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On Amazonian Polytheisms

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The following is an excerpt from the forthcoming book ***The Way of the Gods: Polytheism(s) Around the World****, which is based upon the series of lectures I gave in the online course "Introduction to Polytheism" (INDICA Courses, 2021).*

In South America we find many and diverse indigenous traditions, as well as traditions from the African Diaspora, which we will discuss separately. In the native traditions there is a sharp ecological and social difference between the forest dwelling, stateless peoples of the Amazon, represented in the reading for this unit by works of Yanomami theology, some collected by anthropologists and some authored by Davi Kopenawa, a spiritworker and advocate for his people and for the forest, and on the other hand, the Andean cultures of the mountains and seashore, which goes back as far as 3200 BCE, in which can be discerned a series of cultural phases, the latest of which being the empire of the Inca. The distinction between 'stateless' and 'state' societies, while of heuristic value, should not be taken to imply a lesser degree of 'development' or complexity in the former than the latter. In reality, all societies, having all lived through the same span of time, probably exhibit the same degree of 'development', albeit in different directions.

The indigenous traditions of South America are under intense and sustained assault by Christian missionary activity, as well as by forces seeking control of their land, especially in the Amazon, and indeed, these work in close coordination. In the Andes, the movement for indigenous sovereignty in Bolivia, which has a majority or near-majority

indigenous population, resulted in the official recognition and encouragement of the worship of the Goddess Pachamama during the administration of Evo Morales (https://www.smithsonianmag.com/travel/la-paz-bolivia-aymara-indigenous-traditions-reawaken-180956143/). During the Bolivian political crisis of 2019, by contrast, interim president Áñez posted tweets expressing bigotry toward indigenous religion (https://factcheck.afp.com/did-bolivias-interim-president-delete-anti-indigenous-tweets), calling indigenous rites 'satanic', in addition to expressing racist hatred for indigenous people. Evangelical Christian drug gangs have also been documented as engaging in a 'holy war' against practitioners of African Diaspora religions in Brazil (https://insightcrime.org/news/analysis/brazil-evangelical-christian-gangs/). Such incidents remind us that indigenous religions are directly and intensely political in their very existence, and that in this light it is impossible to regard religion as a merely private affair, or to think that religious typologies can be separated from long-standing relations of power. The growing strength of evangelical Christianity has exerted pressure on the kind of limited syncretism with Catholic and Anglican Christianity that permitted the marginal survival of indigenous practices such as shamanism within converted communities. A study found, for example, that evangelicals in Makushi and Wapishana indigenous communities in Guyana were less likely to visit shamans or to accept their legitimacy than Catholics and Anglicans.[1] It should also be mentioned that in many South American nations, but perhaps particularly in Brazil, there is a vibrant revivalist polytheist community, with many different tendencies, both directed toward the revival of European polytheisms as well as toward engagement of various kinds with indigenous traditions.

At the same time, there are currents of thought which are bringing indigenous, especially Amazonian wisdom into increasingly closer contact with Western philosophical discourse. The study of South American indigenous thought led in large part to the revolution in anthropology known as structuralism, which although marked at first by a naive positivism or scientism, nevertheless created a vehicle by which myth could once again form part of philosophical discourse to an extent which had been impossible in the West since the closure of the Platonic academies in the 6th c. CE. Instead of thinking of structural anthropology simply as a body of Western reflections upon

1 J. B. Luzar & J. M. V. Fragoso, "Shamanism, Christianity and Culture Change in Amazonia," *Human Ecology* 41 (2013), pp. 299–311.

Amerindian myth and symbol, we can instead see it as an unstable early phase of the disruption of European thought by Indigenous traditions at first being heard indistinctly through European interlocutors, but that may over time become increasingly autonomous. In my view, one way to begin to accord agency to Indigenous traditions is to recognize the influence they are already exerting, even inasmuch as it is alienated from them, for alienated agency is still agency. Dharmic thought, similarly, exerted an influence alienated from its original holders through Western appropriation, and yet this had a transformative effect in the West over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries. There is an autonomy of thought and of symbols which rests ultimately upon the autonomy of the living Gods from any vehicle which would contain Them. It is similar in a certain way to the material continuum created by the widespread adoption of a South American food crop like the potato, or the maize of Mesoamerica and North America. Disrupting the anthropocentric perspective allows us to recognize the activity of such non-human agencies, irreducible in themselves to the human societies which have been the conditions of their physical emergence and propagation. Such has been the trajectory of the structuralist moment in anthropology, which begins in the writings of Claude Lévi-Strauss in a rather extractive form, we might say, retaining its sense of a methodologically privileged perspective on the Indigenous traditions with which it engages, but which in the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro has undergone a radical transformation into a cosmopolitical practice grounding itself in the notion of *perspectivism*, a concept originating in the myths themselves, as we shall see.

