

FROM VENOMOUS SNAKEBITES TO ANOMALOUS SPIRITS

(IN THREE EASY STEPS)

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I came to Oxford as an undergraduate in Human Sciences. This was where I first encountered social anthropology and its power as a method of comparative and reflexive critique. But I was also taught to think about humans as simultaneously cultural and biological organisms. In my second year I spent the summer researching snakebites in a missionary hospital in Ecuador. It was this experience that led me to apply for the MPhil in Medical Anthropology, which I undertook from 2005 to 2007. Here I was introduced to some of the philosophical and practical ways in which humans are bisected between the biological and the cultural, and I was encouraged to look for ways of putting things back together using the critical approaches of medical anthropology and phenomenology. This is what I have been trying to do in my MPhil and DPhil theses, inspired by the holistic vision that underlies both Human Sciences and Medical Anthropology at Oxford.

Starting points

A few days before I sat down to write this paper, I went to a talk that raised my hackles. Writing out of this state of provocation, I have produced something which lacks the flippancy suggested by my title, and perhaps this is a good thing. The speaker was trying to develop a theoretical framework to assert the paramount value of human individuality against what he characterised as a kind of servitude to category ascriptions. I think this is a laudable aim. I agree with him that human individuals consist of something far more important than cultural categories and representations, group membership, languages and traditions; and that none of these things should ever be valued at the expense of the well-being of individual human beings. I suspect that, had we been able to debate the subject more fully, we would eventually have agreed with one another. However, the speaker's apparent concept of what the freedom of the individual consisted of and what it required seemed to me, upon first impression, to produce something altogether inhumane. By the time he had stripped away all the

category ascriptions common to humanity, he was left talking not about an unfettered individual, free to develop their own 'life-project' without undue hindrance from others, but about no one, no life, no project, nothing at all. He claimed that he was trying to make history 'bunk'. But it is history that makes us, and without it there would be no individuals to speak of. Unless the individual is a particular person, a particular body, speaking a particular language, occupying a particular place, in a particular configuration of kin relationships and friendships, she is merely a theoretical concept, empty of content, no one at all. Furthermore all these particulars through which each individual may be said to embody humanity in her own unique way are not the self's creation but consist of things received from others. We do not make ourselves; we are made by other people, and we make other people in our turn. We become more human, not less, the more we recognise this mutual involvement. Where freedom becomes important is in considering what we do with the history that we are given, how we carry it forward, how we hand it on to others. And we are free, not to the extent that we escape our history, but to the extent that we are able to produce from it something good and not evil.

Good and evil, of course, are not fashionable words in anthropology. We react to them as particularly loaded examples of the kinds of culturally constructed categories that we want to avoid imposing upon other people to whom we suppose that they are alien. However, what they connote are more than mere conceptual categories. If they are understood as referring to the kinds of existential states that we recognise in ourselves and in others as suffering, pain, fear, despair, happiness, joy, delight, then they tell us what really matters, here and now, to the individual standing in front of us. They consist of those existential states through which we have the potential to become most keenly and directly aware of other people as other selves. Evil is perpetuated

whenever we fail to make this recognition and good whenever we do. Our moral responsibility, then, is to recognise ourselves as much as we are able in other people and to act accordingly. But not only this, we must take other people seriously as selves in their own right who can return the compliment, and we must let them redefine us until they can recognise themselves in us.

