

Indigenous Shamanic Worldviews as Dialogical Eco-Cosmology

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Abstract This article deals with indigenous shamanic worldviews and indigenous knowledge as dialogical eco-cosmology. It shows the relevance of eco-cosmology as local indigenous ecological and spiritual knowledge in the context of global biodiversity and sustainability discourses.

Keywords Eco-cosmology. Indigenous knowledge system. Indigenous worldview. Dream as knowledge. Adivasi and Brazilian indigenous people.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Eco-Cosmology – An Indigenous Alternative to SDGs and Shamanic Perspective. – 3 Eco-cosmologies as Shamanic Worldviews and Dialogic Healing. – 4 Shamanic Dreams. – 5 The Amazonas. – 6 Anthropogenic Forests of the Amazonas. – 7 Amerindian Ontologies. – 7.1 The Yanomami. – 7.2 Brazilian indigenous Amazonia. – 8 Davi Kopenawa – Yanomami Spokesman and the Dalai Lama of the Rainforest.



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1 Introduction

Eco-cosmologies are indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems and life-worlds relating the human intrinsically with the non-human, the cosmos and the other-than-human sphere such as the earth, trees, animals, rivers, mountains. Eco-cosmologies are indigenous knowledge systems correlating agro-ecology, ethno-forestry, sustainable food production, biodiversity and sustainable living. With the ecological destruction of ecosystems most valuable local knowledge resources and eco-cosmological worldviews disappear worldwide, and have to adopt to dramatic landscape changes. These worldviews and local knowledge systems transmitted through shamanic dreams and dialogical ecological ritual practices, however, could be a key for finding local and global solutions for a sustainable and philanthropic global world of cultural and eco-biological diversity, mutuality and dialogue.

2 Eco-Cosmology – An Indigenous Alternative to SDGs and Shamanic Perspective

Eco-cosmologies as indigenous knowledge systems on sustainability represent an indigenous alternative to the United Nations global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), an oxymoron and compromise established between environmentalism and the capitalistic business model of a developmental progression. Eco-cosmologies can be viewed as indigenous sustainability knowledge systems, however missing in the global SDGs.

The reason for the global exclusion of indigenous peoples perspectives on sustainability might be the general industrial world's negligence of indigenous spiritual traditions as knowledge matrices.

Eco-cosmologies represent shamanic systems which play a major role in the transmission of indigenous knowledge (Silitoe 1998), incorporating sophisticated ethno-botanical and ethno-medicinal taxonomies. As a shamanic apprentice, the young shaman learns about plant classifications, symptoms of diseases, cosmological connections, deductions and other logical devices important when he communicates with laymen in a more profane context (see Lévi-Strauss 1962, Agrawal 1995). Contemporary indigenous ecological knowledge systems relate to indigenous shamanic world-views (Århem 1996, 166-84; Kopenawa, Albert 2013) and the non-dualistic perspective on human and non-human agencies in a mutually shared world and cosmos (see also Reichel-Dolmatoff 1976, 307-31).

Ontological pluralities include the diverse perspectives of humans, non-humans and other-than-human elements regarding each other, interconnecting with each other as different personalities in a mutually interconnected world and cosmos (see Viveiro de Castro 2015).

With the ontological turn in French anthropology (Descola 1992; 2005; 2013; Viveiro de Castro 1998; 2015) as well as the discourse on neo-animism (Harvey 2005), hegemonic anthropocentric and dualistic perspectives have been broadly questioned. An emerging “new kind of ecological anthropology” (Descola, Pálsson 1996, 2) has been since then blurring the supposed clear demarcation line between nature and culture opening up new approaches to understanding alternative indigenous taxonomies, epistemologies, hermeneutics and ecologies.

