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Invisible Humans and Their Gods

Book Symposium: *How God Becomes Real: Kindling the Presence of Invisible Others* By Tanya Luhrmann

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The white people, they do not dream as far as we do. They sleep a lot but only dream of themselves… This why they are unable to understand our words.
Kopenawa & Albert, 2013, p.313

In her new book, Tanya Luhrmann (2020) offers a theory of religion of universal scope: effort is required to contact and sustain the presence of an *invisible other*, which is why people regularly pray and engage in rituals. Focusing one's attention, through thoughts and behaviours, on the invisible kindles — like a small fire — the presence of the supernatural. The concept of kindling, like most of the other ideas and mechanisms cited to support her theory of religion, derive from a wide corpus of psychological science, from learning theory to the cognitive science of religion. The writing of this book is clear, it steers away from jargon or strips it to the bear essentials; in that sense, it is a joy to read and widely accessible to a large audience. Something exciting about it is that one can easily think of applications of Luhrman's theory of religion well beyond the scope of the book. Take the example of secular rites surrounding nationalism, the efforts people are willing to undertake to feel that their nation is a real entity; or consider the success of mindfulness meditation as a secular religion, where individuals go through the effort of meditating twice a day to reach a pure state of awareness that changes their wellbeing and perception of the world (Kabat-Zinn, 2017).

The list of examples can easily go on. It is precisely the ease with which one can — rather intuitively — think of applications of Luhrman's theory that made us stop and ask: what does this theory exactly explain about *which* religions? There is a growing sense of discomfort within psychological science about universal claims; this is due to a greater awareness of significant cultural variations of how the mind works; of difficulties in replicating key findings, and also an acknowledgement of the biased samples used in psychological research (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010; Open Science Collaboration, 2015). If psychology, which has the ambition of generalising its theories to all of humankind, is undergoing a more subdued phase, when it comes to the anthropological study of religion the path towards universal claims has, for a long time, been a rocky one (to put it mildly). There are very good reasons for this distrust, as universal theories of religion tend to be inextricably associated with a difficulty in acknowledging *other* perspectives of experiencing the world that do not fit with our own categories.

Luhrmann acknowledges the challenge of religious diversity in chapter 1, when she writes '…there is something quite culturally specific about the way that people in the modern West think about what is real' (p. 4) but, then, very quickly evades the question by claiming that *other* people also differentiate between what is natural and supernatural. There is a wide range of non-Western otherness that could be explored, but her examples focus mainly on the works of Viveiro de Castro and Aparecida Vilaça, who have studied indigenous peoples from the Amazon region. Luhrmann appears to be in a hurry to summarise the religious experience of the peoples we usually only hear about in ethnographic work; she is even quicker in circumventing criticisms of 'colonial impulses' or 'scientific imperialism' (p.4) towards past or present academics who are too eager to apply their Western categories to these cultures. In her hurry, she may have significantly misread the key findings of these studies.

In this commentary, we will first focus on Lurhmann's reading of Vilaça's work on the Amazonian Wari', which we consider problematic, before turning our attention to what is being disregarded in her theory of religion.

Vilaça (2013) wrote a commentary on Luhrmann's (2012) book about religious experience in Evangelical Christians. In this commentary, she highlights key differences between Evangelical Christianity and the religious experiences she observed in the Wari'. In her new book, Luhrman cites a short excerpt from this commentary:

'It seems to me, then, that questions of the kind posed by Luhrmann vis-à-vis her material only make sense within a cultural frame informed by a very specific notion of personhood' (Vilaça, 2013, p.362).

Luhrman then proceeds to summarise Vilaça's argument by saying: 'In other words, people only doubt that spirits are real in modern, secular, individualist societies' (p. 13). And then moves on to use Vilaça's (2016) ethnographic work to show that she's wrong, giving examples of how the Wari', too, differentiate spirits from ordinary objects. But in this remark, she entirely misses the point of contrast between the Wari' and the USA Evangelicals. Vilaça is not interested in the dualism that is key to Luhrmann's theory; instead, she is arguing that, unlike the ontological difference one finds between humans and the Christian God, the Wari' division between what is a human, an animal, and an invisible entity is much more fluid and multidimensional: an animal can, under certain circumstances, experience reality like a human, and vice-versa. Another point of contrast is that while the Evangelical's training is focused on the mind, the Wari' are mainly concerned about the body (more on this below). A final difference is that the Wari' ignored the notion of an omnipresent, active, invisible God around which Luhrmann shapes her data collection and theory.