This is, I believe, the task to which the methods and theory of anthropology, at its best, are dedicated. Merleau-Ponty puts it like this:

We can expand our experience of social relationships and get a proper view of them only by analogy or contrast with those we have lived. We can do so, in short, only by subjecting the social relationships we have experienced to an *imaginary variation* [his emphasis]. These lived relationships will no doubt take on a new meaning in comparison with this imaginary variation [...], but they will provide it with all the sociological meaning it can have. (Merleau-Ponty 1964: 100)

Here Merleau-Ponty reminds us that sociological or anthropological knowledge is, at its roots, knowledge of the lives of other subjects. But it is important to note that what we have in view here is not the isolated Cartesian subject who knows others only by a conjecture of analogy with her own self-knowledge. This is a model which Merleau-Ponty elsewhere rejects (Merleau-Ponty 2010 [1945]; Morris 2012). Here he is talking instead about ‘our experience of social relationships’, the intersubjective world which, he argues, in fact precedes the kind of cognitive self-reflection reified by Descartes. To know others in this way as other subjects, as other intersubjective selves, is simultaneously to discover ourselves at the other end of their knowing.

When seen in this way, it is clear that our discipline ought to be a thoroughly moral endeavour, unafraid to engage with the existential imperatives of good and evil, happiness and suffering, and striving to make us more and more transparent to one another as other intersubjective selves. Medical anthropology, since it focuses on illness and healing, suffering and well-being, confronts these questions particularly clearly,

and here I want to illustrate some of the ways in which they have influenced my own research.

Metamorphoses

We are made in the first place by our history, and my own history over the last few years has taken me from an initial interest in the treatment of venomous snakebite in Amazonian Ecuador to a point where I am now trying to make sense of ghosts and anomalous apparitions among the Tsachila on the other side of the Andes. The steps involved in this process were not in fact easy. But they were accidental and in the end proved to be serendipitous, driven by transformative encounters with individuals, and by circumstantial exigency.

In 2003 I visited a small missionary hospital on the edge of the Ecuadorian Amazon, where I had some friends of friends who were working as Christian missionary doctors and nurses. Among their patients were many indigenous people from a wide area of the Upper Amazon basin. I had gone there on a two-month research trip to collect some information regarding snakebite for D.A. Warrell, Professor of Tropical Medicine at the John Radcliffe Hospital (Smalligan et al. 2004). One day a young man was flown in from an Achuar village near the Peruvian border. He had been bitten twice on the calf by a fer-de-lance snake, one of the most dangerous vipers in the region. I remember his name, his face; he was about 24 years old, he had a four-year-old daughter, and he had been retrieving her play ball from the undergrowth when the snake bit him. He had an oedema, and the doctors insisted on surgery to release the swelling. This he refused until his leg became so gangrenous that the doctors insisted upon its amputation, to which he eventually consented. As my visit to the hospital continued, it became increasingly apparent that one of the most important issues

surrounding the provision of health care from both the indigenous point of view and that of the doctors was the former's frequent refusal of surgery. While surgery seemed to kindle anger and suspicion on the part of these Amerindian people, their resistance to it was a source of bewilderment and frustration for the doctors, whose dearest wish was to save lives. No one likes surgery, but in this instance it raised the question of a profound mutual incomprehension between doctor and patient. Here neither of them was able to make himself recognisable to the other as another self with a mutual interest. It was this encounter that motivated me to apply for the MPhil in Medical Anthropology; with these two bodies in view, the surgeon and the snakebitten young man – neither of them knowing what they meant or did to one another – I began to be inducted into the anthropological critique of Western medicine.

We are all now familiar, of course, with the tendency of Cartesian medicine to treat the human body as a machine, as primarily an object, and thereby to marginalise her subjective reality as another self. The ethnographic subject matter of medical anthropology militates against this reduction of the body to a machine-object, being replete with examples of alternative accounts of embodiment. In the Achuar case, for instance, the shape of one's body seems to bear a close relationship to the integrity of one's soul, and the conservation of body parts has both personal and cosmological implications. This much I was able to surmise from what I read of the work of Anne Christine Taylor (1993, 1996, 1998). However, as I attempted, with the help of the rather controversial writings of Viveiros de Castro (1998, 2005), Vilaça (2002, 2005) and Lima (1999), to get to grips with something like an Amazonian concept of body and soul, and how these are related, I was side-tracked by questions of bodily instability, metamorphosis and Amerindian perspectivism.

