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Resumo: Este artigo parte de uma curta narrativa Yanomami sobre o Espírito Dono do Ouro para descrever sucintamente o pandemônio que a corrida do ouro do final dos anos 1980 provocou em suas comunidades. Passa então a relacionar essa narrativa com as diversas versões da fábula europeia do El Dorado, discutindo o poder de certas ideias resistentes ao tempo que ainda permeiam o imaginário sobre o Novo Mundo. Considerando a virtual impossibilidade de conectar essa narrativa Yanomami do século XXI às fantasias européias do século XVI e seguintes, o artigo também reflete sobre a (in)capacidade da antropologia canônica contemporânea de lidar com temas como esse que desafiam a atual imaginação etnográfica.
Palavras-chave: El Dorado; Crise; Yanomami; Brasil; Séculos XIX-XXI.

Abstract: This article takes a short Yanomami narrative about the Owner Spirit of Gold as a lead to briefly describe the turmoil that the gold rush of the late 1980s caused in the lives of numerous communities. It then relates the narrative to the various versions of the European El Dorado fable in order to discuss the power of certain recurrent ideas that still pervade how the New World is imagined. Given the virtual impossibility of linking the twenty-first century Yanomami narrative to sixteenth-century European fantasies, the article also reflects upon the (in)capacity of contemporary canonical anthropology to analyze themes such as this one which defy the current ethnographic imagination.
Keywords: El Dorado; Crisis; Yanomami; Brazil; 20th-21st Centuries.

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1. The gold rush

In 2005, I was visiting a Sanumá village in the Auaris region on the border between Brazil and Venezuela when a young man told me about the owner of gold, the same gold that had been responsible for the biggest catastrophe to fall upon his people in recent history. This paper tells this story and sets it against the background of the Whiteman's El Dorado madness. The readings I made as preparatory for the writing fascinated me and absorbed me beyond reasonable limits. I hope to instill in the reader a similar fascination.

From 1987 to 1991, the Yanomami in the state of Roraima, north Brazil, were assaulted by tens of thousands of placer miners (*garimpeiros*). As latter-day adventurers in search of the elusive El Dorado, they wreaked havoc on nearly seven thousand people who occupied the eastern part of the Yanomami Indian Land, leaving behind a trail of death, illness, hunger, malnutrition, despair, and bewilderment among the survivors. The invaders outnumbered the Indians manifold and took control of often extremely tense contexts (Albert 1994).

In the first two years of *garimpeiro*-invasion, an estimated 12.5% (roughly 1,500) of the Yanomami in Roraima had perished due to continuous malaria epidemics and armed attacks by the miners (Ramos 1995a, 1996). If this figure seems rather modest in absolute terms, suffice it to imagine the equivalent proportion of Brazilians if such a disaster were to hit the country: more than 14 million dead! (Ramos 2008: 113). The loss of so many people is bound to deeply affect the wellbeing of any human population.

Infant mortality and orphanage were perhaps the worst consequences of the gold fever. Children who survived their parents became fair game for illegal "adoption" by both Brazilians and foreigners. Entire communities were wiped out when the survivors of devastating epidemics merged into other villages. Forest trails to neighboring villages and to hunting grounds were bisected by huge craters dug deep into the soil, destroying houses, gardens, and chasing away game animals. Dependence on strangers for food and other goods exposed the Indians to constant abuses, greatly aggravating their misery.

