

Do Animists Become Naturalists when Converting to Christianity?

Discussing an Ontological Turn

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This article is an ethnographic essay on the notion of an 'ontological turn', taken here in its literal sense of ontological change. It explores a specific sociocosmological transformation – one resulting from the conversion of an Amazonian people, the Wari', to Christianity – via the concept of ontology. The central question here concerns the relationship between an Amazonian animist/perspectivist ontology and the naturalism characteristic of Christian-Western thought. Through a critical reading of the notion of ontological change advanced by Descola (2013) in *Beyond Nature and Culture*, the article aims to show that the transformation experienced by the Wari' with the arrival of Christianity can be described neither as a linear transition between ontologies, nor as the result of the foregrounding of conceptions or kinds of relationship previously found in an encompassed form. The separation between humans and animals, and the constitution of an inner self typical of Christian naturalism, are becoming gradually absorbed into the Wari' world now but were non-existent and inconceivable in their traditional universe. An examination of the translation choices made by the Evangelical missionaries from the New Tribes Mission and the apprehension of these ideas by the Wari' suggests a complex and non-linear transition between the two ontologies.

Keywords: Amazonia, change, Christianity, ontology, perspectivism, translation

Amid a debate with many different kinds of approach and lines of argument, one point of convergence among the authors who have proposed the ontological turn in anthropology is their dissatisfaction with the representationalist bias prevailing in analyses based on the notion of culture (see Viveiros de Castro 1998, 2012, 2015; Carrithers et al. 2010; Pedersen 2012). In these analyses, cultural plurality is necessarily accompanied by natural universalism, attributing Western culture and its science privileged access to an irreducible/ultimate reality. The notion of ontology, or 'accounts of what there is' (Lloyd 2012: 59; see also 2011), appropriated by anthropology as a replacement for the notion of culture in conceptualizing human diversity, has the advantage of including in this diversity the notion of nature itself, thereby enabling a more radical and faithful apprehension of difference and placing peripheral peoples and their symbolic systems on an equal footing with Euro-Americans.



The inspiration for Viveiros de Castro, one of the authors to have initiated this ontological turn,¹ came precisely from perceiving how Amazonian peoples invert the nature and culture poles. In his now classic definition of his theory of perspectivism, Viveiros de Castro (1998 and 2012) opposes perspectivism to our cultural relativism, showing that in Amazonia the given is not nature but culture, in the sense that the latter is shared by diverse kinds of beings, humans, animals and spirits. The difference between them is given by their bodies, equipment that allows them to inhabit distinct worlds, or diverse natures. The notion of multinaturalism thus replaces the notion of multiculturalism. In a well-known example both humans and jaguars drink beer in their quotidian and ritual lives, yet what each of them perceives as beer varies radically: for the Wari' from Southwestern Amazonia, on whom we focus here, beer is a maize drink, while for the jaguars beer is blood. We are dealing, therefore, with a world in which different perspectives do not combine to constitute a natural underlying universe, but exist side by side, the passage between them afforded not by what we know as cultural change, since culture is the same for everyone, but by bodily metamorphosis. This metamorphosis occurs through food sharing and everyday coexistence with other beings, implying the adoption of their perspective and their natural world, and is commonly associated with processes of illness and death. The only beings who control metamorphosis are shamans, endowed with multiple bodies and perspectives: this allows them to adopt other perspectives as a form of empowerment, as well as reverse the metamorphosis of others through the work of curing.

My rapid mention of the ontological turn, locating its roots in Amazonian ethnology, derives from my option to use the term ontology to describe the symbolic system of the Wari', rather than adopt a rigid position on one of the two sides of the great divide in the debate: I find myself in agreement with those authors who argued for the motion 'Is ontology just another name for culture?' (Carrithers et al. 2010) just as much as with those who opposed it. My reasons for this choice, which I shall rapidly enumerate here, will become clearer when I discuss the ethnographic data. First the notion of ontology, unlike the notion of culture, has the advantage of focusing our attention more clearly on the question of the diversity of natures and bodies that founds the Wari' perception of difference. Second, some uses of the notion of ontology in the recent anthropological literature, particularly in the work of Descola (2005, 2013), are imbued with an idea of stability already long vanished from the notion of culture, which obliges us to make an analytic and conceptual effort to explain transformation. The kind of transformation I wish to analyse here, stemming from the adoption of Christianity by an animist/perspectivist people, is treated by authors who have explored the theme of Christianization, and the relation of the latter to the arrival of so-called modernity, with a degree of seriousness which distinguishes their work from the more usual analyses of cultural change. The focus shifts from the study of the transformation of cultural categories to the notion of the person properly speaking (as in Leenhardt 1971; Dumont 1983; Mauss 1999), which is particularly useful in conceptualizing the Wari' case.

We can turn now to the presentation of the ethnography in question.

