ISSUE 05 | JULY 2026
SUMMER SOLSTICE

# TRANSVERSAL PATHS

Adrián Navigante
Roberto Beneduce
Alessandro Montefameglio
Shãwãhu Timá (Vovô João)
Tika Matxuru Wanipashutiya

ALAIN DANIÉLOU Foundation

Interstices
center for transversal thinking

3 **Adrián Navigante**
HOSPITALITY AND ALTERITY: TOBIE NATHAN, THE FAITHFUL APOSTATE

27 Interview with **Roberto Beneduce**
UNSUBMISSIVE THINKING: THE SCANDAL OF ETHNOPSYCHIATRY PART 1
by Adrián Navigante

54 **Alessandro Montefameglio**
BAROQUE AND MUD

69 Interview with **Shãwãhu Timá (Vovô João)** and **Tika Matxuru Wanipashutiya**
YAWANAWA HEALERS
by Amanda Viana de Sousa

**Adrián Navigante**
Director of *Interstices: Center for Transversal Thinking*





# HOSPITALITY AND ALTERITY: TOBIE NATHAN, THE FAITHFUL APOSTATE

*This is the first part of a long essay in which Adrián Navigante approaches the subject of "alterity" (a key notion from a transcultural and ecosophical point of view) through an elaboration of the question of "hospitality" (an essential value in the framework of* Interstices' *activities). The articulation of these two terms is carried out through a transversal reading of Tobie Nathan's ethnopsychiatric work against the background of his mentor, Georges Devereux (an author dealt with in the previous issue of Transversal Paths:* The Psychosocial Lives of Daimones*). Far from being exclusively focused on the therapeutic relationship between doctor and patient, this essay explores the singular relationship between a mentor and his disciple, the problem of exile and migration, the disavowed psychology behind so-called "objective" methods of research, and the motivations for an inclusion of non-human agency (of different cultural codifications) in therapeutic settings.*

## THE DISLOCATION OF COMPLEMENTARISM

In a previous essay for *Transversal Paths*, entitledentitled *The Psychosocial Life of Daimons*, I defined Georges Devereux's complementarism as a hermeneutic tool in the study of human behavior which aims to show that psychoanalysis and ethnology never fully meet their object but reciprocally disclose it from the very gap of its dual nature[1]. This leads us inevitably to the question of alterity, which is the focus of the present essay. Devereux approached this question indirectly, through a critical reflection on certain barriers self-imposed by researchers (upon) themselves in their indefatigable quest for objectivity. The term "self-imposed" is tricky, because for Devereux the barriers are not the result of an ideological choice but an unconscious defense mechanism. Seen from a transversal perspective, the question should be reversed to balance out the poles (ideology, unconscious) and disclose the mechanism at work. If the quest for "objectivity" is not free from unconscious dynamism, it is not only the individual that should be interrogated but the whole field in which it interacts, precisely to rescue what could not come to presentation because of the barrier (i.e the method!) being imposed. A transversal consideration of the problem consists in redesigning a politics of alterity, passing from a progressive occupation of an unknown field to an alternative form of hospitality that permits its mapping without super-impositions. What if the new form and exercise of hospitality were to be obtained from the interstitial space between psychoanalysis and ethnography? Devereux managed to unveil a complex and somewhat paradoxical aspect of unconscious formations affecting the way different cultures shape their own notions of normality and abnormality, health and illness, order and disorder, reality and dream. How does hospitality, as an alternative to conquest, shed light on alterity? How does it transform alterity and how does alterity reveal itself within the laws of hospitality? These aspects require further elaboration and force us to take a step forward into the reception of Devereux's thought.

