

# **Animism, shamanism and discarnate perspectives**

**by**

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## Abstract

Until recent decades, the study of aboriginal perspectives on personhood and discarnate entities, in fields such as animism and totemism, has generally begun from problematic Cartesian-style metaphysics that posit certain a priori subject-object and society-nature dichotomies. This type of theorising appears throughout the work of foundational scientific figures such as Tylor, Durkheim, Freud, Lévi-Strauss and to some extent Lévy-Bruhl. In contrast, current anthropological thought is increasingly discussing animisms as kinds of ‘relationality’ (Hviding 1996, Bird-David 1999, 2006 Descola 2005, Ingold 2006, Wallis 2009) while recognising that for many people around the globe the space between society and nature is social. However, despite Tylor’s lead that ‘dream and trance states’ are the prime domain of animistic rationality, much contemporary discourse on animism tends to neglect the study of shamanism. While remaining critically aware of theoretical problems in traditional scientific thought, this thesis draws heavily on the thinking of Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004, 2005) and his notion of perspectivism to assist in a phenomenological analysis of Yaminahua shamanism, exploring local Amazonian views on discarnate entities and subjectivity.

# Contents

i. Abstract	2
ii. Introduction	4
<b>1. Chapter one: Animism, totemism and cartesianism</b>	<b>8</b>
a) Forefathers — Tylor, Freud & Jung, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss and Lévy-Bruhl	8
b) Hallowell's other-than-human persons	14
c) Cartesian crises	16
<b>2. Chapter two: Relational animism and perspectivism</b>	<b>21</b>
a) Phenomenology	21
b) Bird-David's relational animism	23
c) Perspectivism	27
<b>3. Chapter three: Shamanism</b>	<b>37</b>
a) Shamanism and imagination	40
b) Shamanophobia	41
c) Yaminahua case study	44
<b>4. Conclusions and further questions</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>5. References</b>	<b>58</b>

# Introduction

The dreams of magic may one day be the waking realities of science.

~Sir James Frazer *The Golden Bough* (1890:806)

Descartes — a reclusive man — was once accidentally locked in a steam room, where under hallucination he had a dualist vision on which the modern project is found.

~Brian Morris *Western conceptions of the individual* (1991:6)

While sixteenth century Cartesian philosopher René Descartes has become a sort of pin-up boy for intellectuals to criticise science and modern thought, dualisms of transcendence-immanence and spirit-matter appear throughout the history of western thought, including in Platonism, Gnosticism, Deism, and to some degree, Christian Neoplatonism, Hegel's philosophy, and Hermeticism. The major problem with Descartes' (2003) meditations is not simply the declaration of a mind-body dualism but the sharp separation of the two while radically prioritising thought at the expense of other modes of being. 'There is a great difference between mind and body', for Descartes (2003:118), a difference that severely marginalises perceptive, emotional, and imaginal experiences from the apparently greater and primary world of rational thought.

Particularly over the last sixty years, social scientists and others have become increasingly suspicious of these Cartesian-style analytical frameworks. However, as Brian Morris (1999:83) notes, the postmodern trend to disregard notions such as 'reason, culture, mind, religion, spirit, nature, or what have you' as modern concepts that are positioned and crippled by dualistic metaphysics is rather simplistic. It is the Cartesian-style emphasis on thought, humanity and western civilisation, and not simply the use of conceptual dualities, which has and continues to disfigure much scientific analysis.

Descartes (2003:112) described the body as an extended thing, a non-thinking object that moves as an instrument at the whim of thought. Significance is held in thinking as the

body and other extended things, including artefacts and nature, are largely devalued. It has been argued that this Cartesian axiology ('ethic and aesthetic value system') aligns with many ideas that underpin modern sociality (Hornborg 1999:81), capitalism (Pálsson 1995:3-5, Morris 1999:82) and of course science by holding firm to notions that urge demarcation and alienation between subject-object and also society-nature dichotomies.

Traditionally, the study of indigenous or aboriginal societies by anthropologists and others was performed under the heavy influence of — for want of a better term — modernity. Cartesian-style elements of this influence permeated theoretical and methodological tool boxes restricting how the disciplines of the academic intelligentsia interpreted the many reports that speak of *primitive* peoples both associating nature with personhood and acting towards spirit entities (such as animal and plant spirits).

This thesis charts a brief history of academic thinking that concerns different scientific understandings of aboriginal worldviews and subjectivity. It demonstrates a particular journey of academia, observing ways in which it developed certain sensitivities and overcame blocks and projections (or mirrors) in regards to the conceptualisation of different aboriginal perspectives on subjectivity and discarnate entities.

While the terms 'aboriginal' and 'indigenous' denote slippery and highly contested western constructs, often revealing more about the researcher than those being researched, they are reluctantly used in this thesis as synonyms to define a loose and broad category that refers to something like localised, pre-modern, autochthonous persons that are commonly associated with European colonisation.

Chapter one sets out to show that the anthropology of animism and the psychology of animism were traditionally limited by anthropocentric and sociocentric tendencies that have assisted in projecting problematic subject-object classifications onto indigenous realities of nonhuman subjectivity. Through tracking the thinking of Tylor, Freud, Jung, Durkheim and

Lévi-Strauss a trend is observed that showcases modern thought struggling within Cartesian-style frameworks of mind-body and society-nature.

Indicating a significant turning point in scholarship, the pioneering anthropology of Irving Hallowell (1960) is discussed for its attempts at bridging Cartesian chasms by working with such concepts as ‘a worldview perspective’. In addition, also explored are Hallowell’s influential understandings of the ‘other-than-human persons’ (such as tree-persons, bear-persons, rock-persons, spirit-persons) of Ojibwa ontology, along with his ideas on Ojibwa non-substantiative or non-fixed local identity. Contemporary debates on different contradictions of subject-object theorising are introduced, along with Latour’s notion of subject-object ‘hybridisation’ (1993:46). The chapter finishes by looking at current discourse in the field of animism that has grown out of the recent anthropological Cartesian crisis, including ideas that relate to human-nonhuman notions of relationality, sociality and intersubjectivity.

Chapter two describes the importation of phenomenological thought to schools of the ‘new’ animism and analyses a landmark case study by Nurit Bird-David (1999) exploring the concept of ‘relational epistemology’ in the anthropological construction of Nayaka experiences of spirit entities. It is shown that Bird-David’s animism is extremely innovative. However, much like other contemporary anthropologists of animism, her ideas do not offer much allowance for local metaphysical notions and she discards shamanic and trance discourse, thus leaving major gaps in her analysis of Nayaka involvement with discarnate entities.

The second part of chapter two is dedicated to exploring discussions on perspectivism, largely through the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998). The school of thought extends certain logics of ‘relational animism’ by presenting various understandings of how local Amazonian peoples tend to perceive, conceive and share subjectivity, including

nonhuman subjectivity. Perspectivism hybridises the notion of the ‘body’ to include things such as dispositions, capacities, moods and affects while positioning the soul as subjectivity and thus manages to work within an adjusted dualistic metaphysic. The notion of perspectivism is explored further in the third and final chapter where it is shown to elucidate understandings of Yaminahua shamanism.

Chapter three introduces the field of shamanism, briefly discusses some of the main characteristics of anthropology’s attempts at coming to terms with ‘shamans’ both as an academic construct and ethnographic phenomenon, including 20<sup>th</sup> century trends in scholarship that pathologised magico-religious practitioners, and it also looks at ideas related to what Dowson calls academic ‘shamanophobia’ (1996:468). The third chapter then explores an ethnographic case study on Upper Amazonian shamanism by Graham Townsley (1993) focussing on Yaminahua understandings of subjectivity and spirit entities. The thesis finishes by exploring certain methodological concerns for contemporary studies in the anthropology of shamanism, advocating a participatory ethnographic turn.

The theoretical framework of perspectivism not only appears to ‘fit’ Yaminahua cosmology and local notions of personhood, but in return, Townsley’s (1993) study on Yaminahua shamanism extends certain chapters of perspectivism offering various nuances to the conceptualisation of Amazonian-based ontology. By cross-pollinating perspectivism with Townsley’s phenomenological study of Yaminahua shamanism, notions of personhood, identity and metaphysics are opened up revealing sensitive and sensible understandings of local Amazonian perspectives on discarnate entities and subjectivity.



## Chapter One: Animism, totemism and cartesianism

The contemporary study on different ways in which indigenous peoples perceive and conceive subjectivity and discarnate beings has emerged from foundational scientific discourses, such as animism and totemism. Early theories and discussions on animism and totemism in anthropology, sociology and psychology generally operated from Cartesian-style metaphysics that perpetuated problematic humanistic and sociocentric models. In response to these tendencies, anthropology has increasingly begun to reconsider, particularly over the last few decades, subject-object and society-nature analytical frameworks for understanding aboriginal worldviews. Chapter one examines prominent early conceptions of animism and totemism, appreciating and critiquing various arguments, before moving on to discussing post-Cartesian social scientific thought that is concerned with notions of personhood and human-nonhuman relationality.

### Forefathers — Tylor, Freud & Jung, Durkheim, Lévi-Strauss and Lévy-Bruhl.

Publishing in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the forefather of anthropology Edward B. Tylor was not exempt from — indeed, he was largely animated by — the scientific trends of the time, including evolutionism and Cartesian-style dualisms. Many of the ideas and values that underlie Tylor's thoughts on indigenous ways of being are generally not accepted in today's canon of social science, including the author's patronising primitivism, notion of survivals and theory of cultural evolution. Tylor persistently conflated 'savages' or 'primitives' with children and the lower culturally evolved. He is generally remembered most for his patronising primitivism, often at the expense of his entire prolific body of thought.

Circumventing the long debate concerning Tylor's theory of religious origins (Lowie 1936:108-14, Durkheim 1915:53, Evans-Pritchard 1965:25, Tambiah 1990:48, Stringer 1999:543-545) this section is interested in the author's notion of animism, which for Tylor

can be split into two parts, or ‘two great dogmas’ (1974:426). On the one hand is the belief in souls, that is, ‘individual creatures, [including humans, animals and plants] capable of continued existence after the death or destruction of the body’, and on the other hand, the belief in spirits entities ‘upward to the rank of powerful deities’ (1974 I:385). Tylor was fascinated by the many recorded accounts of humanity attributing personality to plants, animals, minerals, weather systems and other aspects of nature. He stated that people living with an animistic mentality do not sense a psychical distinction between humans and ‘beasts’ nor between humanity and plants or other ‘objects’ (cited in Harvey 2005:8).

According to Tylor, animism pays attention to ways in which people think the existence — emphasising the *cogito* — of ‘non-empirical’ beings into reality, and the apparent erroneous subjectification of objects, including associated beliefs and practices such as worship and sacrifice. He placed animism as antithetical to science, and the ‘soul’ as that which ‘divides Animism from materialism’ (1974 I:367).

Tylor detested the scientific validity of animism — including dream and trance states which he held as the prime domain of animistic rationality.

He who recollects when there was still personality to him in posts and sticks, chairs, and toys, may well understand how the infant philosopher of mankind could extend the notion of vitality to what modern science only recognises as lifeless things ... Everyone who has ever seen visions while light-headed in fever, everyone who has ever dreamt a dream, has seen the phantoms of objects as well as of persons (Tylor 1974 I:399).

These thoughts and perspectives showcase the dialectic roots from which the fate of animism, as a century long academic project, emerged. Tylor’s reduction of dream and trance states to sickness and his sharp separation of science from animism does not resonate with much contemporary anthropology, particular in the field of shamanism as is outlined later in the thesis. In addition, the author thinks with Cartesian-style biases that reduce aboriginal involvement with discarnate entities to manifestations of self and *thought*, while neglecting human-nonhuman relationality; including notions of inter-species care and concern.