The Wari' and the Missionary Encounter

The Wari' are an indigenous group of around three thousand people distributed in various villages located in the southwest of Brazilian Amazonia, close to the border with Bolivia. Until the mid 1950s they had no peaceful contacts with any other people, including the Brazilians living in the region. The latter were named and treated like their other enemies, *wijam*, being killed and, whenever possible, eaten. The aversion to this practice among inhabitants of the neighbouring city of Guajará-Mirim, as well as the economic interest in rubber found in abundance on their lands, led to the Wari' being massacred by organized groups of rubber tappers who, armed with machine guns, exterminated the populations of entire villages, forcing the survivors to move into increasingly isolated areas. This was when pacification expeditions were organized, members of which initially included government agents and American Fundamentalist Protestant missionaries from the New Tribes Mission, which had recently begun work in Brazil and Latin America. After several years of trying, they achieved the first peaceful contacts around 1956, and by 1962 most of the Wari' had begun to live with the missionaries on a daily basis (see Vilaça 2006, 2010 and forthcoming).

These expeditions, in which a variety of other persons took part, including manual labourers from the city hired at the last minute, caused serious epidemics. The missionaries dedicated themselves to nursing the population, distributing antibiotics and food, essential given the meagre resources allocated by the Brazilian government to these expeditions. Once established in the villages, the missionaries concentrated their efforts on learning the language, a task for which they had been specially trained. As fundamentalists, the main objective of their work was the literal translation of the Bible, for them a book dictated from beginning to end by God.

Conversion took place in a collective form, the first 'wave' happening around 1969, around ten years after contact with the missionaries had stabilized. At the start of the 1980s, however, a new 'wave' occurred in the opposite direction, involving deconversion en masse. The reasons given by the Wari' for the latter movement were the deaths caused by animal spirits, as well as club fights and the sorcery attacks attributed to affines. They reconverted en masse at the start of the 2000s, prompted, they said, by the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center in 2001 and the fear that the end of the world would catch them unprepared, taking them to hell. I visited the Wari' for the first time in 1986, by which time they had already deconverted from Christianity and resumed their rituals and shamanism. Thus it was only from 2002 onwards that I was able to see them as Christians, which was the moment I began to research this theme.

As in many other regions, the initial interest of the Wari' in the missionaries and God was related to the missionaries' ability to cure and their material wealth, including the abundance of food. They looked to access these capacities through bodily transformation, performing a mimetism very similar to that described both by the first Jesuits vis-à-vis the Tupinambá in the sixteenth century, and by diverse present-day ethnographers (see Viveiros de Castro 2002: 196; 2011: 19; Chamorro 1998: 63 and Taylor 1981: 672). As soon as they could comprehend something of the Christian message, which eventually became transmitted in their own language, they were particularly interested in one of its aspects: the divine creation narrated in the

Book of Genesis, especially in the verses that specify the position of humans as leaders of animals, such as Genesis 1:28:

[In Wari'] He spoke contentedly. Reproduce yourselves many times ... Spread across all the other lands. Be leaders. Be leaders of the fish, the birds and all animals.

[[King James Bible] And God blessed them, and God said unto them: Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.)

By desubjectivizing animals, turning them into merely the prey and food of humans, creation was taken as a new origin myth and a powerful tool in controlling interspecific metamorphosis, which was otherwise a constant threat for the Wari', demanding all kinds of care in the treatment of animals and respect for food taboos. When human, animals can exact revenge for predation, inverting its direction and themselves acting as predators (see Vilaça 2002, 2005, 2008, 2009).

To share the divine perspective in relation to animals, the Wari' strove to live with the missionaries, frequent church services and offer prayers. Lapses in this process were attributed to the devil who, according to the Wari' and the missionaries alike, entered the animals and made them act like humans, preying on the Wari' and attracting them to their world, causing diseases and deaths, thereby reconstituting the earlier Wari' world of the mixture between humans and animals (see Vilaça 2011, 2015).

With the passing of the years, however, some modifications became felt among the Wari' in terms of this reversibility of perspectives, related above all to the growth of divine power in relation to the devil, in turn arising from a greater Wari' control over the means of access to this God. Two of these transformations should be highlighted. The first was the stabilization of the separation between humans and animals through a shift from the devil being inside animals to being inside the Wari', making them act in a morally condemnable way. The animals began to be treated as simple prey, and the shamans lost their credibility and, with it, their multiple body. This separation between humans and animals is associated with the constitution of a given natural universe, created by God who, being omniscient, oversees it ceaselessly. As we can note, this is an idea incompatible with perspectivist ontology where natures are multiple.

