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# Versions versus bodies:

## translations in the missionary encounter in Amazonia<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

This paper analyzes the two distinct concepts of translation at work in the encounter between the Amazonian Wari' and the New Tribes Mission evangelical missionaries, and the equivocations stemming from this difference. While the missionaries conceive translation as a process of converting meanings between languages, conceived as linguistic codes that exist independently of culture, for the Wari', in consonance with their perspectivist ontology, it is not language that differentiates beings but their bodies, given that those with similar bodies can, as a matter of principle, communicate with each other verbally. Translation is realized through the bodily metamorphosis objectified by mimetism and making kin, shamans being the translators par excellence, capable of circulating between distinct universes and providing the Wari' with a dictionary-like lexicon that allows them to act in the context of dangerous encounters between humans and animals.

**Key words:** Wari'; Amazonia; Christianity; translation; perspectivism; shamanism.

# Versões x corpos:

## traduções no encontro missionário na Amazônia

### Resumo

Este artigo analisa dois conceitos distintos de tradução em ação no encontro entre os Wari' da Amazônia brasileira e os missionários evangélicos da Missão Novas Tribos, em particular os equívocos gerados por essa diferença. Enquanto os missionários concebem a tradução como um processo de converter significados de uma língua para a outra, concebendo a linguagem como independente da cultura, para os Wari', em consonância com a sua ontologia perspectivista, não é a linguagem que diferencia os seres, mas o corpo. Como consequência, aqueles com corpos similares podem, em princípio, comunicar-se entre si verbalmente. A tradução é assim realizada por meio da metamorfose corporal objetificada no mimetismo e na produção de parentes, sendo os xamãs os tradutores por excelência, capazes de circular entre universos distintos, disponibilizando para os Wari' uma espécie de dicionário que os habilita a atuar no contexto de encontros perigosos entre humanos e animais.

**Palavras-chave:** Wari'; Amazônia; cristianismo; tradução; perspectivismo; xamanismo.

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# Versions versus bodies:

## translations in the missionary encounter in Amazonia

*Aparecida Vilaça*

The aim of this paper is to reflect on the conflict between ontologies involved in the encounter between an indigenous Amazonian people, the Wari', and the Evangelical missionaries of the New Tribes Mission (NTM), based on the analysis of the different concepts of translation underlying this encounter.

The choice of translation as a focal point is not fortuitous since it is a central part of missionary activity as a whole, and particularly important to the work of the fundamentalists of Evangelical faith missions for whom the Bible was dictated by God from beginning to end: this means that it must be translated literally into the language of remote peoples. And not only for the missionaries, since the Wari', long before this specific encounter, found themselves concerned with the question of translation, reflecting in minute detail on it, as we shall see, although they conceived it very differently.

It is not my intention to turn to the intense linguistic, philosophical, theological and anthropological discussions concerning the concept of translation per se, since this, as well as being outside my field of competence, would lead me away from my central objective, which is to present the idea of translation implied in the perspectivist ontology of an Amazonian people in light of the contrast with the conceptions of a specific group of missionaries concerning the same topic.

### **Missionaries' words translation**

From its earliest moments, Christian missionary activity was intrinsically related to the work of learning native languages, taken as the condition of possibility for transmitting the divine message. In his analysis of the activities of Catholic missionaries among the Tagalog of the Philippines, Rafael (1993) shows that as early as the beginning of the XVII Century the Spanish king issued a decree requiring that all missionaries in the islands learn the indigenous language. The same policy was adopted in the American colonies, both in Mesoamerica and in the Andes.<sup>2</sup>

As Rafael observes (1993), this was an explicit response to the tendency towards vernacularization propagated by the Protestant Reform. Over the centuries and following the global expansion of Protestantism, which culminated in the faith missions created as part of the revivalist movements in nineteenth century Europe and North America, translations were made into the idioms of native peoples around the world.