Drawing heavily on thinkers such as Tylor, Frazer and Lévy-Bruhl, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung explored notions of animism from perspectives in traditional psychology. Freud described the ego as the seat of reason or that which makes sense of things. It acts in accordance with the ‘reality principle’ which ‘strives for what is useful and guards itself against damage’ (1911:37-41). The ‘reality principle’ is part of a human survival mechanism. Placing animism at the bottom of the barrel, below religion which is under science, Freud argued that animistic philosophy and behaviour is characterised by the projection of ‘internal’ processes and structures of the mind onto the ‘external world’ (1986:149). He described it as a primitive type of reality which ‘came to man naturally and as a matter of course. He knew what things were like in the world, namely just as he felt himself to be’ (1986:149). According to Freud, spirits and demons in animistic societies are but personified externalisations of people’s own unconscious emotional impulses (1986:150). They work to offer mental relief and represent types of thought and behaviour which he paralleled with an ‘intelligent paranoic’ and ‘neurotic’ (1986:150,148).

In contrast to Freud’s ‘neurotic’ hypothesis, Jung perceived animistic behaviour as the initial psychological state of all human beings, where the ‘non-differentiation between subject-object’ displays the subject’s unconscious being:

projected into the object, and the object introjected into the subject, becoming part of his psychology. Then plants and animals behave like human beings, human beings are at the same time like animals, and everything is alive with ghosts and gods (1960:265).

Brown and Thouless (1965) furthered these theories claiming that animistic thought and conduct is resultant of human unconscious predispositions, which Guthrie (1993:43) used to found his odd thesis that animism is anthropomorphic cognisance designed to help people survive in a world where it is safer to assume something is alive than dead or inert.

Jung and Freud both fall victim to modern humanism by claiming that animals, plants, and spirits are imbued with personality simply as vacuums for humans to sort and experience unconscious structures. Although challenging the Cartesian emphasis on ‘rational thought’ by

introducing ideas on the influence of unconscious processes, the two psychologists nonetheless conceived animism through an anthropocentric gaze by reducing the subjectification of nonhumans to mere aspects and concerns of the human psyche while largely neglecting human-nonhuman relationality or sociality.

Also researching at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Émile Durkheim applied a sociological lens to the study of Australian Aboriginal societies. Exploring social organisation, concepts of morality and pervasive types of ‘exotic’ rationality, Durkheim placed totemism central to the systematic dynamics of Aboriginal kinship and society.<sup>1</sup> He noted that the perception of ‘blood’ — or what science tends to now call ‘genetic’ — kinship in Aboriginal society tends to extend to members of the same clan and also to certain nonhuman species that function as clan signifiers or totems. In addition, he observed that for such peoples certain interpersonal and interspecies morals and sentiments appeared to overlap and entangle, for example in hunting and marriage restrictions that are associated with totemic animals and plants (1996:101,108). Durkheim interpreted this organisation and rationality as being produced naturally from social facts however mistaken in the sense that it claims ‘mystical’ kinship between humans and nonhumans (1996:107). Siding with Tylor and Freud, Durkheim perceived ‘primitive’ philosophers as ‘children’ that cannot distinguish the animate from the inanimate (1996:10).

Durkheim struggled to appreciate, among other things, certain ontological perspectives and moralities that ‘glue’ or bond Aboriginal societies with ‘inanimate’ kingdoms. He acknowledged that totemists relate to nonhuman entities with notions of friendship, interdependence and qualities and characteristics ‘like those which unite the members of a single family’ (1996:108). However, as Bird-David comments, Durkheim

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<sup>1</sup> Durkheim Challenged Tylor’s notion that totemism is an aspect of animism. The sociologist was not impressed by the idea that trance and dream states founded Aboriginal religious rationality and in response he placed ‘totemism’ at the centre of Aboriginal religion due to its primacy in the function of ‘social organisation’ (1996:48-55,76).

reduced totemic behaviour to a childish confusion and an error between the spiritual unity of a totemic (mind) force and ‘bodily unity of the flesh’ (1999:70). This reductionism on Durkheim’s part displays creativity limited by certain modern Cartesian-style conceptions of subject-object and society-nature that focus on subject and sociocentric principles, disregarding the relationship of aboriginal metaphysics to human-nonhuman interaction.

According to Durkheim, totems are associated primarily with social organisation by a mental plane that makes abstract society substantial for an individual, through a totem-body dichotomy. He suggested that collective representations, such as totemic emblems, function to help pattern the individual’s different sensory faculties, or in Durkheim’s words, they ‘turn upon sensation a beam of light that penetrates and transforms it’ (1996:437). In contrast to Durkheim’s sociocentric and ‘mind’ (or representation) reductionism, contemporary thinker Deborah Rose noticed among various Aboriginal Australian societies that ‘totemic relationships connect people to their ecosystems in non-random ways of relation of mutual care’ (1998:14). Durkheim’s anthropocentric and sociocentric perspectives, that purport human with nonhuman kinship as ontologically mistaken and epistemologically functional but wrong, are indicative of Durkheim’s times and demonstrate early 20<sup>th</sup> century sociological originality.

The structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss joined social scientific discussions on totemism arguing that species are chosen as totems not because they are ‘good to eat’ — as Malinowski suggested — but because they are ‘good to think’ (1969:89). With a nod to Evans-Pritchard (1940), Lévi-Strauss claimed that totemism is a system of symbolic representations and analogies that pre-literate societies use to organise their relation to both nature and other societies. He claimed that it allows a coherent classificatory system, a framework for human cognition to comprehensively grasp its surroundings. From this, Lévi-Strauss concluded that ‘totemic thought’ is not so different from ‘scientific thought’ with the

former interspersing symbolic representations among mythological stories and the latter logically and painstakingly organising ‘nature’ into various symbolic representations (cited in Cutrofello 2005:140).

Tylor, Freud and Durkheim perceived the tendency for indigenous pre-modern peoples to extend kinship to animals as a ‘childish’ mistake, whereas Lévi-Strauss interpreted it not as failed epistemology, but rather, purely as analogy; a rational way of thinking and differentiating the world. Much like the humanism of his predecessors, Lévi-Strauss’ theories are couched in a priori notions of a great divide between society and nature, including the objectification of the latter. He argued against trends in scholarship which placed indigenous people on the nature side of the culture-nature dichotomy but, as David-Bird (1999:70) states, ‘while he correctively placed them on the “culture” side, he placed the dualistic split itself inside their “savage mind”, he did not explain animism, but explained it away’. Lévi-Strauss, similar to Durkheim, struggled to squeeze animistic thought into a modern dualist epistemological agenda, causing a kind of inventive intellectual friction that nonetheless projected the anthropological imagination onto its once objects but now subjects.

While Tylor and Frazer argued that ‘modern’ and ‘primitive’ mentality is different by kind, early 20<sup>th</sup> century scholar Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1985[1926]:76) argued that the difference is one of degree. He (1985:65) stated that primitive thinking is pre-logical, not alogical, but prior to, or without the knowledge-base of science; that it operates with an alternative type of logic that is impervious to experience and saturated by localised ‘collective representations’, echoing Durkheim. The force of emotion, imagination and passion imbues primitive social representations, according to Lévy-Bruhl, making ‘primitive man’ indifferent to certain basic contradictions and thus participating in a form of mysticism. *Participation mystique* captures primitive mentality by conflating subjects and objects ‘not only in an ideological, but also in a physical and mystical sense’ altering the functioning of

reason, logic and inference (Lévy-Bruhl cited in Throop & Laughlin 2007:639). For example, the scholar noted that the Bororo of Brazil discussed their subjectivity and identity as being simultaneously red parakeets and humans (1985:77). Lévy-Bruhl described primitives as masters of contradiction, as pre-logical mystics that are driven by emotion, however, in later years, after heavy amounts of criticism, he allocated this type of imagination and emotion to ‘modern man’ stating that ‘there is a mystical mentality which is more marked and more easily observable among ‘primitive peoples’ than in our own societies, but it is present in every human mind’ (1975:100-10). Although beginning to move away from Cartesian-style values — by conflating subject-object dualities with a notion of ‘mystical participation’ — Lévy-Bruhl’s ideas nonetheless reflect and emerged from a racist intellectual climate founded on cultural-evolutionary theories and other types of patronising western rationalism.

### **Hallowell’s other-than-human persons**

Through studying and living with the Ojibwa from southern central Canada in the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century, the anthropologist Irving Hallowell contributed a quantum leap to the study of animism. As Harvey (2005:17) notes, much contemporary anthropological thought on animism — or the ‘new’ animism — owes its respects to Hallowell’s lengthy dialogues with the Ojibwa. According to Hallowell (1960:43) the nexus of Ojibwa ontology rests on what the author calls ‘persons’, a category that is not limited to the human species but extends to ‘other-than-human’ persons — whom populate spiritual and ecological landscapes — such as rock-persons, bear-persons, and thunder-persons.

Hallowell stated that, in contrast to dominant modernist contemplation, ‘any concept of *impersonal* “natural” forces is totally foreign to Ojibwa thought’ (1960:29). A difficulty in correlating typical western ideas such as ‘person’, ‘sentience’, ‘nature’ and ‘inanimate’ with Ojibwa beliefs and practices pressured Hallowell’s anthropology into a consideration of ontology.

The author built on the work of Robert Redfield, and his idea of a ‘worldview’, in attempting to meta-theorise certain foundations for exploring Ojibwa realities. Redfield (1952:30) described a worldview as a particular ‘organisation of ideas which answers the questions: Where am I? Among what do I move? What are my relations to these things? ... Self is the axis of [*sic*] worldview’. Undertaking a thorough analysis of aspects of Ojibwa language, beliefs, values and behaviour, Hallowell discovered a kind of unified cognitive outlook being lived that seemed to fundamentally contrast with certain modern frameworks; including the idea of a sharp separation between both society-nature and subject-object. Rather than attempting to impose Cartesian-style dualistic ontologies, Hallowell suggested that the worldview of the Ojibwa is embedded in beliefs that are concerned with what it means to be a person, which of course includes other-than-human persons. But not all things are animate, or deserve the title ‘person’, in Ojibwa society. According to Hallowell, the allocation of sentience or personhood to aspects of the Ojibwa worldview is part of a ‘culturally constituted cognitive “set”’ (1960:25).

Hallowell’s conceptions on the idea and definition of a ‘grandfather’ in Ojibwa society exemplify the difficulties of trying to reduce an Ojibwa worldview to Cartesian-style dualistic frameworks. ‘Grandfather’ denotes a non-substantiative or non-fixed category in Ojibwa society that may include both human persons and other-than-human persons, such as animals and spirit beings (1960:21). It also may include particular human persons who are not necessarily of genetic relation to a grandchild. The Ojibwa title ‘grandfather’ denotes persons who are listened to, who teach and communicate matters of significance and who inculcate respectful living (Harvey 2005:18). Hallowell described the various types of Ojibwa grandfathers as being terminologically and ontologically equivalent across different biological and discarnate domains.

The other-than-human grandfathers are sources of power to human beings through the “blessings” they bestow, i.e. a sharing of their power which enhances the “power” of human beings... the relation between the human child and a human grandfather is functionally patterned in the same



way as the relation between human beings and grandfathers of an other-than-human class (1960:22).

The author acutely goes on to suggest that by adopting a worldview perspective of Ojibwa culture there is no strict dichotomy between society and nature nor mind and body (1960:22).

Living outside such dualistic frameworks, the Ojibwa attribution of personhood to other-than-human persons does not depend on requirements of discovering human-likeness in nonhumans but humans are like other persons. Hallowell claimed that any analysis of Ojibwa life that does not take into account these basic dynamics of ‘social’ — which includes certain ‘natural’ — relations is bound for disaster. He stated (1960:21):

if, in the world view of a people, “persons” as a class include entities other than human beings, then our *objective* approach is not adequate for presenting an accurate description of “the way a man, in a particular society, sees himself in relation to all else” [italics added].

