



TRANSLATION

## The construction of the person in indigenous Brazilian societies

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Each ethnographic region in the world has its moment in the history of anthropological theory, leaving its imprint on the characteristic problems of different periods and schools of thinking. Thus, for example, reciprocity was discovered in Melanesia, asymmetric marriage alliances in Southeast Asia, and lineages, witchcraft, and politics in Africa. The indigenous societies of South America, after Montaigne’s cannibals and the Tupi influence on Enlightenment political theories, have only recently begun to contribute to the theoretical renewal of anthropology.

Credit is undoubtedly due to Robert Lowie and Claude Lévi-Strauss for introducing indigenous South American thought to the broader conceptual landscape of the discipline. In terms of ethnography, with the exception of Curt Nimuendajú, it was only after World War II that more detailed descriptive studies of Brazilian tribal societies began to emerge, and only more recently has the theoretical elaboration of this material been initiated. The focus of research has shifted away from broad categories, referring to national Brazilian society, on the one hand, and, on the other, “Amerindians” as a general category, toward the study of specific tribal societies, where the focus is no longer the discussion of the place of Amerindians (along with blacks and whites

in the hierarchy of the national universe) but, rather, the position of a particular tribal society as a unit in itself.

It is now possible to say that Brazilian anthropology has reached a certain maturity, developing original theories and problems and entering into more abstract dialogue with questions introduced into anthropology by African, Polynesian, and Australian societies. The aim of this article is to highlight the contributions that the anthropology of Brazilian tribal groups is making to anthropology as a whole. We will focus our attention on a particular proposition, arguing that the originality of tribal societies in Brazil (and more broadly, South America) lies in an especially rich elaboration of the notion of the person, with special reference to the body as a focal symbolic idiom. Put another way, we suggest that the notion of the person and the place of the human body in the vision that indigenous societies hold of themselves are essential avenues for reaching a satisfactory comprehension of the social organization and cosmology of these societies.

Many recent ethnographies on Brazilian groups, whether Gê, Tukano, Xinguan, or Tupi, have dwelled on “native ideologies” in relation to the body: theories of conception and illnesses, the role of bodily fluids in the wider symbolism of society, food prohibitions, and





body ornamentation. The works of Irving Goldman (1963, 1977), Christopher Crocker (1967), Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff (1968), Pierre Clastres (1972), Stephen Hugh-Jones (1974), and many others are good examples of this trend, one that dominated the recently published symposium papers on social time and space (Kaplan 1977b). We do not think this is accidental or the result of some theoretical bias. All the data suggest that, in fact, the great majority of tribal societies on the continent emphasize corporeality in the elaboration of their cosmologies. Indeed, it was essential for the ethnographies mentioned above—which, admittedly, we chose for theoretical reasons but guided by the nature of the object—to examine these ideologies of corporeality to account for the principles of the social structure in these groups. The concepts that anthropology has imported from societies elsewhere—lineage, alliance, corporate groups—are inadequate for explaining the organization of Brazilian societies. We believe it is now possible to assert that the vast complex outlined by Lévi-Strauss in *Mythologiques* (1964, 1966) has a profound relationship with the nature of indigenous Brazilian societies. As we will argue here, the complex deals not only with myths, beliefs, and ideologies but also with principles that operate at the level of social structure.

This emphasis on corporeality is actually part of a broader concern: the definition and construction of the person by society. The physical production of individuals is part of a context directed toward the social production of people, that is, members of a specific society. The body, such as we Westerners define it, is not the only object (and instrument) through which society has an impact on individuals: naming practices, ceremonial groups and identities, and theories about the soul are associated with the construction of human beings as understood by each tribal group. The body, whether affirmed or denied, painted or perforated, secluded or devoured, always appears to occupy a central position in the vision that indigenous societies hold about the nature of human beings. We will thus explore the place of the body in these societies and initiate an investigation into the forms that the construction of the person takes.

### The notion of the person as a category

Although there is no human society without individuals, this does not mean that all human groups deal with this infrastructural reality in the same way. Some societies systematically construct a notion of the individual

in which the internal dimension is celebrated (as in the West); in others, the emphasis falls on the social notion of the individual, apprehended in its collective aspect, that is, as an instrument of a complementary relationship with social reality. This is what occurs in so-called tribal societies, giving rise to the basic notion of the “person” that we wish to explore here.