For the fundamentalist missionaries who concern us here, preaching in the native language forms the core of their activity. In the words of a New Tribes Mission missionary: "The missionaries have concluded that for the spiritual truths to penetrate their hearts, to be understood and move them, they must be transmitted in the maternal language, even though some [Indians] know how to express themselves in Portuguese."<sup>3</sup> With this objective in mind, from its outset NTM's missionary training included studies of

<sup>2</sup> See Durston (2007: 79) on the need for sixteenth-century Catholics priests to understand Quechua, and Hanks (2010, 2013, 2014) on the Yucatan Maya. In the case of Peru, the language was a dialect of Quechua spoken in Cuzco: see Durston (2007: 2, 187-189).

<sup>3</sup> Previously found on [www.ntm.org](http://www.ntm.org), accessed May 2010; the article that this quote was drawn from is no longer posted.

language and literacy, which would later focus exclusively on those trainees demonstrating more aptitude for linguistics. According to Johnston (1985), such people are able to capture a new language like children, offering information to the linguists outside the field area and thereby “cut down the time it takes to break down a language” (Johnston 1985: 218).

Schieffelin (2007: 144) argues that the idea of language as a code separable from cultural practices has been a recurring Western conceit which presumes that “[t]he vernacular could be expanded, contracted and changed in myriad of ways to express ideas that were foreign and still remain the same vernacular”. Schieffelin adds that the author directly inspiring many evangelical Protestant missionaries, is missionary-linguist Eugene Nida. In particular she cites his work from 1964, where he developed the “dynamic or functional equivalence model of translation,” which centres on the practical search for “close functional equivalents to words” (ibid: 144, 145). The aim is to achieve word-for-word translations in the belief that the translations will thereby “stay very close to the literal meanings of the ‘original Bible text’” (ibid: 147).

Although personally disinterested in native cultures (Schieffelin 2007: 144), conceived to be little more than an array of errors, the missionaries need to understand at least some of their basic premises, especially those relating to the ‘religious’ universe, since this is where many of the key terms to be translated are sought, including words for God, the Devil, good, evil and sin.<sup>4</sup>

The idea – adopted especially by Evangelical missionaries – that the existence of functional equivalents in the world’s different languages is based on a specifically relativist notion of culture, which is characteristic of the mainstream Euro-American thought (see Wagner 1975). This presumes the existence of a physical world (a nature) that is given and universal (created by God) and whose shared elements are named differently by each culture, thus justifying the search for linguistic equivalents. Such cultural relativism is accompanied by a hierarchical and evolutionist element, which supposes western culture to be the epitome of civilization, an idea reflected in a hierarchical conception of language determining the practice of missionary translation.

As we shall see now, while for the missionaries there are two (or more) languages, requiring the passage from one to the other, for the Wari’ there is just one language through which people who live together can immediately communicate, irrespective of whether this is Wari’, Portuguese, or a mixture of both.

## **The Wari’ perspective on translation: translation of worlds**

For the Wari’ translation is a complex operation, which does not involve the search for new words to designate the same things, but different worlds designated by the same words. Life is based, therefore, on an awareness of the coexistence of different worlds and not, as among the missionaries and ourselves, different cultures with particular perspectives onto the same world.

The Wari’ term for language is the same for mouth and tongue, *kapijaxi*, ‘our [inclusive] mouth/tongue,’ which designates not only this part of the body, but also the voice, lexicon, prosody and oral tradition as a whole.

Until pacification, which took place between 1956 and 1961, the Wari’ had no peaceful contact with any other ethnic group. Consequently, unlike those groups living in multiethnic complexes in Amazonia such as the one situated in the Upper Xingu river area (Franchetto and Heckenberger 2001), in the Upper Rio Negro river area (Andrello 2006; S. Hugh-Jones 1979; C. Hugh-Jones 1979; Lasmar 2005) and in the Upper Ucayali river area (Gow 1991, 2001, 2006, 2009), where people live on a day-to-day basis with completely

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<sup>4</sup> See Durston (2007: 84) on Quechua, Robbins (2004: 128 and 2007), Schieffelin 2007: 145, Handman 2015 and Stasch 2007: 113-114 on Papua New Guinea; and Clifford 1992: 80 on the New Caledonia; see also Almeida 2002: 146)

distinct languages, the Wari' were not exposed to any other language. The only differences in speech identified by them refer to prosody and to elements from the lexicon of people they call foreigners, members of other Wari' subgroups, inhabitants from neighbouring territories and speakers of the same language in the broad sense, who maintain ritual and marriage relations (Vilaça 2006, 2010, 2016; Conklin 2001).