Of cardinal significance for the Ojibwa are the bonds which link their people to a broader sociality populated by other-than-human persons. Hallowell claimed that the perception of this ontological continuum that spans across certain life-forms weaves itself through Ojibwa language, beliefs, values and conduct. For example, the author noticed during fieldwork that in response to thunder beginning on the horizon the Ojibwa would relate to *it* (the storm) as they would human persons, saying and asking things like ‘did you hear what was said?’ (1960:34). Hallowell’s insights and perspectives set the stage for many contemporary theories on animism, including post-Cartesian-style relational understandings of different ‘persons’ and their intersubjectivity.

## **Cartesian crises**

Although publishing in the 1960s, Hallowell’s pioneering anthropology was largely pushed to the margins of academic discussion until the 1990s, when the Cartesian subject-object interface came under heavy criticism in the social sciences. Particular anthropocentric subject-object and society-nature dichotomies have undoubtedly acted as central designs for modern western thought, aesthetics and ethics. Toward the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Bruno

Latour (1993) entered the subject-object debate suggesting that social philosophy and epistemology is in a state of crisis due to a flaw in the foundations of modernity. He (1993:47) states that *we* moderns have never really been modern, and that the ‘purification’ of society from nature — which he suggests is the basis of modernity — is but a pervasive theoretical reflection that does not hold currency in the unfolding of everyday life.

Latour (1993:29) discusses the production of hybrids in subject-object relationships that emerge in the modern tendency for people to impute objects with personality and agency (such as houses, cars, teddy-bears), and similarly, hybrid mixes of society and nature that are produced by growing technological capacities (ozone holes, genetically modified organisms). Modern subject-object and society-nature dualisms have created what Latour calls ‘quasi-objects’ and ‘quasi-subjects’, things that contain both subjective and objective characteristics (1993:46-8). Such third-legs help exemplify the fallacy of Cartesian-style dichotomies of mind-body and society-nature. Social conventions, social artefacts and the environment are increasingly hybridising as science continues to rise and uncover certain of its own inner epistemological contradictions. Artefacts are only ‘nature’ re-arranged by humans. In addition, as Viveiros de Castro notes, what is ‘nature’ to us may in fact be ‘culture’ to other-than-human persons and societies (2004:471).

Following Latour, it appears that modern ways of thinking, that inexorably support an uncontaminated separation, and indeed, alienation, of humans from nonhumans, including ‘natural’ and ‘artificial’ provinces, nonetheless fail at the question of praxis.

Problematic modern society-nature interfaces may be doing more than simply attempting to distance society from nature. The idea of ‘nature’ appears to define the very existence of ‘society’. Heidegger (cited in Descola 1996:98) noticed that nature is not simply the antithetical shadow of society but is also the encompassing totality that reflects and determines the very characteristics it opposes. Taking off from Heidegger, Descola suggests

that ‘the conclusion seems inescapable: suppress the idea of nature and the whole philosophical edifice of western achievements will crumble’ (1996:98), resulting in a major transformation of western cosmology by undermining its key anthropocentric device. This reshaping would reduce certain *exotic* qualities of modern thought, bringing it in line with numerous other cultures that appear to be operating within kinds of more sympathetic relational worldviews.

Around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century increasing ethnographic accounts began to emerge discussing societies around the globe that do not seem to resonate at all with the historically recent dualist notions of subject-object and society-nature generally associated with modernity. The Amazon region offers many rich examples of societies that hold humans, animals, plants and spirits to certain fundamental resonances or ontologies (Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2004). This region is discussed in greater detail in chapter two. However, these ontologies are not restricted to populations of Amazonia. Howell (1996:141-142) discusses the Chewong of the Malaysian rainforest and their view that plants, animals and spirits embody consciousness, language, reason, intellect and moral codes. Hviding (1996:173) argues that the Marovo of Melanesia experience the world through no boundaries along a ‘culture-nature’ dualism, nor through a distinction of what is commonly known as ‘science’ and ‘magic’, or nature and supernatural. Hornborg (2001, 2008:37) discusses animistic qualities of the Mi’kmaq peoples of Northeast Canada, including the redundancy of a society-nature ideology for interpreting Mi’kmaq cosmology. Furthermore, Pederson (2002:413) attests that the space between society and nature for indigenous peoples across North Asia — such as in Siberia and Mongolia — is social. And finally, Bird-David (1993:121) offers a comparative analysis of the Cree from North America, the Walbiri from Western Australia, the !Kung from Southern Africa and the Nayaka from South India, stressing that in these four

societies ‘nature and humankind are ‘seen’ within a ‘subject-subject’ frame as interrelated in various forms of personal relatedness’.

Largely finishing its dogmatic chapter of Cartesian solipsism, the study of animism has recently undergone a resurgence of sorts. From within this changing intellectual climate, we now find ourselves, as social scientists, in a period of thinking that tends to recognise the social construction of reality, including culturally relative constructed perceptions and conceptions of human and nonhuman domains. The diverse ways in which cultures organise, classify and relate to plants, animals, spirits, ecological forces, and cosmology proper, as is experienced through beliefs, values, and conduct, presents a perplexing cross-cultural anthropological totality. The temporal nature of reality constructs, and their culturally and historically specific contexts and movements, set great challenges to animistic studies and the social sciences more broadly. As Pálsson and Descola (1996:15) ask:

Are we to restrict ourselves to endless ethnographic accounts of local ‘cosmologies’ or must we look for general trends or patterns that would enable us to replace different emic conceptions of nature within a unified analytical framework?

Largely circumventing universalising concerns, the trajectory of this thesis is targeted at understandings of Upper Amazonian notions of subjectivity and discarnate beings while remaining critically aware of traditions and tendencies in related anthropological discussions.

Post-Cartesian contemporary anthropology of animism (Bird-David 1990, 1999, 2006, Descola 1992, 1994, 1996, Ingold 2000, Stringer 1999) has generally gazed upon animistic behaviour through holistic understandings of the environment including human-ecology relations. While these perspectives have contributed significant insight to studies of aboriginal human-ecological relationality and interspecies-subjectivity, the notion of discarnate entities is generally hushed into the shadows or poorly investigated by scholars of animism. Conceptualisations about societies and individuals who attribute subjectivity to nature dominates contemporary concerns in animistic studies, while theorising on discarnate entities remains extremely marginalised or reduced to something like processes of human-

nonhuman relations (as is discussed in Chapter 2). Overall, inquiries into local ontological perspectives on spirit entities by animistic discourse is minimal and severely limited despite rich ethnographic studies and theories on the subject-matter being discussed elsewhere, such as in the study of shamanism.

Chapter two leads into discussing a major contemporary study in the field of animism that looks at Nayaka beliefs and practices that relate to spirit entities. Certain limitations and critiques are drawn before moving on to examining perspectivism for its valuable conceptions on Amerindian subjectivity, metaphysics and shamanism.

## Chapter Two: Relational animism and perspectivism

Over the past two decades, the terms ‘relationality’ and ‘perspective’ have significantly brought to life contemporary anthropological discourse on discarnate beings. Drawing on ethnographic case studies, along with postmodern philosophies, Bird-David’s work on relational animism and Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism are here discussed for their contributions and contentions to current arguments in the study of animism. Both authors offer intelligent thought and methods of analysis. However, major aspects of Bird-David’s work are shown to lack considerable depth in certain areas due to examples of theoretic avoidance, particularly in relation to shamanic and trance discourse and local metaphysical notions. While focusing heavily on Amazonian peoples, Viveiros de Castro takes into account elements of such thought, and, in addition, offers helpful ways of thinking through animism by sharply problematising Cartesian-style dualities of soul and body without having to completely discard such analytical frameworks.

### Phenomenology

Inseparable from the re-evaluation of Cartesian dualisms for interpreting animistic behaviour is the migration of post-Husserlian phenomenological thought to the social sciences. Following Heidegger, philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1962:x) suggested that the differentiation of mind and body exists as an abstraction from, the more fundamental, being-in-the-world; what Ingold calls ‘dwelling perspectives’ (2000:5). The French philosopher placed a primacy on the *body*, or embodied experience, rather than simply the act of thinking (a modern analytical tendency). In Strathern’s description, phenomenology urges ‘a return to the sensuous quality of lived experience’ (1996:198). Merleau-Ponty described the ‘external’ world as a flesh substance, a sort of organic continuum that unites the surface and depth of the world with the individual or body-subject (1968:146).

This relation, between a person and the world they inhabit, is described by phenomenologists as an indivisible coupling that gives birth to pre-reflective meaningfulness. As Taylor (1989:2) argues, ‘the subject is in a world which is a field of meaning for him, and thus inseparably so, because these meanings are what makes him the subject he is’. These types of post-Cartesian conceptions place *the* person radically in an environment, or more accurately, as Tilley (1999:322) suggests, ‘we do not live in an environment. Such a position immediately posits our separation. Rather we have an environment, we are a part of it and it is a part of us... we are ... immersed’. As has been noted, the idea of a sharp split between society and nature, as a type of macrocosm of mind and body, has historically favoured modern human relations often at the expense of ‘nature’, or what Hallowell called our not too distant other-than-human relatives.

Recently in vogue, terms such as ‘biocentrism’ and ‘ecocentrism’ (Callicot 1994, Hughes 1996, Anderson 1996) refer to a tendency often found in pre-modern societies that seems to undermine modern anthropocentric ethics by perceiving human cultures as but subcultures among a vibrant cross-species sociality. Callicot claims that many contemporary anti-Cartesian scientific ideas, inspired by such philosophical conceptions as Heidegger’s being-in-the-world, resonate with many indigenous or pre-modern views by elevating the role of environment in the constitution of self and society.

[Ecocentrism] conforms not only to the evolutionary, ecological, physical, and cosmological foundations of the evolving postmodern scientific worldview ... but also to most indigenous and traditional environmental ethics (Callicot 1994:10).

Some critics (Smith & Blundell 2004:249) have responded to such ideas arguing that by simply accepting postmodern scientific perspectives, such as an a priori phenomenological ontology of embodiment, scholars may risk normalising and inscribing an ‘uncritical immersion’ of western based modes of thinking onto indigenous practices and beliefs. An example of theorising that appears to partially produce an ‘uncritical immersion’ of postmodern notions of ‘process’ onto certain indigenous lifeworlds will be discussed shortly.

For ethnographers of animism, obviously an awareness of the risk of postmodern *projection* is helpful, however, in certain circumstances so are phenomenological terminologies and ideas in the very young post-Cartesian climate that social science currently finds itself.

Tim Ingold's cross-disciplinary thinking has uniquely contributed to contemporary discussions on animism, or what he prefers to call — a term that I will now take up — 'animic' discourse,<sup>2</sup> by offering, among other things, creative applications of phenomenological thought. Ingold is interested in how people produce meaning in the world by way of their embedded relations with various environments. He states that:

Human beings everywhere perceive their environments in the responsive mode not because of innate cognitive predispositions but because to perceive at all they must already be situated in a world and committed to the relationships this entails (1999:82).

Echoing Merleau-Ponty, Ingold defines this 'situatedness' as a:

dwelling perspective... [a] perspective which situates the practitioner, right from the start, in the context of an active engagement with the constituents of his or her surrounding... meaning already inheres in the relational properties of the dwelt-in world (2000:5,417).

He describes each organism, human and nonhuman, as *not* a composite entity, but a node in a continually unfolding field of relations. Working closely with Ingold, anthropologist Nurit Bird-David (1999, 2006, 2008) has offered the study of animism various nuances and much food for thought over the last decade, largely, by exploring animism as forms of 'relational epistemology'.

### **Bird-David's relational animism**

Her (1999) essay "*Animism*" *Revisited: Personhood, Environment, and Relational Epistemology* in the journal *Current Anthropology* significantly aroused contemporary discussions on animism, as did the eight replies attached to the end of the article. Undertaking ethnography in the Nilgiris of South India, beginning in the 1970s, Bird-David found that the

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<sup>2</sup> Ingold proposes the term animic, axing the suffix (anim)'istic' as it carries the meaning 'in imitation of' or 'having some characteristic of', suggesting that 'animistic' is slightly pejorative. Furthermore, as (Wallis 2009:63) notes, the term 'animic' functions to create space and differentiation from the 'old animism'; the Victorian-Tylorian based styles of animism that are grounded in problematic Cartesian dualisms.



