

Some reflections on principles of Isthmo-Colombian Amerindian ontologies

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Abstract:

The search for ontological principles specific for the Isthmo-Colombian region developed slowly during the last decade and started from ethnographic data and anthropological experiences which diverge in specific ways from the ideal-typical ontological notions of animism or analogism. The paper presents reflections on a set of ontological principles, which – based on the current state of analysis – allow to characterize a variety of Isthmo-Colombian socio-cosmologies in non-essentialist terms and in delineation to Amazonian animism, which became used as interpretative frame also for contemporary indigenous groups further north. Thus, rather than proposing the existence of a specific and rigid Isthmo-Colombian ontology I will try to summarize a number of basic principles along which local socio-cosmologies differ from the great ontological schemes like animism and analogism. By making some ontological links between the Isthmo-Colombian area and Mesoamerica visible the paper invites to rethink local principles in ontological terms, while avoiding the imposition of theoretically attractive, but only partially fitting ontological schemata, which may cause selective misreadings and biased interpretations of local ontological principles.


Keywords: Isthmo-Colombian Area, ontological principles, Amazonia, Mesoamerica

Resumen:

ALGUNAS REFLEXIONES SOBRE LOS PRINCIPIOS ONTOLÓGICOS AMERINDIOS ISTMO-COLOMBIANOS.

Durante la última década la búsqueda de principios ontológicos característicos para la región istmo-colombiana se desarrolló paulatinamente y empezó con los datos etnográficos y experiencias antropológicas que discrepan específicamente de las nociones ideales del animismo o analogismo. El artículo despliega las reflexiones sobre un conjunto de principios ontológicos que, a partir del estado actual de análisis, permiten caracterizar las variedades istmo-colombianas de sociocosmologías en términos no esencialistas y en cuanto a la descripción del animismo amazónico, que se convirtió en un marco interpretativo también para los grupos indígenas contemporáneos situados más al norte. De este modo, en lugar de proponer la existencia de una ontología rígida y específica istmo-colombiana, intentaré resumir la presencia de una serie de principios básicos en la que las sociocosmologías locales muestran diferencias con respecto a los grandes esquemas ontológicos como lo son el animismo y el analogismo. Exhibiendo varios vínculos ontológicos entre el área istmo-colombiana y la región de Mesoamérica, el presente artículo invita a repensar los principios locales utilizando los términos ontológicos. Al mismo tiempo se evita de imponer los esque-

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mas ontológicos que parecen ser teóricamente atractivos, pero que solo parcialmente se pueden ajustar a las realidades locales. De este modo se pretende eludir lecturas equivocadas o interpretaciones sesgadas de los principios ontológicos locales.

Palabras claves: Area Istmo-Colombiana, principios ontológicas, Amazonia, Mesoamerica

Introduction

The search for principles of Isthmo-Colombian ontologies, to which this paper contributes, is inspired by the broader anthropological debates on Amerindian ontologies and multinaturalism (Descola 2013; Viveiros de Castro 1998) and a certain gap in socio-anthropological research on the Isthmo-Colombian area. Since Clark Wissler's (1922: 229–231) and Paul Kirchhoff's (1943) proposal of a "Chibcha Area" and Julian Steward's studies on the "Circum-Caribbean Area" (Steward 1948; Steward and Faron 1959), anthropology has failed to offer a new comparative understanding of the region. The search for a comparative view on the region has rather been led either by archaeology – for example, by the archeological studies of Haberland (1957) and Willey (1971) on the "intermediate Area", by John Hoopes and Oscar Fonseca on the "Isthmo-Colombian Area" (2003) or Broekhoven, Geurds and Hofman's research on the "Greater Caribbean Area" (Geurds and van Broekhoven 2010; Hofman *et al.* 2010) - or the linguistic studies of Adolfo Constenla Umaña (1991, 2012).

In Julian Steward's cultural-ecological understanding, the so-called "Circum-Caribbean Zone" was defined most importantly by the existence of chiefdoms. After these chiefdoms¹ had disappeared, the contemporary, transformed, and numerically reduced groups resembled the cultures of the Amazonian Tropical Forest Area. For this reason, since the 1950s the theoretical framework for their study was - at least in the region's lowlands - provided by Amazonian anthropology.