The Wari' associate these differences with bodily peculiarities by referring to them as "that's what the body of the OroNao' [a Wari' subgroup] is like" (*je kwerekun OroNao'*). It is worth observing that body, *kwexi'*, for the Wari' is what characterizes the person and refers not only to physical substance, flesh, but also to habits, affects and memory (see Viveiros de Castro 1996, 1998, 2002; Vilaça 2002, 2005, 2007). It explains why a person acts in a particular way, such as a quiet woman, for example, saying of her: "*je kwerekem*" (that's what her body is like).

But not only the Wari'. Although from the viewpoint of the Wari' they themselves are the only humans, *wari'*, they know that enemies, *wijam*, other indigenous peoples and whites, as well as animals of diverse kinds, including fish, various types of birds, snakes and mammals, all of which can be killed and/or eaten by the Wari', see themselves as humans and may act as such, preying on the Wari' (which manifests as sickness and death). The subject imposing itself as a predator is considered human, *wari'*, causing the other to occupy the position of prey, *karawa*, associated with nonhumanity. *Wari'* and *karawa* are positions, therefore, that define the difference within a wide relational universe in which all beings are human.

Although both animals and enemies can occupy the position of humans, animals were the only ones, at least until contact, with whom the Wari' had social relations properly speaking, through their shamans. Through them they know that animals speak the same language as themselves, *kapijakon wari'* (people language), although they can be comprehended only by those who can 'hear' (*taraju pa'*) what they say, a capacity that depends exclusively on the social relation established between them, especially living and eating together. The Wari' concept of translation, as the possibility of communication between different types of people, therefore involves the shift from one collective of humans to another, and occurs through a bodily transformation enabled by new foods, the proximity to other bodies and the new relations of sociality as a whole. The person thereby begins to inhabit another world, the automatic consequence of which is the capacity for verbal communication with these new people.

In no case of encounters with humanized animals, whether mythic or historic, do the Wari' mention language as an obstacle to communication. To them it seemed obvious that those who perceive each other as human, as companions, automatically share the same language. Wagner observed (1975: 107, 114) based on his experience among the Daribi of Papua New Guinea, that while language for us is a product of history, evolved to describe a world of facts, for some native peoples it is a given, just like morality. It is manifested in a person's actions, but cannot be used consciously (ibid: 114). Thus, for example, a child says Mummy when he or she recognizes the filial bond with a particular woman, the consequence of living and eating together, initiated with breastfeeding. This is why the Daribi said to Wagner, just as the Wari' told me, that he would learn their language by eating their food. According to Taylor (2007: 162-163, n. 16), among the Jivaro, the "recognition of a shared field of communication also implies recognition of kinship: kin are defined as people who talk in the same language."

Given the 'transparency' of language and its determination by coresidency, it is understandable that the Wari' do not share the same concept of translation as the missionaries, although they do elaborate this topic in minute detail, as we shall see.

## Translation through body metamorphosis

I turn to the account of an abduction by a jaguar, very common among the Wari' until the recent past, which provides a very clear illustration of their concern with translation. The event was told to me in Sagarana village in July 2005 and the narrator and victim was A'ain Tot, a woman of about sixty at the time we spoke. Various other local inhabitants were present. When the episode happened, A'ain Tot was about five years old. One day the adults had sent the children to the stream to fetch water. A'ain Tot's mother then appeared and called her to come and catch some fish somewhere else. So she went along. She had no idea it was a jaguar since it looked exactly like her mother. On the way they came across *nao'* fruits (from a type of palm) much relished by the Wari', and her mother took maize from the basket she was carrying to eat with the fruit. Soon after a thorn pierced the child's foot which her jaguar mother removed (at this point the listeners laugh in surprise). After walking for a while, they stopped to sleep. Milk was seeping from the breast of her mother, who was breast feeding one of A'ain Tot's brothers at that time. When the girl was almost asleep, she noticed a man approach, who lay down on top of her mother to have sex. The girl asked, "Who is this man?" So the mother smacked the girl's bottom lightly, as the Wari' do to put a child to sleep (again the listeners laughed, very surprised, and asked for more details about this moment). They had no fire.