The second relevant transformation, one related to the first, involved the constitution of an inner self, non-existent among the Wari', for whom identity was always contextual, relational and determined by an outside perspective. In other words a child with a disease caused by monkeys could be seen as a person by the monkeys, the form in which they see themselves, and as a monkey by a Wari' shaman asked to cure the child. As Viveiros de Castro (2012) observed, in the perspectivist world, objects, animals and people are relational terms of the same type as kinship terms. A man is a husband to one woman, a brother to another woman, and a son to a third. Hence the apparently paradoxal statements so common in the accounts of Amazonianists, such as the jaguar's monkey is a white-lipped peccary, or the tapir's beer is muddy clay. With Christianity, the Wari', especially in the context of Christian rituals, began to conceive of the idea of the secret, using expressions like 'he knows his own heart', revealing the interiorization of the Wari' organ of knowledge and feelings, the heart,

which previously had to be expressed in bodily form and in actions, and objectifying in this process individualized persons, who would constitute specific relational pairs with God (see Robbins, Schieffelin and Vilaça 2014).

The success of the Wari' in adopting the divine perspective on humanity and animals therefore produced a transformation different from the kind implied in the adoption of the perspective of an enemy or animal, both of whom shared the ontological principles of the Wari'. Animals, according to them, were perspectivists although God is not. It is as though the Wari' were following the path of modernity analysed by a great variety of authors, among whom I shall cite two of the most well known by anthropologists.

In his essay on the notion of the person, Mauss (1999) analyses a change over the history of the West from a notion of the multiple person (the *persona*) to the individual, associating the final moments of this transition with Christianity. This essay would be re-explored many years later by Dumont (1983) in his analysis of the genesis of the individual as a cardinal value of modern societies. A notion of the individual prior to Christianity, Dumont argues, can be found in Ancient Greece, especially among the Stoics (ibid.: 36–39, 48; see also Tillich 1968, Chapter 1), though in the latter case the notion contained otherworldly characteristics also typical of the ideas of the first Christians. It was following the institution of the Church and its political stabilization (Dumont 1983: 70–71), and especially after the Reformation, that the mundane antagonistic element characteristic of Christianity – namely the opposition between the believer's relations to God (individual) and his or her relation to the world (holistic, collective) – eventually disappeared (ibid.: 73). The final blow was landed by Calvin, who established the importance of the worldly action of the individual devoted to God as the only evidence of his or her choice and salvation. The individual is thereby inserted completely in the world and individualism becomes the dominant, unrestricted value (ibid.: 73).

As Dumont showed, the genesis of the individual and the human/non-human separation are not dissociated questions. He argues that the historical process through which the Christian individual became stabilized in the world coincided with the separation of humans from non-humans: the identity established between human and divine will in Calvinism consolidated the separation between man and nature already present in the thought of Saint Augustine (ibid.: 56, 60) as man became the master and owner of nature (ibid.: 76; see also Latour 1994 and Descola 2005, 2013). This allows us to associate similarly the two transformations identified earlier in relation to the Wari'.

Are the Wari' indeed becoming modern then?

Descola on Ontological Transformations

The diverse forms of relation between nature and culture as a means of differentiating moderns and non-moderns (albeit not denominated in this form) is analysed in fine detail by Descola (2005 and 2013). Here I shall present this work in some detail due to its relevance to the contemporary theoretical discussions of Amazonian anthropology and to the fact that Descola treats these different symbolic systems as ontologies, attributing to them a stability that I wish to place in question.

According to Descola (2005, 2013), there are four ontologies, defined by their distinct ways of relating a natural series to a cultural series: animism (within which, for him, perspectivism comprises a subspecies), totemism, analogism and naturalism. Here I am particularly interested in animism and naturalism, which would correspond to the Amazonian and Euro-American ontologies respectively, and which for Descola are found in symmetric opposition. In animism we encounter a continuity of 'interiorities', that is, properties such as 'intentionality, subjectivity, reflexivity, feelings, and the ability to express oneself and to dream' (2013: 116) between beings (all of those capable of such), in opposition to a discontinuity of 'physicalities', that is, 'external form, substance, the physiological, perceptive and sensorimotor processes' (ibid.: 116). In the naturalist mode the opposite happens. In these cases we observe a continuity of physicalities (all beings are biological specimens of the same type) and a discontinuity of interiorities. Hence while animism is structured on 'the principle of an unrestricted sociability that encompasses both humans and nonhumans' (ibid.: 393), naturalism is founded on an 'apartheid regime' between humans and non-humans (ibid.: 397).

Descola identifies the advent of Christianity, and more specifically the belief in creation, as the key event in the constitution of the Moderns, taken as paradigmatic examples of the naturalist mode of identification. Descola argues (ibid.: 103):

In order for the nature of the Moderns to acquire existence, a second operation of purification would be necessary [the first concerns the Greek concept of *phusis* and its developments by Hippocrates and Aristotle (ibid.: 99–100)], it would be necessary for men to become exterior and superior to nature [which they were not in Greek thought]. It is Christianity to which we owe this second perturbation with its double idea of a transcendence of man and a universe created out of nothing by divine will. From this supernatural origin, man assumes the right and the mission to administer the Earth, God having made him on the last day of genesis in order for him to exert his control over Creation.

