

Performing Flights: Perspectivism and Shamanic Epistemology in the Amazon

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ABSTRACT: Alfred North Whitehead famously compares the philosophical method of knowledge acquisition with the process of flying an airplane. Likewise, “shamanic flight” marks stages of cognitive processing in navigation through perceptible and imperceptible worlds. This article focuses on the cosmivision of the Amazon people Huni Kuin, the Whiteheadian method of imaginative rationalization, and the concept of Amerindian perspectivism. This study also investigates shamanism as an experience of knowledge generation. Furthermore, “shamanic flight,” as an ecstatic technique experienced in many diverse Amerindian rituals, will be explored as a method in the discovery and organization of nonhuman alterities. Finally, Amazonian-based shamanic epistemology will be discussed within a “multinaturalist” ontology.

Introduction

Amazonian shamanism can be defined as the ability manifested by some individuals to deliberately cross bodily barriers and adopt the perspectives of members of other species in order to manage the relationships between them and humans (Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological” 1). The meeting or exchange of perspectives is a fundamental shamanic process, which refers to a hybrid practice of art and politics. This process can be understood as a metaphysical diplomacy (see Sztutman).

In this diplomatic relationship, which involves humans and nonhumans, the emergence of shamanism as a sacred phenomenon is closely associated with the presence of the animal world, which may seem, at first, related to the need to hunt and obtain animals as a food source (see Vitebsky). The idea of the shaman as a tutelary spirit, the guardian of an animal species whose worship provided the community with sustenance, points to a shamanic practice that is associated with animal mimicry, that is, with the imitation of animal expression and behavior (see Vitebsky; Winkelman).

Thus, animal imitation includes a subjective factor and may be related to the shamanic practice of “soul flight” or “shamanic flight,” which in a historical perspective points to a fundamental element of shamanic techniques of ecstasy (or ecstatic technique): the journey of the soul through the use of psychoactive plants (see Eliade). The way in which a shaman’s soul flies across the landscape to locate hunting animals is similar to the flight to save the captured soul of a sick person during a healing ceremony using psychoactive plants. Just as living humans hunt animals, so spirits hunt human souls, and it is often the abduction or ingestion of the soul that causes illness and death (see Eliade; Winkelman).

In this sense, the ecstatic technique presupposes the soul’s journey to other worlds (higher or lower) and to the “middle earth” (this is the common reality), in which the purpose of humans is to find spirits, allied to totemic animals, in addition to obtaining knowledge and curing diseases (see Krippner). It is possible to think that ecstatic techniques provide, therefore, not only journeys of the subjectified soul, but also a somatic affectation of the body (Viveiros de Castro, “Os Pronomes” 115–144). In evolutionary terms, such affectations may be able to promote a shamanic epistemology with “neurognostic potential,” that is, an epistemology capable of providing “a basis for the forms of perception, cognition and affect that are structured by the neurological systems of the organism” (see Krippner).

It is possible to understand shamanism as a way of acting that implies a way of knowing, or rather, a certain ideal of knowledge (Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectivismo” 255–254). Such an ideal is in many ways the opposite of the objectivist epistemology favored by Western modernity. In the latter, knowing is to objectify; it is to be able to distinguish in the object what is intrinsic to it from what is extrinsic to it, and which, as such, was improperly projected onto this object. Knowing, thus, is desubjectifying, making the part of the subject present in the object explicit in order to reduce it to an ideal minimum. As a result, subjects, as much as objects, are seen as effects of the objectification processes, and subjects only affect or recognize themselves in the objects they produce, with everything that escapes the objectification process being restricted to the unreal or abstract (Viveiros de Castro, “Os Pronomes” 115–144).

A shamanic epistemology, on the other hand, seems to be guided by an ultimate inverse: the personification process. Knowing is, therefore, taking the point of view of what must be known. Shamanic knowledge, in personifying, aims at a “something” which is a “someone,” which has

agency and, therefore, has the status of a person with a different way of existing (Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectivismo” 255–254). Thus, by seeing nonhuman beings as they see themselves (as humans, subjects, or agents), shamans are able to assume the role of active interlocutors in a dialogue between members of human and nonhuman species. Recognizing the agency of the parties in this interaction, they are able to tell stories and generate knowledge based on something that objectivist thinking is not able to access.