The ethnographic record in South America, and indeed in much of the world, is dotted with accounts of human to animal metamorphoses, along with highly transformative accounts of the body and what seem to be startlingly corporeal accounts of the soul. I was presented, then, with the following question: How can I recognise, in these transformative accounts of the body and these corporeal accounts of the soul, the embodiment of other selves? To put it another way, how must my own experience of embodiment be altered in order to admit these accounts as something familiar, belonging to myself, rather than as something alien belonging to an incomprehensible other? Until I have done this, I have not recognised them as the witnesses of other selves to a humanity which we must both have in common. In an attempt to do this, I experimented with a broadening of the category of the 'real' to include dream experience and drug-induced hallucinations. Both these fields of experience are widely attributed a considerable degree of ontological significance in the ethnography of Amerindian societies in North and South America alike, and they open up the kinds of experience which seem to be presupposed by Amerindian accounts of body and soul as being at once corporeal and unstable or metamorphic.

However, when I attempted to investigate this possibility in the field, I found that the government of the group with which I wished to work insisted upon a considerable fee in return for their permission. Although the remuneration which they sought presented a considerably lower price than that of a Master's degree at Oxford, it was, in local terms, an entirely unrealistic sum and was in any case far more money than I had at my disposal. So I found myself having to relocate. I contacted a friend of mine in Quito, and was introduced to the Tsachila in the lowlands on the other side of the Andes. The Governor of the Tsachila eventually granted me permission for my research, but on condition that I did not study hallucinogens, medicinal plants or

shamanism. And so I found myself with a field site but no research question, and for the first two weeks I spent most of my time playing with the village children and gorging myself on mandarins which they picked for me from the tops of the neighbours' trees.

Discovering oko

One day the children and I discovered that I could do an impression of a monster. 'Do the monster! Do the monster!' they entreated me before running away in terror as I chased them, roaring and making the most frightening grimace I could muster. The little ones, three and four years old, who still spoke very little Spanish, would shout, in Tsafiki, '*Oko! Oko!*' This emerged in our games as a synonym for the Spanish *monstruo*. This is the word usually translated in the ethnographic literature on the Tsachila as 'spirit' or 'demon', but what I discovered when I began asking people about it was a seemingly endless array of accounts of phantoms and disappearing figures, apparitions of the dead and vampiric monsters, *duende*, i.e. monsters, goblins, and other weird creatures the like of which I had never heard of before, and which seemed to rest upon a bewildering tapestry of ancestral stories and personal encounters. These were not things that only existed in a mythical period or an occult dimension. They were there, in the forest, to be stumbled upon; they shook trees, they left footprints. They were present, and often bodily present, to particular people in particular places at particular times.

How, then, can I understand these accounts as recognisable variations upon my own experience? Of course, one could analyse them as conceptual representations reflecting social structure, as the expression of a particular cultural logic, as the manifestations of more general cognitive predispositions, and there is no reason why all

of these approaches together should not form part of their elucidation. But this is not, in the first place, what they are. They were related to me on the one hand as oral history, and on the other as a series of personal encounters. Until I allowed them to speak to me in these terms, first of all as the experience of other people, I had not taken those other people seriously as other selves.

So, for example, my Tsachi acquaintances told me stories they had heard from their grandparents about a number of occasions, perhaps one hundred, three hundred, or five hundred years ago, when dead mothers and grandmothers, hearing their children wailing, had climbed out of the grave and returned to take care of them, to cook, to wash, to collect firewood, etc. But these walking dead, called *puyan oko*, complete with putrefying bodies, did not understand properly what they were doing. Instead of salt they used their own rotten flesh to season the food; they ate poisonous insects; they did not wash their hair properly; and instead of bathing their children or grandchildren, they put them into pots of boiling water and inadvertently killed them. When they were discovered by their surviving spouses, daughters or sons-in-law, they were chased back into the grave whence they had come, and a fire was lit there, or some similar means devised, in an attempt 'to kill them all over again'. And as they stoked the flames, the *puyan oko* would cry: 'My house is burning! My house is burning!'