A principal issue in the reception of the traditions particularly of the Amazon, but which has arisen in the academic treatment of Indigenous traditions around the world, is the question of so-called 'animism' and its relation to polytheism. The first Europeans to encounter Indigenous peoples in Sub-Saharan Africa, in the Americas, Oceania and Asia typically characterized them as 'pagans' or 'heathens' or 'idolaters', that is, in the exact same terms with which Christians and later Muslims had referred to the polytheist traditions with whom they struggled in late antiquity and the middle ages. In the later 19th century, however, many of these more recently encountered traditions, specifically those which belonged to stateless peoples and which were also the least documented, would come to be classified under the new term 'animism', which was invented by Sir Edward Tylor in his 1871

book *Primitive Culture*, and the term remains deeply entrenched, even as many other academic notions of its vintage have been questioned. As originally conceived, the idea of animism was inseparable from the developmental understanding of religion, in which more 'primitive' forms of religion gave way to more 'advanced' ones, unless some factor led to a state of arrested development in particular cases. In this regard, the 'animism' of Tylor is not essentially different from the 'fetishism' of Auguste Comte.

It is not uncommon, at this point, for such developmental models to be criticized for their general presumptions concerning so-called 'primitive' and 'advanced' ways of life, but such critiques do not consider the motivations for and consequences of separating 'animism' and 'polytheism' as these classifications do. The basic concept of animism as Tylor and others have articulated it, namely the idea of life and agency extending to things that, in the model European scientific worldview, are lifeless or without true agency, such as inanimate objects, forces of nature, or non-human animals, is not in any essential opposition to polytheism. Indeed, most if not all polytheisms are strongly animistic in this positive sense. The concept of animism has, however, virtually always been deployed in opposition to polytheism, because polytheism is supposed to be associated with more 'developed' or 'advanced' societies, especially those with centralized political organizations and marked social hierarchies, which the existence of Gods is supposed to reflect. Little, indeed, has really changed in how this concept is deployed since Tylor's day, except that the value placed upon these respective social organizations has been inverted. In Tylor's day, it was a mark of progress that societies passed from the stateless and minimally hierarchical social organization associated with 'animism' to the form of social organization manifest in polytheism, albeit the latter was of course taken as inferior to the social structures and religious ideologies characteristic of modern Europe. Today, however, it is far more common that the social organization associated with animism is taken to be more virtuous than that associated with polytheisms, especially insofar as the latter is no longer seen as a stepping stone to anything better, but rather as embodying the worst traits of human societies, which well-intentioned moderns hope to have transcended. The degree of reflectiveness concerning this state of affairs in the contemporary human sciences is remarkably low. Indeed, I would argue that there is no other area in the social sciences where

one can find basic theoretical positions of the late 19th century so little altered or questioned as in anything pertaining to polytheism. The question of why animism and polytheism should be opposed to one another at all, and specifically why we ought to expect to find anywhere a worldview in which there are so-called 'spirits' of everything but no 'Gods' as such, is not clearly posed even by academics actively engaged in discussion of the concept of animism, or to the degree that it is, it will be treated as given by the importance of the concept of hierarchy in social terms, which presumes that religion is nothing other than a reflection of social organizations, with no domain of objectivity appropriate to it. Or else, there is a deep, unexamined metaphysics guiding the classifications, such as when theoretical anthropologist Philippe Descola speaks of an 'analogism' seeking to "cement together a world rendered fragile by the multiplicity of its parts."[2] But *whose* fragility is this?

There is no doubt that there are institutions present in some traditions and not, or only minimally present in others. Among the Yanomami, for example, the dead are not spoken of, let alone the objects of cult after the ceremony by which they are laid to rest, while West African traditions attach great importance to ongoing ritual engagement with the ancestors. The practice of sacrifice in some traditions is virtually absent, while in others it is ubiquitous. In the most general terms, there is more space, and more diversity of spaces, in some traditions than in others. Previously I discussed the importance in many African traditions of the symbolic withdrawal of a God who thereby opens a space, a space often of mortality, indeed, but also of possibility. I will have more to say, in particular, about the relationship between the *raising* of the sky in these traditions and the concept of the *falling sky* in Yanomami theology. It seems arbitrary, at any rate, to claim that the differences in *intelligible spatiality* in diverse traditions require any radical difference in classification.

