Abstract

The main aim of shamanistic initiation among the Yanomami people of the Upper Orinoco River region in Venezuela is the metamorphosis of the human body into a Cosmic Body, or what I term the ‘corporeal cosmo-genesis’. During the initiatory ordeal, the neophyte undergoes an intense experience of death through dismemberment by the spirits, and subsequent rebirth, thus overcoming the human condition and becoming an individual living spirit. But at the same time, he becomes a ‘collection’ of other spirits who leave their natural habitats - located on the mountain tops and in the forest - and move into the initiate’s body which becomes their abode. As the candidate surrenders his soul and humanness to the spirits, the latter become his personal allies and sources of power while at the same time imbuing the shaman’s post mortem ego with certain properties that can best be described in holographic terms.

Transformation of the human condition during initiation, through the fusion of body and cosmos, is manifested on two levels. On the micro-cosmic body-level, the shaman’s body becomes a micro-replica of the Yanomami universe, consisting of distinctive body-structural components, embodied by the master shaman, such as the path of spirits, communal spirit-house, and Cosmic Mountain among others. At the same time, the candidate’s ego-consciousness undergoes radical transformation of self-perception and mode of being as it expands beyond its usual body-self boundaries into a cosmic, all-embracing open mode, becoming unified with the external dimensionality of the macrocosm. The body, in this sense, becomes a medium for embodiment and manifestation of a larger structure of the Yanomami cosmos. It is through mediation of the shaman’s body that the physical features of the Yanomami life world intersect with the invisible world of spirits.

Representation vs. being-in-the-world
Intellectualism vs. lived experience
Culture vs. lifeworld
Dualism (Mind/body; Subject/object, nature/super nature) vs. holism/embodiment

The key words are highlighted.
Anthropological critique

• Anthropological conception of ‘Culture’ characterised by linguistic and intellectual interpretations of social existence, divorced from biology and the human body.
• **Body** perceived as an unchangeable, material entity and object among objects; a part of the natural world of science and subject to biological empiricism.
• Culture is understood (interpreted) as a system of signs and symbols that could be read as text (This was in later years replaced with terms such as ‘discourse’ and ‘representation’).
• “The body is not only reduced to the status of a sign; it is also made into an object of purely mental operations, a ‘thing’ onto which social patterns are projected” (Jackson 1983:329).
• The body (and its parts) are perceived as an object; a source of symbols whose cultural meaning and social significance are explained in terms of various discourses.
• **Intellectualism** tends to reduce bodily experiences to abstract semiotic models and regard practices (such as shamanistic) as ‘symbolic’ of something outside themselves.
• As a result of this focus on discourse, textuality and representation, the notion of ‘experience’ was left out of general theories of culture.

• **Shamanism** as a topic of ethnographic research and analysis was either:
  (a) Psychologised or reduced to universal properties of the human mind
  (b) Intellectualised or reduced to socio-cultural symbolic and semantic explanations divorced from the human body
  (c) Reduced to materialistic explanations of biology.
• **Shamans** described as: manipulators; psychopaths; imitators; ventriloquists…
• **Consciousness and Altered States of Consciousness** reduced to mere psychological states and cognitive functions of the brain.
• **Spirits** are reduced to unconscious projections or simply dismissed a priori as non-existent.
• The successful outcomes of **shamanistic healing** were ascribed to **placebo effect**.
• Complex belief system and cosmologies are assigned symbolic, representative value and reduced to semiotic models.

Phenomenology: basic principles, methods and central insights

• In 1906, a German mathematician and philosopher **Edmund Husserl** developed phenomenology as a transformative, anti-positivistic methodology aiming at understanding consciousness.
• As opposed to representation, the domain of phenomenology is **being-in-the-world**. The phenomenological method aims at direct understanding and thorough description of phenomena by including all modalities of human experience and deconstructing the way in which they are objectified and ideologically theorised.