Nayaka accommodate certain beings, including certain animals, people from neighbouring societies, anthropologists and discarnate entities, within an inclusive notion of ‘we-ness’ or ‘us-persons’ locally known as *nama sonta*. This form of inclusivity — a kind of ‘non-genetic kinship’ system — is described by Bird-David as being emergent and dynamic and based on principles of sharing and relatedness (1999:73). She states that *nama sonta* does not dichotomise humans and other beings but is incumbent upon a notion of personhood that extends beyond the human domain (1999:73).

For Nayaka, attributing ‘personhood’ to various life-forms is continually negotiated through immediate and intimate types of relatedness, ‘the capacity to be with others [including nonhumans], share a place with them, and responsibly engage with them’ (2006:43). Nayaka ‘personhood’ is not a fixed category that certain species deserve, according to Bird-David, but spans across different species and entities and emerges dynamically ‘*As and when and because* [Nayaka] engage in and maintain relationships with other beings’ (Bird-David 1999:73). Analysing Nayaka understandings and experiences of discarnate entities — locally known as *devaru* — Bird-David conceives a similar kind of sharing and relatedness taking place. However, as will now be discussed, she attempts to ‘objectify’ these entities as simply processes while implying that other beings (humans, plants, animals) enjoy a *more-real* type of personhood, despite the fact that for Nayaka *devaru* exist as other-than-human persons.

The Nayaka partake in an annual public ‘trance gathering’ that begins as a collection of ‘performers’ individually wrap themselves in special cloth, pick up and wave branches bowing in the four directions calling local discarnate beings (Bird-David 1996, 1999:75, 2006:38, 2008:61). Each Nayaka ‘performer’, or conduit, then falls into an ‘altered state’ trance and mediates a variety of different *devaru* persons. These persons include deceased predecessors, ancestors, certain Hindu deities that are locally revered, and various

environmental beings such as hill-persons, tree-persons, and elephant-persons. At times a collection or ‘gang’ of *devaru* will be evoked by a single medium who, from sentence to sentence, switches gestures, speech styles, dialects and occasionally languages. Sometimes *devaru* communicate with each other through the Nayaka mediums. Certain *devaru* gain reputations over the years, known as, for example, ‘the one who always requests wild fowl for food ... [or the one who] waves a knife’ (Bird-David 1999:76). The annual gathering usually lasts for two nights, continuing all day and night, and is accompanied by rhythmic drumming, flutes, and dancing.

Generally, every Nayaka present at the event takes turns in conversing with the different *devaru*. Nayaka and *devaru* enter into negotiation in a highly personal and informal manner, joking, cajoling, bargaining, expressing and demanding care and concern. *Devaru* often request such things as better and more food-offerings, respect and hospitality, while Nayaka locals tend to request such things as cures from *batha*; illness and misfortune that is understood as being symptomatic of disrupted relations between *devaru* and Nayaka, and, at times, even disrupted relations among *devaru* themselves (Bird-David 2008:62).

Bird-David reifies the existence of *devaru* as objects of relatedness that connect Nayaka and their environment, for example, a hill *devaru* ‘objectifies’ sharing relations with Nayaka and that specific hill (1999:73). Despite repeatedly exposing and criticising anthropology’s tendency to reproduce problematic Cartesian-style dichotomies, Bird-David nonetheless conceptualises *devaru* as purely ‘objects’ of certain relations. For Bird-David (1999:69), *devaru*:

are constituted of sharing relations produced by Nayaka with aspects of their environment. The *Devaru* are objectifications of these relationships and make them know... These relatednesses [Nayaka with ecology] are *devaru* in-the-world, met by Nayaka as they act in, rather than think about, the world.

She describes the entities as ‘objects’ that the Nayaka use to act in their environment with.

However, *devaru* are locally understood as having personality, character, and agency beyond

their relations with specific humans (Bird-David 1996:48). As it is problematic to discuss politicians as ‘objects’ of democracy, Bird-David’s choice of words is misleading, and thus her understandings of local Nayaka involvement with discarnate persons is problematic.

For the Nayaka, *devaru* are no more ‘objects’ of relatedness than humans or trees or animals. They are persons, not simply processes. The reduction of *devaru* to productions of Nayaka relatedness, and Bird-David’s assumption that such entities are but ‘objects’, or kinds of embodied artefacts, that people use to relate to and think about the environment, displays, as Viveiros de Castro (1999:79,80) indicates, ‘the massive conversion of ontological questions into epistemological ones’ while projecting and privileging modernist knowing over Nayaka doing and knowing. Bird-David states that *devaru* is ‘a concept... enigmatic to positivistic thought’ (1999:71) though she nonetheless manages to ‘objectify’ these entities. She calls the annual ‘trance-medium’ event a ‘relatively unusual situation in which Nayaka engage with forest interlocutors’ (2008:62), though, unusual for whom? Perhaps, unusual for her epistemology of relatedness, or more accurately, her epistemology appears unusual for Nayaka animic ontology.

Unfortunately Bird-David overlooks a major aspect of Nayaka animic relations by largely ignoring one of the central pillars of Nayaka *devaru* negotiation, the ‘trance’ itself. As Rival (1999:85) states in response to Bird-David’s analysis:

too little is said about local perceptions and experiences of trances and possession by animal spirits for the reader to decide whether to agree or not to agree with the author about [her] distinctiveness of hunter-gatherer animistic performances.

In attempting to understand some of the fundamental dynamics of Nayaka-*devaru* relations, Bird-David looks upon their annual ‘trance gathering’ while maintaining one of the anthropology of animism’s common blind-spots. The ‘trance’ experience itself is largely dismissed, and, in addition, shamanic and trance discourse is completely neglected in the author’s conceptions of Nayaka animism. A reluctance to appreciate aspects of Nayaka metaphysics — such as local notions of souls, bodies, and spiritual economies — along with

largely discarding the ‘trance’ experience itself, sets major limits in the author’s work. Therefore, understandings of Nayaka-*devaru* relationality is weakened as the author brackets-out significant perspectives that shamanic discourse tends to embrace.

It appears that Bird-David undertook a kind of postmodern or quasi-post-Cartesian study of Nayaka animism through an analysis of certain relational continuums that immerse both Nayaka and their environment together in emergence and intimacy. However, at the centre of Nayaka being-in-the-world, or their ‘dwelling perspective’, is a relation to *devaru*, discarnate persons not objects. While her phenomenological analysis of both Nayaka personhood or *nama sonta* — as a dynamic and emergent relational identity — I find inspiring and well articulated, Bird-David’s central arguments on *devaru* and her analysis of these entities remains severely limited due to theoretical limitations set by avoiding shamanic and trance discourse and inquiry.

## Perspectivism

In the 1990s a novel anthropological discussion began gaining currency in the study of pre-modern indigenous ontologies and epistemologies under the rubric ‘perspectivism’. The movement has been formulated and popularised largely by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2004a, 2004b, 2005, 2007) and therefore I draw heavily from his work, however see also (Vilaca 2005, 2009, Strathern 2009, Pederson *et al.* 2007, Praet 2009). Like Bird-David’s notion of relational epistemology, perspectivism is concerned with understanding different examples of indigenous human-environment relationality. However, the latter theory attempts to accommodate shamanism and discarnate entities in more depth and perspective than Bird-David’s epistemological reduction of *devaru* ontology.

Perspectivism offers conceptualisations that concern ways in which humans and nonhumans, such as animals, plants, and the discarnate, apprehend reality from different points of view or perspectives. The school of thought has grown most from ethnographies

and analyses of Amazonian peoples, however it has also been taken-up and negotiated in anthropological studies of various North American and Asian communities (Hornborg 2008, Pederson *et al.* 2007, Humphrey 2007, Swancutt 2007, da Col 2007). Perspectivism argues that animals and spirits, and in some cases plants, meteorological phenomena, and even artefacts, as subjective points ‘see’ themselves *as* persons see themselves in their own dwellings, that is, animals and spirits become anthropomorphic beings when in their own homes and villages and experience various habits, cultural characteristics and social organisation.

Many Amerindian beliefs and practices suggest that animals perceive their bodily aspects — fur, spots, claws, feathers — as ‘decorations or cultural instruments’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998:470). Perspectivism states that different entities, such as humans, animals, and spirit beings, perceive different but shared worlds, however, in the *same* fundamental way. What to us is a tree, to a snake is a home with bedrooms. What to us is blood, to a jaguar is manioc beer, and what appears as rotting corpse to us humans is grilled fish to vultures, ‘all beings see... the world in the *same* manner — what changes is the *world* that they see ... non-humans see things *like* ‘we’ see them’ (Viveiros de Castro 2005:53). Under typical conditions humans see humans as humans, animals as animals, and spirits — if they see them — as spirits. To switch perspectives, as Viveiros de Castro (1998:470) explains, ‘animals (predators) and spirits see humans as animals (prey) to the same extent that animals (as prey) see humans as spirits or as animals (predators)’. The expression of perspectivism in hunting, gathering food, language, mythology, beliefs and values generally includes not all but only those species and phenomena — in Amazonia, generally animals — that play a key relational role for a human community, such as predator and prey animals.

Perspectivism distinguishes itself from the influential Durkheimian tendency of ‘representation’ by arguing that understanding animals and spirits as perceiving the world in

the *same* way that humans perceive the world (though each from different *perspectives*), the former is not a representation of the latter — as if there is a formalised objective reality behind the different representations. Perspectivist philosophy states that ‘there are no points of view *on* things — things and beings *are points of view*’ (Viveiros de Castro 2005:57). In other words, jaguars do not have a unique (particular) perspective of *the* (universal objective) world, but, the question to ask is, what is the world of which jaguar’s *are* the point of view?

Discounting the assumption that moderns, or the sciences, are building a seemingly absolute perspective on reality in which conceptions of other perspectives are mere representations, Viveiros de Castro (1998:486) nods to Deleuze and Leibniz stating that different ‘points of view’ or perspectives are different realities distinguished by each entity’s ‘body’ — as affects, capacities and dispositions and not simply substantial corporality but also, for example, what an entity or species eats, ‘how it communicates, where it lives, whether it is gregarious or solitary and so forth’ (2005:54).

Understanding that peccaries perceive other peccaries in the *same* basic way that humans perceive other humans is not necessarily incumbent upon the former representing the latter, but on a ‘logical equivalence of the reflexive *relations* that humans and animals each have to themselves’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998:477). It is because humanity is the general category used to denote subjectivity, agency, and consciousness, that we can say nonhuman persons see themselves and their world in the *same* way that humans see humans and their world.

Although perspectivism may appear symmetrical to the notion of relativism, Viveiros de Castro stresses that a *perspective* is not a representation and thus is inimical to relativism as a cosmological theory. Relativism posits a cosmology of multiple and different representations of the same external and unified nature. For example, in regards to Northwest Amazonian worldviews, Århem (1993:124) states that, ‘every perspective is equally valid

and true’ and that ‘a correct and true representation of the world does not exist’. In contrast, perspectivism suggests multiple worlds and one phenomenological unity, soul or *representation*. Immersed in different perspectives or bodies (including nonhuman) is but one form of subjectivity and intentionality; the condition of what we generally call humanity. For perspectivists, each different morphology or body of a species may be described as a kind of ‘envelope’ or ‘clothing’, a system of affects and capacities which cloak and express an *internal human* form that is generally only fully perceived by the particular species (Viveiros de Castro 1998:471) — exceptions to this being certain trans-specific entities such as shamans, which is discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

Whereas animism denotes the organisation of the environment with terms and ethics derived from the social (as kinship, neighbours, enemies) recognising a metaphysical integration, perspectivism differentiates with an elaborated non-Cartesian conception of the *body* (as not simply physiological systems but bundles of affects, capacities, and dispositions). Therefore, perspectivism, crudely inverting common modern frameworks, suggests one ‘culture’ and many ‘natures’, one epistemology and many ontologies. In contrast to multiculturalism, perspectivism is ‘multinaturalism’ (Viveiros de Castro 1998:477). Furthermore, a perspective is not a representation because representations are products of thought and the nexus of perspectivism is the body, indissociable from minds and affects and intersubjectivity (including with certain nonhumans). That is, ‘perspectivism is not relativism but relational’ (Vilaca 2009:132 Viveiros de Castro 2005:55).