The concept of the person, as Clifford Geertz observed, is a royal road to anthropological understanding; in a certain sense, doing anthropology involves “analyzing the symbolic forms—words, images, institutions, behaviors—in terms of which, in each place, people actually represented themselves to themselves and to one another” (Geertz 1976: 224–25). We have known since Marcel Mauss (1938) that the definition of this “category of the human mind” varies enormously from society to society. We also know, especially since Louis Dumont (1966), that the Western vision of the person or individual is extremely particular and historical. Nowadays, after Mauss, Dumont, and Geertz, as well as Godfrey Lienhardt (1961), Marcel Griaule (1948), and the French Hellenists inspired by Mauss, it has become almost a commonplace to point this out. Following this through to its analytical consequences, however, is more difficult, as Dumont clearly demonstrated. Because it is so basic and central, the concept that we Westerners have of what it means to be human tends to be projected, to some degree, onto the societies we study. As a result, native notions about the person are considered “ideologies,” while our unanalyzed preconceptions are used as the basis of “scientific” theories.

Hidden beneath this rather vague notion of the “person,” however, are significant theoretical differences within anthropology. We can say, in general terms, that social anthropology, since Bronislaw Malinowski, has tended to analyze the social personality, that is, the person as an aggregate of social roles that are structurally prescribed, with roles being conceived as bundles of rights and duties.

The Maussian tradition, which Dumont picked up and which also appears in authors such as Geertz, leans more toward an “ethnopsychology” (Carneiro da Cunha 1978: 1) or an “ethnophilosophy”; that is, it considers notions of the person as categories of native thought, whether explicit or implicit, and thus as culturally variable constructions.

The conception of the person as an aggregate of roles, by contrast, assumes there is a fixed node underlying the infinite variation of roles that individuals in different



societies and in different times may take on. This node, in the modern Western conception, is the Individual. In particular, the “juralist” perspective of A. R. Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and his followers presupposed a conception of “rights and duties” taken on by individuals, who are viewed as having the same attributes that Western thought attributes to the Individual. Because of this equation, the dichotomy between Individual and Society is a recurrent one in theoretical discussions in social anthropology, appearing in various guises: kinship/descent (Evans-Pritchard 1951), descent/complementary filiation (Fortes 1970), structure/*communitas* (V. Turner 1969), and social structure/social organization (Firth 1964). Ever since Malinowski (1926: 101) linked the Trobriand Islanders to the opposition between mother-right and father-love, and Radcliffe-Brown (1952) defined the avunculate based on an opposition between law and sentiment, the jural and the optative, the obligatory and the spontaneous, anthropology has used a legion of dichotomies and dichotomous analyses of social structure in terms of a polarization between the social and the individual, the normative and the spontaneous, and the jural and the emotional. All the analyses of “unilineal” societies fall into this model. At the level of concepts of the person, this tendency assumes a divided, dual individual—somewhat like the earlier Durkheimian (1912) duality between body and soul, individual and society. Even those who sought to react against the idealism and formalism of the “classic” British school, such as Raymond Firth (1964) and Edmund Leach (1971), ended up privileging individual action, strategies of power, options, and manipulations of norms and roles. At this point, native notions of the person disintegrated and gave way to the abstract human being who acts within concrete structures.

The other tradition, the Maussian, radically assumes the *formative* role that the collective categories of a society play in the concrete organization and practice of this society. It further assumes the impossibility of using particular notions, such as the Individual, to comprehend other sociocultural universes. In working on and with “native categories,” this tradition makes an epistemological choice that we believe defines the particularity of anthropology. To treat the notion of the person as a category and an instrument for organizing social experience, a collective construction that gives meaning to lived experience, it cannot simply be derived, through deduction or determination, from supposedly more “real” instances of praxis. Rather, praxis, as the concrete prac-

tices of this or that society, can only be described and understood on the basis of its collective categories (here we take something from the position of Sahlins 1976). Treating the category “person” as focal arises from several factors: the need to criticize preconceptions linked to the notion of the Individual that inform many anthropological currents; the perception that the term “person” is a useful label to describe the most central native categories, those that define human beings of any society; and the observation that, in South America, the symbolic languages linked to the elaboration of the person yield extensive insights, unlike the regulatory languages of kinship groups and alliance.