Looking for a 'fit'

These stories graphically illustrate the way in which the difference, and the distance, between the living and the dead has historically been conceptualised among the Tsachila. They show death as being associated with both a bodily and a perceptual or psychological kind of decay or distortion, which renders the continuation of social relations with the living impossible. In fact, death transforms these relations into fatal

ones by way of this distortion. At the same time, the dead remain all too close to the living; the wailing of the bereft can call them back. Thus, just as bodily decay occurs alongside perceptual and affective distortions, so the continuation of affective bonds has bodily consequences: you wept too long and loudly for her, and now there she is, your dead mother, in front of you, putting your children into a boiling pot. Here we might identify some suggestions of the kind of perspectival logic which I mentioned earlier, favoured by Viveiros de Castro, Lima, Vilaça and others as the underlying principle of many Amerindian cosmologies.

But to expound such an implicit logic, if indeed it can be found, is not the end of the task. Where might it come from? Why would it persist? People do not pluck such things out of the air. We find echoes of the same logic, of course, in kin relations, and in the forms and conceptual representations of social structure. But of these we can ask the same question. If people carry around with them a certain pattern of thought vis-à-vis the world, as these mythic accounts implicitly suggest, and as we expect to find echoed in social structure, then a similar pattern ought to be implicit somehow in the world also. ‘The world!’ cry the constructivists! ‘Surely you do not mean the world.’ But I do mean the world: that which constitutes the *fait-accompli* which confronts us all both individually and collectively, whether we like it not; that which, in fact, makes the discipline of anthropology possible. For a model of thought, or a scheme of behaviour, to arise and persist, we would expect it to produce some kind of ‘fit’ with the world over whose manifestations and exigencies we have only limited control (see Williamson 2000: 1).

What kind of fit, then, should we be looking for between the ancestral accounts of the Tsachila concerning the dead and their contemporary experience of a world which they share with others, including myself? I must note that the accounts were

related to me as oral history concerning events that happened a long time ago, and when I asked why people told these stories, the reply was always that they were passed on so that people wouldn't forget what had happened before. The fit which the Tsachila expected was the literal one of history, things that happened here some time ago. Thus, the questions raised and answered in the accounts were historical ones: a hundred years ago, three hundred years ago, the dead used to climb out of the grave bodily, until shamans worked out a way to keep them there by summoning the earthworm to burrow through their ears and make them deaf. Some people said that things changed when the missionaries arrived and the Tsachila were baptised and gained the protection of God; others that the fumes of petrol engines kept such things away, or that the increasing population density made it more difficult for them to appear. Here we can see the historical changes of the contemporary world being made of use to produce a fit between these ancestral accounts and people's everyday experiences. Once again, the fit achieved by such expositions is a literal, direct one, rather than the indirect fit produced by means of analogy or allegory. This does not mean to say that it might not be possible or appropriate to identify at the same time some kind of analogical, allegorical, psychological or indeed evolutionary fit between myth and social structure, and between myth and the experience of everyday life more generally. But it does suggest that these are not the kinds of fit considered relevant by the Tsachila themselves.

For my Tsachi interlocutors, a still more pressing point of contact between the ancestral accounts and people's contemporary experiences was to be found not in the absence of *puyan oko* from the contemporary world but in their continuing presence. *Puyan oko* could still be met in the forest, beside paths, by rivers, in plantain groves, in the graveyard, in the kitchen, in the environs of the house. But rarely if ever did these

contemporary *oko* have putrefying bodies. Sometimes they were invisible, their presence manifested only by a cry, by the sound of laughing, coughing or wailing, or by the noise of footsteps. Sometimes they left a kitchen disordered, or started a fire, or threw things at houses and people. Sometimes they appeared as distant figures, sometimes as strangers, mute and unresponsive, with their faces obscured. Sometimes a dissolute young man would find himself suddenly confronted by a dead grandfather or sister, giving him advice about how he ought to live, before vanishing again. Sometimes the dead would appear to people in dreams. Occasionally I heard tell of an encounter which was reminiscent of the bodily revenants of ancestral accounts. But in general people's personal experiences differed considerably from these. Nevertheless it was to this tranche of anomalous and highly diverse phenomena that people connected the stories of their grandparents when they identified them as *puyan oko*.