This study aims to investigate the experience of shamanism as an experience of knowledge generation based on a theoretical framework that combines concepts from the Western philosophical tradition with Amerindian ways of defining and thinking about coexisting worlds. The cosmivision of the Huni Kuin Amazon people will be used as a starting point, the method of “imaginative rationalization” proposed by Alfred North Whitehead will be compared and contrasted with the modes of exploration of worlds experienced in shamanic journeys, and the relevance of the concept of Amerindian perspectivism for Amazonian-based shamanic epistemologies will be discussed.

Trance and Huni Kuin Cosmovision

The Huni Kuin people, one of the most numerous groups belonging to the Pano ethnic family, occupy a vast territory in the basin of the Juruá and Purus Rivers, in the lowlands between Brazil and Peru (see Camargo and Villar; Zans). The Huni Kuins (also known as Kaxinawás) inhabit the rainforest, ranging from regions close to the Andes to the state of Acre, in Brazil. The total population is close to six thousand people, and of these, around thirty-five hundred live in Brazilian indigenous lands. Among the Pano peoples, there are great similarities in terms of cosmologies, myths, spiritual rites, and cultural practices involving the use of psychoactive drugs. The Huni Kuin people enjoy a vast body of studies on their culture, which makes them a frequently studied reference on the use of psychoactive plants and drinks, such as *ayahuasca*. (see Lagrou; Zans).

One of the central aspects of the Huni Kuin cosmivision is the belief that the universe is formed by multiple realities, occupied by beings capable of bodily transformations made in this multiplicity. This process introduces an idea of cyclicity, from which the body is transmutable and inseparable from a soul that preserves the perspective of the human being (see Ingold; Keifenhein; Viveiros de Castro, “Cosmological”), and refers to the fundamental principle of the history of creation: the principle of

transformation (see Keifenhein). Huni Kuin cosmogony has an elaborate view of reality, according to which, in the beginning of times, life unfolded in a flow of continuous transformations, with beings metamorphosing into other forms of being, into an enormous potency that was gradually lost (see Keifenhein).

However, to access this principle of transformation today, the Huni Kuins utilize ritualistic practices that integrate narrative and poetry, reinforcing their oral tradition, the memory of their myths, and the shamanic cosmological recreation. The Huni Kuins use the psychoactive drink known as *nixi pae* (also known as *ayahuasca*) as a ritual operator that, acting on the body, allows the transit between the ordinary world and the primordial reality where the spirits of their ancestors live. As in dream and death, the experience of trance allows crossing the borders of these realities, but, unlike death, in a reversible way, and unlike dreams, in a controlled manner (see Almeida).

Nixi pae (or *ayahuasca*) is a drink prepared by cooking vines (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and leaves (*Psychotria viridis*). The psychoactive and psychedelic properties of *nixi pae* are widely known in the scientific literature and have been the subject of anthropological and therapeutic investigations for several years (see Almeida; Luz). The term *ayahuasca*, of Quechua origin, is translated as “vine of the dead,” whose meaning can be understood from the perspective of a native healer and *ayahuasca* master: “*Ayahuasca* is the healing agent, it paints visions, it’s a natural tonic that regenerates a person. With *ayahuasca* you feel death, but you don’t die, the ego dies, the negative dies” (see López). The trance produced by *nixi pae* has a visionary characteristic, marked by the presence of mental images (visions), and an aesthetic characteristic, marked by the presence of native chants during rituals. The visions produced by the use of *nixi pae* can have a nonrepresentational character, which are indices that trace paths in the visionary experience. When taking the *nixi pae*, the Huni Kuins believe that men can see through the eyes of the Anaconda, the mythical animal that brought the knowledge of the drink to the native community and that is associated with the “manifestation of the primordial shaman.” When the visions produced by the drink form representational images, that is, figurative images, they acquire a synesthetic character, implying bodily metamorphoses that can be modulated through sacred songs throughout the rituals (see Lagrou).