Central to the idea of perspectivism is an anti-ethnocentric, however anthropomorphic ideology of personhood. Many Amazonians who busy themselves tending cultivated plants may conceive human to plant relations as blood relatives, hunters may approach game animals as affines and shamans may relate to animal and plant spirits as enemies and associates (Viveiros de Castro 2004a:466), as similarly outlined earlier in discussions on

animism. A unique conception emerging out of perspectivism is an observation and understanding of particular ways in which the subjectivity of others (including nonhumans) is referred to by certain pre-modern societies.

Viveiros de Castro (2005:49) argues that ethnonyms (names of ‘tribes’) in Amazonia are largely a product of both colonialism and ethnography and have generally been derived from other local societies labelling and differentiating each other than from the society for whom the label refers to. He (2005:49) suggests that what Amazonian ethnographies have tended to call ‘people’ (us, we-people) is actual ‘persons’. Not so much a proper name but an enunciative marker, a point of view. It is less a noun than a pronoun, and thus encompassing the huge scale of variability that characterises pronouns. Immediate kin, neighbours, all humans, and indeed, all aspects of the cosmos imbued with subjectivity or a ‘point of view’ may be talked about as ‘us, we-people’ — for example, what is referred to as *nama sonta* for Nayaka. Viveiros de Castro urges that local understandings of Amerindian souls or subjectivities, be they human or nonhuman, are to be conceptualised as ‘perspectival categories, cosmological deictics, whose analysis calls not so much for an animist psychology or substantialist ontology as for a theory of the sign or a perspectival pragmatics’ (1998:476). To say that a muddy pit is a hammock to a tapir is the *same* as saying that my brother is my mother’s son, and is therefore not representational but relational (Viveiros de Castro 2005:56). ‘Snake’, ‘hammock’ or ‘canoe’ are referred to as if they were relators, not defined objects complete in themselves but emergent and entangled as a kind of rhizome of relations — to borrow Deleuze’s terminology.<sup>3</sup> These ideas appear to parallel with Ingold’s dwelling

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<sup>3</sup> Wallis (2009:59) and Ingold (2000:5, 2009:12) also draw upon Deleuze’s concept of rhizome for analysing animic relationality. A rhizome is a botanic term that literally refers to creeping root-like systems that give birth to new but related entities. A similar analogy is that of a ‘chaotic’ spider-web, or mycelium network. Philosophically, for Deleuze and Guattari (1972), it refers to a collection of overlapping and interpenetrating lines (or entities/processes) each void of essence but immanent in and as each other, and thus for social scientific inquiry, it urges an analysis of collectivities.



perspective and Bird-David's relatedness, ultimately, phenomenological thought, by describing the immersed and emergent qualities of perspectivist relationality.

Contrasting with modern scientific tendencies to categorise entities of the natural world into objectified, identities — bagged and tagged — and de-subjectified, perspectivists (especially hunters and shamans) are interested in subjectifying nature. For the perspectivist, to know is not to re-present, but be-from-others-present. To know the tapir, the hunter must *be* the tapir. That is, the hunter focuses his ability to know from the perspective of the tapir, switching to the animal's point of view. Viveiros de Castro describes this epistemological ideal stating that:

far from trying to reduce 'surrounding intentionality' to zero in order to attain an absolute objective representation of the world, [perspectivism takes the] opposite decision: true knowledge aims at the revelation of a maximum of intentionality, by way of a process of systematic and deliberate "abduction of agency"... a good shamanic interpretation [including hunter] succeeds in seeing each *event* as being in reality an *action*, an expression of internal states of intentional predicates of some agent (2005:43).

An intelligent judgement is based on how much intentionality can be attributed to an 'object'.

It is necessary to personify in order to know.

A perspectivist stance suggests that the capacity to adopt a point of view is incumbent upon the soul whereas different viewpoints are designed by the body as assemblages of different ways of being. Vilaca (2009:134) argues that the soul is less the force which animates feelings, thoughts and consciousness for perspectivists and more a point of *instability*. This he urges it due to the ability of perspective transformation — the enabling of a person to be perceived as a *person* by another perspective, such as jaguar-personhood. For example, Vilaca (2009:136) tells of an experience in southeast Amazonia where he and a Wari' shaman came across a jaguar. The shaman attempted to convince the animal that Vilaca was not prey but the shaman's kin, and thus the kin of the jaguar. Fortunately for the anthropologist the perspective shift was a success. The result was Vilaca's body metamorphosing into that of a jaguar in the eyes of the animal. For the Wari', having a soul

means having an active soul, one that permits transformation, a state of instability, which can result in fortune and growth but also loss, such as abduction by animals, spirits, sorcerers and other predators. In this regard, Riviere describes Amazonian ontology as a ‘highly transformational world’ (1994:256).<sup>4</sup>

According to perspectivism, Amerindian ontology is characterised by ephemeral and changeable *bodies* or ‘clothings’ that interact in an economy of metamorphosis and exchange — humans turning into animals, animals into other animals, spirits and the dead assuming animal and human form — a system in which shamans and discarnate beings tend to be the most proficient brokers. In Viveiros de Castro’s (1998:472) words, ‘If Western multiculturalism is relativism as public policy, then Amerindian perspectivist shamanism is multinaturalism as cosmic politics’.

It appears that much of Viveiros de Castro’s pioneering work on Amerindian cosmological deictics, notions on situational subjectivity and perspective transformation was being discussed, unbeknownst to Viveiros de Castro, some twenty years prior to the author’s highly popular seminal work on perspectivism. Focusing largely on the Váupes area of the Upper Amazon, the anthropologist Roger Rouse (1978) previously tracked much of the conceptual ground that the notion of perspectivism rests on.

In attempting to understand local definitions and categorisations of ‘shamans’ (*pariekoku*, *kumu*, *ye’e*, *paye*) in certain Northwest Amazonian societies, Rouse (1978:116,119) discovered that the terms appeared less as identities or nouns than as situated expressions of specialised techniques that many men practiced though each to different degree and ability. Harner commented in the 1970s that one in every four Jivaro men were ‘a shaman’ (1973:154). In stark parallel to perspectivism, Rouse (1978:121) stated that the terms:

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<sup>4</sup> These notions of cosmological transformation have been recorded across North and South America, Asia and other parts of the world. See Viveiros de Castro for a comprehensive list (1998:471,484).

*Kumu* and *ye'e* [shaman] describe positions, but more than this their use implies the creation or recognition of a relationship between people occupying different positions in a given context... in a purely relational system of naming there are no absolute terms. Only from a particular point of view, that of the naming subject, does there appear to be an intrinsic identity between the name and the object so described. Kinship terminologies exemplify this. *It seems useful, in the Tukanoan context, to regard statements such as 'he is a shaman' or 'he is a jaguar' as analogous to statements such as 'he is a brother' or 'he is a 'cross-cousin'...* The Tukanoans themselves recognise that, in the last resort, terms such as 'cross-cousin' and 'brother' describe positions rather than people [italics added].

Furthermore, drawing on the work of Reichel-Dolmatoff, the author tells us that the Tukanoan term *paye* or 'shaman' has commonly been found to also mean 'jaguar', which, as is noted below, this interchangeability is closely tied to local experiences and understandings of human-animal transformation and, as it seems, perspectivist subjectivity.

The Tukanoan term 'skin' (*suriro*) — such as jaguar skin and anaconda skin — often locally used to denote garments and tree bark (consider Viveiros de Castro and 'assemblage' or 'clothing'), which Reichel-Dolmatoff commented may also be referred to as a kind of:

state or mood... in the sense of a person being invested with, that is clad in certain qualities. The elder informants... insisted that it was in this sense that the transformation [human to animal] had to be understood... on these occasions the person was imagined as being covered by a kind of invisible envelope expressing his mood or state (1971:125).

Bringing this conception together with his previous idea of a 'purely relational system of naming', Rouse argued that:

The statement 'he is a shaman', or 'he is a jaguar', seems to rely to a large extent on personal or consensual appreciation of a particular state (or 'skin') which, perhaps only temporarily, another person, or other people, are held to fill... The term 'singer' seems, in all but the relational sense, to approximate more closely to the word *kumu* [shaman], covering certain animals as well as people, describing actions, states, ceremonial roles or widely recognised abilities, and applying in one instance to almost everyone and in another to only a few (1978:119,125).

The central pillar of Viveiros de Castro's perspectivism, that is, the idea of one 'soul' and many perspectives or *bodies* that each perceive different but shared worlds in the *same* way, does appear to be foreign to Rouse's ideas. However, as has been shown, much of the theoretical guts of perspectivism was indeed previously charted by Rouse, including the idea of a kind of non-substantiative relational subjectivity and the notion of multiple bodies or 'garments' in transformation.

Although perspectivism draws on binaries such as soul and body for the intellectual construction of Amerindian ontologies and epistemologies, a reconfiguration and hybridisation of the notion of body to that of capacities, affects and dispositions, complicates Cartesian opposites of rational mind and extended body. In addition, the ‘soul’ for perspectivism is less a substance than a viewpoint or form of reflexivity. It is ‘an ephemeral vantage point, the temporary outcome of a complex play of perspectives’ (Vilaca 2009:133) and it is described as being characterised by *instability*, or subject to transformation. The ‘soul’ in perspectivist societies appears to function more like a relational pointer than a static and constant position endowed to particular species (such as humans and some ‘higher’ animals — a belief that tends to underpin much modern philosophy and science).

Perspectivism positions soul and body in a way that does not appear to sit in dichotomous opposition, but rather, as dialogical counterparts. Perhaps, in some ways, it would be theoretically less problematic to drop the terms soul and body and instead envisage perspectivism as describing an assemblage of affects, capacities and dispositions that necessitate a point of view.

As explained earlier through the work of Latour and the phenomenologists, modern dichotomous understandings of mind-body and society-nature have extremely obscured understandings of personhood and its immersion in and as an environment. Extending such evidence, Viveiros de Castro (2005:49), speaking from his time with Amazonian societies and studies, suggests that:

We modern people have always been blind due to our foolish, not to say sinful, habit of thinking in dichotomy. Thus are we to be saved from modern *hubris* by primitive and post-modern hybrids.

Amerindian perspectivism describes ephemeral, transforming souls and the body as multiplicity. According to Viveiros de Castro, the specialisation of shamanic techniques is founded on skills that work to shift perspective, transform one’s body into the knowing

subjects of, generally, animals and spirits, in order to undertake communication and negotiation for the betterment of society.

The thesis now turns to introduce and discuss the academic field of shamanism. After introducing shamanism, the third and final chapter brings together perspectivist thought and ideas pertaining to the study of shamanism through a case study on Yaminahua shamanic practice.

## Chapter 3: Shamanism

Like the terms ‘taboo’ and ‘totem’, ‘shaman’ is a word that has been imported from a particular ethnographic context — the Siberian Tungus — and is now used to describe a much wider field of academic inquiry. Typically, the highly contested term ‘shaman’ is a label given to different types of magico-religious practitioners that are thought to traverse otherworldly landscapes, aided by spirit-helpers and powers, in order to perform various forms of divination, including healing, soul retrieval and prophecy. Definitions of shamanism tend to allocate ‘spirit mastery’ — learning to control discarnate entities — as central to shamanic practice (Eliade 1964:93, Firth 1967:296, Lewis 1971:51, Landy 1977:417, Siikala 1978:334, Harner 1980:20, Noll 1983:444-5, 1985:448).