Shamanism as a common term pre-eminently designates a religious phenomenon of Siberia and Inner Asia, with the term shaman originating from the Siberian Tunguz *šaman* and relating to a religious trance specialist of the indigenous Evenki people in eastern Russian Siberia. Throughout the immense area comprising the central and northern regions of Asia, the religious/ritual life of Siberian societies centres around the ritual specialist – the shaman – who

remains the dominating figure, for throughout the vast area of Asia in which the ecstatic experience is considered the religious experience par excellence, the shaman, and he alone, is the great master of ecstasy. A first definition of the complex phenomenon of shamanism – and perhaps the least hazardous – is that it is a technique of ecstasy. (Eliade 2005, 269)

Despite its ‘ism’, shamanism should not be regarded as an institutionalised religion, rather it is a complex of different rites and beliefs surrounding the activities of the ritual specialist – the shaman. Piers Vitebsky speaks of “shamanism” as a common shamanic spiritual worldview (2001) and defines “the shaman” (1995) as a spiritual trance healer mediating between the world of the living and the world of the spirits, a common phenomenon occurring from indigenous Siberia to the Amazon.

Today shamanism is regarded as a variety of similar phenomena in indigenous North American, South American and South Asian cultures. Contemporary shamanisms are in this vein embedded in analogous ecological knowledge systems relating always to indigenous cosmologies, ontologies (Kopenawa, Albert 2013) and indigenous hermeneutics (see Gomez 2021)

In am using the term ‘shamanism’ in Atkinson’s sense as a comparative concept. In her article, Atkinson (1992, 307-30) discusses various themes raised by the scholarly constructed models of shamanism. Well aware of the critiques of this Western category, she nevertheless postulates maintaining the concept in a plural form: ‘shamanisms’. In this way the cultural, historical and social specificity of local practices can be ensured (Atkinson 1992, 321) and the continuity of the interdisciplinary dialogue guaranteed – regardless of ethnographic specificities.

In this vein, indigenous shamanisms include classical shamanic cultures of Siberia and Inner Asia, of South Asia, North and South America. Also prehistorical forms of shamanic cultures can be found in Rock Art and archeological settings. Urban contemporary shamanisms emerge also as Neo-Shamanisms in diverse current cultural urban setting of the global world.

3 Eco-cosmologies as Shamanic Worldviews and Dialogic Healing

Following Vitebsky's classification (2001), shamanism, contrary to its 'ism' - can be regarded as a universal spiritual phenomenon which does not indicate any sort of unified doctrine or canonization of content. Instead, the ritual practices of ecstasy, the centrality of ritual specialists and healing and linguistic practices (see also Walker 2001, 35-60) build the starting points of this analytical classification of shamanism.

Shamanism is not a single, unified religion, but a cross-cultural form of religious sensibility and practice [...]. Shamanism is scattered and fragmented and should not be called an 'ism' at all. There is no doctrine, no world shamanic church, no holy book as a point of reference, no priest with the authority to tell us what is and what is wrong. (Vitebsky 2001,11).

However, as Vitebsky notices, there are astonishing cultural similarities in shamanic societies such as recurring motifs of 1) an initiation of the ritual specialists, the shamans; 2) the travelling between worlds; 3) the existence of benevolent and malevolent non-human beings, such as spirits.

Recalling Sudhir Kakar, who calls a 'shaman' a "specialist in a non-Western culture who relieves and heals anxiety" (Kakar 1982, 92), indigenous shamanisms are traditions of dialogic healing. In the same vein as Lévi-Strauss (1974, 213-34), Kakar classifies the local indigenous Indian ritual specialists employing a symbolic language in order to heal (Kakar 1982, 94), as shamans. The healing here consists of dialogues between the non-human and the human, the spirits of the forests, rivers, mountains, the cosmos and the earth. Kakar's descriptions of the therapeutic and ritual specialists of the Indian indigenous Oraon (Kakar 1982, 95-111) correspond very much with my own ethnographic observations of indigenous *alekh gurumais*, local shamans in Koraput, Odisha (Guzy 2002; 2007; 2020) who act as spiritual and ecological mediators and dialogical healers.