The dual nature of the ethnopsychiatric object is related to what separates *and* connects psychoanalysis and ethnology. Precisely for that reason, it is perceived as a "gap". While each discipline contiguously fills its respective object (i.e. renders it intelligible), a mysterious remnant pulsates between the psychoanalytic and the ethnological object, rendering disjunction and conjunction simultaneous[2] and ruling out any further sequence that might establish a hierarchy or enable a unifying (third) principle. The object of psychoanalysis and the object of ethnology are suddenly *two and the same*. It is to be expected that this should upset both psychoanalysts and ethnologists, for professional self-confidence is gained mainly through positivist demarcations – irrespective of the fact that such procedures may end up betraying the spirit of both disciplines. In a way, the perception of the gap between psychoanalysis and ethnology accounts for the methodological solidity of Devereux's undertaking[3]. But it can also be seen as a blind spot he intends to suppress – at any

1 Cf. Adrián Navigante: "The Psychosocial Lives of Daimones", in: *Transversal Paths, Issue 04*, December 2025, pp. 19-20.

2 This does not contradict but rather confirms Devereux's prescription that the complementary disciplines cannot be applied simultaneously (Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, Paris 1985, p. 14). The simultaneous combining of disjunction and disjunction (conjunction?) in the combination of the disciplines involved calls for their successive application. In this regard cf. also Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, Paris 1977, p. 41: "He [Devereux] specifies that both discourses, the psychological and the sociological, cannot be held simultaneously, for which reason ethnopsychiatry calls for a successive application of two pure sciences".

3 In his article "A Conceptual Scheme of Society" (1940), Devereux clearly declares that the double discourse of his complementarist approach is obligatory, and that the disciplines involved, namely sociology and psychology, have absolute autonomy (cf. Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 14). The reference to the necessity of complementarity and to the absolute autonomy of the discourses involved point to Devereux's remarkable sleight of hand, by means of which his "object" – in itself very complex and unstable – appears as purified to the point of becoming the ultimate placeholder of what is (normatively) taken

price. The anxiety thematized by Devereux[4] is a concrete indicator of that instance. Being a negative, evasive, and complex affect, it cannot be assuaged by metaphysical subterfuges (which are usually bad synthesizers of complexity). It rather imposes itself as a phenomenological remnant from which clear empirical traits must be distinguished and considered in their specific effects[5]. What remains hidden can become accessible through proper elaboration of the "anxiety" that generates the defensive reaction (i.e. the method) and seeks shelter in it.

The paradox, though, is that *a proper elaboration* can no longer abide by Devereux's scientific model. Shedding light on the non-objectifiable aspect of anxiety presupposes dealing with the researcher's countertransference in a broader spectrum. The blind spot should be localized and elaborated in both the subjective implication (researcher's attitude) and the objective replication (theoretical construct)[6]. The phenomenological remnant lurking behind the epistemically cleansed space is related to what the unconscious of the researcher discloses *without ever reaching the level of discursive elaboration* [7], *a* reaction to an affect coming from outside, something liminal not only to the person of the researcher but also to the field constituted by his/her methodological framework. But the unknown remnant is specifically disturbing because it is not *behind* but rather *adhered to* or *encroached in* the (margins of the) object, thus disrupting its epistemic self-containment. This disruption ruins the *epistemic trick*. From that moment on, the surreptitious transformation of an experimental method into a consistent worldview (which has been the strategy of Western domination over non-Western cultures[8]) is no longer possible.

*The phenomenological remnant lurking behind the epistemically cleansed space of Western science is related to what the unconscious of the researcher discloses without ever reaching the level of discursive elaboration.*

---

to be "reality".

4 Cf. in this respect my remarks in: Adrián Navigante: "The Psychosocial Lives of Daimones", in: *Transversal Paths, Issue 04*, p. 12.

5 Devereux's complementarism is also a way of preventing the scientific destruction of the phenomenon from being analyzed. His recourse to Niels Bohr's principle of destruction [*Abtötungsprinzip*] leaves no doubt that, despite his tendency to fashion a human science like psychoanalysis or ethnology after the model of mathematics and physics, Devereux mistrusts excessive precision when it comes to accounting for phenomena belonging to a field so fluid as "human behavior", especially when unconscious processes become the center of the researcher's attention. Cf. Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, pp. 24-25.