Phenomenology aims:
(a) to describe human consciousness in its lived immediacy
(b) to reach an undistorted/’pure’ description of experience
(c) to capture life as it is lived, before it becomes the object of theoretical elaboration or conceptual systematising

• Phenomenology starts with the premise that the world is real, that it can be experienced, and that this experience can be described. The starting point is the world in its totality as an indeterminate horizon of conscious experiences.
• Before the world can be objectified and reflected upon, it must be encountered first as a world of meaning.
• The world is indeterminate: The world is not “…something finished, something which thought can bring to a close: the world is always in the making, and our thoughts, like our actions, have meaning only in relation to the practical and social life in which we are engaged” (William James cited in Jackson 1996:4).

Phenomenological Method

• The main method in phenomenology developed by Husserl is called ‘phenomenological reduction’ or _epoche_.
• The main aim of _epoche_ is transformation of consciousness in relation to natural attitude
• Reduction involves the act of bracketing the world of ‘objective’ reality in order to explore the reality of human consciousness; ‘putting aside’ or ‘bracketing’ temporarily questions concerning the rational, objective and ontological status of ideas and beliefs in order to grasp better the way in which they appear in their consciousness.

Phenomenological central insights

(a) Embodiment of consciousness:
• Consciousness is embodied; it originates in the body
• Consciousness and body are inseparable although the radical disengagement of one from the other can occur temporarily through dis-embodiment, a feeling of being outside of one’s normal body-boundaries, or self-consciousness of being inside one’s own body. Through shamanistic initiation this unity of body and ego-consciousness becomes temporarily fragmented whereby the ego-dissolution contains the experience of body-dismemberment.

(b) Intentionality
• Consciousness is always conscious of something.
• Consciousness is an endless stream between the two poles: subject and object.
• Consciousness is a movement or flow from ego, as its source directed towards an object or other egos (other human beings).
• Consciousness is not a thing in itself but a process constituted through engagement of human beings in the world.
Phenomenology of perception

• **Maurice Merleau-Ponty** developed Husserl’s basic insights further by shifting focus from an individual transformation of consciousness through reduction to the engagement of human beings-in-the-world through the bodily act of perception.

  - Body is a ‘setting in relation to the world’, while consciousness is ‘body projecting itself into the world’ (Merleau-Ponty 1962:303).
  - The problematic of perception as a methodological principle with aims to collapse the distinction between mind and body and subject and object.
  - Primacy given to the experience of perceiving over the objects of perception; the latter are the result of reflective thinking.
  - Shift of focus from objects of perception to the act of perceiving; there can be no object without perceiving it first.
  - Perception starts with or in the body rather than in objects or from the objective point of view. This process Merleau-Ponty calls **pre-objective**.
  - Things exist only because we can perceive them in the first place.
  - Perception is not invariable but open-ended and indeterminate. There is no limit to what we can perceive.

Phenomenology and its application in anthropology (ethnography)

• “The application of phenomenology in ethnography involves detailed description of how people immediately experience time, space, and the world in which they live. At the same time the ‘facts’ of natural science, like the notion of objective reality itself, are treated as phenomena of human experience, together with beliefs of so called subjective reality” (Jackson 1996:12).

• “Phenomenology is a descriptive science of existential beginnings, not of already constituted cultural products. If our perception ‘ends in objects’, the goal of phenomenological anthropology of perception is to capture that moment of transcendence in which perception begins, and, in the midst of its arbitrariness and indeterminacy, constitutes and is constituted by culture” (Csordas 1990:9).

• “The body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as the subject of culture or as the existential ground of culture” (Csordas 1990:5).

• The rift between the subject and object or body and mind is bridged through the methodological analytical concept of **embodiment**. “Embodiment [is] an existential condition in which the body is the subjective source of inter-subjective ground of experience” (Csordas 1999:181).

• It is the general task of phenomenology and more specifically anthropology to bridge various dualities such as between subject and object, body and mind, and material and spiritua, by grounding its analysis in concrete ethnographic examples of other beings-in-the-world or other lifeworlds.