Ecology within an indigenous shamanic knowledge system and worldview is thus spiritual. It is a culture and language of spirits, an-

imated energies and other than human agents with their own motivations, perspectives and agencies which the shaman on his/her spiritual, astral trance journeys has to decode and to mediate. Shamanic trance eco-dialogues with an imbalanced and conflictual non-human 'nature', which need to be understood as the particular culture of spirits, deserves an eco-dialogical mediation, shamanic translation, reconciliation and healing.

This dialogic nature of indigenous eco-cosmologies is strongly echoed in Piers Vitebsky's *Dialogues with the Dead: The Discussion of Mortality among the Sora of Eastern India* (1993), where the indigenous Sora shamanism is shaped by the concept of a dialogic continuity between humans and the spirits of the deceased. Among the indigenous Sora, their ideas of death and the afterlife, and the concept of the individual and of personality are based on spiritual dialogues. The book is organised around indigenous dialogues between the living and the dead. For the dialogue with the dead, the Sora need mediators (*kuran*) between the worlds of the dead and the living, whom Vitebsky translates as 'shaman' (Vitebsky 1993, 18). These shamans, mostly women, but also men, put themselves into a dissociated state of consciousness - trance - in order to become receptive to the possession by a dead person's spirit. The dead person's spirit then speaks through the female or male shaman (1993, 5). The living people present at the ritual gathering, e.g., embrace the dead person (embodied by the shaman), argue intensely with him or her, cry, laugh, hit or caress the embodied deceased. The shaman, embodying the deceased during the ritual, is confronted with extremes of emotions. For Vitebsky, such emotional dialogues represent not only expressions of communication with the afterworld, but also the feelings of the collective. Among the Sora there are two types of shamans: the funeral shamans (usually women), who take over more important ritual roles, and female or male divinatory shamans who heal through sacred oracles or auguries (divination). Male and female shamans of the Sora undertake spiritual 'journeys' that a 'normal' person only experiences once - namely with the exit of the soul of the body at the time of the physical death. The shaman, however, goes to the underworld and begins dialogues with the dead in order to comfort and heal the living. His or her quality and qualification as a shaman, as a spiritual mediator and communicator, is the fact that he or she returns from the astral journey to the world of the spirits, in order to transmit the message of the dead for the living.

The shaman of the Sora heals with dialogues and with verbal communication, mediating in this way between the dead and the living. The shamanic worldview can be defined as explicitly dialogical, mediative and healing.

4 Shamanic Dreams

Shamanic dreams are a crucial characteristics of shamanic worldviews and life worlds.

The trance state as the altered state of consciousness of the shaman or the dream is crucial in understanding indigenous hermeneutics:

While in a state of trance, the shaman is regarded as capable of direct communication with representatives of the otherworld, either by journeying to the supranormal world or by calling the spirits to the séance. He is thus able to help his fellow men in crises believed to be caused by the spirits and to act as a concrete mediator between this world and the otherworld in accompanying a soul to the otherworld, or fetching it from the domain of the spirits. The shaman acts as a healer and as a patron of hunting and fertility, but also as a diviner, the guardian of livelihood. (Siikala 2005, 8280)

Shamanic dreams are not exclusively apparent in non-European indigenous contexts. They have not disappeared from European cultures. Dreams that transmit both personally or communally transformative knowledge from other realms continue to manifest within the Balkan's Christian and Islamic cultures. In the Balkans and Eastern Europe careers of healers are commonly initiated through shamanic dreams (see Kapalo 2014).

The importance of dreaming, visions and ecstatic capacities of shamans are apparent in all cultures of orality expressed in songs, performances and dances. Shamanic dreams and visions express through therianthropy, the shape-shifting between humans, non-human beings and agencies (Beggiora 2013, 259-74), "the knowledge that comes through dreaming is absolute because it comes from a level of symbolic association that is deeper than consciousness" (Ridington 1971, 123). This knowledge is acquired by the lonesome experience with the 'bush', the 'jungle' where encounters with animals transmit transformative knowledge between humans and non-humans such as medicine mythic animals or other than empirical beings. The North American Beaver Indians for example consider animals as educators and as symbols for the varieties of human nature as

a man can learn his combination of qualities through getting close to the qualities of animals. The experience with a medicine animal in the bush is the culmination of childhood and the beginning of adulthood. (Ridington 1971, 122)

The same applies for example for the Siberian Nenets who as indigenous reindeer herders send their children "to learn from the rein-

deer". The reindeer for the Nenets is a mythic and central animal that transmits spirituality to the child. This spirituality is regarded as a particular knowledge of life based on human animal communication and understanding (Toulouze 2017).