The next day they ate some *nao'* fruit and carried on walking, until the girl heard the voice of her older brother, who was shouting to her. At this point the supposed mother said that she was going to defecate and disappeared into the forest. Her kin then approached. A'ain Tot's body was covered in jaguar fur, which they cleaned off. At the end of the narrative I asked whether she had not seen any trace of jaguar in the supposed mother, a bit of her tail or something similar (which appeared in other accounts), and she replied: "Nothing. It was truly my mother."

Just how much of a problem translation is for the Wari' becomes evident in comments made by the listeners at a specific point in the jaguar account, when the narrator said that they stopped to eat *nao'* fruit. "What was it? A fruit (*memem*)?" someone asked. To'o Xak Wa (whose mother had been abducted by a jaguar) suggested, "Seven-banded armadillo" (*kwari*). Paletó, her husband, retorted, "Tail of six-banded armadillo" (*kahwerein pikot*). To'o Xak Wa pondered, "Perhaps it was *paca* [*mikop*]." "I don't know," the narrator said, and To'o Xak Wa immediately corrected herself: "That's it, *papaya* is *paca*!" (*makujam na mikop*)—meaning, for the jaguar.

It is as though the listeners had Wari'-jaguar dictionaries in their minds that they used to translate what the narrator said. As can be seen, the problem is not in finding equivalents in the Wari' language to words spoken by the jaguar. It is presumed that the jaguar, to the ears of the girl who saw it as her mother, spoke the Wari' language, that is, a 'people language,' comprehensible to all humans. The problem resided in identifying the world of the jaguar, the empirical equivalents to the words uttered by the animal. What is the *nao'* fruit for the jaguar? As a jaguar, it cannot be the same thing as for the Wari' who, in contrast to the girl who saw the animal as her mother, did not share its point of view. This is a clear example of what Viveiros de Castro (1998) has called 'perspectivist translation,' highlighting the difference between the standard Western conception (shared by the missionaries) and the native concept. In his words:

The problem for indigenous perspectivism is not therefore one of discovering the common referent (say, the planet Venus) to two different representations (say, 'Morning Star' and 'Evening Star'). On the contrary it is one of making explicit the equivocation implied in imagining that when the jaguar says 'manioc beer' he is referring to the same thing as us (i.e., a tasty, nutritious and heady brew) (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 6).<sup>5</sup>

5 On the opposition between this concept of translation and Benjaminian theory, see Cesarino (2011: 34-5).



As the author observes in the same article, the capacity to translate is typical to the shaman, who, through an experience of bodily transformation, can circulate through more than one of these 'discordant exteriorities,' returning to tell the Wari' what he saw and heard. It is the shaman, therefore, who constitutes the 'lexicon' of the Wari'-jaguar dictionary to which my Wari' friends resorted when they heard the abduction narrative. Given that each shaman has a unique experience, it makes sense that this dictionary has different 'entries' for the same referent, which explains the oscillation and conjectures of the listeners concerning the relations between two referents (rather than between two words).

The verb meaning 'to transform' is *jamu*, understood as the actualization of a (new) body, one that is equally human since it is seen as such by the new companions in another relational context. This capacity is not limited to shamans, who differ by being able to control the process, but is common to all beings deemed human, *wari'*, which includes diverse animals, as attested by the jaguar episode just described. It is the capacity of some beings to transform themselves, *jamu*, which leads to the attribution of a 'spirit' or 'double,' *jam-* to them. Although this very rough translation of 'spirit' evokes the idea of a component of the person, something like a vital principle, the Wari' notion in fact resists any essentialization. The attribution of a spirit results from the capacity to transform, not the contrary. Nobody, under normal conditions, has a spirit.