Although he mentions the constitution of the moderns, the focus of Descola's analysis is not the transformation of one ontology into another, but the stability of each of them, which, he writes, seem 'to have defied the test of time' (ibid.: 497). Despite making this observation, the author develops a model for conceptualizing ontological change: this, he argues, occurs through the transformation of modes of relation, or the modes of treating the Other characterizing each of the ontologies. Descola identifies a set of six types of modes of relation, divided into two groups. The first, composed of those characterized as 'potentially reversible relations between terms that are similar' (ibid.: 311), is 'predation', 'exchange' and 'gift'. The second group is constituted by relations 'founded upon connections between nonequivalent terms' (ibid.), namely 'protection', 'production' and 'transmission'.

Although each of the modes of identification is 'compatible' with more than one of these modes of relation, not all combinations are possible. Hence, for example, the compatibility of animist identification seems to be limited to the relations of the first group, predation, exchange and gift, although the second may be present in encompassed, limited or devalued form (ibid.: 443).

Ontological change occurs, Descola argues, when a kind of minority relation becomes hegemonic (ibid.: 366):

Certain ways of treating 'others' that are present in a minor form in one mode of identification sometimes come to play a more predominant role that soon renders them incompatible with the ontological regime in which they have developed; and this makes it necessary to alter that ontological regime or transfer to another mode of identification that is better suited to a different way of treating.

As he observes, this involves a very slow change: 'Such mutations usually remain unnoticed by those who live through them, for they may be drawn out over a long period of time, spanning many generations' (ibid.: 365); 'this kind of rectification of ontological frontiers comes about very gradually over a very long period of time' (ibid.: 524). The reasons for the change are external: brusque climatic changes, historical events (especially contact with the West) such as persecutions, warfare and territorial confinement: 'all these things oblige humans to modify their strategies for subsistence and, above all, upset the relations that unify them with others and with the world' (ibid.: 390), 'upsetting habits transmitted from one generation to the next' (ibid.: 389).

Descola considers the possibility of more than one ontology coexisting within the same community, organized in a hierarchical relation. According to Lloyd (2006: 23) in his review of Descola's book: 'there will be one dominant ontology, so he claims, but that does not exclude traces of others'. For Lloyd (2006: 23), who agrees with this possibility, this coexistence is especially evident in populations with differentiated social groups, though radically different from the Wari, especially Euro-American societies where 'naturalist' atheist sections of the population coexist with 'animist' religious groups for whom, for instance, the wine drunk in Catholic mass is really the blood of Christ. For Descola, while modifications remain reversible, they can be taken as experiments. Hence, he argues, 'it is not so much movement that needs explaining as stability' (Descola 2013: 388).

The sole example of ontological change analysed by Descola is the shift from an animist ontology to an analogical ontology, based on the introduction of the domestication of animals, like the caribou in Siberia, causing the relation of protection to become the hegemonic mode of relation (ibid.: 499–505). In his words, 'the progressive predominance of livestock raising goes hand in hand with the establishment of a vertical relationship of protective domination [which] presents a strong contrast to the egalitarian relations between humans and nonhuman persons' (ibid.: 373).

It is important to emphasize again that for Descola the schema of relationship to be privileged 'must correspond to a pre-existing schema of interactions that, however, has so far been confined to a subordinate ... position' (ibid.: 386), which of course echoes Dumont's schema of hierarchical encompassment in his essay on the genesis of individualism.

The change that interests us here in particular, and which justifies all the attention given to this model of transformation from animism, founded on 'the principle of an unrestricted sociability that encompasses both humans and nonhumans' (ibid.: 393), to a naturalism founded on an 'apartheid regime' between humans and non-humans (ibid.: 397), is not thematized by Descola who, in the book's epilogue, gives

special attention to the relation between these two modes of identification in order to show their mutual irreducibility (ibid.: 393). Hence in 'animist cosmologies,' 'the only structuring relations possible are those that operate with potentially reversible links between subjects, whether human or nonhuman' (ibid.), namely predation, exchange and gift giving. 'Conversely, intransitive relations of the production, transmission, or protection type are bound to remain marginal given that they presuppose a hierarchy between terms whose ontological disparity is rendered effective by the very action that one exerts upon another within the relationship' (ibid.); 'the subject establishes a dependent subject or a subordinate object' (ibid.).

Continuing this line of argument, Descola analyses the absence – despite the possibilities and facilities of every kind – of domestication in Amazonia, which, he argues, is explained by the complete incompatibility of this mode of protective/pastoral relation with the region's animist ontologies (ibid.: 514–521) given that 'an animal in tropical South America can only be seen as the subject, both individually and as a member of a group, of an egalitarian relationship between two persons' (ibid.: 384). '[T]he rejection of the technique of domestication' is thus 'an effect of the impossibility, for them, of transforming their schema for relations with animals' (ibid.). This does not mean that these societies did not quickly adopt some domestic animals from the whites, such as the dog and the chicken, which are domesticated without problems. The issue arises with the domestication of autochthonous animals, which, Descola suggests, would entail 'modification to [the] ontological status' of non-humans, which these peoples have resisted for five centuries (ibid.: 385).