As for the techniques used during the intake of *nixi pae* by the Huni Kuins, sacred chants (*huni meka*) play a preponderant role as conductors

of experience. It is the structuring and conducting effect of the voices that makes it possible for each participant to rediscover the path to be followed amid the sensory and kinesthetic turmoil of the transmutation of bodies. At the same time, it is through chants that ritual participants are led back from the labyrinth of visions to the structured order of everyday perception (see Keifenhein).

One of the interesting aspects of the use of *nixi pae* is the pedagogical feature that the substance provides for the Huni Kuins. For them, it is from the *nixi pae* that knowledge about the worlds comes; it is *nixi pae* that teaches about creation, the beings that exist in it, and the logic that governs its functioning. Therefore, *nixi pae* teaches how to deal with ancestry, animals, and forest spirits (see Luz). Power plants, such as *nixi pae*, are therefore called “master or teacher plants,” reinforcing the nature of their “work” based on the psychoactive potentials they have that alter the perception of those who experience them. According to Krippner, these plants have “neurognostic potential,” that is, they activate cognition of another way of apprehending reality. Many Huni Kuins refer to the *nixi pae*, therefore, as a “teacher plant,” which in its “pedagogical character” has the property of teaching through trance experiences that are felt through the “shamanic flight.”

It is possible to think that the “neurognostic potential” and the “pedagogical character” of the ritualistic use of *nixi pae* are necessary conditions for the shamanic healing process, as the generation of knowledge about disease is similar to a “good diagnosis” that is built by taking perspectives from two worlds: the world of the living and the world of the dead. If shamanism can be understood as a diplomatic activity of mediation between worlds (see Sztutman; Winkelman), a double perspective (vision of the two worlds) is needed beforehand to understand the contrasts and the conflicts that present themselves as a process of illness. In this sense, it is through the “shamanic flight” that pedagogical work becomes a perspectivist and cognitive practice: the shaman starts from a perspective (world of the living); the shaman expands this perspective, during trance, to a double perspective (world of the living and the dead), from which the shaman makes comparisons and mediations; and the shaman returns with a new perspective on health and disease (world of the living renewed with mythical narratives built from the experience of trance). Therefore, the “shamanic flight” seems to be the necessary and sufficient condition for the generation of new knowledge about life, death, health, and disease.

Shamanic Flight and Modes of Producing Knowledge

The investigation of “shamanic flight” refers to the techniques of the body as a manipulable device and assumes anthropological studies that point to the body as a primordial technical object and instrument of relationship with the world that is privileged in the history of humankind (see Mauss). For Marcel Mauss, the body is, above all, a symbolic and cultural construction, which leads him to believe that human beings have always known how to make the body a product of their techniques and, therefore, of representation. This thought contributes to relativizing the shamanic ecstasy as a tool and equipment in light of body techniques and to including the shaman as an immanent agent of practice, responsible for a mediation of the affected body in its understanding of reality through the senses and the “supernatural” (see Eliade).

The “soul journey” of the shaman to other worlds or to “supernatural” realities, which aimed at the knowledge and guidance of the souls of members of a community toward healing, gained in the last century an understanding that supposes the shaman as a performer of a double body (see Eliade). On the one hand, it is a physical body in ritual performance employing body techniques to affect subjectivity through psychoactive plants, and, on the other, it is a “transcendent” body, whose function is to spiritually guide the patient’s body on its journey (again, Eliade).

Thus, the process of leaving the body (ecstasy) and accessing other dimensions requires the use of a collection of body techniques, such as fasting, the use of drums, sexual abstinence, orgasmic practices, isolation practices, or the use of psychoactive plants (see Eliade; Winkelman). It is these techniques, isolated or associated, that produce the ecstatic event, when the soul takes the mystical journey and practitioners deliberately alter or “increase their consciousness” to enter the so-called “spirit world.” These states of consciousness acquire various nomenclatures in research, such as “altered states of consciousness,” “nonordinary states of consciousness,” “modified states of consciousness,” or “enhanced states of consciousness or greater consciousness” (see Winkelman).