One of the ideas which has repeatedly arisen in Western reflections upon the stateless societies characteristic of Amazonia, as opposed to the imperial Inca state, for example, or the strongly centralized and hierarchical states observed at the time of European first contact in West Africa or in the Congo region, which are more easily grasped through Western politico-religious paradigms, is the notion of what

2 Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2014), p. 227.

anthropologist Peter Gow called the "complex social mechanisms of heterogeneity" in the stateless societies, versus the "complex social mechanisms of homogeneity" exhibited in centralized state forms (http://aotcpress.com/articles/lvistrausss-double-twist-controlled-comparison-transformational-relations-neighbouring/). Pierre Clastres, similarly, spoke of 'society against the state' in his studies of Amazonian Indigenous polities. Monotheism can also, of course, be regarded as a 'mechanism of homogeneity'. The question I would like to think about here is whether a certain centrifugal tendency is inherent to polytheism as well, which would entail that polytheism is in certain respects against the State.

Obviously, this is not an all-or-nothing issue. Polytheism has existed in centralized states for as long as such states have existed, up until the rather recent invention of monotheism. Monotheism was clearly not a condition, therefore, for the centralization of state power, nor does the centralization of state power seem to lead in any direct fashion to the emergence of monotheism. But linguistic diversity is probably fairly strongly associated historically with the weakness of the state, and we may legitimately wonder whether this diversity stands proxy for a primary diversity of theophany which is eroded, too, with the loss of linguistic diversity. The evidence here is ambivalent. States that are highly centralized and with a single dominant language not only continue in many cases to host many Gods, and strongly autonomous ones—for example, multiple cosmogonies and so-called 'Creator Gods'—but also open, within certain constraints, to recognizing new Gods emerging from the grass roots, indicating that the mechanisms for integration of the state are not interfering with this process, though particularly strong states will attempt to regulate the introduction of new Gods, as was seen in ancient Rome and during much of China's history. On the other hand, where there is evidence of strong multilingualism in the historical record, integration into another language frequently leads to identification of Gods in the less dominant languages with those in the more dominant. This can occur in a way which does not affect actual worship, which continues in the original languages. Influence can also occur in both directions, of course, just as peoples who are not integrated into any larger polity will be influenced by one another simply through interaction.

In general, however, we need to think of religions less as things made by humans, and more as ways in which humans shape the field in

which theophany and divine activity occur, and about what pressures different shapes place upon these basic human experiences, in the same way that we would think about the human engagement with other elements of the environment. Just as the Amazon, therefore, is a reserve of biodiversity, it is also a reserve of linguistic, and correspondingly of theophanic diversity, with about 330 languages extant in Greater Amazonia, and just as we seek to understand what ways of living on the land have made the former diversity possible, so too we must seek to grasp what ways of living with the Gods and what intellectual structures have secured the latter. In this connection, it could be important to note that more than 500 languages are reportedly spoken in Nigeria, which hosted a number of strong polities prior to colonization—but then, these were all polytheistic states, and therefore, arguably, did not exert the kind of homogenizing pressure on the multiplicity of languages that might otherwise be associated with the centralized state.

An element of incoherence in the approach to so-called 'animist' traditions can be seen from the fact that while 'animism' is supposed to imply the absence of Gods, the Yanomami, who are supposed to be paradigmatic animists, do indeed have them. Even if we regard their Xapiri, the entities whom their spiritworkers call upon, as 'spirits' rather than Gods, as Kopenawa does in explicit concession to Portuguese usage, a classification I see every reason to dispute, there would still be Omama, His brother, His wife and Her family, His son and so on. Now, if it is the case that we are not to regard the Xapiri as Gods because They were created by Omama, then it can hardly be the case that Omama and His associates are not Gods. Indeed, were we in the African context, we could imagine that Omama would be cast as the sort of 'High God' who is supposed to embody primordial monotheism, notwithstanding, of course, the fact that He is not alone. It seems that Omama is not viewed in this fashion by academics simply because He has not been conscripted into this role by missionaries. The missionaries who have attempted to convert the Yanomami, as recounted in a chapter of Kopenawa's *The Falling Sky*, instead refer to their God as *Teosi*, that is, as *deus*, using what was originally a class term for Gods as though it is a proper name, rather than using the name of a native God or a native class term, as has often been the case in Africa. This is likely because Omama is inseparable from the practice of calling the Xapiri, and hence cannot be appropriated by the

missionaries while excluding the manifold of Xapiri. Indeed, Kopenawa recounts (pp. 192-3) the ridicule that was heaped upon a missionary who attempted to identify the Christian God with Tupã, a syncretism that had been applied to some extent with the Guarani, because the missionary was unaware of the very different role this God (or the one to whom the Yanomami were equating Him) had among the Yanomami. It is always troubling to see just how little separation there still is between the academic study of Indigenous religions and the missionary project, the former still following in the footsteps of the latter.