6 As I intend to show throughout this essay, the question of countertransference is not limited to the blind spot in the analyst revealed by unexpected reactions to the patient's emotional investments during the analytic session, or the unquestioned dimension of the researcher's subjectivity that sets barriers to the procedure that should unveil the object of research and provide its proper understanding. For an explanation of the notion of countertransference from Freud to Devereux, cf. Adrián Navigante: *The Psychosocial Lives of Daimones*, in: *Transversal Paths, Issue 04*, pp. 16-19.

7 I should underline that acknowledging the impossibility of discursive elaboration does not imply having to assume an ineffable instance in front of which any form of verbalization, symbolic articulation, or performative response is foredoomed to failure. Quite the contrary, it seems to me that assuming a mystical opposition obstructs the understanding of other – very well and richly articulated – modalities of world-making. Many times – not always – recourse to mystic undifferentiation is the last bastion of ethnocentric resistance to the challenge of alterity. It does not mean that one reaches the point where *any* aspect of *any* culture is homogenized by the force of a superior mystery, but rather that one has reached the point at which the dominant explanation fails but persists in the exercise of its superiority – this time as the recognition of a "shared mystery" that thwarts the emergence of another - quite alien and therefore threatening – world-disclosure.

8 I am aware of the terminological problem in the delimitation of the terms "Western" and "non-Western", especially if taken as a geographical delimitation – something which, in the present context, would be too vague and in many ways wrong. I understand by "Western" an orientation in thinking, or more precisely a specific geopolitical project consisting in the expansion of European civilization to the rest of the world (cf. Franco Cardini: *La deriva dell'Occidente*, Bari: Roma 2023, pp. 81-82). In this sense, the phenomenon of modernization is a key factor consisting in a concrete material application of modern epistemology for the sake of conquest: scientific specialization, technical development, mechanization of labor, increasingly perfected exploitation of human and non-human resources, etc. Non-Western, on the contrary, is a term pointing to a subtraction from

There are two ways of dealing with the paradox of an outside that is at the same time (located) inside, a behind that is (or moves) forward, and the (self-)disclosure of something that remains hidden. The first way is recourse to what I would call "vulgar metaphysics", that is, postulating an ineffable "*x*" previous to the division subject-object with the aim of simplifying and/or justifying any instance of subjective dynamics, objective relation, inter-cultural connection, or even pan-natural resonance fields without further efforts to elaborate on the problematic gap that joins and divides the opposites. The second way is a transversal detour – in this specific case *a dis-location of Devereux's complementarism* – to open a more complex field, namely the reverse-side of that elusive and in many ways puzzling affect called "anxiety". Concerning the psychoanalytic interpretation of this affect, Freud tried different approaches to account for it – each one belonging to a specific moment of his own development. The first one, elaborated at the time of his work on hysteria, posits an excess of sexual energy difficult to manage, which enacts a pathological response of the psyche. The second one, which derives from his psychotherapeutic practice and his meta-psychological reflections, introduces a qualitative aspect to the quantitative problem of the sexual energy: the question of the representation of the drive-force, or the passage from the economy of hysterical conversion to the displacement of libido in the case of neurotic anxiety. The third one, which analyzes the coupling "aggression-sexuality" to its last consequences, brings a new element to the debate: the death-drive. This element displaces the question of anxiety in pathological formations to make room for a foreign element that catalyzes the entropy of the whole psycho-biological system. All three approaches have the common denominator of bringing the enigma of anxiety to an intrapsychic anchorage point. From all functional components of Freud's approaches, only the *demonic force*[9] of the death-drive seems to open another space that renders Freud's methodological reductionism unreliable. Still, he clings to it for the sake of scientific legitimation, and each one of his elaborations seems to reaffirm the psychoanalytic approach as a product of Western Enlightenment – however irrational it might have appeared to natural scientists in that context[10]. The enigma of anxiety is for Freud that of a situated individual and cannot in any way be amplified to make room for a radical (and possibly other-than-human) instance of alterity. Such inclusion threatens to decenter the well-established parameters that legislate upon psychic and culture, desire and reality. Reaching the reverse-side of

