

One Cultural Model of Nature in Amazonian Brazil.

The results of my analysis of the interviews and the free lists collected in 2015 provide an extensive set of propositions about what the world is and how it works, bringing to the fore fundamental modes of relation between constitutive categories of Nature.

- ‘God’ created the world; including ‘people’ and everything that exists in ‘nature’ – environments (water, soil and sky; rivers, lakes, streams, forests, moon, sun), animals, fish, weeds, and spirits.
- Once ‘god’ created the ‘world,’ he masters it; ‘he’ is everywhere, and may destruct everything if his creation acts badly.
- ‘People’ vs ‘Nature.’ What belongs to ‘people’ does not pertain to ‘nature;’ therefore, cultivated/domesticated environments, animals and plants contrast with the ones that exist in ‘nature.’
- The ‘mothers’/ ‘enchanted’ own and master what exists in ‘nature.’ Everything that exists in ‘nature’ have specific ‘mothers’ or ‘owners,’ that live in an enchanted ‘world’/‘city’ beneath water and soil.
- The ‘mothers’/‘enchanted’ think and act as ‘people’ because they are animated by a ‘human spirit.’ As masters and owners, they can use different bodies – ‘people,’ ‘animals,’ and ‘fish’ – as clothes and may help/punish ‘people’ if they do not take care of or destroy ‘nature.’

These results suggest that different causal models proposed by Bennardo (2014) – introduced in Section 2 – co-exist within the cultural models that structure the knowledge I elicited from the Arapium and the Tapajo. The propositions about [Christian] ‘god’ imply that ‘he’ is as a ‘father’ and occupies a privileged position above everything that exists. This suggests a ‘god-centered causal model.’

At the same time, results highlight the occurrence of a salient contrast between ‘humans’ and ‘nature.’ The ‘nature’/‘people’ opposition points toward a ‘human-centered model’ in which ‘people’ are placed in a privileged position over everything that exists in ‘nature.’ The ‘people’/‘nature’ opposition also points to a causal model in which ‘enchanted mothers’ occupy a privileged position in ‘nature’ and over ‘people,’ thus I suggest the possibility of an ‘enchanted’-centered causal model. But as ‘people’ and ‘mothers’ think, feel and act the same way, and are animated by a human spirit, the relationship between them appears to be one that characterizes a holistic causal model, in which ‘people’ and other beings in ‘nature’ share a common condition.

The assumption that everything that exists in ‘nature’ has a ‘mother’/ ‘owner’ – this concept repeatedly appeared in the results of the different analyses conducted – indicates a cultural model vastly shared among the indigenous peoples of lowland South America, and that scholars have named an animist/perspectivist ontology (cf. Descola, 1996, 2014; Viveiros de Castro, 1998; Lloyd, 2007; Fausto, 2008). In this cultural model, categories of ‘mother’ *do* ‘owner’ transcend specific domains of application to constitute a “generalized mode of relating that characterizes interactions” that operates at “different scales, ranging from the micro-constitution of the person to the macro-constitution of the cosmos” (Fausto, 2008:01, 18). In this cultural model, ownership denotes not domination and private ownership, but motherhood. The act of taking care with love, as mothers do

with their children, connects with the cultural saliency of the cultivation of plants, and contrast with relations mediated by the idiom of predation, as those established with animals, fish, and enemies.

The key words analysis and the results of the free lists about 'environments' pointed out a spatial model of orientation framed by three distinct complementary oppositions: the 'front-back' (of the river), the 'inside-outside' (of the forest or the river), and 'center-periphery' (of the forest). In this scheme, humans live between the inner and the outer, in front of the main aquatic bodies, with their backs to the center of the forest. Within this spatial frame, the house is thought a 'center' around which all other human environments (gardens, harbor, paths, communities) radiate from, in the midst of 'nature.'

Destructive acts upon 'nature' are commonly described as caused by greedy 'people' who have no respect for mothers and their children. Within this frame, 'people' argue that deforestation is causing climate changes for a series of interconnected reason associated to the perception that 'plants are being hardly impacted.'

- For plants to grow they need the force of the moon, the sun, the water and the soil, but in the right measure.
- The best time to plant is during the new or the waxing moon because the growth of the moon makes plants grow.
- Unlike the moon, whose force is regular and fixed, the forces of the sun, rains, winds and soils are more unstable, and have changed a lot and for worse lately.
- The climate is warmer because nowadays when it gets to 9-10 a.m., no one can work in open spaces (e.g. gardens) anymore, whereas in the past 'people' were able to stay until 11-12 a.m.
- Lesser and unpredictable rains are causing harsher droughts, that are making people confused about when to 'plant.' In the past, 'people' used to slash, burn and plant from September to December, when the rains used to begin, but now 'people' are having to farm their gardens in January and February.
- These changes are making many 'people' lose their crops because the plants are growing weaker and end up dying. In that context, many 'people' are complaining that the manioc roots are more frequently "cooking and rotting under the earth."

In a world like this, the conclusion is that 'people need to stop destroying nature,' because if not, humans will end up dying 'cooked and rotted' in their houses, just as it is already happening to plants, but as a righteous punishment for their wrong deeds. It is not deforestation that is problematic, in fact, it is fire and ashes that can make soils as fertile as the black soils of Indians. The problem is a bad attitude that combines disrespect towards life and makes people forget that everything has a 'mother' and needs to be taken care of. Greed for money and things that come from the cities makes people forget about nature.