In his landmark cross-cultural study *Shamanism*, scholar of religion Mircea Eliade (1964) largely pioneered and popularised the field of shamanism. Undertaking a phenomenological approach, the author examined numerous case studies of various ‘techniques of ecstasy’, ‘dreams, hallucinations, and images of ascent found everywhere in the world’, while attempting to inquire into such phenomena ‘apart from any historical [social] or other ‘conditions’’ (1964:xiv). While Eliade’s work on shamanism remains popular for scholars of religious and literature studies, the discipline of anthropology has become extremely suspicious of cross-cultural generalisations, particularly since its postmodern preoccupation with the particular.

Geertz claimed that the term ‘shamanism’ is a meaningless and convenient abstraction invented by anthropologists to sort their material (cited in Porterfield 1987:725).<sup>5</sup> Wallis comments that it is an ‘academic construct and a word for the West, its meaning inevitably

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<sup>5</sup> Similar to Geertz’ description, but perhaps more robust, Taussig (1989:44) argued that ‘shamanism is... a made-up, modern, Western category, an artful reification of disparate practices, snatches of folklore and overarching folklorization, residues of long-established myths intermingled with the politics of academic departments, curricula, conferences, journal juries and... funding agencies’.

universalized, repeatedly re-fabricated, its definition contested’ (1999:4). Over a century ago sociologist Van Gennep (2001 [1903]:51) declared the term ‘vague and dangerous’. Despite these and other manifold criticisms, ‘shamanism’ as a term and research category not only lives on in academic quarters but is currently undergoing what some researches call a renaissance of sorts (Dubois 2009:1, Znamenski 2007:viii, Jilek 2005:14, Atkinson 1992). In response to the wide array of case studies that discuss different varieties of shamanism, Atkinson and others urge scholars to adopt the term ‘shamanisms’ (1992:321).

However, inseparable from the contemporary flourishing of research on shamanisms are post-Eliade comparative cross-cultural studies (Winkelman and Peeks 2005, Winkelman 1999, 2000, Bourguignon 1973, Koss-Chioino and Hefner 2006). Erika Bourguignon (1973:11) commented that 90% of cultures have institutionalised forms of shamanism. Speaking from an impressive three decades of studying shamanism, Michael Winkelman (1982, 1989, 1996, 2000, 2002) argues that shamanic practitioners from different continents such as Africa, Asia, and the Americas ‘share more characteristics in common across [global] regions than they do with other healers in their own cultural and geographic regions’ (1999:395). In addition, although ‘shamanism’ is typically limited to describing aspects of pre-literate indigenous societies, Kocku von Stuckrad comments that western esotericism also exhibits knowledge derived from extraordinary states of consciousness, ‘a reoccurring theme in Western cultural history [that] goes back to at least Gnostic traditions’ (2005:10-11). According to the work of Bourguignon, Winkelman and Stuckrad, shamanism, in its most basic meaning, is a ubiquitous phenomenon that covers continents and millennia.

Movements in anthropology that inquire into cross-cultural ‘universals’ are not diametrically opposed to restricted studies of ‘particulars’, as Furst (1994:5) suggests, but the two are simply different though related areas of inquiry. Anthropological catalogues offer many rich examples from across the globe of culturally sanctioned, and culturally valued,

shamanic orders and practitioners that profess relationships with spirit beings (Turner 2006). While this may be ‘universal’, the key anthropological contentions lay in the varying ethnographic and theoretical interpretations of spirit beings and their relations to shamans and local societies.

‘Altered states of consciousness’ (ASCs) has become a popular phrase in recent decades, referring to types of activity and awareness that shamans are generally considered to undertake and experience. Tart defines ASCs as a ‘qualitative alteration in the overall patterning of mental functioning, such that the experiencer feels his consciousness is radically different from the way it functions ordinarily’ (1975:208). However, the phrase implies that consciousness always stems from a normalised base-perspective and thus views shamanic activities from a monophasic bias rather than as certain types of ‘ordinary’ experience in-themselves. For a Yaminahua shaman drinking hallucinogens every second day, regularly interpreting animal calls of the forest as potential communication of spirit beings, and deducing psychological and social tendencies in his family and community, it appears unlikely that he is constantly switching between ‘ordinary’ consciousness and ASCs. After developing skills for forty years, Yaminahua shamans would undoubtedly see their states of consciousness as ‘ordinary’ in the strictest sense of the term. In addition, ‘shaman’ appears to be more like a set of varying techniques (or even ‘skins’ or ‘clothings’) than a substantiated identity, hence Harner’s (1973:154) claim that a quarter of Jivaro men are ‘shamans’ and Hviding’s (1996:178) insight that for the Marovo of Melanesia everyone knows the spell to stop the dangerous water cyclones.

Consciousness is altered between every moment, though sometimes in more significant ways than others. Therefore — for want of a better phrase — I prefer to use the label ‘integrative modes of consciousness’ (Winkelman 1999) to refer to the manifold diverse



techniques and types of awareness that different practitioners employ in their work with discarnate entities and forces.

### **Shamanism and imagination**

Psychologist Richard Noll (1985) produced an impressive study on the role of visions in shamanism in an article published by the journal *Current Anthropology*. He (1985:445-6) argued that, typically, central to advanced shamanic training is learning how to increase ‘vividness’ and ‘controlledness’ of mental imagery by way of various psychological and physiological techniques.

That imagery-based techniques are used by ecstatic specialists among such widely distributed people as the Washo and the Lakota Sioux of North America, the Tukano of Colombia, the Tamang of Nepal, the classic Siberian groups, the Kalahari !Kung of Africa, and the Australian Aborigines points to the valid generalizability of the concept of shamanism as a form of mental imagery cultivation (Noll 1985:458).

Noll suggested that contact with ‘spirits’ is the central aim of shamanism and is occasioned by increases in the vividness of mental imagery. On the topic of discarnate entities, the author commented:

Culturally, whether these are interpreted as exogenous forces or agencies exhibiting a certain “intentionality” (such as spirits or gods) or as endogenous ones such as anthropomorphized sources of occult power that reside within the shaman’s body... they are all experienced from the perspective of the shaman as originating from outside him. To the shaman, the experience of “spirits” is in every sense of the word “real”. To the “cognicentrist”... observer, such experiences can be reduced to explanations that account for their phenomenology but not their ontology (Noll 1985:449).

Hultkrantz (1985:453) and others argued against Noll’s psychological reduction of shamanism as ‘controlledness’ of mental imagery stating that the common shamanic experiences of ‘obeying’ certain spirits and ‘soul liberation’ are not accounted for in his conceptions. Furthermore, as Honko (1985:453) suggested, mental imagery is but one sense organ ‘cultivated’ by many advanced shamanic practitioners, such others include ‘mental’ auditory, tactical and olfactory sensations.

Regardless of Noll’s argument that mental imagery cultivation is definitive of shamanism, its role is undeniably central to many shamanic traditions. Many types of

sophisticated shamanic epistemologies hail the disciplined and focused use of ‘imagination’ as essential to certain important faculties in the construction of knowledge. In contrast, following Cartesian traditions, the role and significance of ‘imagination’ — mental imagery, or non-linguistic thought — has typically been relegated to the margins of scientific practice, despite science’s fascination with logic. Some western scientists have challenged the ontological priority of ‘concrete reality’ over the imaginal sphere (Buchler 1966, Epstein 1981, George 1982, Hillman 1983). Ingold argues that imagination is not ‘rehearsal’ of ‘concrete reality’ but a means of intentionality in itself (2000:418). However, ‘imagination’ tends to be associated with fiction, irrationality, dreams, hallucinations and other fanciful mistakes for anthropology and science proper.

### **Shamanophobia**

The dismissal of ‘imagination’ by common western disciplines of knowledge is arguably tied in with the recent scientific understandings and projections of shamans as mentally sick and deranged. Whereas Levi-Strauss described shamans as charismatic ‘tribal psychoanalysts’ (cited in Znamenski 2007:229), modern anthropology shows a trend in scholarship that diagnoses magico-religious practitioners as pathological persons in need of treatment from psychotherapists. Hambly argued that ‘the shaman’ is a ‘neurotic’ (1926:219), similarly, Radin described the shaman as ‘the neurotic-epileptoid type’ (1957:108), Devereux as ‘psychiatrically a genuinely ill person’ (1961:262), and Kroeber suggested that ‘not only the shamans are involved in psychopathology, but also the whole lay public of primitive societies’ (1948:300) — to be fair, Kroeber revoked the shamanism pathological hypothesis in later years (1952:317-19). Leighton and Hughes, perhaps better than anyone, led the way in refuting the anthropological spell of deeming shamans as mentally ill:

What in shamanistic behavior may appear hysterical or psychotic to the Western psychiatrist is, to the people concerned, a time-honoured ritual through which practitioners heal sick people or divine the future. Hence the ‘symptoms’ of the shaman may in fact be the result of learning and practice (1961:421-365).

In recent years, Winkelman argues that the key difference between ‘shamanic and pathological states of consciousness is the control of and intentional entry into states of consciousness associated with shamanic practice’ (2000:9). Put crudely, where the shaman swims, the psychotic drowns.

While correlations and reflections on comparing western psychiatry to shamanism may offer insight into understandings of both fields, first and foremost, early to mid 20<sup>th</sup> century anthropology appears guilty of being mentally dis-ordered in relation to ordering sensitive and accurate understandings of shamanic practices. This tendency of pathologising shamans offers reflexive insight into the discipline of anthropology, including aspects of its historically jaded relationship to indigenous traditions of knowledge and healing. As Znamenski notes, ‘shamanism’ as a term traditionally carried anti-modernist connotations, including the ‘bizarre, the irrational, the erratic, and the abnormal’ (2007:364), and, as outlined above, the mentally ill.

Conceiving shamans as pathological neurotics may not be acceptable in contemporary studies — even though it was only sixty years ago — however, some critics argue that phenomenological discourse on shamanic practice is still largely dismissed by anthropology due to widespread condescending views on *primitive* knowledge and practice. According to Langdon, shamanism and magic are highly fragmented as analytical concepts due to ‘our own positivistic assumptions that it [magic] does not work, and thus requires explaining if we accept the native as equally intelligent to us’ (1989:63). Hufford discusses the ‘unexamined assumption’ in anthropology that ‘spirit’ is not ontologically real (2008:280). He reminds us of Evans-Pritchard’s experience of witnessing a hovering ball of light move past his tent while undertaking ethnography with the Azande. The next morning Evans-Pritchard asked locals who then informed him that he had witnessed witchcraft. Shortly after the discussion a messenger arrived telling about the death of a local man. The anthropologist rationalised the

occurrence as anomalous and coincidental but failed to state how he knew that the villager's beliefs were false, and that 'Witches, as Azande conceive them cannot exist' (Evans-Pritchard 1976:11). Some thinkers go as far as suggesting that these uncritical methodological biases, that is, the assumptive invalidation of 'psi/spirit/transpersonal experiences and EuroAmerican science's failure to resolve the problem of their authenticity and assessment... has kept humankind from reaping the benefits of this knowledge' (Schroll 2010:21).

In contrast to this type of thought, Taussig described shamanism as permeated by uncritical romanticism and a 'fascist fascination' with mystical trips and heavenly spheres (1987:443). As Atkinson notes, the romanticisation of shamanism by Euroamerican promoters (such as within the New-Age) is unsettling for anthropologists 'despite—or perhaps because of—their own familiarity with romantic tropes' (1992:323). However, anthropology must be careful to *not* throw the baby out with the bath water and recognise what Dowson perceives as academic 'shamanophobia' (1996:468), along with the discipline's historical and political positioning particularly in relation to such evidence as the recent wide-spread ostracising and pathologising of shamanic ways of knowing. In addition, Winkelman describes the anthropology of shamanism as currently being crippled by a 'modern rational bureaucratic consciousness' (2000:xi).