Shamans, generally men, are like chronically sick people who, assailed by animals of a particular species, have not been cured but have turned into their companions. The Wari' often say that animals prey on the Wari' (who they see as enemies or as prey animals) with the eventual aim of turning them into kin, the outcome of which is death for the victim, who goes to live forever on the side of the animals. In such cases, the person's Wari' body disappears and what goes to live among the animals is, from the Wari' viewpoint, the person's spirit. In the case of a shaman, the animals decide to cure him by bathing his body in apparently boiling water (simulating a cooking process) after which his body is reconstituted. One of them will become the shaman's father-in-law, offering him daughters in marriage, children still, as was the custom among the Wari'. Henceforth the shaman's spirit will be continually activated, implying the coexistence of two bodies, one of them living among the Wari', which he perceives as human and kin, and the other among the animals, which he also sees as human, but as affines rather than kin. The Wari' typically say that the shaman "accompanies (*jaja*) the animal" or the "animal's spirit" (*jami karawa*).

With this double body, the shaman acquires a double perspective, that of the Wari' and that of the animal species that he accompanies, which gives him access to animals as a whole, since, as they would explain to me, they do not differentiate a deer from a collared peccary or a jaguar: all are seen as people and it is common for a shaman to change his animal companions (and body) simply by accompanying and eating with other species. This 'strange' vision is precisely what allows him to act as a translator of perspectives.

Given his continuously transformed state, the shaman is a being who circulates through distinct relational universes, living with different types of humans and learning about their language, or that is, about the distinct referents to which the same words from 'people language' apply. It is the distinction between bodies that makes the shaman a translator since from the moment when they identify with each other, the shaman becomes a common sick person, subjected to the animal's perspective.

Since the shaman's capacity to transit across different worlds is a pan-Amazonian phenomenon, the relation between shamanism and translation is a common theme in the region's ethnological literature. Carneiro da Cunha (1998), in an article subtitled "shamanism and translation," based primarily on the ethnographic literature on the Pano groups of southern Amazonia, explores the question. What particularly interests us here is the notion of the 'twisted words' mentioned by the author based on

Townsley's (1993: 460) analysis of Yaminawa shamanism (cited in Carneiro da Cunha 1998: 13). These are the words from everyday language applied to distinct objects – a fish may be called a peccary, for example – the mode encountered by the shaman to solve the dilemma of interpreting the unusual that becomes the object of his perception.

For the notion of twisted words to be applicable to the discourse of the Wari' shaman, or indeed to the discourse of anyone in a state of transformation, it must be emphasized that this does not refer to metaphors, at least in the substitutionist notion of this figure of speech, founded on the distinction between literal and figurative, or true and false. Overing Kaplan's analysis of Piaroa shamanism concerns precisely this point, and coincides with the perspective of Viveiros de Castro cited above:

Uncertainty about identity was a daily ontological puzzle for the Piaroa... But such 'problems' of identity [...] were certainly not those of 'metaphor', for the Piaroa are obviously worrying about factual identity: 'Is that wild pig a human or a vegetable?' 'Is that jaguar an animal, a human sorcerer or a god from the 'before time'? [...] If they got it wrong, it was their understanding that the literal consequences could be grim – the individual could become subject to a predator attack. It was the *ruwang* [shaman] who was able to solve such mysteries of identity [...] A metaphysics very different from our own (Overing Kaplan 1990: 610).

### The jaguar-woman as a dictionary: material translation

The Wari' work of translation may also involve another level, no longer related to an oral manifestation of distinct referents designated by homonyms, as the shaman does through his use of "twisted words", and as the listeners did in response to A'ain Tot's account of abduction. The following narrative shows that more than a capacity arising from bodily transformation, translation itself may be achieved by the body.

In July 2005, To'o Xak Wa, a woman of around sixty-five, wife of my Wari' father Paletó who I call mother, narrated some events she herself witnessed when still a child and involving her mother, A'ain Tain. What follows is a summarized version.