*Reaching the reverse-side of anxiety means, in Georges Devereux's conception, risking a transition from the elaboration of the blind spot in the researcher's affective field to the hidden space of experience ruled by objectivity criteria.*

---

the expanding power of European civilization (from its original location in a continent to its potentially global conquest), bound neither to a temporal scale (non-Western as pre-modern) nor to a strictly spatial configuration (like Middle or Far East). In this sense, "non-Western" is a collective formation that, even if permeated to a certain extent by modernity, is not fully determined by its values insofar as it preserves the dynamically actualized recognition of a "traditional" core. The last remark makes the term "non-Western" semantically linked to "traditional", but in no way equivalent to "conservative" or "reactionary" – since these two categories are valid only within a chronological axis inherent to Western history! "Traditional" would in this case be an adjective indicating opposition to what Bruno Latour termed "modern constitution" (cf. Bruno Latour: *Nous n'avons jamais été modernes*, Paris 1997 [1991], pp. 23-26), a kind of secular *creatio ex nihilo* quite reactive to local (not global) ways of thinking and living.

9 "The manifestations of the compulsion to repeat [*Wiederholungszwang*] [...] are to a great extent drive-related and, when they act in opposition to the pleasure principle, show a demonic character" (Sigmund Freud: *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, in: Gesammelte Werke XIII, Frankfurt 1999, p. 20). Jean Laplanche speaks of the internal attack that the notion of drive implies, primarily on account of its excess of energy. Further, he sees the death-drive both as the ultimate extension and a turning point of what occurs in the case of the sexual drives. In the death-drive, the attack is direct and explicit, and its ultimate consequence is revealed – namely the destruction of the individual as living being –, rendering its character paradigmatically demonic (cf. Jean Laplanche: *Problématiques I: L'angoisse*, Paris 2006 [1980], p. 137.

10 And also to Devereux, who granted psychoanalysis "a culturally neutral [i. e. scientific] attitude" at first and thought that it was subsequently contaminated by a kind of moral masochism ending up in a "progressive *Gleichschaltung*" to supernaturalist models, the death-drive being one clear example of this moralizing and unscientific bent (cf. Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, pp. 340-341).

anxiety means, if we go back to Georges Devereux's conception, risking a transition from the elaboration of the blind spot in the researcher's affective field to the hidden space in the experiential field ruled by objectivity criteria. If that space is disclosed and acknowledged *as such*, another approach is required, one that does not enact apotropaic magic against the extraneous forces of the outside, one that does not confine these forces in the phantasmatic regions of an idiosyncratic psyche. In other words, an approach is required that may channel and distill the impact of those forces with a view to re-configuring *the whole field* without further ignoring or repressing the logic of alterity – even if that means abandoning the safety of cultural parameters imposed by the West and therefore deemed "universal". This dislocation was carried out by Tobie Nathan in his heretical interpretation of Devereux's ethnopsychoanalysis.

