattern displayed by the elytra compared with the same pattern from the back of a spider rendered in a fine line drawing by a Moche artist (c.) as a predatory human face (Donnan & McClelland 1999: fig. 3.44k).

But still, neither the harlequin nor the *Macrodonia cervicornis* beetles are carnivorous. The vinegaroon or whip scorpion (*Mastigoproctus sp.*) looks like a scorpion and is therefore mistaken by the children for the “grandfather”. Its moving tail, however, is stingless and thin as a whip. This arachnid should be seen as a potential candidate for the children-whipping cannibal “boogiemán” character incarnated in the myth. This *Uropyge* species seems to correspond to the character of the myth and its shape is somewhere between the stag beetle and the scorpion. With its enlarged pedipalps ending in pincers, it resembles the stag beetle’s “antlers”, but its long whip-like tail is used as a sensitive organ to touch its future prey. It is therefore a “deer” character that uses a whip, as in the myth. Secondly, it has another characteristic transcribed in the mythical language: Its anal glands produce a vinegary substance – acetic acid – that is projected as a defensive substance onto its assailants. *Pisse vinaigre*, “vinegar piss”, or *uropyge* in Latin, describe the feature that is mirrored in the Miraña myth when the children are encouraged by a mosquito woman to bite the deer’s testicles.

This action produces no result as they taste “too much like (liquid) tobacco”. Being a true carnivore, the whip scorpion or vinegaroon is a good candidate for the young children (pseudoscorpions) who mistake him (he resembles them) for their “grandfather” – the harlequin beetle who transports them under his wings. Obviously, identifying these possible candidates and finding parallels with the characters of the myth and their actions is speculative, as it is difficult to be sure that this part of the myth combines all the characters within the narrative.

Another possibility is to trace the appearance of the stag beetle in ethnographic accounts and to look at how they were depicted in Amerindian art. There is also the option of taking into account the different theoretical constructions regarding the various ontological figurative modalities which I outlined at the beginning of this article.

6. Stag beetles in Amerindian art

The first example comes from the Huichol art of *nierika* where the artist constructs cosmologically constrained “shamanic” visions with different coloured yarns. Various beings appear, in the same vision, with deer horns. In the Huichol belief system, the deer incarnates the major transformational paradigm of humans/corn/prey/peyote/ants/etc. Therefore, each one of them is shown with antlers in the yarn pictures and should be considered as visual compositions of the fact that they are “deered”. If we now consider each of these characters separately, it is possible to see that most of them are figurative: The human figure with deer horns is no exception as he could be referring to a deer dancer or the dance of the ancestors. Thanks to the omnipresence of the deer figure in Huichol tradition, it becomes apparent that the small winged insects are also shown with antlers and that sometimes the same insect is shown without wings, then resembling a spider or a pseudoscorpion. In the case of the latter, the antlers reference the pincer-like pedipalps.

To give an example for this last assertion, in one of the first *nierika* shown to the general public, which was created by Cresencio Perez Robles in 1970, a scorpion featured in the central part of the yarn picture. Instead of depicting the scorpion’s pincer-like pedipalps in a naturalistic way, the artist took the analogical perspective of depicting them as antlers. This is only possible if the scorpion is anthropomorphized in such a way that the elements present on the front of its head are placed on top of a vertical being and thus transformed into horns or antlers. For the Huichol *nierika* then, the analogical point of view is more pertinent than the perspectivist construction which seems to be irrelevant in this case. But the analogical option is only generated if the artist first undertakes the anthropomorphic modality, in the same way as the artist Chrissie Cool constructed her contemporary image of “deer”.



Figure 8. Scorpion painted with antler-like pincer.

Huichol yarn painting by Cresencio Perez Robles, Nayarit, Mexico, c. 1970s
 (<http://www.indigoarts.com/gallery_huichol_cresencio5.html>; 15.10.2012).

Regarding the deer/beetle association, let us now look at other Amerindian artistic compositions that are more directly “perspectivist” and anthropomorphic. The motive of this piece of Zuni pottery shows a connection between a schematic depiction of a bat forming an arch, under the centre of which rests a deer, a deer whose heart can be very clearly seen. This thematic is a classic in Zuni imagery and is often described as the “Deer in his house”. The point is that the same “house” motive is frequently repeated in the reverse position, as if it was a “hanging” house, but with the deer remaining in the same standing position. The hanging motif is not a complete mirror picture of the first house. It is more a bat figure, with ears, that appears in both positions; at flight and at rest, hanging from the roof beneath the earth (or in a tree, etc.). If the deer remains “in his house”, then this house has a bat aspect.