The main tradition in social anthropology generated the vast majority of the classic concepts in the analysis of social organization: lineages, descent groups, marriage alliances, and corporate groups. As we will see, the realities in indigenous South America appear to resist the application of these concepts, suggesting the need for new analytical models to be developed. This resistance, we argue, is due to the impossibility of working with the dichotomy between “native ideas” and “what’s really going on” (i.e., the anthropologist’s ideas), a dichotomy assumed by the main tradition. Of course, the suspicion will arise that the position defended here—which we see as part of the second tradition (that of Mauss, Dumont, and Geertz)—suffers from “idealism,” an accusation that has been raised against South Americanist anthropologists, who then passed it along to the indigenous peoples of the region.

### The idealism of indigenous Brazilian societies

When Joanna Kaplan (1977a) opened the symposium on “Social time and social space in lowland South American societies” at the Forty-Second International Congress of Americanists, she called attention to the difficulty of applying the classic concepts of anthropology to the social organization of societies in this region. Our challenge, she said, is to find a language to express the observed phenomena. Essentially, the anthropological concepts that seek to define the structure of social groups (corporate, descent, affinal) and the interrelationship between them do not account for the structural features of societies on the continent. “Thus we South Americanists are not infrequently accused of being idealist by our more ‘empirically’ minded or materialist Africanist or South East Asian colleagues. But if we are so, it is only because the Amerindians with whom we are dealing



are also idealists when it comes to the ordering of their societies. We must face this fact and argue it well" (Kaplan 1977a: 9–10).

This is not easy to argue, especially since South America has witnessed a series of studies that are resolutely part of the opposite epistemological pole: cultural ecology, which attempts to account for phenomena such as political authority, warfare, ceremonial organization, food taboos, and so on as adaptive responses to the given conditions of the relationship between technology and environment (see, e.g., Carneiro 1961; Meggers 1971; Gross 1975; Ross 1978). Although it is undeniable that studies of ecology illuminate many mechanisms of social organization in South American tribes, such studies are subject to all the vices inherent in reductionist and hyperdeterminist explanations. Above all, they are incapable of generating anthropological concepts for describing and comparing the phenomena of social organization. Many of the recurring features of societies on the continent—the small populations, the prevalence of cognatic systems, the absence of corporate groups that control access to scarce material resources, the division of labor, and so on—can be correlated with the ecology of the rainforest or savanna. Other phenomena, however—especially the variations between groups in the same environment—escape the ecological model. In this model, society is part of nature; for “idealists,” nature is an arena within a socially maintained and organized cosmology.

Kaplan recalls that “whether we are looking at Africa or South America we are always dealing in one way or another, on one level or another, with our informants’ conceptualization of human society” (1977a: 10). The problem is that “Africanist” conceptualizations (or Melanesianist and others) have been reified by anthropology—totems, mana, taboos, lineages, witchcraft vs. sorcery, corporate groups—and have been transformed by some alchemy into universal scientific concepts and norms into which everything is either forced to fit or is considered anomalous or deviant (at which point ecology is called in to explain them). This has often been the case in the recent history of South American anthropology: how to force the material into anthropological models and/or how to explain the anomalies. Thus, George Murdock (1960) called the South American social systems “quasi-lineages,” while Curt Nimuendajú (1939) found elaborate forms of descent and marriage prescriptions where such features do not exist, which is now criticized (Seeger 1975b; Da Matta 1976). Robert Murphy’s (1956) characterization of the Mundurucu as

strongly patrilineal was criticized for simplifying a much more complex reality (Ramos 1974). What should be done about societies with Crow-Omaha kinship terminology that are not divided into unilineal groups and have moieties that do not prescribe marriage (the Gê case)? Or with a society of lineages in which 50% of the population does not belong to any lineage at all (the Sanumá case)? Or, again, with societies in which notions of corporate groups do not play a crucial role in controlling material resources but, rather—when such groups exist—symbolic resources (for which numerous examples could be cited)?

All these debates, which have focused more specifically on the use of the concepts of lineage and descent (as well as alliance) in South American materials, end up emphasizing a “trait” said to epitomize these societies: how they are “fluid,” “flexible,” and open to “individual manipulation.” This characterization is curious and complex: it is undeniably part of a general movement in anthropology, a reaction against the jural typologies of Radcliffe-Brown (1952) and his successors. It led to the “discovery” of cognatic systems, the emphasis on the manipulation of norms by actors, and explanations of the systematic deviations between the “native model” and praxis in terms of power relations. Thus, the South American material appears to be an ideal field for advocating on behalf of this reaction. We must not forget, however, that the questions of “flexibility” and “individual manipulation” arose from African material itself in studies of lineage societies (Evans-Pritchard 1951; Forde 1950). On the one hand, this means that the hypothesis that the abundance of resources promotes flexibility cannot be sustained (the “flexible” Nuer do not live in an earthly paradise). On the other, notions such as “fluidity,” “flexibility,” and the like are *negative* concepts in relation to a *norm*. The positive aspect of this South American “non-normality” has not yet been explored; to do so, we must elaborate concepts that account for the South American material in its own terms, avoiding African, Mediterranean, or Melanesian models.