Considering that the use of psychoactive substances affects the culture and some members of the community, the aesthetic and/or cognitive “evolution” that is brought about by ecstatic practices is observed by some experts, who claim that there is a difference between shamans and other members of the community (see Krippner). According to Mircea Eliade, in light of linguist Kai Donner, the shaman’s memory and capacity for

self-control are above average. “The poetic vocabulary of a Yakut shaman comprises 12,000 words, while his usual language—the only one known to the rest of the community—contains no more than 4,000,” argues Eliade. This view is in line with Krippner’s shamanic epistemological perspective, which assumes that shamanism, in its specialization in society, has contributed to the evolution of human consciousness and to the acquisition of sociocultural roots (see Krippner; Winkelman; McKenna).

Based on these assumptions, from the hypothesis that cognitive evolution is affected by shamanic practices and the use of psychoactive plants that cause nonordinary states of consciousness, speculative theories discuss the possibility that the development of human cognition has arisen from factors external to the physiological evolution of the race that occurred in the Paleolithic period. Others refer to the physical capacity acquired in the very evolution of the species (see McKenna; Krippner). In addition to this perspective, David Lewis-Williams suggests that early *Homo sapiens* had the same nervous system as modern humans and that the years 45,000 to 35,000 BCE marked a period of revolutionary transition, a “cognitive quantum leap” precisely when “rock art” was done in caves under the effects of consciousness alteration processes through the use of psychoactive plants (see Lewis-Williams and Clottes). If caves were the primary place of initiation rituals, then it seems that their walls were considered as a “veil” suspended between this world and the realm of spirits. In their practices, the shamans crossed this “veil,” sometimes following the painted “threads of light.” On their return, they brought revelations of what was happening in “the other world” (see Lewis-Williams and Clottes).

Richard Schechner, when analyzing the Lewis-Williams perspective, treats mental images as the “eye-that-sees-the-world” and points out that the construction of mental images, from altered processes of perception, are similar to the way in which the visual cortex constructs the images perceived in nature. These images produced in such heightened states of consciousness demand, however, that people interpret the phenomena and make sense of them as “stories told, sung, danced, painted and carved in caves” (see Schechner).

The “neurognostic potential” of ecstatic practices, experienced in trance rituals, may be linked to an epistemological perspective that considers “flight” as a cognitive condition for the production of new knowledge. How should one think about these conditions, based on the intersection between the Amerindian cosmologies and the contemporary cosmologies of the Western tradition? What categories? What concepts? Which image

of thought is capable of narrowing the boundaries of these worlds? What are the implications for knowledge?

In *Process and Reality*, Whitehead compares the philosophical method of knowledge acquisition with the process of flying an airplane. According to the author, the “true method of discovery” goes through the stages from takeoff to landing, including a cruising period that characterizes the ordinary course of an aircraft: “It starts from the ground of particular observation; it makes a flight in the thin air of imaginative generalization; and it again lands for renewed observation rendered acute by rational interpretation” (*PR* 5).

In a first phase, “thought” finds itself on the ground of observation limited by the ordinary resources of perception. In a second phase, it ascends in a speculative flight that expands the capacity of observation, supplementing ordinary perceptions with imaginative resources experienced during flight. And finally, it returns to the ground with an expanded observation that renews the real, thanks to the manifestation of the mind in an interpretive and rational mode.

According to Whitehead, “we usually observe by the method of difference.” That is, we notice what is not always there and base our observations on a set of unobserved, but operative selections (*PR* 4). However, speculative rationalism, through the “imaginative rationalization method,” makes it possible for thought to overcome that which direct observation lacks, based on factors that are constantly present, even though they are not being observed directly (*PR* 5). The imagination, therefore, accesses the imperceptible repetitions that, when included in the cognizant process, complement the observations, making the differences a novelty.