I went through one of the most excruciating experiences in my life when, in 1991, I worked as interpreter to a medical team in several Sanumá communities in the Auaris River valley. Unlike other Yanomami regions, such as Paapiú and Surucucus (Menegola/Ramos 1992; Castro Lobo 1996), Auaris was not a target for gold panning, but simply a corridor through which Brazilian *garimpeiros* passed to reach Venezuelan grounds. Nevertheless, the mere sojourn of miners in one or two of those villages was enough to spread malaria throughout the entire region. With just one medical team to assist over one thousand people dispersed in many villages, a large part of the Sanumá population remained totally unaided. In twelve months, 6% of the Auaris Sanumá succumbed to the lethal *Plasmodium falciparum*

(Ramos 1995b). A number of children died and many more would have perished if our medical team had not arrived just in time to curb the epidemic ... for the time being. Dramatic cases included heroic blood transfusions done in loco, long sleepless nights fighting death, the patient effort to retrieve a beautiful child from her disfigured condition due to prolonged undernourishment, and the sobering shock of watching a boy die at my doorstep. Such tragic events welded my memories with those of the Sanumá for the rest of our lives.

2. A Midas dream or nightmare?

The tale – or myth, if you like – I heard in 2005 is brief, sharp, and condensed as myths and short stories usually are (Leach 1966; Benjamin 1985: 197-221; Calvino 1994: 45-67; all the writings by Jorge Luis Borges). Like the world in a nutshell, it highlights the most striking features of the critical events (Das 1995) that in the last fifteen years overpowered the lives of the Yanomami in general and the Sanumá in particular. This is the story paraphrased from the way it was told.

> Gold has an owner, the spirit of gold. As the name indicates, it is an entity made of gold from head to foot, including his hat. When he bathes in the river, layers of skin fall into the water, but the skin is always restored. From time to time, he scratches an arm and sheds a larger amount of gold into the river for the benefit of humans. He allows people to pan this gift of gold, but issues a warning: "take only a little or I'll kill your children!"

We immediately perceive the pedagogical value of this mini-narrative. Its precepts stress a number of features that set the Sanumá apart from the non-indigenous invaders. In the first place, resources are not available in an unrestricted, prodigal manner. On the contrary, they have owners who control their reproduction and use. Judicious consumption is the best way to avert punishment. Resources are to be used, by all means, but with moderation and good sense. Excess can kill, especially children, thus jeopardizing the very reproduction of society.

Other indigenous peoples show a similar attitude. Consider, for instance, what the Caribspeaking Ye'kuana, the Sanumás' neighbors at Auaris, say. In speaking of gold, they also speak of ethics.

> Wiyu, an anaconda that is also the owner of water, owns gold. An androgynous entity, it has the power of turning into a human being of either sex and deceiving real humans by seducing them. The Ye'kuana say that Wanaadi [the Demiurge] put gold underground for Ye'kuana use, but it should be taken with great care and parsimony. People can only extract a little at a time, when they need to buy something, for greed

> infuriates Wiyu. That is why only mature men should know about gold because young people have no control of themselves (Andrade 2010).[1]

Like the Sanumá, the Ye'kuana were deeply affected by the gold rush in the Auaris region in the early nineties, suffering equally with malaria epidemics and social distress (Ramos 1996). The golden spirit is then to the Sanumá what the anaconda is to the Ye'kuana. The imagery varies, but the message remains the same. In sharp contrast to uncontrolled *garimpeiro* consumption that so shocks them, the Indians weave their gold tales precisely to set themselves apart from the reckless intruders. Economic morality takes the form of extra human commands that trigger off doom when disobeyed. Thus, praise of moderation and condemnation of intemperance are constitutive principles, as refusal of material accumulation is constitutive of most indigenous societies.

These principles are foreign to the moral economy of mining and other non indigenous extractive activities anywhere, but most visibly in the fragile Amazonian context. In flagrant contrast to the indigenous politics of temperance, what guides the invaders is usually an (anti-)ethics of abuse and excess (Slater 2002: 35). There is more than a hint of irony in the fact that the legend of King Midas, probably the remote precursor of the Sanumá gold spirit, carries a strong message condemning greed and self-indulgence. Midas' insatiable craving for gold caused him the utmost misfortune of being deprived of both nourishment and offspring. Like in the Sanumá tale, wealth in excess killed his child. However, unlike the Sanumá, those who invented and go on recounting the Midas tale do not take its lesson seriously. Gold seekers anywhere in time and space would rather risk health and well-being than give up extracting gold to the last grain.