South Americanists in general are beginning to realize the need to build models that are specific to the societies they study. Bruce Albert and Patrick Menget (n.d.: 1) observe that recent ethnographic works on this region indicate that these societies do not fit into “the traditional typological framework of ethnology that is guided by a substantialist perspective,” since they present certain socioideological properties, including “the great fluidity of social groups and the constant presence





of a complex symbolism that is impossible to reduce to a simple ideological reflection of a more fundamental order.” They then summarize a position that is beginning to spread:

Thus, taking these forms of social organization and abstracting the discourse of kinship as an autonomous sociological operator, which supposedly functions by carving out discrete social units from networks of genealogically founded productive interactions, strikes us as arbitrary, ethnocentric . . . and useless. From the point of view of their permanence, the social units of this cultural arena are *communities of symbolic properties* that articulate systems of social identity before they are collectivities that are economically or jurally solidary. Actual social transactions . . . can only be understood as a system of categories that distributes social identities, which are conjunctural expressions of this system.

(Albert and Menget n.d.: 2–3)

Two points are highlighted here: the “fluidity” of social groups and the dominance of the symbolic in the delineation of *social structure* in South American indigenous societies. Perhaps the “fluidity” and “flexibility,” so often pointed out by ethnographers, are simply the result of the application of inadequate models, precisely since such models do not consider the categorical-symbolic dimension as playing a part in shaping praxis. This misplaced concreteness—when looking for groups, categories of persons are found; when looking for scarce resources, instead macaw feathers, ceremonial distinctions, and spirits are found—suggests that models are being inappropriately imported or that a sociological empiricism is utilized, which defines social organization as a matter of living, breathing people of flesh and blood.

However, instead of asking ourselves about the absence of a Nuer (or Roman) descent system, we should turn our attention to what it is that characterizes South American indigenous societies in themselves. What we suggest here is that notions linked to corporeality and the construction of the person are foundational. This is not “idealism.” “Lineages” and “clans” are no more real than the idea that bodies are fabricated only by semen, for instance. All these ideas are principles of social organization. Since the ideas operating in South America are different from those operating in Africa (the anthropologists’ Africa), they appear to be simple “ideas” or “symbols” (Seeger 1975b). They are nevertheless principles that operate and inform praxis. Our thesis, therefore, is that South American social fluidity may well be

an illusion and that the societies of the continent are structured in terms of symbolic languages that—unlike symbols in Africa, Europe, and so on—do not concern the definition of groups or the transmission of goods but, rather, the construction of people and the fabrication of bodies.

### The notion of the person in indigenous South America: Corporeality and society

Reflections on the role of the body as a matrix of social meanings and as an object of social significance appear in the work of some contemporary anthropologists, such as Victor Turner (1967, 1969, on the corporeal-sensory pole of all ritual metaphors), Mary Douglas (1966, 1970, on the way social experience uses bodily processes to become thinkable), and Claude Lévi-Strauss (1962, 1964, 1966, on sensory qualities and bodily experience as operators in social discourse). Despite the countless differences among these authors, they have something in common: they do not see corporeality as an infrasociological experience nor do they see the body as a simple support of identities and social roles but, rather, as an instrument, an activity, that articulates social and cosmological meanings. In other words, the body is a matrix of symbols and an object of thought.

In the majority of indigenous societies in Brazil, this matrix occupies a central organizing position. The fabrication, decoration, transformation, and destruction of bodies are themes around which mythologies, ceremonial life, and social organization revolve. A physiology of body fluids—blood, semen, and the processes of communication between the body and the world (food, sexuality, speech, and other senses)—seems to underlie the considerable variations that exist among South American societies under various guises.

Thus, among the Gê of central Brazil, the basic dualism between the domestic sphere (on the periphery of the village) and the public ceremonial sphere (in the village center) is, in essence, a complementary opposition between a domain structured in terms of a logic of physical substance (the production of individuals, nourishment, relationships through bonds of substance) and the domain structured in terms of naming relations or age grades, relations that “deny” the bonds of substance. Among the Gê, the human body seems to be divided in the same way: internal aspects are linked to blood, semen, and physical reproduction, while external aspects



are linked to names, public roles, and ceremonies—in short, to the social world (expressed in body painting, ornamentation, songs) (T. Turner 1969; Seeger 1974, 1975a; Melatti 1976; Menget 1976; Viertler 1976; Da Matta 1976).