The “imaginative rationalization method” provides conceptual and linguistic lenses designed to introduce new invisible differences to our habitual modes of observation, new contrasts that modify our sense of what matters. Whitehead thus contributes new concepts to call our attention to what is exemplified in all experience and which does not derive from the authority of privileged cases, but from general notions that allow us to continually invent and adjust the lens of observation. The use of language becomes fundamental for the calibration of these lenses, which implies an adjustment of conventional modes of perception through speculative construction.

This approach is in opposition to techniques of introspection, positivist observation, or any methodology that asks us to set aside theory or abstraction and see the world “directly.” In addition to implying an

expansion of the perceptual field through the “imaginative flight,” the return to the ground of ordinary perceptions requires experimenting with one’s own linguistic resources and verifying their suitability to the sensitive world. In this way, the “flight” is not possible without an impeccable landing that ensures that no experimentation is detached from its context and that no claim to knowledge is separated from the problem it is trying to solve and the means invented to solve it. The “speculative flight” must always return to experience, so as to be tested for the difference it makes to particular practices, in a verification that concerns the schema’s ability to modify practice, to change the habits of thought involved in our interpretation of experience.

The “imaginative rationalization method” or the “airplane flight” suggests that the process of discovering and creating novelties does not operate through a mechanism of subtracting thought, reaching the concrete through more intuitive ways, but, rather, by a process of adding abstractions that can explain the very process of abstraction by which thought arrives at its claims (*SMW* 51). For Whitehead, it is not possible to think without abstractions, so it is extremely important to be attentive in critically reviewing the modes of abstraction. The task of philosophical thought is not to attack and discard abstractions, but to manage them, even to take care of them, so that they are not treated as more concrete than they really are. In this way, the “speculative flight” can be a producer of knowledge and imply a manifestation of the mind in its highest power of abstraction.

Returning then to the “shamanic flight,” some authors have highlighted that the trance experience, often marked by visionary phenomena associated with changes in sensory perception, can be divided into three phases. In the first, there is the appearance of geometric motifs, while the participants still look at the world with “normal eyes.” Here, acoustic perception is understood as “sound paths” that produce, or outline, varied graphics. In a second moment, the internal visions take over the body and the differentiation between subject and object is erased, eliminating the distance between who perceives and what is perceived (see Keifenhein). In this second phase, the appearance of representational visions is remarkable, especially with closed eyes. It is in these visions that the emergence of spiritual beings, animals, and ancestral beings can take over the participants’ self-perception, leading them to the experience of moving through the sky in the form of a bird or through “unknown parts of the world.” Finally, in a third phase, the reduction of visionary effects and changes

in perception is accompanied by a contemplative and enchanting state that often provides new meanings to participants' experiences, similar to deep meditative states (see Almeida; Luz; Winkelman). This three-phase process characterizes what is commonly known as "shamanic flight" or "soul journey," which is marked by a rapid sequence of sounds, images, and body sensations, followed by a decrease in the intensity of these sensory and perceptual manifestations (see Winkelman; Keifenhein).

Just like the phases of Whitehead's "airplane flight," the phases of "shamanic flight" mark stages of cognitive processing and knowledge generation from navigation through perceptible and imperceptible worlds, which uniquely characterize the practices of shamanism (see Winkelman). The crossing of worlds has been described in several ethnographies as a distinctive activity of the shaman, who, as humanity's ambassador to the cosmos, negotiates with the forces of nature and the powerful spirits that control the affairs of life and death on Earth (Viveiros de Castro, "Os Pronomes" 115–144).