In shamanic worldviews and life worlds (Guzy, Kapalo 2017, 3-5) the transformative experiences of animal human and ecological encounters through therianthropic visions and dreams are the most important expressions of shamanic imaginaries (Noll et al. 1985), realities, epistemologies and ontologies revealing imagined, dreamt and lived experiences of local shamanic societies. In this way, the visual mental imagery experiences construe the inner and outer knowledge of life worlds and worldviews.

5 The Amazonas

The Amazon rainforest (Amazonia) represents one of the world's greatest natural resources where about 20% of Earth's oxygen is produced as thus is labelled as the 'Lungs of our Planet'. The Amazon rainforest also contains the world's highest level of biodiversity with half of the world's species: with over 500 mammals, 175 lizards; over 300 other reptiles species, about 30 million insect types and one third of the world's birds population.¹ The Amazon River gives the Amazonas the life streams of the rainforest with the Amazon delta covering 2,722,000 million square miles, and extending to Brazil, Columbia, Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador, Bolivia, and the three Guyanas. Amazonia covers more than half of Brazil.

6 Anthropogenic Forests of the Amazonas

Since the publication of the *Handbook of South American Indians* by Julian Steward in 1946 and the beginnings of research on Cultural Ecology (see Sutton, Anderson 2004), it is known that a large part of the Amazonas' bio-diversity is the result of the skilful agricultural, ecological and botanical knowledge of Amerindian indigenous communities. This leads to the scientific recognition of the dramatic ethno-ecological impact of Amazonian indigenous hunter-gatherers societies for the development of the unique ecological diversity of the Amazonas since millennia (Rival 1999, 77-85).

Botanical and ethno-botanical research by Balée and Posey (Balee 1993; Posey 1984; Posey, Balee 1989) have empirically proven that indigenous people of Amazonia have created 'anthropogenic forests'

¹ <https://rainforests.mongabay.com/amazon/>.

by means of a complex knowledge of 'agroforestry' since prehistoric times to this day. Also Rival's research on historical ecologies in the Amazonas among the Huaruani of Ecuador proves the socio-cultural and ecological existence of 'anthropogenic' forests as resources that are not 'wild' but 'bio-cultural', ethno-historical and manmade according to elaborated ethno-agricultural, ethno-biological knowledge of Amerindian hunter gatherer societies and their local ancestral histories (Rival 2002; 2006).

The Huaorani are very conscious of past human activity, and are perfectly aware of the fact that every aspect of their forested territory has been transformed in equal measure by their ancestors, other indigenous groups, and the forces of nature and the supernatural. Taking the forest to be a legacy from the past, they have developed an understanding of the forest as owing its existence to past human activities. The forest exists to the extent that humans in the past lived and worked in it, and by so doing produced it as it is today for the benefit and use of the living. Their relation with the forest is lived as a social relation with themselves across generations, hence its eminently historical character. (Rival 2006, 82)

Walking in the forest means thus for the Huarani an constant ecological encounter with their ancestors, their beloved deceased family members and their local history, memory, the social and individual healing.

In the same vein research by Josep A. Garí on indigenous agroecology refutes the global perception of 'wild Amazonia' and proves the sustainable indigenous impact on Amazonian ecosystems and biodiversity.