These accusations of anthropological avoidance, condescending views and positivist limits may indeed account for the neglect of shamanic discourse by much of the contemporary research on animism. In an attempt to bridge certain fields in the study of animism with discussions on shamanism, and create space for types of mature contemplation, the thesis now turns to discuss a specifically phenomenological analysis of Yaminahua shamanism, after a brief detour in methodology.

The general movement of anthropology has been, for the most part, a materialistic enterprise, which presses a certain nerve in the anthropological study of shamanic beliefs and practices. James Lett expresses his disdain towards the phenomenological approach and its method of bracketing-out certain *unanswered* scientific questions in order to allow other questions to arise. He states, '[A]nthropologists have an intellectual and ethical obligation to investigate the truth and falsity of religious beliefs' (1997:104-5). Lett fails to recognise that truth is intimately interwoven with particular discourses and power regimes (Foucault 1972). By bracketing-out particular holes in, for example, scientific materialism and the study of religion, and then, from this inadequacy, equating certain non-material dimensions of religious experience as false, elements of the religious practise become bracketed-out. This debate seems more like a battle of discursive values than an issue of scientific truth. Therefore, I will be accepting certain basic premises' of the statements of Yaminahua shamans, rather than the paralysing doctrine insisted by Lett, in an attempt to open up sensitive understandings of Amazonian perspectives on subjectivity and discarnate entities.

### **Yaminahua case study**

From spending time with the Yaminahua of the Upper Amazon during the 1980s and 90s, ethnographer Graham Townsley (1993) has contributed various understandings and nuances to the study of shamanism, particularly in relation to local techniques of knowing. The author's (1993) paper *Song Paths — The Ways and Means of Yaminahua Shamanic Knowledge* draws on Yaminahua metaphysical conceptions of subjectivity and personhood, the role of mythic discourse and song in local shamanic techniques, and struggles with certain paradoxes surrounding understandings of spirit beings, to offer a series of unique conceptions, particularly in relation to shamanic epistemology.

According to Townsley (1993:456-7), Yaminahua philosophy ascribes three fundamental components to the make-up of the human being: (1) *yora*, a material body or

entity of flesh (2) *diawaka*, a non-material body that is attached firmly to *yora* and has as its attributes most aspects of everyday consciousness including reason and language, intentional thinking and reflection, and interpersonal ethical centres associated with such systems as kinship, and (3) *weroyoshi*, a major player in the arena of shamanism, is described as an entity or body that animates and give life and vitality, resembling something similar to the European notion of the ‘soul’. Yaminahua ontology suggests that each human exists with these three structures of being. Whereas humans are unique in their *yora* (physical bodies) and *diawaka* (language, reason, and certain community ethics) it is their *weroyoshi* that radically unites them with nonhuman persons. It is claimed that *weroyoshi* offers shamans certain abilities to mingle easily with *yoshi* (discarnate entities, other-than-human spirit-persons) who are beings of the same type.

Resonating with Viveiros de Castro’s discussions on perspectivist subjectivity as a point of view, *weroyoshi*, or ‘eye-spirit... is what sees and... feels. It is perception’ (Townesley 1993:456). Not only permeating the physical body (*yora*), but, Yaminahua shamans stress, *weroyoshi* may become disembodied, detach, ‘leave, wander, come back and so forth’ with control and intent along different shamanic ‘paths’ (Townesley 1993:456). *Weroyoshi* is a faculty of being wrought with instability by its ‘sameness’ between human and nonhuman. Reminiscent of Vilaca’s perspectivism noted earlier, Townesley (1993:456) tells that transformation of humans into nonhumans may occur because humans have *weroyoshi*, a non-material body that may open a person into direct communication with other *yoshi*. Such transformational abilities — which are cultivated especially by shamans, and to some degree hunters — are believed to offer radical participation in all nonhuman aspects of the world, that is, from the different perspectives of other-than-human persons.

Yaminahua shamans or *yowën* are understood to be imbued with supernatural powers that enable them to heal and cure and harm or kill, including illness prevention and protection

from sorcery. Specialised Yaminahua shamanic activity tends to be performed under the influence of the visionary entheogenic (otherwise known as ‘hallucinogenic’) brew known locally as *shori* — a sacralised tea that is considered to offer direct access to ‘the world of animate essence’ (Townesley 1993:457).<sup>6</sup> Central to the techniques of Yaminahua shamanism is the development and proficiency of manipulating ‘mental’ visionary images and landscapes (controlled vivid ‘hallucinations’); a proficiency that includes other ‘mental’ sensations such as olfactory, auditory and tactile. The skill and focus of this ‘mental’ activity is not so much incumbent upon linguistic thought — thinking in ‘words’ — but on pharmacologically enhanced conditions of the body and perception (Townesley 1993:456). Given Townesley’s claims that the visionary landscapes accessed by *yowën* is an embodied perceptual experience, not simply thought but also seen, smelt and heard, then only applying the term ‘mental’ experience (as Noll does) appears to obscure much interpretation of Yaminahua shamanic phenomenology. Yaminahua shamans claim to negotiate their way in domains beyond ‘normal conditioned perception’ (Laughlin *et al.* 1990:275) largely with the help of *shori*, mythic discourse, songs and of course *yoshi*.

Both myth and song are referred to as *wai* or ‘paths’ by Yaminahua shamans (Townesley 1993:454). It is claimed that *wai* offer means of navigating super-sensuous landscapes that are populated by *yoshi*. Similarly, Yaminahua myths, or ‘the time of dawns’, offer windows into the various categories and beings of the cosmos. They are the ‘paths of the old ones who went before’ (Townesley 1993:454). As well as offering a map or ‘path’ of sorts, these mythic templates are regarded, in some senses, as existing in extrasensory realms where they charge or power the abilities of trans-specific beings, such as shamans and *yoshi*. As Eliade commented, ‘what for the rest of the community remains a cosmological ideogram for the shaman becomes a mystical itinerary’ (1964:256).

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<sup>6</sup> *Shori* is generally made from lianas of the banisteriopsis family and the shrub *psychotria viridis* (Townesley 1993:457).

Yaminahua shamans attest that in shamanic ceremony particularly origin myths offer great ‘paths’ into ‘visionary’ landscapes and to the abodes of *yoshi* (Townesley 1993:453). Likewise, the Yaminahua state that each shamanic power-song offers the practitioner different ‘vehicles’ and ‘paths’ for navigating and negotiating in different para-perceptive spaces (Townesley 1993:457).

According to Townesley, local understandings of hunting may act as metaphors to help describe central Yaminahua shamanic activities. For hunters navigating paths of the forest in search of game, very little is revealed to them directly. Townesley explains that this is analogous to shamanic work and certain communication with *yoshi*. Although Yaminahua shamans claim to have direct contact with various *yoshi* they also hone abilities to interpret all aspects of their specialised visions — including movement, colour, smell and formal distortion — as potential indirect and coded communication from the discarnate beings. Similarly, when searching for indications of the presence of game, hunters tend to rely on animal tracks, droppings, checking the remains of eaten fruits, smells, and sounds. Through imitating the calls of his prey with poise and mastery the Yaminahua hunter may communicate with the animal in what is generally the last crucial method before capturing the food.

This mimicking, through which humans momentarily gain control over the non-human by becoming like it, thus creating a shared space of communication, is precisely the goal of the shaman’s song. “My songs are paths” said a shaman, “some take me a short way – some take me a long way – I make them straight and I walk down them – I look about me as I go – not a thing escapes my notice – I call – but I stay on the path” (Townesley 1993:454).

It appears that these dynamics of opening a shared space for *yoshi* and shaman to interact by way of ‘mimickery’ are symmetrical to Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism and its notion of the transformability of *weroyoshi*. While such a theory may account for the transformation of perspectives (such as from human to spirit being) Townesley’s study offers by way of extension novel understandings of discarnate entities through paying attention to the



diversifying ‘perspectives’ or morphologies of *yoshi*, that is, recognising certain aspects of their elasticity.

*Yoshi* are referred to as animate beings imbued with individual character and personalised intentionality but also, at times, as different types of essence. To know the *yoshi* of something, including not only ‘things’ such as plants and animals, but also, outboard motors, aeroplanes, radios and other modern artefacts, is ‘to know in detail the appearance, behaviour, and characteristics of the thing it animates’, requiring a highly focused empirical knowledge of the ‘thing’ (Townesley 1993:453). To import perspectivist epistemology and the idea that things become known through a maximisation of agency imputation, *yoshi* may be seen as agentive forces and reflections that accommodate different things.

Many conceptions of cultural artefacts, natural ‘objects’, along with notions of nonhuman subjectivity, appear to merge together for Yaminahua ideologies revealing a challenging — what Townesley calls ‘paradoxical’ — set of anthropological material. Yaminahua shamans tend to refer to discarnate beings as independent entities but also as kinds of essence. In addition to claiming that radios have a *yoshi* of sorts, the Yaminahua speak of a super-sensory ‘realm where even the *yoshi* of trees and insects live intelligent, volitional lives’ (Townesley 1993:452-3). Having direct access to these realms is of course part of the arduous and unique capabilities that enable shamans to negotiate with various *yoshi* while being able to return to tell the tale.

For Yaminahua shamanism there seems to be *no* sharp demarcation between a kind of ‘mental’ plane that hosts various subjectified forces and entities with that of a physical plane that hosts different corporeal morphologies. This understanding appears inseparable from the Yaminahua ontological notions that posit a human being’s physicality (*yora*), intentionality, cognitive abilities, affects, ethics (*diawaka*), and soul (*weroyoshi*) as different kinds of bodies or entities each in themselves. Much like Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism, the Yaminahua

conceive the human as a bundle of different bodies — physical, thinking, emotional, ethical, soul — that integrate together constituting each person as a kind of (multi)bodypolitic or assemblage.

Certain local understandings of these bodies appear to radically challenge dominant modern conceptions of how an individual's body (physicality, thoughts, emotions, etc) may relate with other bodies and 'things' of the world.

One of the keys to this knowledge and, more widely, the whole question of the so-called "primitive mind" which shamanism has so often been taken to exemplify, seems to me to lie exactly in an image of the person and knowing subject which, paradoxically has no place for a "mind" and associates "mental" events with animate essences which can drift free from bodies and mingle with the world, participating in it much more intimately than any conventional notion of "mind" would allow (Townesley 1993:454-5).

By exploring Yaminahua metaphysics and shamanic practice clues emerge that help to construct understandings of certain anthropological puzzles surrounding the nature of *yoshi*.