One morning, when To'o was around five years old, her mother after a discussion with her (the mother's) older sister, went to the river and was invited by a young man, her nephew, to go fishing at a spot further on, where, he claimed, there was a lot of fish. The young man carried her on his back for a stretch of the path. After a while, A'ain Tain began to hear voices calling her: "It's an animal that called you! It's not Wari'! Look, here is your daughter! She's crying a lot." And her true nephew shouted to the figure who was pretending to be him: "Put her down on the ground." This was when A'ain Tain realized that the supposed nephew was licking leaves as they trekked along the path, just as jaguars do. She looked carefully and saw a glimpse of a tail. Hearing the insistent calls from her kin, the jaguar left her behind and departed. According to To'o, the mother was covered in jaguar fur from being carried.

One day, sometime later, To'o's father killed a lot of capuchin monkeys in the forest. Seeing the prey, the mother put the monkeys in her mouth, still raw, and drank a lot of blood. She then spat out the liquid and To'o and other people saw that what emerged from her mouth was not blood but bits of maize *chicha* drink (here we should recall that the jaguar's *chicha* is blood).

Afterwards, according to To'o's descriptions, her mother seems to have turned into a dictionary which, rather than substituting one word for another, transformed one object into another, inside her body, a consequence of her double identity. On another occasion she called her daughters to go bathing with her in the river. There they saw many tiny fish, that the Wari' call *wam* (red wolf fish). The mother told the girls: "I'm going to fetch insect larvae (*orojat*). Wrap some leaves together [to make a recipient] for us to roast



them.” Meanwhile the mother caught the little fish. When she showed them to her daughters, they were no longer fish but insect larvae. To’o, narrating the event to me, exclaimed: “the fish turned completely into larvae.” Other occasions like that happened in sequence.

The efficacy of the body as a medium of translation, a three-dimensional Google Translate, emerges here in its extreme and almost caricatural form, when the metamorphosis of the person is objectified as a metamorphosis of the things surrounding him or her. The duality of the person’s body, invisible to the Wari’, is expressed as a duplicity of things that are transmuted as they traverse the body. Those who observed To’o’s mother therefore had the opportunity to live in two distinct worlds simultaneously: the world of the jaguar and that of the Wari’.

But the idea of translation by the body is not limited to specific and rare cases like the ones narrated above. Isn’t the mimicry of whites, common in the first contacts of native peoples around the world, a perfect example of perspectivist translation too? Let us turn to some examples.

### Mimetism as translation

Viveiros de Castro, in his essay on the Christianization of the Tupinambá, cites various examples of what he calls a “mimetic enthusiasm for the ritual apparatus of the missionaries” (2002: 196), one of them taken from Nóbrega’s First Brazilian Letter (1549: I, III cited in Viveiros de Castro 2002: 196; 2011):

All of those who have dealings with us say that they want to be like us... If they hear the mass bell toll, they rush to attend, and whatever we do, all of them do: they kneel, beat their chests, raise their hands to the sky; and one of their main figures is already learning to read and observes lessons every day with great care, and in two days knew the entire alphabet, and we taught him to bless, absorbing everything with great gusto. He says he wants to be a Christian...

Writing about the Guaraní of Paraguay, Chamorro remarks that at the mission village of San Ignacio de Ipaumbucú, the chief and shaman Miguel de Atiguaie, considered by Montoya a “true minister of the demon,” “pretended to be a priest” and

simulated that he was saying mass. He put some cloths over a table and on top of them a manioc tart and a heavily painted vase with maize wine and, speaking through his teeth, conducted many ceremonies, showing the tart and the wine like the priests and finally eating and drinking everything. With this his vassals venerated him as though he were a priest. (Montoya 1985: 57 in Chamorro 1998: 63, my translation).<sup>6</sup>

Santos-Granero (2009: 118) describes the mimetic behavior of the Peruvian Yanesha priestly leaders in relation to Franciscan missionaries, including one who spent a year in the mission attending mass and catechism before going on to replicate the acts of the Catholic liturgy. “The most important of these acts was the solemn ‘reading’ of a book made of feathers, which undoubtedly replicated the Bible.

The impressions of the missionary Friedrich Scharf on his first visit to the Wari’ (some time after contact) reveal the same kind of mimetic behaviour; unlike the examples cited above, however, this imitation did not refer to the religious ritual per se:

6 Also see Kopenawa & Albert (2010: 292, 340) on the Yanomami, Fausto (2007: 82) on the Guaraní, Fausto and De Vienne (2014) on a recent prophetic movement in the Upper Xingu and Laugrand (1997) on shamans and priests among the Inuit, including the inverse mimetism of shamans by priests. On Bible translation as an enacted ritual among the Reformed Guhu-Samane, see Handman (2015).