Indigenous communities conserve, use, cultivate, manage and exchange biodiversity as a fundamental component of their rural lifestyle. The indigenous agro-ecology comprises the whole set of knowledge systems, agro-ecological practices and socio-cultural dynamics that shape indigenous agriculture in the context of biodiversity. The indigenous agroecology provides food security, health care, and ecosystem resilience through a local regime of biodiversity conservation and use. (Garí 2001, 21)

Deep historical ecological, agro-ecological, ethno-biological and ethno-veterinary knowledge (Monteiro et al. 2011) of Amerindian indigenous populations have created and sustained anthropogenic Amazonia forests and human survival.

7 Amerindian Ontologies

Amerindian ontologies of the Amazonas represent best the relatedness between the human and nonhuman sphere – where the dreams of the shaman connect an animated ecological landscape with the Amerindian indigenous people, which I call an eco-cosmological worldview (see also Sarma 2011).

The shaman in Amerindian ontologies heals through ecstatic dream transformations and mediations of knowledge encountered through journeys to other realms of the world (Kracke 2006, 106-20).

7.1 The Yanomami

The Yanomami are a good example for the possible impact of Amerindian indigenous people on contemporary discussions around climate change and eco-biological sustainability.

The Yanomami represent the largest relatively isolated indigenous community in South America. They live in the rainforests and mountains of northern Brazil and southern Venezuela. Like most indigenous groups on the continent, the Yanomami probably migrated across the Bering Straits between Asia and America some 15,000 years ago, making their way slowly down to South America. Today their total population stands at around 32,000. At over 9.6 million hectares, the Yanomami territory in Brazil is twice the size of Switzerland. In Venezuela, the Yanomami live in the 8.2 million hectare Alto Orinoco – Casiquiare Biosphere Reserve. Together, these areas form the largest forested indigenous territory in the world.

7.2 Brazilian indigenous Amazonia

The 2010 IBGE (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística) Census calculates the total indigenous population in Brazil to 896.917 individuals, which corresponds to approximately 0,47% of the country's total population (200.4 million). The Brazilian Amazon is home to 280,000 to 350,000 indigenous people, of which 180,000 live traditionally, heavily dependent on the ancient forest for their sustenance, spiritual and cultural life. The 2010 IBGE Census counts 197 forest-dwelling indigenous groups, living either on reservations or in one of four national parks.

Since the beginning of the European colonisation of the Americas beginning in 1492 with Columbus, Europeans collectively killed between 70 million to 100 million indigenous people (within 80 years). In the analysis of genocide expert David Stannard, this constitutes “the largest ongoing holocaust in the history of humanity” with 95%

of indigenous people killed by European actions, 100% of indigenous lands stolen by Europeans, and with European-descent people becoming the most prosperous people on the planet (see Stannard 1992, X-XI). According to the anthropologist Darcy Riberio (1962, 325-46), 55 indigenous populations vanished in the first half of the twentieth century alone.

In 2010, 247 peoples, speaking more than 150 different languages were documented (IBGE 2010). As a whole, the Indian population has been growing over the last 28 years, although some specific peoples have decreased in number and some others are even threatened with disappearance. Among the Indian peoples in Brazil listed by the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), seven have populations between 5 and 40 individuals. According to Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, researcher and professor of anthropology at the Museu Nacional (UFRJ) and founding partner of Instituto Socioambiental (ISA), an Indian

is any member of an indigenous community, recognized by the latter as such. An indigenous community is any community founded on kinship or co-residence relations between its members, who maintain historical-cultural ties with pre-Colombian indigenous social organizations.²

According to the Constitution, indigenous people in Brazil are considered 'relatively capable' Brazilian citizens, having a childlike status which deserves particular protection from the state. In this sense, according to Instituto Socioambiental, the state follows a principle established by the old Brazilian civil code of 1916, based on the idea that Indians should be tutored by a state indigenous institution. From 1910 to 1967 it was the Serviço de Proteção ao Índio/SPI and currently it is Fundação Nacional do Índio (Funai). The aim has always been to support a full integration of indigenous communities into the national community, which means to integrate them into the majoritarian Brazilian society. The Indian Statute of the Brazilian Constitution and the rights of Brazilian Indigenous Peoples were promulgated in 1973, defining the rules on the relations of the state and Brazilian society with the indigenous communities. Even though the 1973 Statute remains in force, new approaches in the Federal Constitution of 1998, grant greater rights to indigenous peoples. The 1988 Constitution does not call for the integration of the indigenous peoples into Brazilian society anymore, ensuring them, the right to be different from the rest of the country.³

² <https://pib.socioambiental.org/en/c/no-brasil-atual/quem-sao/quem-e-indio>.