To understand Tobie Nathan's dislocation of Devereux's complementarism, it is helpful to begin with two decisive quotations. The first stems from a book published in 1993, *Fier de n'avoir ni pays, ni amis, quelle sottise c'était* (*Proud to have no country, nor friends, what stupidity that was*)[11], in which he strives to reformulate the principles of ethnopsychoanalysis by clearly departing from Devereux's method: "In adopting a position of theoretical reductionism, most clinicians spare themselves a great deal of anxiety in the practice of a profession that generates a lot of it. But avoiding an epistemological problem never leads to progress in that discipline"[12]. The second quotation belongs to a book written in 1996 and co-authored with his Beninese colleague Lucien Hounkpatin, *La guérison Yoruba* (*Yoruba Healing*), in which they refer to the official exercise of ethnology with irony (or rather sarcasm): "We are neither ethnologists nor anthropologists. Thank God! No chance of imagining ourselves settled in the kitchen of strangers to study their cooking habits or – who knows? – in their bed every night to explore their passion for raw meat"[13]. In the first passage, psychoanalysis is accused of exercising a form of theoretical reductionism that blocks the progress of therapy; in the second text, ethnology is denounced as the intrusion of a foreign gaze that invades the lives of the cultural groups being studied[14]. Devereux's pluri-disciplinary *forcing* of both psychoanalysis and ethnology, enacted by his double and complementary discourse capable of rendering another – more intricate – "object" understandable and manipulable, is questioned from its basic assumptions. For Tobie Nathan, ethnocentric therapy will never be able to grasp the disorders of "the others" because it denies its responsibility and rejects its obligation to engage in the others' own modality of socialization – an engagement whose goal should not be to conquer their space but rather to learn the specific configuration and arrangement of that space. Western therapists are blind to any other method of healing than the one related to the well-established "science of psychology", especially when the foreign technique reveals itself incommensurable with the epistemic presuppositions of their clinical practice. As to ethnography, it may provide an exhaustive description of a phenomenon, but the question remains whether the product results from the ethnographer's *relational* insights into a foreign way of living or from a set of preconceived ideas forced into the field interaction to "enlighten" the phenomenon in question. How much does the ethnologist really *socialize* if the field is delimited by the asymmetric relation imposed by the very framework of the research? Seen from that perspective, the complementarity of psychoanalysis and ethnology cannot bear fruits when applied to non-Western cultural systems. For Tobie Nathan, Devereux's method fails to provide a proper re-configuration of Heisenberg's indeterminate relation, namely

11 The title of Tobie Nathan's book is a quotation from Arthur Rimbaud's "The Impossible", a text belonging to his famous *A Season in Hell*, in which the poet rejects his nomadic past. Tobie Nathan seems to have seen in that sentence a poetic verdict on the importance of cultural attachments, which turns out to be a central theme in his progressive elaborations away from George Devereux's conception.

12 Tobie Nathan: *Fier de n'avoir ni pays, ni amis, quelle sottise c'était : principes d'ethnopsychanalyse*, Paris 1993, p. 17.

13 Tobie Nathan, Lucien Hounkpatin: *La guérison yoruba*, Paris 1996, p. 9.

14 In the same foreword to *Yoruba Healing*, the authors are quite explicit in this respect: "The [Western] claim to universality always serves as a justification to perpetuate the conquest" (Tobie Nathan, Lucien Hounkpatin: *La guérison Yoruba*, p. 10).

the passage from methodological indeterminacy (or a combination of two symmetric disciplines) to uncertainty as learning principle (through the introduction of a foreign parameter). In a later essay entitled *Ethnopsychiatry, complementarism and possession*, Nathan makes this point clear: "Anthropology and psychology do not condition the same researcher to the point of fragmenting him/her and forcing him/her to the point of uncertainty [...]. Ethnopsychiatry could really develop a complementarist pluridisciplinarity only if the same researcher manages to account for the indigenous explanation (or ethnoscience) and the scholarly explanation (or science) of the same phenomenon"[15].