While we were on the river shore washing ourselves, the Indians were on the bank watching us and trying to imitate our gestures [...] One of our missionaries used false teeth and when he removed them from his mouth to wash them – imagine this – two of the Indians also tried to remove their natural teeth from their mouth in order to imitate the cleaning gesture” (Scharf 2010: 32, my translation).

The replication of this mimetism five centuries later is obviously not unique to the Wari’ and will be familiar to any Americanist. According to Taylor, for example: “Many Achuar, particularly the great men, adopt typical missionary public behaviour: they pray ostensively, simulate mastery of reading, and sing hymns. The ritual care with which they imitate and reproduce these activities testifies to their efforts to assimilate foreign symbolic techniques which, they say, are the keys to the reproduction of white manufactured wealth” (1981: 672).

Mimesis involves more than simply the assimilation of specific techniques. The descriptions of the mimetic behaviour of native peoples indicates the central place reserved for the body and for bodily transformations in this process of apprehending another perspective. For Taussig (1993: 46), mimesis is “an alternative science” based on a “sensuous transformation.” As Viveiros de Castro (1998: 482) notes in his article on Amerindian perspectivism, ritual paraphernalia, like clothes, masks and adornments, are instruments, not costumes, with the power to conjure metaphysical transformations. Among various examples, we have the Yagua of Venezuela, whose shamans utilize “clothing” that allows their transformation into animals (Chaumeil 1983: 51, 66, 125). Likewise, as I have sought to show elsewhere (Vilaça 2007, 2010), the Wari’ use of white people’s clothing and the consumption of their food are both effective modes of transforming into whites that, like shamanism, do not imply a unique identity and, far from being a process without return, are founded precisely on this oscillation of positions.

Lattas (1998: 43-46), in his work on Melanesian cargo cults, linked to the arrival of the whites, analyzes the detailed process of imitation undertaken by the natives, who copied not only the body postures, gestures and etiquettes of the whites, but also their bureaucratic structures, organizing police forces, cricket clubs and banks (ibid: 43), behaviour that would be no surprise to an Amazonian specialist. Just like the Amazonian notion of ritual efficacy, in Melanesia it was “a way of capturing those secret magical acts that would deliver the European existence they copied” (Lattas 1998: 44).<sup>7</sup>

## Further equivocations

In the encounter between the Wari’ and the missionaries, obviously other questions emerged over time, related to the translation between words properly speaking, which the missionaries undertook with the help of native translators. The latter, as we might guess, were young people who lived closer to the missionaries, sharing their food and habits, which according to the Wari’ allowed them to comprehend what the missionaries said. It is interesting to note that the term chosen by the Wari’ to express the idea of word translation, the passage from one language to another, is to imitate/repeat.

However, the fact that the passage from one language to another is not problematized does not mean that reflection was not required from the native translators. It is precisely this point that I wish to examine briefly now. My aim is to explore another type of equivocation constitutive of translation, a kind of development of the type implied in the difference between the translation of bodies or words, both related to the conflict between distinct conceptions of the world subsumed by an apparent synonymy.

<sup>7</sup> Clifford (1992: 76), in his biographical study of Leenhardt, notes that for him conversion “can be a method of ‘observation’ of the white.” See Gell (1998: 99-101) for an interesting discussion of mimesis, Zoppi (2012) on the Cashinahua in Brazil and Willerslev (2004), on the difference between mimetism and metamorphosis among the Siberian Yukaghirs.

I shall take as an example the translation of the verb ‘to love’ central to Christian discourse. This verb is absent among the Wari’, who express the feeling love as ‘to not dislike’. Love for a person is conceived as the suppression of indifference and anger, precisely what people feel for enemies.