Imagination, as a kind of image centre, tends to be recognised as a personally contained private affair for western theoreticians. Ingold states, 'I dwell, in my imagination, in a virtual world populated by the products of my own imagining' (2000:418). In contrast to the model that all mental activity is limited in expression through an outer material extended body — physical movement, language, speaking and writing — Yaminahua shamanism declares that thoughts and emotions inhabit transpersonal planes of existence. As noted earlier, Yaminahua metaphysics suggests that the faculty of cognition is a kind of body or entity. Yaminahua shamans appear to be telling that this entity of cognition expresses animate thoughts, as like mental sperm or pollen, that are not restricted to corporeal expression but may enjoy efficacy in a mental plane that reaches beyond the personal — from which ideations and intentions may manifest into physicality.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Townesley (1993:457-466) offers an in-depth description of a Yaminahua shamanic healing rite. Under the influence of *shori*, *yoshi* and *wai* (entheogen, spirit entity and songs-paths) the shaman sings complex metaphoric songs that embody meaning that is completely incomprehensible to the patient. Analogies and language games are delicately sung by the shaman generating and focussing healing intentionality. As the ceremony carries on, overarching or highly significant meanings build, interpenetrate, and amalgamate, they 'metonymically link as part of the single whole forged by [the shaman's] vision' and are then issued forth at

For Yaminahua shamanism thoughts and emotions are understood as being alive, having personality and agency, existing as something like larvae in a ‘mental’ pond or like birds taking flight through the sky. ‘All that is “mental” is the property of entities which, although closely related to particular bodies, are not permanently attached to them’ (Townesley 1993:456). This aspect of Yaminahua rationality may help demystify Townesley’s ‘paradox’ of *yoshi* — as ‘essence’ but also ‘entity’ — by acknowledging the local belief that thought-forms and ideas are, in some senses, kinds of animate entities. As pointed out earlier, a radio may be understood as being ‘animated’ by the idea or thought-form entities from which the corporeal morphology emerged. That is, *yoshi* may be partially perceived by knowing the appearance and behaviour of the thing which it animates, such as a radio. Yaminahua conceptualisation of *ideas*, artefacts and local notions of personhood and agency are described by Yaminahua philosophies that imbue certain ‘mental images’ and constructs with types of personality. However, against the conceptual temptation to reduce *yoshi* to mere productions of human thought and emotion, the Yaminahua stress that discarnate beings may also belong to bodies of nature and enjoy types of intelligent independent existence (Townesley 1993:452).

Marrying the seemingly disparate conceptions of human thought-forms, emotion-forms with the notion of ‘independent’ discarnate entities may be as simple as extending the Yaminahua logic that individual thoughts and emotions are, in some senses, animate entities, albeit incipient and immature entities. Similar to the way a sperm and egg may become an

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orchestrated moments carried along a staccato stream of tobacco smoke blown from the shaman’s mouth onto the crown of the patient’s head. The healing intentionality is literally ‘sung’ into the patient’s body. The practitioner describes this type of transaction as ‘spilling them’, ‘painting them’ and ‘lining them up’. The shaman is not singing *to* the patient’s understanding, as is indicated by each song’s esoteric and coded meanings (which are comprehensible to Townesley due to later rigorous explanations from the shaman) but is apparently opening communication with *yoshi* helpers who populate his visionary experience and direct his actions, ‘It’s not me who cures – it’s them – I call them – they come and sit by me – show me what to do’ (Townesley 1993:461).

independent person with her own habits and intentions, Yaminahua rationality of *yoshi* appears to suggest that conceived thought-forms may indeed grow to embody mature volition and agency existing as types of independent entities or *yoshi*.

But rather than viewing this from an anthropocentric angle — discarnate beings emerging from human ‘mentality’ — Yaminahua beliefs seem to reverse the relationship. Townsley (1993:456) comments that Yaminahua shamans claim that they do not own or *create* ideas, including their prized healing and journeying song ‘paths’, but that ideas are ‘given’ by *yoshi* to those shamans good enough to ‘receive’ them, including even those ideas that concern modern artefacts. From this perspective, it appears that the great philosophical ideas are hunting the best thinkers. However, even if this is the case, what do Yaminahua mean when they insist that *yoshi* are volitional independent agents?

Perspectivism defines the body as a multiplicity of ephemeral garments (skins, moods, dispositions, capacities, affects) that enjoy and fear possibilities of transformation. The school of thought defines subjectivity as the capacity to adopt a ‘point of view’, as more like an enunciative marker or a cosmological deictic than a substantiative identity. Shamanism is described as those techniques that work to negotiate and manage ‘garments’ as tools for communicating and negotiating with human and nonhuman persons (different ‘points of view’) including plant-persons, animal-persons, and spirit-persons. By applying perspectivist ideas of ephemeral and transformational ‘points of view’ to the levels of thought and emotional bodies, the notion of discarnate entities appears to display a disjunctive synthesis which connects and separates the actual and the virtual. Furthermore, following the lead that subjectivity is less an identity or noun than a relation, *yoshi* appear to index characteristic affects of different qualities of the many faces of the forest, including, at times, even radios.

Resonating with Yaminahua shamanic beliefs and practices, Viveiros de Castro posits Amazonian perspectivist ontology as a unity that affords much greater significance to ‘imaginal’ or ‘virtual’ planes of existence than is generally allowed by leading proponents of western thought (2007:161). In addition, he offers a perspectivist analysis of subjectivity that extends to not only realms beyond the human domain but also those beyond common perceptual domains.

But if Amazonian concepts of ‘spirits’ are not rigorously speaking taxonomic entities, but names of relations, movements and events, then it is probably just as improbable that notions such as ‘animal’ and ‘human’ are elements of a static typology of genres of being or categorical macro-forms of an ‘ethnobiological’ classification. I’m led to imagine, on the contrary, a single cosmic domain of transductivity... a basal animic field within which the living, the dead, the Whites, the animals and other ‘forest beings’, the anthropomorphic and terionymic mythic personae, and the *xapiripë* shamanic images [Yanomami ‘spirits beings’] are only so many different intensive vibrations or modulations. The ‘human mode’ can be imagined, then, as the fundamental frequency of this animic field we can call meta-human — given that human form (eternal and external) is the aperceptive reference of this domain, since every entity situated in a subject position perceives itself *sub specie humanitatis* — living species and other natural kinds (including our own species) can be imagined to inhabit this field’s domain of visibility; while ‘spirits’, in contrast, can be imagined as vibrational modes or frequencies of the animic field found... [beyond] the perceptual limits of the naked, ie. non-medicated, human eye (Viveiros de Castro 2007:161).

These ideas appear to agree with Townsley’s phenomenological analysis of Yaminahua shamanic practice and local descriptions of *yoshi*, and indeed with many other accounts of Amazonian shamanism (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1971, Colson 1977, Kensinger 1973, Harner 1972, Rodd 2003, Jokic 2008). While the notion of a single cosmic domain of transductivity<sup>8</sup> may align with many ethnographic accounts of what different shamanic practitioners *say* and *perform*, the ‘hard-data’ or ‘empirical’ evaluation of these theories is waiting patiently beyond the typical monophasic methodologies of contemporary shamanic ethnography.

As Throop and Laughlin note, it is difficult to access integrative modes of consciousness, characteristic of shamanism, ‘from “outside” as it were’ (2007:648). Particularly over the last few decades there has been a tremendous rise of ethnographic participation in areas of consciousness studies such as trance, meditation, entheogens and

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<sup>8</sup> ‘Transduction’ refers to the transformation of one form of energy into another. For example, water to steam, affection to anger, and inspiration to creation.

shamanic ritual — see Throop and Laughlin for a brief overview (2007:648) — however, anthropology's methodological tools for navigating these spaces are still in preliminary stages.

In a special edition of the journal *Anthropology of Consciousness*, Mark Schroll's (2010) headlining paper 'The Future of a Discipline: Considering the ontological/methodological future of the anthropology of consciousness' describes the failure of anthropology to deal with experiential dimensions of shamanism. He tells that shamanic training tends to make use of methods that first liberate the neophyte from his or her enculturated symbolic worldview, a process that anthropology has trouble assimilating because 'becoming a shamanic practitioner transcends our most far-reaching nomothetic and ideographic methods' (2010:15). As long as anthropology continues to view shamanic-type practice from monophasic ethnographic perspectives, this process of assimilation remains incredibly limited. Regarding certain hurdles in this 'assimilation' process, Schroll claims, that because 'the jury of scientific inquiry as a whole is still deliberating the "thing-in-itself"... [it] continues to be restrained by the straightjacket of a dualistic paradigm that refuses to acknowledge the existence of psi/spirit' (2010:21). Attempting to move beyond such constraints, the author, and others (Laughlin *et al.* 1990:24, Ashbrook 1993, Rodd 2006) are developing a kind of reflexive method of analysis termed 'mature contemplation' to help uncover sensitive understandings derived from and about integrative modes of consciousness. Lahood comments on the emergence of contemporary anthropologists that move beyond monophasic biases and 'enter states of consciousness anomalous to scientific rationalism as a demanding form of participant observation and data gathering' (2007:41).

Perspectivism currently offers anthropologists helpful frameworks for analysing shamanic discourse by exploring metaphysical notions that encompass positions of other-than-human persons, including non-substantive subjectification of humans, animals, plants

and spirit entities. However, the nexus of much local Amazonian knowledge and wisdom is situated in the practice of shamanic techniques that allegedly open the practitioner into radical participation with the subjectivity of other, including nonhuman, persons. Therefore, it appears that the practice and dimensions of shamanism present invaluable means of inquiry for those researching in discourse on perspectivism, and, indeed, animism.

What ethnography is to arm-chair anthropology, experiential shamanism is to the common monophasic methods of participant-observation that dominate ethnographic research on shamanism.

## Conclusions and further questions

Until recent decades, the study of aboriginal perspectives on personhood and discarnate entities, in fields such as animism and totemism, has generally operated from problematic Cartesian-style metaphysics that posit particular a priori subject-object and society-nature dichotomies. It has been shown that this type of theorising permeates the work of foundational scientific figures including Tylor, Durkheim, Freud & Jung, Lévi-Strauss and to some extent Lévy-Bruhl. The solipsistic, sociocentric and humanistic conceptualisations of animic worldviews by these scientific forefathers offer contemporary students of anthropology a note of warning, and in addition, highlight certain reflexive insights that concern the development of modern thought. Early academic contemplation tended to rationalise examples of indigenous peoples imbuing nonhuman domains with subjectivity as erroneous, immature, confused and even sick. In contrast, recent Cartesian crises in the social sciences have extensively opened academic rigour up into novel ways of exploring animic and totemic thought and behaviour.

Currently, anthropologists are increasingly discussing animisms as kinds of ‘relationality’ while recognising that for many people around the globe the space between society and nature is social. These new movements in the anthropology of animism have produced valuable understandings of different beliefs and practices that reflect, in particular, socio-ecological relations and sentiments. Bird-David’s (1999) work on Nayaka relatedness and *nama sonta* — as an emergent and dynamic local notion of ‘us’ or ‘we-ness’ that encompasses certain humans and certain nonhumans — exemplifies this type of post-Cartesian anthropology. However, Bird-David’s analysis of *devaru*, and many other rationalisations of discarnate entities in the study of animism, remain severely limited due to forms of theoretical avoidance particularly in relation to discussions on shamanism.



Only sixty years ago many leading anthropologists argued that ‘shamans’ are mentally deranged and pathological. Although these arguments are now usually discussed as relics of modernity, the recent resurgence of shamanic studies finds itself among dominant intellectual cultures that tend to maintain condescending views, positivist limitations and a general avoidance of phenomenological shamanic dialogue and practice. These biases are inseparable from earlier patronising forms of western scientific rationalism (such as the recent pathologising and ostracising of shamanic practice) and, it appears, display residue or echoes of an intellectual colonialist ethos.

Despite Tylor’s lead that ‘dream and trance states’ are the prime source of animistic rationality (cited in Durkheim 1996:52), and the basic appreciation that much indigenous knowledge on nonhuman subjectivity emerges from integrative modes of consciousness, contemporary discourse on animism tends to neglect the study of shamanism. In contrast, discussions on perspectivism wrestle with local metaphysical notions, ontological understandings and second-hand reports on shamanic practice, offering nuanced conceptualisations on indigenous forms of relationality and cosmology. For example, in this thesis, the school of thought has been shown to elucidate understandings of Yaminahua ontology and shamanic practice.

Perspectivism presents helpful ways of thinking through animism by sharply problematising Cartesian-style dualities of soul and body without having to completely discard these analytical frameworks. However, perspectivism’s more controversial ideas, of a single cosmic domain of transductivity that expresses the condition of what is generally termed ‘humanity’ or the ‘human-mode’ as different animals, humans, plants, discarnate entities, and mythical personae, (that is, ‘perspectives’) remains, for the most part, empirically unjustified. By employing radical empirical ethnographic methods, discussions on perspectivism may benefit from anthropological participation into realms of experience

and practice that many indigenous knowledge systems value — the practice of what academia tends to call shamanism.

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