The former quotation does not only refer to a methodological shift. If neither psychoanalysis nor ethnography succeed in reaching the "indigenous field", ethnopsychiatry – as Tobie Nathan understands it – should include both the cultural codes that frame the patients' disturbances and the traditional healing practices dealing with such disturbances in such a way that *the epistemic stronghold of Western science is pierced and its field hybridized*[16]. The dislocation of ethnopsychoanalysis should be prompted by the adoption of the very criterion that Devereux rejected the most: a "culturalization" of Western psychotherapy[17]. Such process would inevitably end up eroding *any* universal claim and reducing the "scientific theory" to one among many other (and equally valid) mechanisms of influence. It is not only about provincializing psychoanalysis (as a science of the psyche) and ethnology (as a scientific description of foreign societies) but also about opening a pragmatic space where *the others of the others* may be revealed, and their behavior evaluated along a complex relational spectrum. For Nathan, the so-called "cultural entities" who populate the world of our human others are not mere concepts but living presences co-shaping the psycho-social space. Systematically erased from the scholarly discourse that normally legislates upon "foreign cultures", other-than-human beings constitute the core of specific techniques and practices in non-Western societies whose significance is not purely semantic (i.e. verbal, discursive, symbolic) but eminently pragmatic (i.e. performative and relational). The scope and complexity of such entities challenge not only the epistemological exclusivity of Western science but also the ontological basis on which our notion of "world" rests and eventually holds together. A "world" is for Tobie Nathan a living context where concrete relationships take place, and he is too constructivist to believe that *any* world can be exclusively delimited by the logic of a dominant other whose power claims universal validity. He rejects the idea of a "paradigmatic" world in the image of Western modernity, mainly because

*If neither psychoanalysis nor ethnography succeed in reaching the "indigenous field", ethnopsychiatry – as Tobie Nathan understands it – should include both the cultural codes that frame the patients' disturbances and the traditional healing practices dealing with such disturbances in such a way that the epistemic stronghold of Western science is pierced and its field hybridized.*

15 Tobie Nathan: "Ethnopsychiatrie, complémentarisme, possession", in: *Ethnopsy, N°5 : Possession*, Paris 2003, pp. 7-28, here p. 14.

16 Roberto Beneduce refers to the undeniable benefit that an emphasis on local forms of knowledge and the subsequent hybridization of techniques may bring to the therapeutic practice in a global context, given the fact that "hybridity is a constitutive feature of the very condition of many migrants". He also warns against its risks, mainly "the tendency to scotomize other decisive aspects of the context in which disturbances emerge, and to use the notion of cultural identity [...] as a rigid entity" (Roberto Beneduce: *Frontiere dell'identità e la memoria: Etnopsichiatria e migrazioni in un mondo creolo*, Milano 2004, p. 248). The last aspect does not limit itself to the theoretical reification of a concept; it refers mainly to its potentially negative political consequences, namely "to foster a ghettoization [of migrants] instead of their integration, in an unexpected correspondence with certain positions dating back to colonial psychiatry" (Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria: Sofferenza mentale e alterità fra Storia, dominio e cultura*, Roma 2023, p. 26). The heated debate that Nathan's ethnopsychiatric practice generated in Paris during the 1990s shows the extent to which Nathan put his finger on the sore spot, as I will try to show in the second part of this essay. Some of the motives leading to the heated controversy between Nathan and Parisian psychoanalysis in the 1990s are summarized in Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria*, pp. 269-271.

17 Devereux's drastic rejection of culturalism comes to the fore in his characterization of that tendency as "an unbearable sophistic trap" (Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 106), as well as in his rejection of the intrinsic value of materials belonging to the field of "primitive psychiatry" (cf. *Ibidem*, p. 315).

the validity of the term "universal" has always been justified by the presupposition that Western rationality should be the norm in any cultural interaction. The realization of that presupposition implies, among other things, an erasure of all distinctive features of foreign cultures embedded in the behavior of their members[18].