The "shamanic flight" can be understood as a trip to another world, a trip to the imperceptible world that maintains an immanent connection with the perceptible world. With Whitehead, this immanent relationship between two worlds allows us to understand the notions of mortality and immortality in their reciprocal implications. Both notions refer to two aspects of the Universe, aspects presupposed in all the experiences we enjoy (Whitehead, "Immortality" 682–684). In Whiteheadian cosmology, these two aspects are called "the two worlds." The notion that emphasizes the multiplicity of mortal things is called the "World of Activity." This is the world of creative processes, where the originality of the present is made by transforming the past and anticipating the future. Thus, in this world, the emphasis is on the present, in a moment of time when creation takes place in the now, without reference to the past or the future (Whitehead, "Immortality" 684). On the other hand, the notion that emphasizes the immortality aspects of experience is called the "World of Value." Unlike the previous one, this world is based on the active coordination and unity of various value possibilities (Whitehead, "Immortality" 684–686).

The "World of Activity" is based on a multiplicity of finite acts, and the "World of Value" is based on the active coordination of infinite possibilities of value. The immanent relationship between these two worlds takes place when their essential joining infuses the unity of coordinated values in the multiplicity of finite acts. The meaning of the acts is then found in the actualized values, and the meaning of the valuation is found

in the facts that are realizations of the shared values. In this way, for Whitehead, each world individually would be futile except for the function of reciprocal incorporation. From the reciprocal implications of these two worlds, the notion of perspective (see Ross), which we are interested in exploring in Amazonian shamanism, derives from the notion of finitude, as developed by Whitehead:

The contrast of finitude and infinity arises from the fundamental metaphysical truth that every entity involves an indefinite array of perspectives, each perspective expressing a finite characteristic of the entity. But any one finite perspective does not enable an entity to shake off its essential connection with totality. The infinite background always remains as the unanalyzed reason why that finite perspective of that entity has the special character that it does have. Any analysis of the limited perspective always includes some additional factors of the background. The entity is then experienced in a wider finite perspective, still presupposing the inevitable background which is the universe in its relation to that entity. (Whitehead, "Immortality" 682)

In this regard, the notion of "the two worlds" expresses aspects or perspectives that are part of a same world. It is important to emphasize that when Whitehead talks about this notion, he is not intending a cosmological dualism. Whitehead was clear that he wished to avoid the bifurcation of nature (*CN* 30) and, to prevent a dualistic understanding of the "the two worlds," it is important to consider the concept of perspectivism that is imbricated in this notion. Perspectivism differs from objectivism and relativism, despite specific similarities among them. Like objectivism, perspectivism claims that there is only one reality but adds to this metaphysical thesis the epistemological thesis about the perspective of each in front of this one reality. Furthermore, like relativism, perspectivism holds that different individuals perceive reality differently. But, unlike relativism, perspectivism does not say that there are as many realities as there are perceptions of them.

Cognitive Perspectivism and Meaning Making

The notion of perspective is closely linked to the anthropological concept of "Amerindian perspectivism," created in synergy with a common conception of many indigenous peoples, according to which the world is inhabited by different species of subjects or people, human and nonhuman, who apprehend it from different points of view (Viveiros de Castro, "Cosmological"). The concept refers to indigenous conceptions

that imply that besouled beings recognize themselves and those to whom they are related as humans, but they are perceived by other beings in the form of animals, spirits, or nonhuman modalities. It is a concept that rescues aspects of numerous cosmologies of Amerindian peoples, who assume as an existential principle the fact that species see themselves and other species in a very singular way: each one sees itself as human, seeing all others as nonhuman, that is, as species of animals or spirits (see Sztutman).

The humanity to which Amerindian perspectivism refers is not that of the concept of the human species (humankind), but that of the reflexive condition of the subject (humanity). In fact, the Amerindian terms that are usually translated as “human” are forms of self-designation that denote the person’s place, bringing into play the person’s point of view. These are expressions that mark the point of view from which the subject is formed (Viveiros de Castro, “Os Pronomes” 115–144). This is a very important process relationship because it reveals which subject occupies the position of agent, according to the enunciated perspective.

The initial stimulus for the conceptualization of Amerindian perspectivism was the numerous references, in Amazonian ethnography, that predatory animals see humans as prey animals, while prey animals see humans as predatory animals. Seeing beings of the human species as nonhumans, animals see themselves as humans (see Baer). This “seeing as” refers literally to percepts and not analogically to concepts, although in some cases the emphasis may be more on the conceptual than on the sensory aspect of the phenomenon (Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectival” 3–22).

