

Comments on Sky-Earth Systems Science

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Comments on “At the Crossing-Place of Gods and Animals, The Sky-Earth System as Generic Cosmology” (Louis-Klein 2021) given following the talk at the conference on “Polytheisms: Today and Tomorrow” (28-29th October 2021) hosted by the Center for Polytheism Studies at Indic Academy.

I'd like to provide a little context for people who may not be familiar with the philosophical project Adam is developing here. What you're seeing, in essence, is an early stage in the process of formulating a structure whereby traditional cosmogonies could become full participants in the philosophical dialogue which is carried on in real time in hegemonic languages, discourses and institutions of higher learning. It's a question, therefore, of developing a conceptual framework which is loose enough, generic enough, to allow for the participation of these cosmogonies without imposing content upon them, without imposing upon them some sort of alien substance.

We can see this as the culmination of a slow arc that, while it may begin even earlier, we can in any event think of as beginning with the emergence of indigenous discourse in Western philosophy in the form in which it's appropriated by Claude Lévi-Strauss in his structural anthropology, if we think of this not as some positivist, scientific project being carried out with indigenous discourses as passive participants, but instead as an early stage of the emergence of these traditions beginning to speak for themselves in the philosophical discourse. We can then recognize a second stage of this emergence in

the work of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who pushes structural anthropology further in the direction of a kind of open structure.

Lévi-Strauss uses a purely differential structure to analyze myths, rituals and social organizations of traditional cultures, a generic differential structure. That is, instead of interpreting these phenomena according to some lexicon of symbols that would be imposed upon them, he places them in a purely differential structure so that they can begin to speak at least without being spoken over by content, because we're interpreting them in a purely formal fashion. The next stage, in the work of Viveiros de Castro, is the emergence of a structure that he calls perspectivism, which recognizes that what is constitutive for these mythic discourses is essentially the perspective positions of multiple human and non-human interlocutors. Viveiros de Castro reconceptualizes myths as dialogues between human and non-human elements, where non-human primarily designates for him the other animals, because he recognizes correctly that the central moment in the particular cosmogonies that he's looking at is the emergence of a separation between human discourse and that of the other animals, this being a key moment in many of the cosmogonies with which he is concerned, primarily Amazonian.

I would characterize what Adam is doing here, in the third stage of this process, as, first, recognizing that among the non-human participants in this mythic dialogue are also Gods, which opens up new axes in addition to the perspective poles. This opens up the axes of sky and earth, which are sufficiently generic to be frameworks through which multiple cosmogonies can speak. The formal characteristic that dominates this stage is the opening of spaces between the earth and sky, spaces of mediation in which all of these non-human components can enter into engagement with one another. This space of engagement is what spirit workers in a host of different traditions, in every different tradition really, attempt to keep open and to keep fruitful. These spaces are in effect a virtual ecosystem in which humans and non-humans can gather and be nourished in the space of interaction.

The concern of spirit workers such as Davi Kopenawa of the Yanomamo nation—who has written very powerfully on this subject—is that we are entering a societal phase in which a catastrophic event

could be occurring that needs to be prevented, which Kopenawa characterizes in terms of a falling of the sky, and which I would suggest regarding as the catastrophic closure of these spaces, with the result that living beings, mortal living beings at any rate, will be forced into an underworld position, essentially a position of death in life, that is, the condition of being reduced to an object, something instrumentalized for purposes inimical to life. And so the project of bringing these traditional cosmogonies into the philosophical conversation isn't simply in order that we should have them as objects for some kind of intellectual enjoyment; the point is to prevent such an event, which is recognized as a real possibility. (And possibly something which has occurred in localized ways before, which is an interesting, separate question.)

In order to prevent this foreclosure of spaces of mediation among non-human and human entities, which would result in this kind of deathly objectification of living agencies, we need to bring these cosmogonies, and the spirit workers who render them operative, into a real-time intellectual environment where we can work to prevent this kind of spiritual catastrophe. That is what we as polytheist revivalists are trying to accomplish. And in this connection, although the language in Adam's paper can be a little bit off-putting, it has the virtue of being equally off-putting to people who come from a traditional philosophical background, and so for once I think at least we're all on a common footing, and my friends who are coming from a background as spirit workers will find the terms at least as accessible to them as they are to professional philosophers.

This has been my brief attempt to contextualize the project in which Adam is engaged, and which I regard as being extremely important and extremely promising for the potential of creating a genuinely different intellectual structure than we've been operating out of hitherto, and of genuinely putting the practice of philosophical inquiry on a different footing, and I think a far more fruitful one.