Tobie Nathan's attempt to reintroduce other worlds in the space of a unified and purified "science of the psyche" is neither a provocation nor advocacy for some sort of atavistic regression within the field of psychotherapy. Its force is disruptive, but its goal is constructive, especially if we bear in mind the complex intermingling of cultures in the globalized world of today and the meta-cultural skills required to deal with it. His approach broadens the field of psychotherapy and creates a politics of *alterity* based on a logic of constructive antagonisms. In this sense, his work does not only question naturalized forms of exclusion but intends to overthrow them by an unprecedented art of hospitality. It is mainly about restituting the integrity of foreigners (not only those belonging to the human condition as we used to define it) through a destitution of the discourses and practices that have labelled such foreigners marginal, asocial, superstitious, or disturbed, that is, exclusively identifiable within a model of personal deprivation and social invisibility.

## THE OUTSIDE WITHIN (AND BELOW)

As a Jewish-Egyptian exile, Tobie Nathan understood quite early that, in its context of origin, Western universalism is not a set of desirable values to be shared with the rest of the world but rather an infallible program to perpetuate a tenacious form of exclusivism and neutralize the impact of any challenge coming from the outside. This experience must have been painful and left indelible traces, some of which have been partially elaborated in his literary production dealing with his Jewish ancestry, his forced exile, and his perpetual feeling of estrangement – despite a "successful integration" – as a migrant in Europe. Novels like *Ce pays qui te resemble* (*This Country that Ressembles You,* 2015) and *La société des belles personnes* (*The Company of Beautiful People,* 2020) are valuable material to understand his childhood years and Egyptian background. But the thorny road of assimilation in France and the tension he endured, torn between self-legitimation and marginalization, is best depicted in his autobiography, *Ethno-roman*. The antisemitic schoolteacher of the Parisian suburbs he had to endure in the 1950s[19], the ruthless elite of professors he faced at La Sorbonne in the 1960s[20], and his intellectual captivity under the spell of Georges Devereux in the 1970s[21], are indicators of a challenging – if not overwhelming – situation. Tobie Nathan's extraordi-

18 It is more courageous to interrogate one's own cultural identity than to remain silent or to adopt a position of universality, that is, to place oneself outside of all cultural context" (Tobie Nathan, Marie Rose Moro: "Si tu aperçois une calebasse descendant le Niger... Pratiquer l'ethnopsychiatrie ici et ailleurs...", in: *Nouvelle Revue d'Ethnopsychiatrie, N° 15 : Frayeur*, Paris 1990, pp. 7-18, quote p. 17).

19 "In 1958, at school in Gennevilliers with Mr. M. – who breathed the good old antisemitism of the pre-war period –, I began to think that Egypt was after all not so far away but right there in France, and that God had not brought us out of that land but honestly thrown us into the very mouth of the wolf" (Tobie Nathan: *Ethno-roman*, Paris 2012, p. 12). In his novel *Et si c'était une nuit* (*What if it was one night*), Nathan expands on his childhood experience with significant details about "that school I attended in that rotten 9th arrondissement, in that neighborhood where even the stones seemed to sweat in anguish. Nobody spoke about it, but I felt it, through the nauseous reflections of my teacher: 'your name, there, is not French' [...] Stand properly! This is not a synagogue'. I learned very quickly that I could learn that too, that malice, that desire to hurt, the choice of a widespread war of souls [...]. An immigrant can learn everything, especially as a child" (Tobie Nathan: *Et si c'était une nuit*, Paris 2023, pp. 163-164).

20 "Most of the time I felt indifference. The professors I had lived far away from me; they did not belong to my world. [...] Sometimes I experienced rage, as with that psychology professor who cursed me, declaring that all my attempts were destined to fail [...] Sometimes they humiliated me; it was a time in which such things were not forbidden by law" (Tobie Nathan: *Ethno-roman*, p. 126).

21 "I avoided the most violent drifts that followed May 68, like political violence and drug addiction,

nary capacity was battered once and again to remind him of the fact that subjugation is the price to be paid for a decent – though not so generous – degree of recognition. His combat for the dignity and richness of (the world of) migrants can certainly be read as a projective restitution of his own local attachments, but there is much more to it than that. Tobie Nathan's work forces us to re-think alterity through another politics of hospitality which goes far beyond conformist schemes. It reaches a point where the "migrant" gives way to the "stranger", and we are taken to a field of alterity impossible to unify or domesticate, an experience of relational and concrete multiplicity impermeable to the apparent exclusivity of our publicly conditioned self.