Among the groups of the Upper Xingu, the importance of natural substances and physiological processes is also evident. They also have something like the Gê “community of substance”; since they do not have ceremonial groups or naming practices as elaborate as those of the Gê, the matrix of the body has an especially high sociological yield. The notion of disease (and the associated shamanism) underlies the Xinguan ceremonial system, which constitutes the broadest level of integration in the village. The fabrication of adolescents’ bodies during puberty seclusion also involves an elaborate discourse about the body (emetics, scarification, sexual restrictions) (Viveiros de Castro 1977; Gregor 1977).

The Tukano of the Rio Negro offer a good example of the use of corporeal-sexual symbolism to think about society and the cosmos (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1968); their relationship with life and the ecosystem is conceived as a circuit of sexual energy that passes through humans. Tukano society is one of the few that reveals something like classic lineages—groups that control land and economic resources. These lineages, however, are conceptualized in terms of the transmission of physical and spiritual substances in a dialectic between exogamy and (female) blood, and between lineage continuity and (patrilineal) semen, with both sexes contributing spiritual and physical aspects to the fabrication of persons (Goldman 1977; Bidou 1977; C. Hugh-Jones 1977). Moreover, the hierarchical clan structure of the Tukano is grounded in creation myths having a physiological language (concerning birth, pregnancy, the segmented body of a phallic-uterine snake) that is echoed throughout Tukano cosmology: in the house, hunting, and space as well as in myths.

The Gê, Xinguan, and Tukano societies are very different from each other (in terms of ecology, social organization, and cosmology); in each of them, the place of corporeality is inflected by these differences. Nevertheless, certain ideological principles indicate a common ground—precisely the emphasis on corporeality. Indeed, there is an entire complex of sexual and food restrictions and prescriptions in South America that has not yet received the comparative attention it deserves, nor has its importance as a framework for experience

and social organization been taken into account so far. The same basic principles of this complex appear to operate in these various societies: an ordering of social life based on a language of the body (which, in many of them, unfolds in a language of space), which is expressed in practices such as the couvade, periods of seclusion, separation for illness or death, and mourning. All these moments activate the body according to highly consistent, recurrent structural rules.

The exact nature of the bonds of physical substance that bind individuals, or the concepts behind native theories about procreation and the transmission of substance, are matters that ethnographers have only recently begun to explore. However, we repeat that the indigenous *sociologic* is based on a *physiologic*, employing a rhetoric that still seems ironic to those scholars of kinship who, ever since Lewis Henry Morgan (1871), have been trying to avoid attributing any kind of substantialism to their object of study.

Furthermore, the physical body is not the totality of the body, nor is the body the totality of the person. Theories about the transmission of the soul, its relation to the transmission of substance (complementary distribution according to sex, unilineal accumulation), and the basic dialectics between body and name suggest that in these indigenous societies, the person is defined on a plurality of internally structured levels. With a focus on the “theoretical dispersion” of the Gê groups, a certain dualism in human identity tends to emerge in various societies. This dualism is usually associated with the polarities men/women, living/dead, adults/children; in its simplest version, it is reduced to a set of oppositions within the framework of the individual (blood, village periphery, everyday life) versus the collective or social (soul, name, village center, ritual life). The point to be emphasized is that the body is the locus privileged by South American tribal societies as the arena or point of convergence of this opposition. It is the element through which a central, encompassing ideology is created, an ideology that, in these societies, is capable of totalizing a particular vision of the cosmos under specific historical-social conditions. This enables the human, the person, to be valued without reifying any corporate group (such as clans or lineages) that would entail the constitution of a radically different social formation.

It appears that the fabrication of the person in indigenous America in fact activates polar oppositions; however, the nature of the relationship between the poles is far from static or limited to one of negation versus



complementarity. In other words, although the opposition of nature/culture undoubtedly underlies South American groups (especially the Gê) and is expressed in these dualisms, it must be totally rethought. For societies such as the Tukano, for example, the dominance of a supernatural plane establishes a mediation between nature and culture that almost dissolves the antinomy. In the case of the Gê, the *processes* of communication between one domain and the other must be examined if we wish to avoid falling into an artificial formalism.