This resistance was indeed made evident among some Christianized animist groups. Like the Wari, the Inuit of the Canadian Arctic are a hunting people for whom the notion of subject is not limited to the human species, but includes diverse types of animals, including their preferred prey. In an analysis of Inuit understanding of the Biblical Genesis, Laugrand (1999: 98) emphasizes a point that indicates an important variation in relation to the Wari's version of Genesis. In the Inuit narrative, the verses that emphasize the submission of all the animals to men are completely omitted since, according to the author, this implies a radical transformation in the status of animals for the Inuit, the consequence of which would be a 'complete transformation of the ontological and cosmological systems' (ibid.: 98).

By contrast we find the Wari and other Christianized groups such as the Piro or Yine of Peruvian Amazonia who, according to Opas (2008), objectified animals, although the author does not address the question of ontological transformation. In the author's words:

When telling me about these vengeance of animals and about encounters with different non-human beings, the Yine – both Evangelical and Catholic – often ended their stories by saying *Ya no es así*, 'It is no longer like that'. Beings do not appear to people or harm them any more as they used to do because, as the Yine said, 'now we are with the Word of God'. One woman explained that 'They no longer transform into people ... Before God existed they appeared like that, before we knew the Word of God, that is when the animals transformed into people, in those times'. (Opas 2008: 246 and 264; see also Andreello 1999)

The Christianization of animist peoples, a topic left unexplored by Descola – although, as I remarked, he associates Christianization with the constitution of modernity – seems to me to constitute an interesting problem for his model of transformation. The case of the Wari’ and, as far as I know, various other Amazonian peoples, suggest distortions to this model, beginning with the fact that the transformations cannot be explained by the hierarchical encompassment of a dominant mode of relation by another with minor significance, since the forms of relation compatible with naturalism were not found among them. Turning to the correlated question of the emergence of the individual, it cannot be said, à la Dumont, that the individual existed among them as an encompassed value, eventually surfacing with Christianity (although they are still far from conceiving themselves as modern individuals; see Robbins, Schieffelin and Vilaça 2014). In a recent article (Vilaça 2013), setting out from an observation by Strathern (1988: 268–271 and 378, n.1), I suggested that Leenhardt (1971: 249) makes the same kind of supposition in analysing the transformation of the Kanak person with the advent of Christianity. Although he claims that the conception of a unique and indivisible self did not exist among the Kanak prior to Christianity, Leenhardt, in proposing a scheme of the Kanak person, implies the pre-existence of an individual even when the Kanak were still immersed in ‘mythic participation’.

Among the Wari’, before Christianity it was impossible to totalize the person, which was always defined through diverse perspectives, dependent on the relational context. Consequently the interiority that begins to emerge with Christianity is something completely external and unknown.

It is time to bring hybrids into the discussion.

Hybrids

According to Latour (1994), hybrids are everywhere, even among the moderns (Euro-Americans), who are also unable to make a clear separation between the human and non-human domains, producing, especially through science, an enormous quantity of hybrids. These ‘quasi-objects’ or ‘quasi-subjects’, according to Latour, have the property of mixing ontologies (or two ontological varieties, or ontological regions [ibid.: 120]) and distinct temporalities (ibid.: 72–74). However the ‘constitution’ of the moderns guarantees this separation by constantly working to purify hybrids (ibid.: 37), allocating them to the human or non-human side, and thereby rejecting the ambiguity and mixture produced by their practices (ibid.: 16, 106–7). For Latour (ibid.: 98), a totally natural nature only emerges among moderns, who work to purify the profusion of nature–culture hybrids. The true success of this separation, Latour argues, stems from the emergence of a God who, becoming transcendent at the same time as coming to exist in intimate space, turns into a ‘remote referee’ who guarantees the efficacy of purification (ibid.: 38–39), maintaining ‘as much distance as possible between two symmetrical entities, Nature and Society’ (ibid.: 127). He thus argues that seventeenth-century debates, especially those between Boyle and Hobbes over the allocation of domains to nature/science and society/politics, were able to potentialize the ‘lengthy task of the sixteenth-century Reformation’ (ibid.: 33; see Keane 2007 for a critical view

of the Christian purification), thereby recognizing the central, though not exclusive, place of Christianity in the constitution of modernity.

Roy Wagner (1975) reached a similar conclusion in his analysis of aversion to contradiction among members of societies he calls conventionalizing, such as Euro-American society, which look to create rules and conventions through what they define as an innate world of individualities, idiosyncrasies and nature. In opposition to these are differentiating societies, such as tribal peoples, for whom contradiction has a non-problematic place: these societies base their inventive process on creating alternatives to convention, here taken to be part of the innate world, creating a dialectical process between convention and invention that enables the coexistence of diverse alternatives. In Wagner's terms, differentiating controls are not conceived to be executed as a code but as a basis for an inventive improvisation (ibid.: 88). Hence the anthropologist's impression that their lives constitute a continuous improvisation (ibid.: 87). While our concern is to insert things in an ordered relation we call culture, thereby separating it clearly from nature, the concern of tribal peoples is to destabilize the conventional (ibid.), extending the rules.