To be clear, Vilaça never says that the Wari' confuse or conflate the natural with the supernatural realm. They actually differentiate it, but in an entirely distinct way, which is not captured by Luhrman's dualistic framework. For the Wari', and other Amazonian indigenous peoples, non-human entities, whether animal or gods, can think like humans and so can humans think like other entities, which gives rise to a multitude of perspectives. Thus, Viveiros de Castro (2002) makes the case for *Perspectivism*, which places at the centre of study the indigenous concepts themselves.

But how different are these concepts from our own? One anecdote may help illustrating this. Lévi-Strauss (1992) wrote that after the Spanish colonised the Antilles, while their priests where thoroughly discussing whether the indigenous had a soul, the indigenous were carefully examining if the dead bodies of the Spanish decomposed like their own. For these indigenous peoples the realness of the spirit is uncontested; it is the bodily realm that requires special work, including the shamanic construction of a differentiated body that allows interacting with all kinds of living, dead, material, and non-visible beings[1]. The aim of this interaction is also radically different from that of a Western religious paradigm where one seeks to become closer to God; what the shaman seeks is to assimilate another entity's qualities, to see the world from the other's perspective.

None of this is likely to sound as attractive or intelligible as Luhrmann's psychological-based theory, and there may be a lurking temptation to dismiss it as a philosophical thought experiment. Thankfully there is more evidence than that of anthropological ethnographies to rely on. In *The Falling Sky* (2015) we have a rare account: an autobiographical record of a Yanomami from the Brazilian Amazon who was a teenager when his people had the first contact with a white man — a Canadian Evangelical missionary — and grows to become a shaman and an international political activist. In the book, he tells us of his childhood, his initiation as a shaman, the fight against the illegal goldmining in their lands, and also his international political activism for the rights of his people. The narrative is, among other things, an extraordinary document in revealing the abyssal differences between the Western and the Yanomami concepts of the world; and it only becomes more revealing when the focus moves from Kopenawa's own culture to his observations of ours.

As he travels to give invited talks in London, Paris, and New York, we see *our* world through *his* eyes. The level of insight of a man who has stepped from an entirely different world into ours arouses both awe and a deep sense of disquiet. Rather than abstract accusations of colonialism, we find very tangible observations; for example, the greed that Kopenawa first saw in the illegal goldminers, he found it pervading all of our life:

> … merchandise is truly like a fiancée to them! Their thought is so attached to it that if they damage it while it is still shiny, they get so enraged that they cry! They are really in love with it! They go to sleep thinking about it like you doze off with the nostalgia of a beautiful woman. It occupies their thoughts even after they fall asleep. So they dream of their car, their house, their money, and all their other goods—of those they already possess and those they desire again and again. It is so. Merchandise makes them euphoric and obscures all the rest of their mind… If the white people could hear other words than the words of merchandise, the way we do, they would know how to be generous and would be less hostile towards us. They would not want to eat our forest with such voracity. (p.333).

There is a subtle — unhappy — irony connecting this account of an Amazonian indigenous man visiting our world with the first report of the Europeans who arrived in Brazil in 1500.

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[1] There may be *loose* parallels to be drawn between this kind of shamanic bodily work and that found in Indian Tantra movements, such as the Goddess-oriented practice of the Kula system of visualisation, where one learns meditation techniques that aim to radically change the physical body rather than seeking to transcend it (Flood, 2021).

The detailed matter-of-fact letter written for the King of Portugal by Vaz de Caminha (n/d) narrates with some ethnographic detail the first meeting between Europeans and the Brazilian natives. The report is punctuated by delight in what the writer sees. Delight about their physical characteristics ('they are like wild birds… their bodies are so clean and beautiful like no others!'), and their moral state ('So, my King, their innocence is such that Adam's wouldn't be any greater, except for modesty').

But alongside this delight, there is a glimpse of instrumental thinking — not only about the considerations of the conquest of a new land but of the expansion of the Christian faith. Thus the chronicler says:

'They seem to me to be people of such innocence that, if we were to understand their language and they were to understand ours, they would immediately become Christians, *as they clearly do not possess any beliefs*. [our emphasis and translation from the Portuguese]'.