If the depiction is understood in a “naturalistic” manner, then it is a giant bat on top of a common deer (something like a “supernatural” bat enclosing the deer as its prey). In this first approach, it is necessary for the naturalistic ontology to develop the “supernatural” category to explain the respective size differences within the same image. The perspectivist solution would explain it in a different way: It is not the bat that is oversized but the deer that has been reshaped according to the bat’s perspective.



Figure 9. Zuni olla, circa 1880s, classic heart-line deer in cartouche
 (<<http://pottery.twostartrading.com/Pages/Gallery1/ZuniOlla1918.html>>; 15.10.2012).

What the Zuni artist painted is the relationship between an insect presented in the form of a deer – the prey *par excellence* – and its predator, the bat. The perspectivist theoretical approach would claim that it is the point of view of the bat that is visually presented. But a problem still remains: If it is the point of view of the bat that is presented, then the bat should have been depicted as a human (as in the perspectivist theory where bats see themselves as humans), and this composition would then have been that of a human person hunting a deer (a predator/prey relationship). But where, then, is the bat? Where is the insect? It is therefore not the bat's perspective that is presented here, but the humans' – the Zuni – understanding of the relationship that exists between a bat and an insect that is described as the “deer of the bat” – “for the bat, the insect is the same thing that, when hunting, the deer is to humans”. It is therefore through “humanising” a relationship – anthropomorphising it – that the predatory/prey relationship is mentally apprehended. And this visual composition is the same modality as the descriptive naming of the “antlion” (the “lion” of ants).

More than a perspectivist figuration, it is an anthropomorphised relationship based on the analogical closeness of a prey that looks like a deer.

The other pottery motive comes from the Mimbres culture and this time it shows a completely anthropomorphised “flying deer” in an analogical reshaping, where the mandibles are pictured as antlers, or alternatively, the antlers could be the fanned antennae of the cockchafer beetle. Unlike the stag beetle, the cockchafer beetle has

a well-developed pointed underpart detached from the abdomen that is presented in the composition as a complementary element that looks like a tail, and is placed between the legs of the character.⁷



Figure 10. Mimbres pottery, Mogollone tradition, 1000-1150 A.D., New Mexico (Penney 1996: 136).

What this Mimbres pottery represents is probably not just a flying human figure with antlers, but the analogical transcription of a real being, an insect whose body parts can be transcribed with images coming from anatomically more “obvious” sources (such as deer, for example).

The visual parallel between the insect and the deer also seems to have been recognized by other South American cultures, as shown in Moche art (North Coast of Peru, 100-800 A.D.). In this image for example, the Moche artist depicted an anthropomorphised deer with a spear in its hand, a salient tongue, facing another character that appears enigmatic at first glance, except for the fact that he exactly mirrors the anthropomorphised stag. He has the same open mouth with a salient tongue, the

⁷ In my 2002 article, I interpreted this figuration as that of a flying bat, basically because bats are common representations in Mimbres pottery. Even if it were the case, the problem of the antlers is better solved in combination with the stag beetle or the maybeetle if the anatomical element of the “tail” or the end of the abdomen is taken into account.

spear placed in the same position, adornments copying the stag's spots, and a curved tail just like the deer. In other words, they are identical, but each element that makes them similar is shown as being different, a simile that only the global composition allows us to compare. They look familiar to one another as two brothers would, in the same way as the Miraña myth has one brother comparing his bones with those of his sibling. Strangely, these two figures correspond to the "brothers in arms" of Miraña mythology.



Figure 11. Moche anthropomorphic representation of two "deer" as "brothers in arms"
(Peruvian coast, 100-800 A.D., Donnan & McClelland 1999: fig. 3.14).

The big curving elements that are on the head of the enigmatic character seem to represent the distinctive mandibles of the stag beetle, or of other beetles that have "ornamented" head structures. If this representation shows a stag beetle that is being compared to the anthropomorphised deer, then we have the same way of recognising that beetles and deer can share the same shape, and that the human perception is, in this case, producing similar cultural constructions. This analogical figurative process is also a result of a description where the simile is given through names: although we do not have access to this information, stag beetles were probably named in reference to the deer in the Moche language.