One episode I witnessed recently first-hand seems to me a perfect illustration of the problem I am trying to address. An artist from Rio de Janeiro offered to me and to my wari’ brother and father who were visiting my city, a red heart sculpted in wood, and I suggested to my Wari’ brother Abrão that he give it to his wife as a souvenir of his visit to Rio. The next day he came to show me that he had written, with a pilot pen, in the middle of the heart, the following phrase: “I don’t dislike you at all, Tem Xao”, dedicating it to his wife. This was Abrão’s translation of the expression ‘I love you’ (‘eu te amo’) frequently written on hearts’ depictions he could see in magazines and TV.

It is interesting to observe the implications of this absence of a term for ‘love’ in the translation of Christian hymns and Biblical texts. One interesting illustration is the hymn, which says, in its Portuguese version, that “Jesus loves everyone,” translated into Wari’ as: “Jesus doesn’t dislike you, you and you.” Here we can note as well the absence in the Wari’ language of a term for ‘each one,’ that refers to a world peopled by individuals unknown to the Wari’ but referred to by the American Christians who composed the hymns.

The apparent coincidence between the perspectives of the Wari’ and the missionaries demands that we accentuate their dissonance. In their mutual work, the missionaries and the Wari’ seem to have reached an agreement on the suitability of the term ‘to not dislike’ as the translation of the verb ‘to love.’ Indeed ‘to not dislike’ is ‘to love,’ which is clearly expressed by the text written by Abrão on the wooden heart offered to his wife. However, in contrast to the missionary conception of love as the natural basis for the relation between God and humans, and what good Christians should feel for each and every person (to the point of turning ‘the other cheek’ when attacked), the notion of love as ‘not dislike’ reveals an entirely distinct starting point, a world of anger and enmity on which human agency acts with a transformative capacity.

We are presented, then, with a radical difference in what is conceived as the innate universe (Wagner 1975) and as the direction of human agency. For the Wari’, kinship and love must be produced by themselves, and the failures in this process are conceived as resistance – that is, as the imposition of this innate world, which entices them back. This attraction is what they identify as the Devil and sin. For the missionaries, human agency is historically situated in the opposite direction, producing sin and hate from the paradise constituted by God for Adam and Eve.

Lesson Book 1, written by the missionaries with the help of Wari’ translators to be read during the services, and which presents God and the creation, explains that everything created by God, from the forest to the animals, was initially good: “God’s things were very good in the past, just after he created them, in the beginning. Everything was entirely good. There were no bad animals, there was no bad forest. There were no thorns... He didn’t know how to make bad things” (p. 26). Evil first arose from the greed of Lucifer – and his followers.

Hence although the present Christian world is one of (original) sin (see Sahlins 1996), which makes it similar to the innate world of the Wari’, it does not involve, for the missionaries, the true original world but its ‘fallen’ or corrupted version.

As can be seen, an important difference is involved, though not one immediately visible, which provokes the illusion that they involve coinciding visions of personhood and moral action. The missionaries, observing the interest of the Wari’ in suppressing anger, believed that the indigenous people recognized their corrupted state and wished to act in the same way as other Christians to overcome their state of original sin.

As can be seen, both in the first and the subsequent phases of the missionary encounter, important though not immediately visible ontological differences are involved, which bring about the illusion that they involve coinciding visions of personhood and moral action. In the beginning, the missionaries, observing the interest of the Wari' in imitate them, thought they were easy targets for conversion, soon to discover that they were also eager to resume their old costumes. Transformation, for them, was not a one-way process, as the possibility of oscillation is a central part of it. In other words, difference must be preserved, or the world becomes flat and paralyzed, as Lévi-Strauss (1991) showed us when analyzing the relations between Native Americans and the whites in *History of Lynx*.

Later on, when the work on language translation itself began, difference again imposed itself as a constitutive part of the innate world of the Wari', becoming visible through the irreducibility of Christian concepts like love to the Wari' language, although superficially it seemed to the missionaries that they had found the perfect word-to-word translation they were looking for.

The equivocity involved in the apparent coincidence of these movements accounts for the disappointment of the missionaries with what they call the superficial conversion of the Wari' and what seemed to them to be their main misunderstanding: salvation would be based on actions rather than any recognition of Christ as our saviour.

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