Why should this be, when they appear to be so different? First of all, these contemporary *puyan oko* are always associated with death. They are typically encountered shortly before or after the demise of a neighbour or relative, and this much they have in common with their mythical predecessors. Second, despite the divergence in their manifestations, they are susceptible to a similar perspectival interpretation, and to this extent experience and myth can be seen to be mutually reinforcing. Just as the social relocation of the dead was manifested and enforced by the decaying bodies and distorted perceptions of the walking corpses of long ago, so today the dead are encountered across what we might call a perspectival divide marked by a whole range of social and perceptual anomalies, which render the continuation of normal social relations impossible. So, for instance, contemporary *puyan oko* are invisible or uncommunicative, aggressive and antisocial, credited, like the deceased grandmothers of old, with causing death through their attempts to remain among their surviving kin.

So we see that the ancestral accounts and those of contemporary experience exhibit substantial correspondences. And yet these correspondences are in fact of an analogical rather than a literal character. Thus, although they are united by the same implicit logic, their phenomenological divergence continues to beg questions. Why do the dead not return bodily now as they once did? Why are *puyan oko* in general far less common today? Some people say that they are more common; why should that be? Why are some *oko* benign rather than aggressive? Posing questions like these, and suggesting possible answers, my interlocutors worked towards a literal fit between ancestral accounts and their own experience. In this endeavour they made frequent appeal to the power of shamans, to the exhaust fumes and increased population density associated with their greater integration into the national society, and to certain parts of Christian doctrine and Biblical narratives. Yet in all of this, the bizarre and frightening encounters of people's personal experience remained as a potentially subversive presence. Tied to the *puyan oko* of ancestral stories by virtue of their association with death and perceptual anomalies, they nonetheless frequently defied the precedents set for them by common knowledge and personal experience alike, and they typically resisted any single definitive explanation. They were, almost by definition, both literally and conceptually disruptive.

Reflections

This brings me to a concluding reiteration. If I am to take my Tsachi interlocutors seriously, then I must allow my own conceptions of the world to be similarly disrupted by these experiences, and I must do so on their terms, without first recasting them in some sociological paradigm which transforms their inconvenient existential fact into my carefully quarantined social or cultural construct. Ultimately I must admit their

experience as being that of selves on whom my own self is a variation, until their experience and mine become recognisable as something we have in common. I must ask not only how their account of the world fits for them, but how it fits for me too. And finally I must ask, as they keep doing: Which fit is best? In fact, until I have asked this last question, I have still failed to take them seriously as other people. Whether it is verbalised or not, this is the question that we pose whenever we choose to go to a clinic instead of a shaman (or vice versa), whenever we seek out a priest or a prayer meeting, or a hypnotist, or a herbalist, or the shrine of a saint, or, as in so many cases, every option available to us in ascending order of expense. Perhaps it is in the medical encounter that this question is posed most urgently, but as I have attempted to suggest above it is also raised in different ways: by metamorphic accounts of bodies and souls, by ghosts and monsters, and anomalous apparitions, and to a varying extent by all that falls within the scope of ethnographic enquiry. Again we are dealing with the question of our common humanity, which confronts anthropologists in every area of our discipline (whether we like it or not). It is a moral and philosophical question as much as it is an empirical and ethnographic one, and it must be motivated by the conviction that we can and should recognise ourselves among others as other selves.

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