

## COSMOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVISM IN AMAZONIA AND ELSEWHERE (1998)

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### SAVING THE APPEARANCES

The doctrine of animal “clothing,” according to which animal bodies are visible shapes animated by normally invisible spiritual agencies, is directly linked to the notion of metamorphosis, which is probably one of the most difficult Amerindian notions to translate in our received ontological language. Amerindian metamorphosis is imagined, in the “literal” sense of this word, as a clothes—or skin-changing act in which humans and spirits put on the body of animals, or animals take off their bodies and appear in human form. Any body, the human body included, is imagined as being the outer shell of a soul. This notion is to be found all over the Americas. In some native languages, the term for “body” also means “envelope” or “casing,” and as such is applied to things like baskets, shoes, clothes, hats, houses and so on—all these things are the “body-envelope” of something else. Referring to the Kwakiutl aesthetic of containers, Goldman wrote:

*Among supernatural treasures, the house comes within the special category of containers that includes canoes, boxes, dishes, and animal skins. The idea that all forms of life and forms of vital force occupy a house or some container is widespread in North and South America. . . . The Kwakiutl speak of the body as the “house of the soul” . . .*

We should observe that such images are not restricted to indigenous America. They play a major role, for instance, in (neo-)Platonic, Gnostic and Christian doctrines. In these traditions, the general idea of the body as container became the very specific one of the body as constrainer: the body as the prison of the soul. The notion of the body as a type of casing, however, can also be found in the many non-Western (and non-Amerindian) traditions where “skin” is used as the standard term for “body,” although it is far from evident that the concept of “skin” is everywhere

understood mainly in terms of “casing.” As a matter of fact, it is far from evident what a “casing” may signify. The Kwakiutl speak of the body as the house of the soul, but also take houses, boxes, and other containers to be “supernatural treasures.” (The container not the content as the real, or rather, surreal, treasure. Curious idea.)

How are we to reconcile the idea that the body is the site of differentiating perspectives with the opposition between “appearance” and “essence,” which frames the overwhelming majority of interpretations of Amerindian ontologies? Our problem here is the classic one of deciding what “appearance” means. The idea of the body as a casing or shell may at first sight deprive it of any intrinsic efficaciousness, suggesting images evocative of the familiar “ghost-in-the-machine,” or giving it a zombie-like quality. Let us hear Gray, for instance, on the Arakmbut of Peruvian Amazonia: “The anatomy of the body is not a functioning system but a visible casing which operates only when animated by the potent presence within it of the wanokiren (soul).” Gray also wrote: “The invisible world provides life to the visible world which would otherwise consist of dead matter. I was once shown a dead animal and told that the difference between the corpse and life was the soul”. Townsley, in the same vein, quotes a Yaminahua saying that “without the wëroyoshi [eye soul], this body is just meat”.

This seems to leave us with a purely material, inert body animated by an efficacious spiritual principle. However, let us not forget that we are talking of cosmologies which held that the attributes of the species one eats—the meat one eats—pass on to the eater. These attributes, as Townsley understands it, reside in the soul; and indeed, I mentioned in the last lecture that the shamanistic desubjectivisation or despiritualization of animals is often an indispensable measure to make them fit to be eaten. But then we have a problem, for the souls of all species are identical, and identically humanoid. How could they be responsible for the specificity of the species?

[ ... ]

Let us return to the image of the body as a type of clothing. It has proved rich in misunderstandings. The most egregious one is to take



clothing as something unimportant, inert, and ultimately false. I believe that nothing could be further from the Indians' minds when they speak of bodies in terms of clothing. It is not so much that the body is clothing, but rather that clothing is body. We are dealing with societies which inscribe efficacious meanings onto the skin, and which use animal masks (or at least know their principle) endowed with the power metaphysically to transform the identities of those who wear them. To put on mask-clothing is not to conceal a human essence beneath an animal appearance, but rather to activate the powers of a different body.