My intention is not to focus on the Sanumá short story as an object of detailed anthropological analysis, nor am I inclined to do a cultural exegesis of it. For my purpose here it is sufficient to point out the ethical and moral lessons it contains and suggest that, like in Herman Hesse's glass bead game (2003), the tale of the gilded spirit (or the Ye'kuana androgynous anaconda) elegantly encapsulates the mores of a society that values collective distribution above individual accumulation, and parsimony above extravagant consumption. I propose instead to project the story of the golden spirit onto the past, or rather, bring the past up to the present and reflect upon the persistence of images and ideas throughout the centuries. I

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1 Andrade, Karenina: Personal communication. September 21, 2010.
My first encounter with the Ye'kuana ethics of spare consumption occurred during my fieldwork among the Sanumá in the 1970s. A young man came back home from a hunting trip laden with many more wild pig than the village could possibly consume, given the limited storage possibilities. A murmur of censure spread through the area, condemning the fellow for his recklessness.

would also like to ponder on the capacity (or lack of it) of anthropology to take discourse fragments as productive hints worthy of historical enquiry.

3. El Dorado and its transformations

The abundant literature on the legend of El Dorado reflects its magnitude as a trope that gave impetus to the conquest of America, particularly the Amazon. We find a wide range of writings all the way from serious scholarship (Sweet 1974; Gil 1989; Gondim 1994; Smiljanic Borges ms. 1995; Whitehead 1997; Magasich-Airola/De Beer 2000; Slater 2002; Ugarte 2004) to light-weight journalism (Smith n.d.), high literature (Naipaul 1984; Voltaire 2009), and cheap pulp fiction (Monteiro 1973). Furthermore, there are copious sixteenth and seventeenth-century chronicles of the New World, not to mention fiction in films, such as the adventures of Indiana Jones, the stylish and intrepid Hollywood anthropologist.

It is understandable, although not necessarily reasonable, that so many writers busied themselves with such an elusive subject. The meanders of European imagination, the tenacity of illusion, and the power of greed that accompanied the search for El Dorado are perhaps as unique in world history as to justify such a plethora of publications. Lack of success in the interminable search of the fabled gold, rather than discouraging adventurers, seemed to excite them all the more. The failure of expedition after expedition was no deterrent for other expeditions to start anew. The Amazon became an enormous cemetery of men and dreams. But, like a Phoenix, they did not succumb to the ashes of realism. Mixed up with the chimera of golden kings, cities, and lakes was also the manifestation of ancient European fantasies. The tropical ambiance had the effect of materializing in those minds the mystical Amazonas, the warrior women of ancient Greek imagination, and of reviving much antipode oddness. It is as though for the conquerors of the New World the presence of gold in and of itself was just too plain a fact: a source of material wealth had to be more than simply an economic asset. It had to be embroidered with fancy and phantasmagoria to be worth the effort. Pragmatism was obviously not a guiding value in the first centuries of the conquest of Amazonia, as it seems to have been in Mexico (Todorov 1985).

The first image of El Dorado referred to precisely that: The Golden One. It was probably hatched in Africa with the fable of Prester John, the legendary king of an Ethiopian "jewel-studded realm" (Sanders 1978: 118). Gil dates the first appearance of the golden man in America in 1539 in the form of an Indian chief "who bathed everyday in the nude and, as he came out of the water, had himself daubed with turpentine and sprayed with gold powder, his only garment, and the glow that emanated from his body was a marvel" (Gil 1989: 65; my translation).

Another version had the Gilded Man perform a ritual consisting of going out on a raft "to deposit offerings of gold, pearls, emeralds, and other precious ornaments into the middle of a lake" (Slater 2002: 35).