Here it is worth recalling an analogous observation on the unproblematic place of contradiction for native peoples made many years earlier by Lévy-Bruhl, an author with a rare and keen awareness of the properly ontological aspects of native symbolic systems. According to him:

By designating it 'prelogical' I merely wish to state that it does not bind itself down, as our thought does, to avoiding contradiction. It obeys the law of participation first and foremost. Thus oriented, it does not expressly delight in what is contradictory (which would make it merely absurd in our eyes), but neither does it take pains to avoid it. It is often wholly indifferent to it, and that makes it so hard to follow ... [T]hey take but little account of the logical law of contradiction. (Lévy-Bruhl 1985: 78, 361; see also Viveiros de Castro 2002: 215, 2011: 41)²

Returning to Christianity, Latour's notion of hybrids is explored by Webb Keane (2007) in his study of Protestant Christianity in Sumba, Indonesia. Examining missionization as a process of purification, the author focuses his attention precisely on the production of hybrids, here semiotic forms that include objects and words, showing that the discontinuity perceived by the missionaries between them and the Sumbanese (who were accused of being fetishistic and backward) was merely apparent, since the missionaries were incapable of seeing their own hybrids. Both missionary and Sumbanese practice involved precisely the production of human and non-human, natural and cultural hybrids. This is particularly apposite in terms of the American Protestant missionaries from the New Tribes Mission who catechized the Wari' and among whom the Bible, a book stabilized long before the invention of modernity, should be taken as literal truth. As Assman (2010: 10) says, the Hebrew Bible resembles a 'picture puzzle', related to 'two quite different forms of religion – one polytheistic, the other monotheistic; one turned towards the world, the other turned away from it'.

This, I think, is an important point to be taken into account, namely that Christianity is taken to many native peoples by people who share the same notion of a complex and partible person (see Cannell 2006; Mosko 2010; Werbner 2011), at the same time as

they act from day to day on the basis of a clearly individualist conception of the person, making them highly complex hybrids.

We can observe that in its many different local versions and actualizations, Christianity has objectified in a fairly elaborate way a paradigmatic hybrid: the devil. A mixture of the divine and human with the capacity to be incarnated in an animal, as in the Biblical serpent, the devil is not only a hybrid but a producer of hybrids by restoring the agency of local spirits, whether ancestral spirits, as in the African case described by Meyer (1999), or animals, as in the Amazonian case, and consequently the dividuality of humans – that is, their double character, simultaneously human and animal, as potentialities to be actualized in specific relational contexts (see Vilaça 2011 and 2015).

How do we explain, then, the purifications that the Wari' seem to be realizing in terms of simplifying the dividual person towards an individual, in conjunction with the separation of humans and animals? As the authors cited here observe, everything appears to suggest that the introduction of the omnipresent and omniscient figure of God has produced a set of effects and guaranteed the continuation of this separation, eclipsing the possibility of the ontological oscillation that characterizes the perspectivist world.

Things are more complex, however, when we focus on the ethnographic details, especially the translation into Wari' of some of the key concepts of the Wari' and Christian universes alike: body, soul and heart. Here I shall quickly summarize the traditional meaning of these terms for the Wari' in order to show that Christianity, while offering them an alternative model of personhood, also allowed them to reproduce their own.

Body, Soul and Heart

The Wari' have a complex definition of the body (*kwerexi*, 'our [inclusive] body') encompassing not only the idea of flesh, or matter, but also personality or way of being. The Wari' say that a person has a particular way of behaving or being because his or her body is like that. This body not only differentiates individuals through their particularities, it also differentiates the Wari' as a whole from other indigenous peoples, whites and other kinds of beings. They often say that 'the Wari' body is like that' (*je kwerexi' pain ka wari' nexi*) when referring to their collective practices and habits. Everything that exists, animals and objects alike, also has a body, the seat of its capacities and affects (see Conklin 2001a, 2001b)

As part of the body, the heart (*ximixi*, 'our [inclusive] heart') is a central organ, responsible for the most vital functions that we would see as physiological, in turn associated with cognitive and emotional capacities and dispositions. Hence when people say that active living beings have a heart, they mean that such beings know how to act, what to do and what to eat. As with the body, possession of a heart is not limited to those beings conceived to be human. All animals know how to search for food, find a shelter and so on. Just like the body, the heart differentiates species of beings. People also say that beings that act inappropriately 'lack a heart', like an animal that fails to perceive its predator, for instance, and allows itself to be killed.