Finally, it should be noted that the body of this second character is covered with metallic plates, reminiscent of the Chinchansuyu deer-skull players in Guaman Poma's account. If the Chinchansuyu deer-skull players decorated their clothes with metallic plates, it should be interpreted using the same reference as in this Moche

drawing. The metallic elements were a visual reference to the “shiny” property of the exoskeleton of some beetles, a metallic shine that was reproduced on the costumes. The use of the deer-skull instrument is most probably a reference to the mouth of the beetle, and a simile to evoke the stag beetle as it is explicitly played in front of the mouth, or “on the nose”, as the Chinchansuyu women, according to Guaman Poma (Guaman Poma de Ayala 1615/1616: 321 [323]), were chanting to the men. In this sense, it is most probably equivalent to the lowland ritual or myth where the Deer brothers played the role of two kinds of “deer”.

But this is not always the case. For example, the forked elements of the deer antlers can be described using other visual references. In the text that accompanies the following picture (Figure 12), a contemporary North American hunter describes the antlers of the deer he has just killed by saying that the final fork has the appearance of a “fish tail”. In this description, the hunter only makes a reference to the shape of the antlers, not to their essence. Ontologically, he does not claim that the essence of the antlers is fish-like or that a fish was at any moment involved in the construction or shaping of the antlers. He just describes their shape in an analogical way.



Figure 12. Contemporary North American hunter making an analogical description of the deer’s antlers by describing the final fork as resembling a “fish tail” (<http://www.paintrock.com/rifle2006.htm>; 15.10.2012).

If I give this example, it is because the same analogy occurs in another Amerindian case, a Paracas tapestry depicting a fantastic being, sometimes recognized as a shaman with fish or with a fish mask (Figure 13).

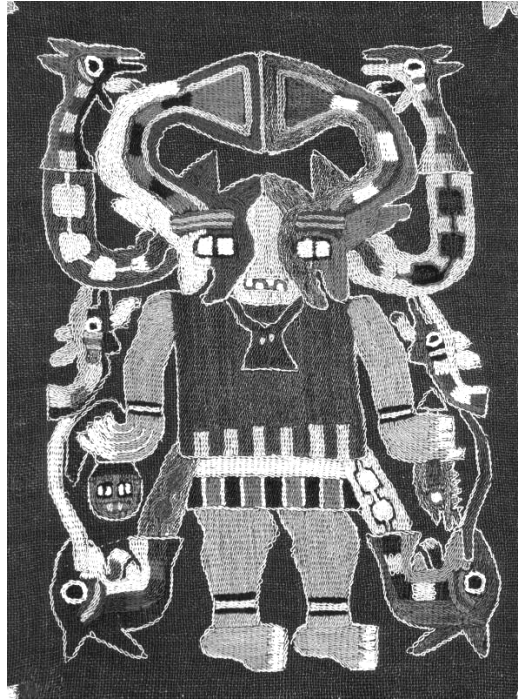


Figure 13. Paracas (800-100 B.C., Peruvian coast) textile representing an anthropomorphised stag beetle with fish as antlers (Lavallée 2008: fig. 84).

Here, a character with menacing teeth and a multiplicity of fish is holding a trophy head in one hand and a knife in the other. What resembles a mask are two fish whose tails are facing each other on top of the head, their eyes joining to become the eyes of the central figure. The dorsal and tail fins seem to represent the different elements that make up the mandibles of the stag beetle. Both of the elements shooting out of the head laterally, and curving to the top where they end as dog or fox heads, are situated where the antennae would have been in a naturalistic depiction of the beetle. The arms and legs of the figure reference those of the beetle, except the central pair which are styled as a kind of belt, and mixed with the fish. Once again, the spiny dorsal fins are visually reminiscent of the thorns present on the legs of the beetle and the elongated succession of tarsus is depicted in the composition as a kind of tongue coming out of the fishes' mouths, ending in smaller fish for the terminal hooks of the beetle's legs. As Paracas is a culture at home on the Pacific coast of Peru, the main analogical figures are fish but the global shape of the character remains identical. It

most probably refers to a beetle, the analogical composition to fish, but the overall motivation comes from an anthropomorphic process that enables the creation of the target hybrid or fantastic being.

With the presence of the trophy head in the composition, the stag beetle is, once again, linked to death and/or to predatory behaviour against humans.

7. Conclusion

We may now understand why the two stags are associated with bones and death as much in the Miraña myth as in the Cuiva-Guahibo funeral ritual: by examining the bones, “Deer-of-the-above” creates a certainty of death – individual death – which is linked to the absence of flesh. This certainty is attained by a being that is perceived as a familiar of prey, that confers meat on the group (humans therefore play the role of “necrophages” in the eyes of the game, as they eat the fleshy parts and leave the bones – behaviour that would be reversed in the case of a human cadaver). But simultaneously, as shown in the Chinchaysuyu dance, the deer skull is played to create fertility within the prey and, to a certain degree, to assure the prey’s continuity. In this sense, the stag beetle seems to participate as a creator of “living bones”, in the same way that he incarnates them (he is himself a living skeleton). Ultimately, blowing into the skull also imitates the loud buzzing/roaring of the beetle’s flight, subsequently delivering a complete anthropomorphised image.