Unimpressed, Alexander Humboldt pragmatically tried to demystify the El Dorado illusion:

> On the banks of the Caura, and in other wild parts of Guiana, where painting the body is used instead of tattooing, the nations anoint themselves with turtle-fat, and stick spangles of mica with a metallic lustre, white as silver and red as copper, on their skin, so that at a distance they seem to wear lace clothes. The fable of 'the gilded man' is, perhaps, founded on a similar custom (Humboldt quoted in Whitehead 1997: 141, note 33).

Caura, I must stress, is a river in Sanumá territory on the Venezuelan side of the border.

The Guiana region had its days of glory when the gullible Spanish explorers shifted their attention from Peru, Colombia, and other South American locations.[2] By mid-sixteenth century, "Meta [in Colombia] is lost in the mists of memory while the formerly insignificant Guayana springs up to light" (Gil 1989: 74; my translation). By that time, the Gilded Man had metamorphosed into a Gilded City, the fabulous Manoa, "the seat and residence of Inga the Emperor" (Whitehead 1997: 139-140) near the equally amazing Parima (or Rupunuwini) salt lake.[3] Manoa was also associated with the prodigious Amazons, the warrior women who so impressed Dominican Friar Gaspar de Carvajal (Gondim 1994: 83-86; Magasich-Airola/De Beer 2000: 171-174). Its name survived as Manaus, the capital city of the Brazilian state of Amazonas, also related to the Manoa indigenous people, "the famed gold-traders from Rio Negro" (Whitehead 1997: 140, note 30).[4] Among the many possible sites for golden Manoa, the strongest candidate was the vast

2 Historians identify many places in South America where fabulous wealth awaited European adventurers. Of these four stand out: Mojos or Paititi, probably in Lake Titicaca, Guatavita, another fabled lake in Colombia, Manoa, usually placed in the Orinoco-Amazon watershed, and the Enchanted City of the Cesars in Patagonia (Magasich-Airola/De Beer 2000).

3 It is Humboldt again who discredits the notion of the golden lake. He "has no doubts in identifying the Rupunuwini of sixteenth-century geographers as the imagined one formed by the real lake Amucu and the tributaries of the Uraricuera. ... The mica rocks of the Ucucuamo hills, named 'the golden mountain' by the Indians, the name of the Parima River (the Branco of the Portuguese), the floods of the Urariapara, Parima, and Jurumu Rivers, and the existence of the Amucu lake were the ultimate causes for the creation of the fabulous Dorado of the Parima" (Gil 1989: 194).

4 Whitehead (1997: 140, note 30). Whitehead continues: "Their power in the Guiana highlands was still very evident to the Dutch and Brazilians of the late seventeenth century through the activities of the war-chief Ajuricaba" (1997: 140-141, note 30).

region between the Orinoco and the Amazon Rivers, precisely where most Yanomami now live.

4. The many faces of a fantasy

That European conquerors brought their fears, follies, fantasies, and hopes to the New World comes as no surprise.[5] What is remarkable, as V. S. Naipaul observes, is that the "legend of the El Dorado, narrative within narrative, witness within witness, had become like the finest fiction, indistinguishable from truth" (1984: 38); or, in the words of Neil Whitehead, an *idée fixe* (1997: 11). Resilient in the face of the most glaring failures, the fiction of El Dorado has persisted well into the present century. Its surviving power resides precisely in its capacity to transform itself. From Ethiopia to Guiana, the golden chimera switched from being a powerful man to a sumptuous city, a bountiful lake, and, finally, a disembodied icon of fast-earned fortunes.

Gold madness struck Amazonia again in the twentieth century, not as a capitalist or State endeavor, but as a hyperbolic euphoria that led to an immense social and economic waste. The *fin-de-siècle* gold rush in the Yanomami area did not result in investments for the public good, but rather in lavish acts of individual exhibitionism, social vandalism, and international criminality. More than 80% of the gold extracted from the indigenous territory was sent south, then to Uruguay for laundering to feed the drug traffic to the United States and Israel (Ramos 1996: 136).