Even if aspects of social differentiation and complexity have disappeared over the last 500 years and contemporary local economies seem to resemble those of the Tropical Forest Culture, a closer inspection brings economic as well as socio-cosmological or ontological differences to the fore. In economic terms the region was characterized by elaborate trade and what is more, by the existence of markets (Kurella 1993, 1998), irrigation systems. and intensive cultivation on raised fields. Some regions like the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta (Kogi, Ika, Wiwa) even today are characterized, as has been described for the Andes (Murra 1972), by the vertical control of various ecological levels and by the systematic exchange of products from such levels among different groups, like in the Sierra Nevada del Cocuy among the

1 For more contemporary reflections on chiefdoms of the area see, for example, Drennan and Uribe 1987; Helms 1980, 1992; Keegan and MacLachlan 1989; Drennan 1995; Redmond 1998; Langebaek 2005; Oyuela-Caycedo 2008.

U'wa (Falchetti 2001; Osborn 2009). Basic agricultural techniques included putrefaction, incineration, and fallowing (Niño Vargas 2018, 2020b).

In socio-cosmological terms, I argue, there are some striking differences from the ideal-typical Amazonian animism or multinaturalism, as defined by Viveiros de Castro (1998) or Philippe Descola (2013). Thus, the region has the potential to make an important contribution to the debate about the plurality of Lowland South American ontological schemata, establishing links to Mesoamerican and Andean schemata, and providing empirical evidence for cosmological schemata that go beyond unified theories of Amazonian sociality (Viveiros de Castro 2001). In the South American lowlands such alternatives have been discussed in different terms for Arawak-speaking groups (Hill and Santos-Granero 2002), the Northwest Amazon and the Upper Xingú, or Carib-speaking groups (Halbmayer 2012, 2010), while the discussion has been lacking reflections on the northwestern part of the continent and Lower Central America so far.

The principles I will present have emerged from a series of conferences and discussions with fellow anthropologists working ethnographically in the area between Mesoamerica, the Andes, and the Amazon. Mònica Martínez Mauri of the University of Barcelona, with whom I organized several workshops on the topic², deserves special mention, as well as Juan Camilo Niño Vargas of the Universidad de los Andes in Bogotá, with whom I discussed the principles of Chibchan ontologies intensively on various occasions. Results have been published in the book *Amerindian Socio-Cosmologies between the Andes, Amazonia and Mesoamerica: Toward an Anthropological Understanding of the Isthmo-Colombian Area* (Halbmayer 2020a), which presents the outcomes of a conference organized in Lyon in 2017³ and a special issue of the Colombian Journal *Tabula Rasa* that deals specifically with modes of relations in the area (Martínez Mauri und Halbmayer 2020). The current paper builds upon and adds to these insights.

2 Among others: the workshop “Between the Andes, Amazonia and Mesoamerica: Cultures and Ontologies of the Intermediate Zone” at the 6th Meeting of German-speaking researchers on South America, Mesoamerica and the Caribbean (Bonn, 2013), the symposium “Cultures and Ontologies of the Intermediate Zone: between the Andes, Amazonia and Mesoamerica” at the 55th International Congress of Americanists in San Salvador (2015) and the panel on “Gifts, Exchanges and Other Modes of Relations among the Contemporary Indigenous Societies of the Isthmo-Colombian Area” at the 56th International Congress of Americanists in Salamanca (2018).

3 The book is the outcome of a Senior Fellowship of the European Institutes for Advanced Study (EURIAS), a program of the European Commission’s Marie Skłodowska-Curie Actions. The fellowship allowed me to stay at the Collegium de Lyon and work on the project “Amerindian Socio-Cosmologies in North-Western South America: Toward an integrated Analysis across Chibcha, Carib, and Arawakan Language Families” during the academic year of 2015/16. With the support of the Collegium de Lyon – Institute for Advanced Studies; the French Network of Institutes for Advanced Studies (RFIEA); the Laboratoire Dynamics of Language (DDL) – CNRS-Université Lumière Lyon 2; and the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology, Marburg University, I was able to organize the workshop “Socio-Cosmologies in the Isthmo-Colombian Area: Toward an Understanding of Relationships among Chibchan and Neighboring Cultures and Languages”, which took place in Lyon from 25 to 27 January 2017.