Let me quote Irving Goldman, on masks and animal skins:

*In ritual the mask stands for the essential form of the being who is depicted or incarnated. Kwakiutl recognize a hidden reality behind the mask, but also insist that the mask be the only reality ordinarily exposed to mankind. . . . The animal skin is also a form, a garment that originally converts a human inner substance into animal form. . . . From the mythical perspective, the skin is the animal's essential attribute from which, however, it is separable, in the way in which soul separates from body. When, in myth, animals give their skins to humans they offer with them their characteristic animal qualities. . . . Thus the animal skin . . . which . . . Boas renders more blandly as "blanket," is like a mask. . . . For the Kwakiutl a mask is a disguise only in the ultimate metaphysical sense of being an appearance behind which is a deeper reality. The mask . . . is imagined as the visible outer form of all life. In myth the animals that deal with persons wear their forms as full body masks or coverings when they are behaving as animals, and remove them when diving for power or dancing in the Winter Ceremonial. They then appear in a human inner form. Basically, the mask stands for natural diversity, the inner form for consubstantial unity. As naturalists the Kwakiutl are far from disparaging natural diversity, and the mask for them is no mere outer trapping. Outer is as essential as inner.*

Going back to Amazonia: Peter Gow tells me that the Piro conceive of

the act of putting on clothes as an animating of the clothes. The emphasis would seem to be less on covering the body, as it is amongst ourselves, but rather on the gesture of filling the clothes, activating them. In other words, to don clothing modifies the clothing more than it does the body it clothes. Goldman remarked that "the Kwakiutl masks get 'excited' during Winter dances." And Kensinger, speaking of the Amazonian Cashinahua, observed that feathers belong to the "medicine" category.

Thus, the animal clothes that shamans or sorcerers use to travel the cosmos are not fantasies but instruments: they are akin to diving equipment, or space suits, and not to carnival masks. The intention when donning a wet suit is to be able to function like a fish, to breathe underwater, not to conceal oneself under a strange covering. In the same way, the bodily "clothing" which, amongst animals, covers an internal "essence" of a human type, is not a mere disguise, but their distinctive equipment, endowed with the affects and capacities which define each animal.

[ ... ]

Do not judge by appearances! I presume this warning is issued by virtually all cultural traditions, for it belongs to that universal fund of popular wisdom which includes many similar maxims. It belongs here because it is true, of course—in a sense; or rather, in many different, culture-specific senses. Appearances may indeed deceive, because appearances hide what is not apparent; in order for something to appear, something else must disappear. But what appearances hide is not necessarily the truth.

Hallowell, however, is saying a bit more than that "appearances deceive" in the abstract. He says that the caution about the deceptiveness of appearances applies above all to dealings with persons, and that the notion of metamorphosis has something to do with it. Indeed: if persons are the epitome of what should not be judged by appearances, and if every type, or most types, of beings are persons, you must never take appearances at their face value. What appears as a human may be an animal or a spirit, what appears as an animal or human may be a spirit, and so on. Things change—especially when they are persons.

This has very little to do with our familiar epistemological warning



“not to trust our senses.” Be that as it may, appearances have other and more important functions than that of deceiving. My impression is that in Amerindian narratives which take as a theme animal “clothing” the interest lies more in what these clothes do rather than what they hide. Besides this, between a being and its “appearance” (its visible shape) is its body, which is more than just that—and the very same mythical narratives relate how appearances are always “unmasked” by bodily behavior which is inconsistent with them. (Take for instance this remark by Ann Fienup-Riordan about Eskimo animal transformation myths: “The hosts invariably betray their animal identity by some peculiar trait during the visit. . . .”) In short: there is no doubt that bodies are discardable and exchangeable, and that “behind” them lie subjectivities which are formally identical to humans. But the idea is not similar to our opposition between appearance and essence; it merely manifests the objective permutability of bodies which is based in the subjective equivalence of souls.

WLAN report >>

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Encryption  
Network Channel

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