The contemporary version of the sixteenth-century gold diggers, a multitude of *garimpeiros* who roam around the remotest corners of Brazil and neighboring countries, carry with them the dream-nightmare syndrome that haunted a long string of generations of fortune hunters. Like countless adventurers in the past, present-day miners suffer similar misfortunes, including death and destitution. As with their predecessors, these modern *garimpeiros* seem to have greed and rapacity as their guiding values. Whether they work as menial laborers, often under debt peonage, cooks or pilots, these men (and women), often by the thousands, are under the nearly total control of powerful *garimpo* bosses (Cleary 1992: 49-69). Few manage to escape the vicious circle of indebtedness. At the peak of the gold rush in Yanomami land, one such boss once boasted about his bonanza by proudly stating that he could afford to have an accident each month with total loss of airplane and pilot! (Ramos 1996: 142). This anecdote reinforces Baudrillard's

5 The literature on this subject is impressive. This is but a small sample: Alegría (1978), Bartra (1994), Baudet (1965), Berkhofer (1978), Chiappelli (1976), Dickason (1993), Dudley/Novak (1972), Dussel (1993), Friederici (1986), Gerbi (1992), Greenblatt (1991; 1993), Hulme (1986), O'Gorman (1961), Pagden (1993), Ryan (1981), Sale (1991).

irony (1981) when he asked "If you had 50 million dollars, what would you do with them?" and answered: "Chaos"! According to a *garimpeiro* saying, "money from the first *bamburro* [the lucky find of a gold bed] has to be spent on whores and booze", otherwise, you'll never have that luck again (Cleary 1992: 122; see also Lazarin/Rabelo 1984; MacMillan 1995).

Contrast this liberality of behavior and wastefulness of resources to the indigenous outlook: the Ye'kuana anaconda and the Sanumá gold spirit, as curators of public wealth, preach the exact opposite and threaten to punish with death whoever dilapidates such valuable resource. With good reason, after the severe infant mortality caused by the gold rush, children are the target of the Sanumá gold spirit. This means, in the last analysis, that excess puts at risk the people's very survival. When the Sanumá have their gold spirit threaten to kill the children, they are proclaiming that an extra-human power presides over the reproductive capacity of their society.

As mentioned before, both the Sanumá and the Ye'kuana lived through the rough times of the gold fever. I have no information as to whether they had any representations of gold mining before the first appearance of *garimpeiros* in their territory around the early 1960s. But it is clear that the latter's violent irruption in the Indians' lives thirty years later was a sufficiently powerful motivation for the intellectual work that is necessary to digest such a destructive novelty.[6] Thus, rather than probing into the origins of the Sanumá narrative about gold or attempting a comprehensive description of it, I limit myself to reflect upon the puzzling similarities – and divergences – between the indigenous and the European versions.

5. Fragments of a fantastic discourse

I should point out that both the Sanumá and the Ye'kuana learned the simple techniques of placer mining with the *garimpeiros* who first appeared in the Auaris region in the 1960s and 1970s. These came in small numbers and headed north and northeast toward Venezuela. Expelled from Venezuelan sites, they returned and many went on mining on the Uraricaá, Ericó, Coimin, and Surubai Rivers, in the territory of the Xiriana, the easternmost Yanomami subgroup. In the 1980s they were again expelled, this time by Brazilian authorities, but at least one of

6 It is worth comparing the Sanumá case in Auaris with that of the Yanomae in the Demini region, state of Amazonas. While Auaris was on the path of *garimpeiros*, and hence hard hit by malaria epidemics, Demini was spared most of the suffering caused by the gold rush, in part due to its location, and in part thanks to the watchful vigilance by Yanomae leaders. For a detailed analysis of the interpretation of the gold rush in the Demini area, see Albert (1988; 1993).

them settled in a Xiriana village and adopted the local way of life (Ramos/Lazarin/Goodwin Gomez 1986: 80-83).