The concept of lifeworld

• The term ‘**lifeworld**’ is preferred over the term ‘culture’.
Lifeworld, according to Husserl, is the world of immediate and shared experience that exists for us independently and apriori to any theoretical reflection of objectification. Lifeworld is: “…that domain of everyday, immediate social existence and practical activity, with all its habituality, its crises, its vernacular and idiomatic character, its biographical particularities, its decisive events and indecisive strategies, which theoretical knowledge addresses but does not determine, from which conceptual understanding arises but on which it does not primarily depend” (Jackson:8).

“Ethnography is important in human understanding because it provides us with an opportunity to explore knowledge as an inter-subjective process of shared human experience rather than a domain of hidden truths and social laws. “It brings us into direct dialogue with others” (Jackson:8).

**Phenomenology and fieldwork**

The conventional method of data gathering in anthropological fieldwork has hitherto been ‘participant-observation’. The legacy of this technique, at least at the level of textual presentation, is grounded in a measure of the scientific positivistic attitude emphasising the neutrality of detached observation with minimal intrusion and interference in the studied culture. Ethnographic analysis in this sense involves certain positivistic expectations which produce data that can be interpreted positively.

Without compromising a critical perspective, my ethnographic engagement with the Yanomami was mainly inspired by Rachel-Dolmatoff’s ethnography *The Shaman and the Jaguar*, which contains a balanced presentation of both the Desana experiences and the author’s own attempts to gain an inside perspective on them.

A similar orientation to fieldwork was undertaken recently by a group of scholars who favoured an experiential full-participatory approach (Goulet and Young 1994). The advocates of this approach place emphasis on the importance of first hand experience of rituals and associated changes in consciousness.

The shift in methodology, which accompanies this approach, involves a change in attitude, from traditional “participant-observation” to what Laughlin (1994:102) calls ‘participant-comprehension’. The focus of data gathering in this way shifts from passive observation and interviews to active participation in dialogue and ritual activities.

Although in my view this kind of “transpersonal participant observation” is not radically different from the classical notion of “participant-observation”, I agree that personal experience can be used as “a mode of experimentation, of testing and exploring the ways in which our experiences conjoin or connect us with others, rather than the ways they set us apart” (Jackson 1989:4). In other words, the new scientific scrutiny, which echoes the Husserlian plea for rigorous scientific philosophy (see Husserl 1960), would not take informants’ information for granted. Rather, it would test their validity (if possible) through intersubjective involvement and experience. The incorporation of anthropologists’ subjective experience into ethnographic analysis is what Jackson (1989) (advocating Husserl, and especially William James) refers to as a “radically empirical method”. These subjective experiences should not be dismissed a priori as irrelevant or biased but treated as practicable research tools (Goulet 1994). The personal data can then be compared to others’ in order to explore “what is ours as alien and what was alien as
our own” (Merleau-Ponty 1964:120). Full participation in the lives of others without any pre-conceived prejudices requires the bracketing of all personal beliefs and suspension of disbelief in order to open up a part of ourselves to the experience, blocked off from our own cultural assumptions (Goulet and Young 1994). However, opening up to experience of other lifeworlds involves more than simply the intellect. It is a holistic endeavor which involves the whole being of the ethnographer; it requires engagement through all the bodily senses.