³ <https://pib.socioambiental.org/en/c/direitos/estatuto-do-Indio/introducao>.

Amnesty International, Cultural Survival and Survival International have for many years raised the problem of the lack of inclusion of indigenous peoples' voices into mainstream discourses in Brazilian educational, cultural and political life. A critical discourse on unsustainable progress and the impact of destructive development by Brazil's contemporary majoritarian society in relation to Brazil's indigenous people is lacking.

The relative isolation of Brazilian indigenous people seems to have retained pre-Columbian eco-cosmological and agro-ecological knowledge systems over centuries which could be crucial for sustainability projects in times of ecological calamities and global climate change challenges in other parts of the world.

8 Davi Kopenawa – Yanomami Spokesman and the Dalai Lama of the Rainforest

Davi Kopenawa is the contemporary Brazilian prolific Yanomami shaman and intellectual, a contemporary global indigenous leader and environmental activist supported by Survival International.⁴

Davi Kopenawa's shamanic dreams and visions on the future of the world are expressed in his testimonial auto-ethnography *The Falling Sky Words of a Yanomami Shaman* (Kopenawa, Albert 2013). This auto-biography could be an inspiration for imagining a non-dualistic world and cosmos, where the eco-cosmological visions of the shaman hold the world by changing the worldview. In the Yanomami worldview the shamans hold the sky by means of shamanic ecstatic rituals, and by doing so he or she heals the imbalances and disturbances between the human and the non-human world. The shamanic 'holding of the sky' relates to shamanic eco-dialogical rituals as spiritual dialogues, mediations and encounters with the cultures of malevolent spirits who need healing through a deep ritual and spiritual communication.

When they think their land is getting spoiled, the white people speak of 'pollution'. In our language, when sickness spreads relentlessly through the forest, we say that xawara [epidemic fumes] have seized it and that it becomes ghost.

What the white people call the whole world is being tainted because of the factories that make all their merchandise, their machines, and their motors. Though the sky and the earth are vast, their fumes eventually spread in every direction, and all are affected: humans, game, and the forest. It is true. Even the trees are

⁴ <http://www.survivalinternational.org/films/yanomamiland>.

sick from it. Having become ghost, they lose their leaves, they dry up and break all by themselves. The fish also die from it in the rivers' soiled waters. The white people will make the earth and the sky sick with the smoke from their minerals, oil, bombs, and atomic things. Then the winds and the storms will enter into a ghost state. (Kopenawa, Albert 2013, 295)

As a spiritual shamanic indigenous radical critique of modernity and an indigenous apocalyptic vision, the Falling Sky can be read as a fundamental dismissal of global anthropocentrism, modernity and materialism. This modernity and materialism resulting in the geological and ecological concept of anthropocene "a world being substantially reconfigured by human activity" (Hamilton 2014, 1), is facing today unprecedented humanly orchestrated ecological, social and cultural disasters.

A new knowledge based on indigenous critique of modernity and its apotheosis of anthropocene might potentially have the power to create a new imagination of a radically interconnected and spiritual world, a worldview which anthropocene - despite its incredibly digital and global capacities - has yet not succeeded to create.

But will an interconnected world-view arise fast enough and gain sufficient political, economic, and social traction soon enough to set humanity on a new course? (Hamilton 2014, 7)

I am convinced that we can learn from the indigenous critique and worldview: only if we start learning to imagine a different reality, to dream and to eco-dialogue we will start to transform and to heal us and the world. Indigenous shamanic worldviews and their dialogic eco-cosmologies reveal a path for academic, spiritual and ecological discoveries and learning.

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