Mining brought death and disease to the Xiriana. More enduring, however, was the influence of mining activities in their lives. From the *garimpeiros* they learned how to extract gold from the earth, but they did it in their own way. They never adopted the illusion of the *bamburro*, the urge to get rich and spend lavishly, or mining as an autonomous activity, separate from the other spheres of community living. The Xiriana, and Sanumá and Ye'kuana for that matter, molded mining work at their own social image by domesticating it, so to speak, into the normal flux of their social life. People go mining as they go hunting, gathering, or harvesting (Ramos/Lazarin/Goodwin Gomez 1986: 74).

The sobering experience of facing child mortality, contagious diseases, and an inordinate number of deaths during the gold rush of the 1980s and 1990s produced other effects as well. Mining had just too high a price to pay. In order to go on practicing it, it was necessary to offset its virulence, not simply by human design, but by demand of a higher force. The Sanumá then created the owner of gold with the power of life and death: a cooperative ally when obeyed, but an executioner when ignored. His hat, a golden hat, hints at his white origin, but his behavior is definitely indigenous.

The main similarity between the gilded man of yesteryear and the Sanumá gold spirit resides in their outer appearance. Whether gold is solid or in powder makes little difference in terms of the impact its image has on the minds of Europeans/Brazilians and Indians. However, apart from the external look, the golden figure represents opposing values, as opposed are the social designs of Westerners and Indians.

The nagging question is: how did the sixteenth-century European creation of the Gilded Man reach the twentieth-century Sanumá? Could it be that Guiana, having been the hub of golden fantasies, preserved an atmosphere conducive of the persistence and diffusion of the El Dorado legend? Do strong ideas hover over the rainforest awaiting the right context to reappear? Do other contemporary indigenous peoples or regional populations in Amazonia have narratives of El Dorado to permit a sort of chained transmission?

Why the Sanumá adopted the El Dorado in human form rather than as a city is not hard to guess: while a human figure is thoroughly familiar, the notion of a blooming urban center is not. One more entity added to their pantheon of spirits (Taylor 1996) makes perfectly good sense. Could their El Dorado be the solitary rebirth of a strong icon from immemorial history, or is it the local manifestation of a continuous flow of infra-memory remembrances?

Short of specific empirical research on this subject, we are left with fragments sufficiently enticing as to whet our interpretative appetite and, above all, our desire to expand anthropological imagination beyond the narrow range of empiricism. In

this context, educated guesses are just about what we are left with while we await scholarly results.

If we think of the extraordinary persistent of the El Dorado fable in European minds, it is not so difficult to make an educated guess about the longevity of the same fable among indigenous peoples. It would be an example of implicit knowledge along the lines drawn by Alexander Humboldt. He believed the El Dorado narratives resembled "those Antiquity myths that, in traveling from country to country, have been successively adapted in different places" (Gil 1989: 194). Juan Gil considers that "the 'fable' of El Dorado, the one and only, has undergone a projection in time and space ...; hence it is possible to trace a rational history of their evolution from the initial search east of the Andes to the shift toward Guayana" (Gil 1989: 194).

On the other hand, venturing in the fields of the unreal or, better said, metareal, Michael Taussig (1986) provides us with a rare example of analytical daring when he studied shamanism and terror in Colombia. In his incursions into shamanism, sorcery, hallucinogenic trips, and genocide, Taussig transgresses the contemporary anthropological canon when his narrative overflows the limits of the discipline. As he says, ineffable, implicit knowledge can be more telling than explicit statements:

> I take implicit social knowledge to be an essentially inarticulate and imagetic nondiscursive knowing of social relationality, and in trying to understand the way that history and memory interact in the constituting of this knowledge, I wish to raise some questions about the way that certain historical events, notably political events of conquest and colonization, become objectified in the contemporary shamanic repertoire as magically empowered imagery capable of causing as well as relieving misfortune (Taussig 1986: 367).

When the past comes flashing into the present, images appear refracted by the uninterrupted work of history. "They are mythic images reflecting and condensing the experiential appropriation of the history of conquest, as that history is seen to form analogies and structural correspondences with the hopes and tribulations of the present" (Taussig 1986: 368).