In the Christian context, 'having a heart' is one way of saying that the person behaves like a good Christian, as in the Wari' version of a hymn originally sung in

Portuguese, which also illustrates the perception of love as a transformation of anger: the stanza repeating 'I am happy, Christ saved me' was transformed into 'You're angry, Jesus said to us long ago. You have no heart, Jesus said to us long ago. I shall give you a heart, Jesus said to us long ago, so you will no longer be angry' (Hymn 37).³

Although everything had a body and a heart, only those entities possessing a double, *jamixi'*, were considered human. These included not only the Wari', other indigenous groups and white people, but also diverse species of animals. *Jamixi'* is not an immaterial component of the person located in some part of the body: it is a capacity to transform, the ability to assume the form of other bodies, a characteristic of every human being. While *jamixi'* is a capacity for transformation, it can only be objectified as a body, a different kind of body because of its links to other relations.

The word *jamixi'* has a synonym, *tamataraxi'*. When asked directly about the terms, the Wari' say that they are interchangeable, such that one can say, for example, *tamatarakon min* (tapir double) or *tamatarain mijak* (peccary double) to designate the human agency of these animals. I am unfamiliar, however, with the existence of any verb derived from *tamataraxi'* equivalent to *jamu*, itself derived from *jamixi'* and signifying interspecies transformation. In my experience, the preferential contexts for applying these terms are somewhat distinct though, with *tamataraxi'* used more to designate the double in dreams, where it normally appears in its human form, as a Wari' body, while *jamixi'* refers to the transformed body of animals and shamans alike.

Translation and Its Effects

The distinct use-contexts of *tamataraxi'* and *jamixi'* noted by myself have also long been observed by the missionaries, although equivocally in my view. According to the missionary linguist Barbara Kern, in a virtual correspondence conducted in 2011, *tamataraxi'* refers to the 'spirit' of a living person, while *jamixi'* refers to the spirit of someone now dead.

Consequently the missionaries chose *tamataraxi'* to translate soul. In every Biblical text referring to the soul, therefore, the Wari' term is usually *tamataraxi'*. The translation for Holy Spirit is *Tamatarakon Iri' Jam* (double of God). This does not mean that *jamixi'* had disappeared in the Christian context, since it came to designate everything related to the danger of transformation, the devil and evil, while *tamataraxi'* acquired the connotation of an immortal component of the person, identified with the heart as the centre of moral conscience.

As the soul and heart became equivalent, animals lost the attributes of agency that once characterized them: animals have no soul and, therefore, also have no reflexivity or thought. Having a soul/heart has become an attribute of the new humanity, no longer equated with animality but with the divine. God has his own soul (*tamatarakon*), namely the Holy Spirit. As Paletó said: 'It is *tamatarakon* who speaks in our heart'.

Although 'body' is translated in Christian writings by the Wari' term *kwerexi'*, whose meaning partially overlaps that of the term for body (*corpo* in Portuguese), it loses its central attribute as the seat of the will and personality and becomes a mere envelope, a 'skin' (*taparixi'*). In the words of one man: 'the things of our body are not good. Only our soul (*tamataraxi'*). Those who do not believe (*howa*) only like the

things of the body'. The words of the pastor Awo Kamip during one church service, reading from the recently translated Epistle to the Romans, show the clear dissonance between the traditional and Christian acceptations: 'It is Jesus Christ who helps our soul (*tamataraxi*) ... It is our soul that believes (*howa*, trusts) in God, not our body'.

Like *jamixi*, the body is associated with evil and sin, translated into the Wari' language by a variety of terms, including *ka karakat wa*, where *karakat* is an emphatic duplication of the verb *kat*, to break, meaning the act per se, something visible through the body. As the pastor Awo Kamip explained in one service: 'God's *tamatarakon* stays in our heart. We do not delight (*param*) in sin (*ka karakat wa*). Our body (*kwerexi*) delights in sin. We speak with God through our soul (*tamataraxi*). Our skin [*taparixi*] does not speak to him'.

While the heart/soul is the locus for communication with God, the devil makes use of our body as well as our soul, as the Bible Lesson Book 6,⁴ prepared by the missionaries, makes clear: '[The devil] speaks to us through our heart, ordering us to do things that are not good. He stays malignantly in our soul (*tamataraxi*), he stays malignantly in our body (*kwerexi*) too'.

The divergence between the Amazonian and missionary conceptions of the soul, and its relation to the body, have been noted by Taylor and Viveiros de Castro (2007: 159):

Deceived by the superficial resemblance between their own dualism, namely between flesh and spirit, the missionaries (and in turn very often ethnologists) quickly assimilated the latter with the soul. In reality the indigenous terms refer to something entirely different to the inner spiritual principle, opposed to the body, implied by our notion of soul ... In short, the Indian 'soul' is formed by the other's perspective.