In short, in Amerindian perspectivism animals are people, or see themselves as people. The manifest form of each species is just a wrapping (a “clothing”) hiding an internal human form, normally visible only to the eyes of members of the species itself or to certain “transspecific” beings, such as shamans. This internal form is the spirit of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness, materializable in a human bodily scheme hidden under the animal mask or clothing (see Rivière). The notion of “clothing” is, therefore, one of the privileged expressions of the principle of transformation—spirits, the dead, and shamans who assume animal forms—which characterizes, for example, the Huni Kuin cosmovision, marked by a ritualistic transmutation of bodies (see Keifenhein). For these peoples, we are involved in a highly transformational world, such that “the common reference of

all beings in nature is not man as a species, but humanity as a condition” (see Descola).

If, on the one hand, the “shamanic flight” is capable of defining cognitive processes of world navigation and “imaginative rationalization,” a “cognitive perspectivism” would establish the conceptual basis for a shamanic epistemology capable of asserting the “neurognostic potential” highlighted by Krippner in order to provide new conditions for the forms of perception, cognition, and affect. At the same time, it is not just a matter of describing other epistemologies and their genesis, but above all, it is about taking alterity as a possible horizon for transforming the ways of knowing. It is about taking as epistemologically valid the description that the Amerindians make of the world and the existing beings that populate it in order to attribute to “others” the possibility of access to knowledge and, therefore, to validate their ways of acquiring knowledge.

A direct implication of this thought can be found in the debate established by the proponents of Amerindian perspectivism (see Descola; Lima; Viveiros de Castro), in which a non-Western cosmology could not be developed from analytical categories tied to the nature/culture binarism. These categories include universal/particular, objective/subjective, immanence/transcendence, body/spirit, animality/humanity, and so forth. In other words, among the Amerindians, nature does not exist in itself as an “objective” sphere, but rather as an effect of a point of view. The way in which the Amerindian worlds are governed, however, leads to assumptions that are irreducible to the modern Western notion of cultural relativism (Viveiros de Castro, “Perspectivismo” 225–254).

The unity of the soul and the multiplicity of bodies that these ontologies point to would lead not to modern Western “multiculturalism,” but to an Amerindian “multinaturalism,” in which culture is the common ground of a multiplicity of natures that unfold from bodies (see Sztutman).

Final Considerations

A shamanic epistemology with an Amazonian basis must be understood, finally, within a “multinaturalist” ontology that is strongly opposed to the “mononaturalist” ontologies prevalent in the modern West. In this sense, the idea that there is only one world (or nature) for various representations or views of it (cultures) would be just one possible description. The Whiteheadian notion of “the two worlds,” far from being a limitation to the multiplicity of possible worlds, is rather the idea that no matter how

many coexisting worlds there are, it is their imbrication in their immanent relations that characterizes the experience of existing. In the same way, “Amerindian perspectivism” demonstrates this: if the worlds are many, the representation that one has of them remains the same.

Navigating these worlds and describing their interrelationships from various perspectives is to produce knowledge in a shamanic way. The “shamanic flight,” as an ecstatic technique experienced in the most diverse Amerindian rituals, is the method for making discoveries that organize nonhuman alterities as cognizant entities in the process of generating knowledge. Flight begins on the ground and in the body of particular observations from a given perspective, it becomes aware of contrasting worlds navigating through the thin air of imaginative generalization and expanded consciousness, and again, it lands for renewed observation by different perspectives, sharpened by rational interpretation.

Flight makes the shaman not only a diplomat, but also a world builder. Shamanism thus becomes a relational technology that generates knowledge about intertwined realities. Between the worlds of activity and value, the shamanic journey is therefore a conquest of new perspectives. With each new perspective, a new value is experienced. When building worlds, it is ultimately up to the shaman’s art to change the value of things.

NOTES

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