

Microbes and Other Shamanic Beings

César E. Giraldo Herrera

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*Para Enrique:
Mugre en mis ojos
manchas de tigre*

Prologue

This book reevaluates familiar myths and understandings of the world with insights developed while doing fieldwork far away from home. It is part of a trilogy derived from my doctoral dissertation in social anthropology. The dissertation dwelt on Nordic seamanship, on relating to the environment without and within, on syncretism, perspectivism, and shamanism. This book is the last part, the trip back home, back into ourselves. So, what or who are we?

My grandfather was a rural medic, in Quindío, Colombia a place infested with venomous snakes. He was adamant that one should get to know them, to see the world from their perspective, acknowledging their ecology, where they lived, and what they ate. Most of their attacks were in self-defence, out of fear. If in your interactions with them you were calm and respectful, even the most poisonous were mostly harmless. My grandfather supported his views on animal subjectivity with authors like Konrad Lorenz. He would have been an avid reader of Ingold, Haraway, Bennet, and Tsing. However, the roots of his views are more likely to be found in the adventures of the miscreant uncle Rabbit and his victimized predator uncle Jaguar, which he used to tell me. Although warranting care for deceiving appearances, these were more than fables, these are far older stories.

I studied my undergrad in biology, focusing on physiology, ethology, and theoretical biology, and so, I am an unrepentant functionalist and would not hesitate to subscribe to a naturalistic¹ understanding of reality.

However, my degree monograph was a theoretical exploration of biosemiotics, suggesting that organisms and other biological systems develop processes of interpretation, and in their own ways, and for their own sake make sense of their world. I find it very hard to fathom how some people assume humans are the only beings with intentions, points of view, or emotions: the only beings to communicate, the only persons. My views, as well as those of my parents, and grandparents, are in many ways closer to what some authors would denominate animism. So, again, who are we? We are the Westernized, or rather their descendants, and we are also descendants of the *indianos*, the Indianized, the Africanized; the colonizers, and the colonized.²

When I was little, I was terrified of the night and fascinated by those monsters that linger in Latin American imaginaries: the witches who transform into jaguars; the one-legged *Patasola*; the *Duende*, a goblin with a humongous hat and backward feet; and the *Llorona*, the spirit of the woman who cries for her abandoned baby. I felt more sympathy for the *Madremonte*, the mother of the forest, and for the *Mohan*, the mischievous guardian spirits of the waters. However, their stories, when they had them, were so diluted and abstract, that they had become caricatures, folkloric fictions.

Years later, working with traditional Afro-Colombian fisher peoples in the Pacific, I met with 'the visions', a rich oral tradition referring some of those stories, linking them with specific ecologies, medicinal plants, behaviours, and powers. The *Tunda* was a one-legged Amerindian woman (Afro-Colombian for Amerinds), who would appear in the shape of a close relative or a lover, and lure her victims into the wildness of the mangrove, taking away their speech, reducing them into sexual slavery and madness. However, there are also herbs and prayers to call *Tunda*; she teaches her protégés the art of invisibility, and hides them from the authorities. These visions could also appear and harass you in dreams. My friends and hosts interpreted some of my own dreams in that way. However, the visions seem to flee from modernity, disappearing together with the ecologies with which they are associated. The visions made evident that the folkloric monsters of my childhood were translations of the masters of game, some of the beings with which Amerindian shamans deal. I sought to explain them as symbolic constructs, enunciating the

affordances and dangers of specific environments and the social relations people established in them.³ However, these interpretations neglect the experiences associated with these beings, how people understand them, and the ways people seek to interact with them.

Later still, reflecting upon my experiences while on-board the industrial fishing trawlers in the North Sea, I began to explore how we relate to microbes, how we may perceive them, and came across a possible alternative translation, which would seem to account for more of the characteristics of masters of game. This led me to explore the early records of Amerindian shamanism and Amerindian myths associated with syphilis, developing a biocultural ethnohistory of Amerindian shamanism and microbiology.

Microbes and other shamanic beings explores whether and to what degree microbiology might be commensurable with shamanism, whether it might offer better translations than anthropology, following missionary theology has so far. The book develops three major arguments. First, shamanism has been generally understood through reference to spirits and souls. However, these terms were introduced by the missionaries, who carried the earliest translations, to convert Amerinds into Christianity. Rather than trying to comprehend shamanism through medieval European concepts, we should examine it through ideas that started developing in the West only after encountering Amerindian shamans. Since the earliest accounts, Amerindian shamanic notions have shared more in common with current microbial ecology than with Christian religious beliefs. Shamans have described the beings with which they deal in ways that correspond to contemporary understandings of microbes. Second, various human senses allow the unaided perception of the microbial world. We focus on entoptic vision, which affords the perception of microscopic objects flowing through our retina. The techniques employed by shamans enhance these kinds of perception, and their depictions of shamanic beings correspond to the images produced by these forms of vision. Third, the theory that some diseases are produced by living agents acquired through contagion was proposed near after the Encounter by a physician who translated and adapted Amerindian knowledge about syphilis, an important subject of pre-Contact Amerindian medicine and mythology. Amerindian myths of the Sun and the Moon described

shamanic beings causing syphilis and closely related diseases, their dynamics, histories, and treatments. Western medicine took four centuries before reevaluating its paradigms, rediscovering germs, and turning microbiology into a mainstream science. I argue that a deep decolonization of thought should reclaim this knowledge back. At a time when the war on microbes is becoming unsustainable, shamanism may afford a refined diplomacy to interact with the highly social microbial worlds which constitute and permeate us.

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Last but not least, a thousand thanks to the reader—I hope you enjoy this trip.

Notes

1. For biologists, a naturalist is a researcher who after many years in the field has come to understand the characteristics of an ecological system, the organisms that make up its community, their behaviour, physiology, developmental, and genetic histories. It is the sort of thing you want to be when you grow very, very old. So, when I read how naturalism is being portrayed in anthropology (Viveiros de Castro 1998; Descola 2013), I cannot but feel profoundly annoyed by what seems like a strawman made with Christian hay and humanist clothes. However, that naturalism is a metonym, which names the whole, that is, that despair bundle of Western ontologies, by what today is one of its most prominent strands.
2. Herrera Angel 2016.
3. Giraldo Herrera 2009.

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