The Wari' case allows us to complicate the equivocation identified by the authors, showing that the Wari' and Christian perspectives intersect with each other in different ways. The demonization of the term *jamixi* shows that the missionaries had some idea of its transformative potential and its role in the definition of the duality of the Wari' person, which they sought to unify through the divine perspective. They therefore turned to the term *tamataraxi*, less imbued with the sense of transformation, as the solution for the literal translation they sought.

Bearing in mind the perspectivist notion of translation, it seems to me plausible that, with the aim of preserving the alterity that interested them, the Wari' made use of the distinction between *jamixi* and *tamataraxi* proposed by the missionaries as a way of maintaining the double perspective that characterizes shamanic transformations. Double in two senses. First, by maintaining the Wari' perspective of the relation between the double (*jamixi*) and transformation, at the same time as distinguishing the latter from the Christian perspective, which proposes a bodiless and non-metamorphic soul, exclusive to the Wari' in contrast to animals. And second, by preserving an essential characteristic of the double through the Christian meaning of the soul, namely the embodiment of the other's perspective, God's in this case, which was precisely the perspective which the Wari' wished to adopt. *Tamataraxi* became precisely God's gaze over the Wari', arising, just like among shamans and animals, from their kinship to him. In this sense the soul, in its two acceptations, has become a 'twisted word' (Overing Kaplan 1990; Townsley 1993; Carneiro da Cunha 1998), a hybrid term pointing to two

simultaneous worlds, mixing ontologies, allowing the Wari' to circulate through these two distinct universes.

The implications of the translation of the term 'body' seem to me even more complex, insofar as this translation makes evident the continuity between the oscillation embraced by the Wari' and the one intrinsic to the Western Christian tradition, which alternates between the body's demonization and sanctification. For the missionaries, while the body is the seat of evil, as we have seen in the above translations, it is also the seat of the Holy Spirit, and it was by making himself human, in bodily form, that God revealed himself to humans. The Christian ambiguity provides the space for the duplicity sought by the Wari', although the latter does not refer to the same notions of good and evil. Hence the body maintains its original meaning of objectification of a relation, since the visible result is given by a relation which can be established with either God or the devil. As Paletó observed: 'God asks for the person to give him all the parts of his body to leave none to give to the devil. If he gives [part] to the devil, he drinks, he goes with women.'

The Christian idea that the body does not belong to the person finds an echo in the Wari' 'outer self', determined by the other's perspective. Is it not precisely the idea of an 'outer self' that we find in Corinthians 6:19, used to illustrate a page from the calendar produced by the missionaries in the Wari' language? The Bible verse in English (New King James Bible) reads as follows: 'Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own?' The translation into Wari' in the calendar states as follows: 'You must all already know that your body is like the house of the double of God/the Holy Spirit (*Tamatarakon Iri' Jam*). He enters and remains in you. [The body] was given to you by God. You cannot say that 'it is mine' among you. (*Om ka mene pan xujuhu*)'.

As Abrão explained, 'God's double enters inside our body. It is what gives thought, what makes us hungry'. Or as one pastor said during a service: 'we don't like to do our things [but rather God's things]' (Estevão, Santo André church service, July 2002).

In other words, just as the self was constituted relationally in the pre-Christian world, determined from the outside either by the perspective of kin or that of animal spirits, in the Christian world the self is determined by God or by the devil who compete with each other for the perspective of the Wari'.

We can conclude, therefore, that while the Wari' are undeniably experiencing a process of ontological transformation, this is more complex than the models of encompassment of Dumont and Descola would have us believe. In other words, the fact that we have detailed ethnographic data on a process of transformation of this kind offers an understanding of this process that is quite distinct from that provided by generic models based on large-scale historical data. The important thing to note is that this new ontology cannot be explained here as the awakening of pre-existing and encompassed models of personhood and relationship, but as the adoption of a new and unusual feature, in an oscillating mode, in a way coherent with the interest in radical alterity that characterizes the 'opening to the Other' and the 'dualism in perpetual disequilibrium' of native American peoples, as Lévi-Strauss (1995: xvii and 239) has shown (see also Strathern 1995: 7–8).

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Notes

1. A recent and wide-ranging discussion by the author on the subject can be found in an earlier issue of this journal (Viveiros de Castro 2015).
2. It is important to note that the use of the term 'contradiction' by these two authors refers to this somewhat vague perception of a coexistence of divergent behaviours or ideas, rather than being determined by the debates between Aristotle and Heraclitus on the Law of Contradiction. In the latter case, attributes said to be contradictory must be 'predicated of the same subject at the same time, in the same respect and in the same relation' (Lloyd 1966: 87; see also 86–102).
3. *Oro Tamara'. Hinos e coros em Pacaas Novos e Português*. Missão Novas Tribos do Brasil, Manaus, Amazonas (no date).
4. Taken from page 15 of *Oro Lição Nein Romanos 6. Lições da Palavra de Deus sobre o Livro de Romanos na língua Pacaas Novos*. Missão Novas Tribos do Brasil, Manaus, Amazonas, 2006.

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