**Notes on shamanism, body/consciousness and embodiment**

• Culture is not only a representation, it is primarily constituted in bodily processes of perception, by which representations emerge in the first place.
• The shaman’s body is not a symbolic representation of the Yanomami cosmos. It is not a ‘thing onto which social patterns are projected’ (Jackson:329). It is an expression of existential lived reality and a direct manifestation of the Yanomami cosmos through embodiment. The structure (of the cosmos) emerges out of practice itself; it corresponds to the structure of shaman’s ego-consciousness.
• Shamans do not imitate the spirits; rather they incarnate a particular spirit and become one with that spirit through the process of embodiment.
• The meaning emerges from the text of initiation itself. Language is a vehicle of embodiment. Language is a bodily act – it is grounded in the body.
• Shamanistic practice is embodied experience. It is a technique of consciousness while the body is an object of this technique.
• The aim of the paper is not so much to transcend the nature/supernature dualism but to demonstrate the kind of body that emerges through initiation which enables the Yanomami to come into relationship and union with the spirits.
• Spirits are not dismissed a priori as unconscious projections, hallucinations, figments of imagination as cognitive capacity of the mind or simply treated as non-existent but are treated as empirical realities of human consciousness.
• Manifested modalities of consciousness are not only visions but **multi-sensory somatic experiences** (visual components develop through practice).
• Initiation is a direct experience of the pre-objective act of perception, a flow of consciousness with its intentionality directed at the world but at the same it is centred upon the subject of perception (inflow of hekura spirits). Pre-objective apperception of incoming spirits is indeterminate and spontaneous, i.e. the existence of various spirits is culturally predetermined although during the initiation they appear randomly; the embodiment of spirits lasts throughout the shaman’s lifetime (indeterminacy of initiation). Once the spirits are embodied, they become objectified as their manifest identities are recognized and acknowledged.

**Additional concepts**

**Holography/hologram**
• ‘Hologram’ (‘whole’, from the Greek *holos*).
• The basic premise of a **holographic worldview**:
  (a) the ‘whole’ is contained within each of its constitutive parts
(b) each part is equal to the ‘whole’;
(c) each part of a hologram has the potential to reproduce the original image.

• **Holography** is a special type of three-dimensional, lens-less photography, invented by Nobel Prize winner Dennis Gabor in 1971. Gabor used holographic film which contains an interference pattern of chaotic light signatures or a hologram. Each illuminated piece of this image-pattern produces the whole three-dimensional, original image.

• Pribram (1981) identifies the basic principles of holography in his neurological research of the interaction between the brain, visual cortex and memory system. By examining the interaction between vision or perception and previously stored memories, he discovered that they collide with each other and create certain ‘interference patterns’ - holographic in their nature - between visual input of image reception and expectation (Hampden-Turner 1982: 94). He concludes (a) that memory is stored in the brain in a holographic manner, and (b) the human brain is a hologram, because in the case of brain damage, the brain will continue to store the totality of personal memory.

• Inspired by the work of Roy Wagner and my thesis supervisor Dr Jadran Mimica, I use the concept of holography, not as an intellectual conception, alternative viewpoint or a theoretical construction. Nor is holography something that forms the basis of the Yanomami worldview. It is an analytical tool and a particular ‘mode of understanding’ of the world (Wagner 1991:170). I developed this concept further in terms of specific characteristics of the Yanomami lifeworld.

• **Trance**: *transire* (Latin: ‘to die; ‘to go beyond’; ‘to pass from one state to another’). When the Yanomami shaman dances and sings in ecstasy together with his spirits, he dies (*nomarayoma*) and enters trance, which is in this instance, a conscious dimension of free-ego-transformations as particular spirits or mythological scenarios manifest themselves through the shaman’s body. In this case, it can be said that although there is no specific word for ‘trance’ as a peak-experience in the Yanomami language, the reference to shaman ‘dying’ corresponds to an original meaning of Latin *transire*.

• **Ecstasy**: *stasis* (Latin), the state of non-movement; *ex-stasis* (ecstasy) stands for movement, motion, consciousness in flux and, as such, is synonymous to *trance*. Also, it can refer to exhilarated state of bliss Both elements are present in Yanomami shamanism.

• **Phenomenology**: *phenom* (Greek), ‘What shows itself in itself’; ‘What is manifest’. Phenomenology: a study of phenomena.

• **Axis mundi**: (Latin), an imaginary vertical axis also known as ‘cosmic pillar’ which connects all layers of the cosmos. It is connected to the concept of ‘Centre’ of the universe and the shaman’s ability to journey in ecstasy to different cosmic regions (also known as: World Tree; Cosmic Mountain)

• **Illud tempus** (Latin); *no patapi tehe* (Yanomami), primordial time; a world in its raw, non-differentiated state; a dimension in constant flux, subject to universal metamorphosis. Also, it is the same dimension or modality of consciousness of the entranced shaman.