An important feature of Yanomami theology and of other so-called 'animist' traditions is the relationship with other animals, in particular, of course, those who are hunted. A less ideological way of making the case that animists do not have Gods is that their spiritual life is simply so absorbed in these interspecies relationships that there is no room for much else. We can see from Kopenawa's account, however, that for him the relationship with other animals is indispensably mediated by the Xapiri, especially insofar as we no longer share direct communication with other animals, as we did when all living beings shared a common form, before many of the ancestors were transformed into game animals. (Here I use the diachronic terms of the mythic narrative, while reserving the possibility of a synchronic reading, in which this primordial temporality might be interpreted as existing simultaneously in parallel with our present mode of being.) The importance in Amazonian ontology of an intersubjective continuum existing between ourselves and the other animals is the foundation of Viveiros de Castro's concept of perspectivism, in which instead of the *multiculturalism* of humans against the background of a single, objective natural world, we would recognize a *multinaturalism* of many *cosmoi* grounded in the common feature of the subjectivity possessed by all beings.[3] This concept is in essence the introduction of animism into Western philosophy, but there is no good reason why it should not incorporate the subjectivity of Gods as well as other kinds of non-human agencies. The hunter-gatherer does indeed possess a 'philosophy of nature' in Tylor's term. We can see the intensity of the hunter's relationship with his prey from a passage in Kopenawa's book about the tapir hunt (in chap. 8 of *The Falling Sky*). The hunter's

3 A very basic introduction to the concept of perspectivism can be found here: https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0083.xml

spiritwork is at once scientific, deploying a web of supportive bird and plant spirits required by the tapir, and suffused with the eros of devotion, a longing for and pious dedication to the tapir ancestor(s), as Kopenawa says that the successful hunter must be "truly in love with the tapir ancestor's image and long for him," (140). This piety is directly comparable with that directed in many polytheist traditions toward one's special God, if not indeed identical with it, and differing only in the corporeal aspect of the cult, to view this difference 'multinaturally'.

The question of the event of the 'falling sky', which has occurred at moments in the past and which is regarded by Kopenawa as a very real potential hazard in our own time, draws together several of the issues which I have been discussing, inasmuch as it concerns the establishment of certain spiritual topologies, the opening of such spaces, as well as their closing or occlusion, particularly through the event in which a prior sky becomes a new earth or forest-space and the prior earth becomes the underworld, not merely in the trivial sense that its denizens die, but rather in that they are transformed from humans into underworld beings or into game animals. In this regard, we must remember that the forest is for the Yanomami the space of civilization, whereas in West African thought, for example, the forest is the wilderness space of the dead and a space of metaphysical externality. The Yanomami doctrine concerns the position of animals, and hence the question of so-called 'animism', but at the same time, it also concerns the question of the diachronic aspect of myth. The events of the mythic past can always be regarded as a cross section of the eternal now—hence, for example, the generic humanity which mythically 'precedes' specific humanity and specific animalities alike can be treated in the same way as eidetic genus with its species—but what about the mythic future?

This question arose previously for us with respect to the Ragnarok of the Norse Eddas, but there we could not be certain of the degree of Christian influence on this supposed 'future' theology. In the Yanomami theology, however, there is no reason to suspect significant Christian influence, and the way in which the falling of the sky is presented has nothing of the Christian apocalypse to it. Rather, it is presented by Kopenawa straightforwardly as a consequence of the inability to maintain the *supports* of the sky. Since the sky is held up by spiritwork in Yanomami metaphysics, it is appropriate to compare the role of spiritwork there with that of the wisdoms and practices that we

have seen, in our study of African cosmogonies, to occupy the space created by the God who withdraws into the sky, as in the Egyptian Book of the Celestial Cow or in the myths concerning the origin of Ifá. It is the neglect of these supports of the sky, through the decline in spiritwork as a result of depredations by Westerners, which risks leading to such a cataclysm, a sort of *inversion* of cosmogony. We could theorize that the mythic past provides the analysis of the constitution of the cosmos, while the mythic future perhaps concerns the conditions of reconstitution, that is, of mortal repetition of cosmogenesis.