I will summarize some basic principles in terms of which local socio-cosmologies differ from the great ontological schemes – like animism, analogism, or totemism – proposed in the literature (Descola 2013). These principles serve to establish a dynamic and flexible characterization of the Isthmo-Colombian region in terms of Wittgenstein's family resemblances or Rodney Needham's polythetic classification (Needham 1975; Osborn 1988). The identified elements are characteristic of the region, but not all of them are necessarily present in each specific case. And the single principles are not necessarily exclusive to the Isthmo-Colombian area. Several of them are likely to exist also elsewhere, for example in Mesoamerica, the Andes, or Amazonia in different configurations and along with other principles. In attempting to offer a more elaborated ontological conceptualization of the Maya world, which is the theme of this special issue, my paper calls for a cautious and empirically grounded import of ontological logics like multinaturalism or animism to Mesoamerica or the Andes. While there may be aspects of socio-cosmological logics that are governed by human-animal relations and notions of perspectivism, I doubt that such logics are at the core of the socio-cosmological principles of Mesoamerican or Andean ontologies. Regional specialists must likewise investigate how analogism, as proposed by Descola, will provide a fruitful theoretical framework of Mayan ontology.

My reflection on Isthmo-Colombian ontologies started from two general principles that made the divergence to Amazonian ontologies – based on my own empirical research among the Yukpa – first visible to me. The Yukpa are a Carib-speaking outpost, living in the neighborhood of different Chibcha-speaking groups (Kogi, Ika, Wiwa, Ette, Bari) and the Arawak-speaking Wayuu in the Venezuelan-Colombian border region. While the Yukpa show typical aspects of Carib-speaking groups, they also interacted with and adopted various characteristics from their Chibchan neighbors. When I tried to apply the animic schemes of identification, it became apparent that the metamorphosis of humans into animals is largely absent and avoided and, if it occurs at all, irreversible. Moreover, there is a continuously reinforced relationship with the dead among the Yukpa that is of outstanding importance (Halbmayer 2013, 2019). The above-mentioned two principles go hand in hand with a third one, namely, that humans and animals have not only different physicalities but also different interiorities and selves.

The avoidance of metamorphosis into animals

Metamorphosis of humans into animals, which is at the core of Amazonian shamanism and the basis of communication between different human and more than human collectivities, is avoided and, if it occurs, irreversible. Such transgressions of the boundaries between species are mentioned in myths, but hardly form part of contemporary practices. Local myths, in fact, remind people that such trans-

gression must be avoided. When metamorphosis occurs, it is the outcome of unethical or norm-transgressing behavior (Velásquez Runk *et al.* 2019) and likely to produce dangerous monstrosity (Halbmayer 2019). It is understood as an irreversible dehumanizing process that ends in disaster (Niño Vargas 2020a). Rather than humans or shamans turning into animals, animals or spirits may appear in human shape to establish contact with humans (Goletz 2020).

Animals as sub-humans

Human and animals have not just different physicalities but also different interiorities and selves. Animals are commonly seen as personalized but gradually different entities that are potentially able to enter into dialogue and relation with humans, but rarely do so. Animal interiorities are simpler and lack aspects that are constitutional for humans (Martínez Mauri 2019; Niño Vargas 2020a; Velásquez Runk *et al.* 2019). They are human-like but not identical to humans as they are composed not only of different bodies and substances but also of distinct spiritual aspects. In short, the classical Amazonian multinaturalism along with the spiritual unity and corporal diversity of animism apparently assumes a different character among the groups of the Isthmo-Colombian Area. Animals are lacking the completeness of humans; they were human-like in the mythical past, but are no longer today. This establishes a hierarchy and places animals in a secondary, potentially subhuman position (Niño Vargas 2020a). While human-animal relations may still be important in the context of hunting, for example, it is the relations with deified ancestor-like beings that take center stage in local cosmologies.

Complex relations with the dead

There is also a special relationship with the dead, sometimes performed in elaborate death rituals and secondary burials (on the Yukpa, see Halbmayer 2013, 2019; on the Wayuu, Perrin 1987; on the Bribri, Bozzoli 1979, Cervantes Gamboa 1990), which contrasts with the paucity of death rituals and the practice of disremembering the dead described for the Amazon (Taylor 1993, see also Chaumeil 2007). In the Isthmo-Colombian area, the dead do not turn into animals, they return to their relatives' villages/houses in the land of the dead⁴ and must be buried in the earth or in the cemeteries of their families, villages, or clans (Halbmayer 2020d). Thus, we have species-specific cycles and the avoidance of being transformed or eaten by predatory animals on the way to the land of the dead. The arrival in the

4 Which is – in contrast to other parts of Amazonia – also the case in Northwest Amazonia were a “vertical transmission of identities” occurs and there “is an ideal of keeping each system closed, even at the level of exogamic clans: human souls should return to their ancestors’ “houses” and be reborn as the same kind of person” (Fausto 2007: 501).