This insight from the first transatlantic encounter of peoples poignantly tells of our difficulty in understanding a non-hierarchical way of relating, including how one might relate to invisible entities. Tragically it also says much about how the greed Kopenawa notices in the 'white people' is an intrinsic part of their religious faith that looks towards increasing its numbers: the history of the forced conversion of indigenous peoples only grew from the 1500 onwards; after Roman Catholic missionaries recognised that more than spiritual conversion these people required physical protection, the 20th century witnessed a renewed aggressive missionary effort by US-based Evangelical movements, often with the political support of governments across South America (Lewis, 1988)[2]. Even today, anthropologists who want to reach the lands where some of these indigenous peoples live have to resort to the planes and boats owned by these Evangelical organisations.

The very brief depiction of Kopenawa's present vision of our world and of the European historical vision of theirs[3] is not a mere excursus in this commentary. There is an interaction between concepts, cognitive mechanisms, and the social world. The opening quote of this commentary taken from Kopenawa's book, about the differences in dreaming between us and the Yanomami, can too easily be misread as voicing the difference between our individualistic *versus* their collectivist culture. What he is saying, though, is both more subtle and wide reaching: Kopenawa is articulating how the Western capitalist greed that *eats* his forest with voracity permeates our entire lives, including our dreams. From his perspective this greed is less of a moral fault, over which one has some control, than what we would call a cognitive disposition. Our whole worldview is predicated upon a dualistic separation of self-world that makes us want to possess more of it. And the same logic applies to our religious dualism where good opposes evil, and the natural opposes the supernatural. This dualism has delicate implications for the very fabric of religious experience: the complete *otherness*, transcendence, and all-powerfulness of God in the Abrahamic religions is predicated on a power imbalance between God and creature, which requires endless efforts

[2] A candid — failed — account of these Evangelical actions is narrated by Daniel Everett (2008), whom as a young linguist and missionary went to live among the Piraha with the goal of translating the gospels into their language and convert them.

[3] To be accurate, the first indigenous people reported in the historical Portuguese account are not Yanomami but Guarani.

of approximation, pleading, submission, and reconciliation. Could this limitless power imbalance be the reason for the cognitive effort required to make God 'become real' in the religions Luhrmann studies?

By contrast, Kopenawa's description of his interaction with the *xapiri* (spirits) conveys something which is hard to put into words. These spirits are not distinct entities, like Western souls or ghosts, but more of a hybrid synthesis of human and non-human that connects to a primordial or archetypal image; Viveiros de Castro (2007) calls them 'non-representational images', like a diplomat whose action is to represent, rather than being a static representation. For the Yanomani, these spirits are not real in the same way that 'your mother's love feels real' (Luhrmann, 2020, p. xi), or angels and God might feel real for Christians. This does not mean that they are unreal in the sense of false or non-existent; but they are unreal in the sense that they do not conform to our intuitive notion of what real means, which entails a static nature entirely different from how these spirits are experienced by the Yanomami.

To conclude we would like to return to the merits and shortcomings of developing intuitive theories for social phenomena like religion. As academics focusing on social and psychological dimensions, we are increasingly pressured to come up with short ideas that 'stick' easily. The merit of conveying something of a complex nature in elegant, simple terms is obvious. It's not easy; and not many of us are able to write a book like this one, of such clarity, displaying a mastery in de-complexifying. The downside is that in the search for scientific elegance we may end up comfortably leaning towards what is intuitive to us — but not for others.

One striking example of such tendency among scientists has been uncovered by the work of archaeologist Emmanuele Honoré (Honoré et al, 2016). For her PhD she worked on the Wadi Sūra II rock art figures, found in 2002 in the Lybian desert, which depict a few hundred hand stencils. About 13 of these hands are rather small and inserted within the adult-sized hands. She had to undertake detective-like work to undo the intuitive theory of her senior colleagues who saw in these small hands those of infants: the parents had stencilled the child's hand within their own. However, the atypical profile of the small hands led her to a careful study of the morphology of the hand in small babies, which showed that these were not human but reptilian, most probably belonging to a type of lizard. These findings have significant implications for the study of the symbolic universe of long gone humans; as they have for the study of anthropomorphic biases in modern-day academics.

We would expect that the growth in cross-cultural research, which Luhrmann also describes in this book, would help provide a cure for our theoretical biases. Instead, it might tragically amplify them, by using small cultures to validate our theories without ever attending to how their perspectives might differ from ours — not just as variations on a theme, but in ways that deeply challenge us intellectually and emotionally to understand their experiences of the world. Unless we are willing of making this *effort*, we risk perpetuating the invisibility of these humans and our distorted views of their gods.

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