The Sanumá owner of gold would be such an image performing his role as a switchboard operator between the Spanish conquistadors and the Brazilian *garimpeiros*. To know where that spirit comes from is less important to the Sanumá than the implicit knowledge that disguises a history of brutal colonization still in the making with "the intertwining of the memories of the victors with those of the vanquished" (Taussig 1986: 375). Like the miasmas that hover over jungle and mountain carrying memories of the Putumayo genocide, the images of El Dorado continue to haunt Amazonia now metamorphosed in diverse local renditions.

The Sanumá short story appropriates the European El Dorado narrative to make its own point about cultural values. The golden man with a golden hat incorporates the Sanumá implicit knowledge about gold as an economic asset, as the reminder of a historical chapter of death and misery, and, above all, as a symbol of the rationale that deploys the exercise of prudence and parsimony. Over and above the quest for gold as a useful commodity, the story reiterates the Sanumá utmost cultural value according to which intemperance is anathema to survival.

6. Toward a magical realism in anthropology?

I end this story with some queries – but no answers – to our discipline. How much do the canonical limits of contemporary anthropology inhibit our imagination when we deal with situations in which the possibility of gaining access to empirical or factual evidence from the remote past is virtually nonexistent? Are we allowed to rely upon "implicit knowledge", "obtuse meaning" (after Roland Barthes quoted in Taussig 1986: 367, see also Barthes 1985: 56), or "magical imagery"? In the absence of palpable data that might connect sixteenth-century legends to its contemporary manifestations, how are we to understand the dissemination and resilience of certain powerful ideas? What does the Sanumá short story teach us about temporality, propagation of ideas, cultural diffusion, and the flow of history?

Before anthropology turned empirical, and methodologically rigorous, that is, scientific, social thinkers dared playing in the wide fields of culture. Frazer visited the world to weave his colorful yarn of religious symbolism. Morgan shifted back and forth in time and space, between nineteenth-century Iroquois and Ancient Greece in his quest to understand what we might well call the elementary forms of civil life. While contemporaries celebrated their theoretical cunning, posterity relegates them to historical curiosities. In so doing, modern anthropology relinquished its capacity to envision non-empirical realities, leaving a vast expanse of human activity devoid of theoretical interest. Taussig's work is a rebellious cry against excessive empiricism. Similarly, the Sanumá short story poses the problem of visualizing history without historical evidence. From what we see in most of the anthropological literature today regarding untraceable chains of events, it would seem that the atavistic fear of conjectural history somehow is still haunting the profession.

I go on posing a number of further questions. There are, for instance, questions that are beyond the pale of anthropology (does God exist?). There are a number of them that can be answered by canonical anthropology (what does cosmology tell us about a people's mind frame?), and there are those that are anthropological, but cannot be answered by the discipline's present-day models (where has the Sanumá short story come from?). Regarding the latter, why can we not seek inspiration in creative sources of unanswerable questions? Literature, for instance,

can provide us with such stimulation by lifting us up from the humdrum of academic routines. Why refuse to embark on productive incursions into the allegoric world of a Jorge Luis Borges, a world made of infinitude, labyrinths, monsters, nightmares, and paradoxes ad absurdum? Or value the capacity to condense the meaning of (ir)reality into a minute capsule, such as that proposed by Guatemalan novelist Augusto Monterroso with his provoking two-phrase short story ("Cuando despertó, el dinosauro todavía estaba allí")? How do these masters of the written word resolve their dilemmas of communication when exploring the para-reality of implicit knowledge?

Perhaps anthropologists should be more faithful to the discursive style of their indigenous mentors and follow their unexpected paths unfettered by the shackles of disciplinary strictures. Writing this paper has been an exercise in letting go of such shackles, allowing doubts to remain doubts, letting loose ends remain loose, and respecting fragments for what they are without the compulsion to fill in the gaps. In sum, it has been an attempt to mimic the flow of life.

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