It is not solely a matter, either, of the way in which Westerners undermine the forest spiritworkers' practices, but also of the Westerners' neglect of the powers to whom their own ancestors were originally devoted. One of the remarkable aspects of Kopenawa's account is his awareness, apparently through direct spiritual experience, rather than historical information, that the Europeans previously had other Gods than the Christian one. He refers to invoking Napënapëri, 'spirits of the outsiders', but explicitly denies that "the napënapëri images we make dance are those of the white people who are nearby around us," for "those white people of the present only want our death," (162). He speaks rather of the Xapiri who live on the land of the Europeans, using the same word he uses for his own Gods. Though these European Xapiri are forgotten by Europeans themselves, They were the ones who originally taught the Europeans all their crafts and sciences. Moreover, these Xapiri also "want to keep the beauty of their mirror-land … Yet today's white people no longer know how to take care of it, ad they know nothing of these images, which are those of their ancestors. This worries me too," he candidly states.

> In the past, their long-ago elders knew them and made them dance. They knew how to imitate their songs and build their spirit houses for the young people who wanted to become shamans. But then those who were born after them began to create the cities. Little by little they stopped hearing these spirits' words. Then the books made them forgetful, and they finally rejected them. As I have said, Teosi [the Christian God] was jealous of the beauty of the xapiri's words … Teosi's words of anger spread everywhere and chased the xapiri's song from the white elders' thoughts. Their minds became tangled and confused … Yet the spirits of this distant land are not dead.

> They still live in the mountains that Omama gave them for houses and they only come down from them for the shamans who are able to see them. (322f)

Kopenawa explains that if the spiritworkers of his own people—and he would likely say those of others whose traditions he would recognize—should die out, the "points of support" of the sky shall be cut, manifesting the broken relationship between deities and humans, causing the sky to collapse (406). The "back of the sky" will then become the new ground, and our own ground will be pushed into the underworld. The ghosts of the humans alive at that time will as a result become *aõpatari*, a kind of voracious predatory beings. This is in effect the *reversal* of the civilizing activity carried out by the original, primordial Gods, who established the space between earth and sky and reinforced its supports, generation upon generation. When this space is closed, humans are reduced to the relationships of predator and prey, as we see from the complementary transformations of ancestors transformed into game animals, on the one hand, or into underworld predators, on the other. The mediation of the Xapiri, or Gods, is essential therefore to maintaining sociality, not only between humans, but also among the humans and other living beings. The connection between sky and earth, we may note, is never actually severed: the ancient sky is the present earth. Indeed, it seems to be precisely the inability to sever this connection, to prevent the worlds of the past, even those which have been forced into the underworld, from continuing to exert their influence in the present, that causes the sky to fall to earth, and be reduced to the mute and material condition of life, rather than simply flying away into ideality. This offers some hope that it may be possible to even re-erect a fallen sky from its sedimented position, so to speak, as would have to be the case in places such as Europe, where traditions were sundered, and the sky arguably fell as a result.

I wish to call attention to certain characteristics of the Xapiri as described by Kopenawa which go against contemporary academic dogma concerning so-called 'animism' and the category of Gods. First, the Xapiri, though They may have Their source in Omama, are described by Kopenawa as being immortal (56). Note, as well, that Omama's wife Thuëyoma knows exactly how to specify Them when She tells Omama to create Them (31), indicating a kind of eternal intelligibility. Their relationship to Omama seems to pertain primarily

to His 'mastery' of Them as the God who grants the ability to call Them. Further, Kopenawa affirms that "their thought is right and they work forcefully to protect us" (ibid), contrary to the moral ambivalence which is stereotypically ascribed by moderns to the Gods of polytheist traditions. He also emphasizes the 'otherness' of the Xapiri, who are "not like animals or humans" (71), contrary to the total immanence often attributed by outsiders to Indigenous divinities. Kopenawa, by contrast, frequently emphasizes the transcendence of the Xapiri in diverse ways. In addition, though he refers to the Xapiri as 'images', he makes explicit that this is not a question of representation, rather, that relative to the animals "These images are the real game" (60). There is a similar ambiguity, we should note, in the Greek term *eidos*, which on the one hand means the appearance or look of something, but also denotes the form or idea of something, its essence. But lest we should think that the Xapiri are rigidly linked to species, Kopenawa asserts that while "there is only one name for the tapir ancestor image we call Xamari, there are an endless number of tapir spirits, xamari pë," and that "The same is true of all xapiri. We think they are one of a kind, but their images are always very numerous. Only their names are not," (61). The care Kopenawa takes to specify this shows that the individuality of Xapiri is a matter of keen interest to him, because it is the basis of his relationship with Them. 'Image' thus in the case of Xapiri clearly signifies the existential fact of making Themselves visible, rather than implying any derivative character.