Looking through the different approaches to representing, first in myth, then in ritual and in iconography, different expressions of the same character, it appears that the modalities of presenting an analogical association between the deer and the beetle are given in such a way that it is always possible to find the source species of the metaphor. This is possible due to the ability of human perception to create links between shapes and to project anthropomorphic behaviour or forms onto beings in the environment (Karadimas 2005).

What does all this change for Descola’s *Animism* and for Viveiros de Castro’s *Perspectivism*? First of all, the relational definition (the beetle as “stag” for the bat, for example) is not an ontological modality that is restricted to Amazonian cultural systems. We can find it in a lot of other Amerindian as well as in “naturalist” ontologies (using, here, concepts elaborated by Descola).

This relational/perspectivist definition of beings and relations can hardly, if ever, be put into images for a precise reason: in order to create the image of a relation, a “third eye” becomes necessary, to qualify the relation and thus make a description of it in terms that can be mentally grasped by another person (or by another being, as non-humans, Indians say, see the world with other eyes).

Perspectivist theory is thus a way of presenting an imputation of human behaviour made by some Amerindian cultures – but it is not exclusively theirs – to something that is not human: this is called anthropomorphism.

On the other hand, *Animism* has challenged the discussion between Nature and Culture to reinforce the distinction that relies on the ontological modality recognized by every culture. The “anima” – the “spirit” – the interiority that exists as continuity between things or beings is something that can also be found in “naturalist” ontologies. There, it is only acceptable if it enters the “art” category (the *Stag Beetle* photocomposition of artist Chrissie Cool, for example), but is rejected as a scientific definition of “stag” or “beetle”, since the shape of a species does not enter the scientific categorization used to define species. But this, too, is an illusion: Latin scientific names do this all the time. *Macrodonia cervicornis* is nothing more than saying that this beetle has “big-toothed antlers”, a definition that derives from the shape the mandible shares with antlers, as in Amerindian iconography or mythology (and this is perhaps why it remains in Latin). This latter characteristic is neither its “physicality” nor its “interiority”: it is the image that the shape of this species displays to a human observer, something like its essence, what we, anthropologists, would qualify as “spirit” if we came across such a definition in another culture. Thus, on a certain level, what Descola labeled “naturalist” ontology relies on an “animistic” process which is kept cryptic (Latin), or separated (art) from the consciousness of people sharing this ontology.

Perspectivism as much as animism is a modality that can be included in a more general ontology involving anthropomorphism – everything is questioned and perceived in terms of human reference – that also occurs in “naturalistic” as well as in “animistic”, “analogical” or “totemic” ontologies, after the typology established by Descola. This human cognitive ability cannot explain all the occurrences of interactions between living forms, but it can certainly help to understand why some ritual and iconographic forms are shown in a similar way even though no contact can be found between the cultural traditions that created them. It is therefore an anthropological invariant.

Our “naturalistic” tradition mainly leaves the expression of these analogical ways of bringing together beings that are separated in different taxa to the arts, which interrogates the nature of such similitudes more profoundly. Amerindian ontologies express it in a more distinct way as they reintroduce them into their myths and rituals.

One of the changes that probably occurred in this Miraña myth, with pre-Columbian ramifications, is the intrusion of history linked to the rubber boom and, before that, to slavery. Binding the children one after the other so that they all walk together is typical of the slavery era as recorded by Spix and Martius, two Bavarian explorers

of the 18th century, during their journey through the Miraña territory. During this time, the Miraña people were engaged in the human trading of neighbouring groups – as were their victims – the practice of taking prisoners that was already linked to the anthropophagic ritual described in the myth.

The probable change to a sap-eating character such as the harlequin beetle can certainly be accredited to the intrusion of slavery and the massacres linked to the rubber boom period at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th, where indigenous people of the area had to produce rubber by cutting the bark of trees to get “milk” for the white men. Considering the thousands of tons that the region produced, and the number of deaths linked to it, the white man’s seemingly insatiable greed for this material can only have been interpreted by the indigenous workers as an aliment for the white people – rubber as a necessary source of sustenance – hence the association with this sap-licking beetle that brings death.

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