It is not a matter of an opposition between the human and the animal that emerges far from the body through individualizing categories, with the natural and the social repelling each other by definition, but of a dialectic in which the natural elements are domesticated by the group and the elements of the group (social entities) are naturalized in the world of animals. The body is the arena where these transformations are possible, as evident throughout South American mythology, which should now be reread as narratives with a central theme: the fundamental idea of corporeality.

In indigenous America, physical continuity and social continuity followed a different path than the one taken by perpetual corporate groups that control the productive and reproductive power of their members. As a result, genealogies carry little weight here in comparison with other parts of the world; social time is not genealogical time; the denial of time, the objective of all cultures, is accomplished here in ways other than that of descent and inheritance. Similarly, South American societies do not conceive of themselves as political-legal entities; the logical structure of society resides on a ceremonial or metaphysical plane (Kaplan 1977a: 391), where conceptions of name and substance, soul and blood, prevail over an abstract language of rights and duties.

The vision of social structure that traditional anthropology bequeathed us is that of a system of relations among groups. This vision is inadequate for South America. The indigenous societies on this continent are structured in terms of logical categories that define relationships and social positions on the basis of an idiom of substance. Here, more important than the group, as a symbolic entity, is the person; here, more important than access to land or pastures is the relation between the body and names. If the Nuer social idiom was "bovine," here it is "bodily."

Everything we have said so far leads us to suggest that anthropologists should explore the notion of corporeality not only as a fundamental category of South Amer-

ican societies but also as a key concept that may allow us to interpret certain social roles such as that of chief, sorcerer, singer, and shaman.

Let us elaborate this point. We know how the body is detotalized in these societies, with the attribution of social values to certain parts or organs of the body that belong to an explicitly social language. Accordingly, Gê boys about to become men (that is, to become social) must have their lips and ears pierced. This graphic, physical penetration of society into the body creates the conditions that give rise to the realm of corporeality, which is at one and the same time individual and collective, social and natural. When such work is completed, the transformation of the boys into men is complete, synthesizing the collective ideals of maintaining individuality, as we conceive it, and reinforcing collectivity and complementarity between them (T. Turner 1969; Viertler 1976; Seeger 1974, 1975a).

But what happens when such a balance is not achieved or when a given person refuses (for whatever reason) to maintain this balance between personal requirements (which follow the most individualizing path) and collective demands?

It is here, we believe, that space opens up for the sorcerer, the shaman, the singer, and the tribal leader to appear. For it is in these social roles that the tribal system recuperates and constructs something similar to our individual, a person outside the group who reflects on it and is thus able to modify and guide it. Among these roles, a liminal region emerges where people can express their deep disagreement with the group, as happens with sorcerers, or make a contribution to the group's heritage, as happens with the chiefs and singers, who can create and invent new forms of action that the collectivity decides to incorporate. Indeed, all the myth narratives systematically situate such hero figures outside the everyday realm. They are people who, for one reason or another, often an accident, were thrust outside the village and into the world of nature, in contact with their physical substance. There, they found some natural entity (such as an animal) that saved their life and taught them a new technique that is essential for the survival of their social group. In South America, we do not see classical renouncers, as in India, but we have clear evidence of roles and spaces where people's internal impulses can manifest themselves. We believe that such spaces are individualized and that within them, an approximation of the individual, as we think of the notion, may appear. Our suggestion is thus to study



these traditionally problematic roles in South American anthropology as states in which an individualized facet of the person may arise, leading to a more or less clear opposition between the collectivity and the leader, hero, sorcerer, or singer, who then enters into dialogue with the group through highly dramatic and creative conditions.

## Conclusion

First of all, we wish to stress the need for a broad comparative analysis of body symbolism as the basic language of the social structure of South American groups, which articulates with other perspectives, notably social space and social time. Secondly, we wish to reiterate the need to view indigenous discourse about corporeality and the person as a means of informing concrete social praxis, which is the only nonethnocentric way to understand such praxis. Situating this approach in the notion of the person and corporeality as a focal idiom will, furthermore, avoid the ethnocentric segmentation of society into domains or arenas such as “kinship,” “economy,” or “religion.”

The approach we have proposed here is limited in its objectives. As we will see, the issues discussed in other presentations in this symposium, dealing with indigenous societies in the context of the national society, are beyond the scope of this paper. All we wish to suggest here is the possibility of rethinking anthropology with the eyes of indigenous Brazilians instead of looking at them with the eyes of the Nuer, the Trobrianders, or the Crow.

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