Socially speaking, migrants are the embodiment of an outside, a kind of external membrane to a system that rejects the singular core of the difference they incarnate. Migrants do not de-part only when they leave their homeland. Their departure movement continues far beyond and perpetuates itself. If they settle in a foreign land, the sense of continual departure turns into profound disorientation. Dwelling abroad releases in migrants another kind of internal movement remindful of the destabilizing motion thematized by Plato in his dialog *Timaeus*, the so-called *errant cause*[22]. An errancy in the social body with effects beyond the perimeter of the individual incarnating it. What migrants embody not only resists but also distorts homogeneous identity construction, since their worlds become encroached in the space of assimilation and threaten to break it open. That is why migrants are reduced to the status of wandering ghosts with no past, no attachments, and no beings or relations of their own. If they happen to meet the standards of assimilation, a miasma of "inferior self" is attached to them to secure the inviolability of the dominant space. Their difference is reduced to something invisible and intangible – so that the order and coherence of the whole (*one*-world) can be preserved. It is legitimate to ask how a "well-integrated" migrant like Tobie Nathan must have experienced this problem. Many aspects of his writings indicate the direction he took and the task he was faced with, namely that of transforming the oppressive sameness imposed upon him into a creative difference that might eventually release all those "other beings" from the ontological bondage they had been confined to. He must have felt the responsibility of balancing out his life-long assimilation to European standards by means of a subversive openness, not so much to the difference he epitomized as to the systematically denied strangeness of *alterity.* A strangeness with many forms, so many and so different, both plastic and evasive. Herein lies the main difficulty not only in the production but also in the reception of Nathan's work. How to do justice to metamor-

---

because Georges Devereux captured me, kidnapped me, and took me away from the circulation of ideas [...]. I neither loved nor hated Devereux, I didn't worship or despise him. He had become like an interior function to me, a container, the implicit grammar of my words" (Tobie Nathan: *Ethno-roman*, pp. 125-127).

22 Plato: *Timaeus*, 48 a-8. Plato's notion of errant cause [*planômenê aitia*], caused endless discussions in the reception of his dialogue *Timaeus*. Together with its corresponding notion of *anankê* (necessity), the errant cause introduces a spectrum of variance and discontinuity to the manifest design of *noûs* (the superior intelligence responsible for the order of the universe) and allows a speculation about a power external (and resistant) to the *noûs*. This cosmic speculation contains an interesting reflection on identity and alterity which is not confined to Plato's thought but was extended throughout the long reception of *Timaeus*, revealing the ideological tension between those who see alterity as a threat and those who emphasize its intrinsic value (against its functional reduction to an indirect expression of noetic design, which deprives it of its intrinsic dynamics and renders it invisible). Richard Dacre Archer Hind, the English scholar responsible for the first annotated English translation of Plato's dialogue, advocates the unicity and uncontaminated nature of the supreme intellect: "It is necessary once and for all to discard the notion that *anankê* is in any sense external to *noûs*: this would be totally repugnant [...] to the cardinal doctrine of Platonism" (*The Timaeus of Plato,* edited with an introduction and notes by R. D. Archer Hind, New York 1888, p. 166). Against this idealist and monistic interpretation, Emanuela Bianchi (in a recently published article on the subject) insists on the link between the errant cause and a repressed instance of alterity (the feminine) related with materiality and becoming, which comes to light not only in the famous passage concerning the creation of the universe but also at the end of the dialogue, where "the same errancy, straying or wandering (*planômênon*) [...] is attributed to the womb [...], in a passage that is the locus classicus for all studies of the historically feminine malady of hysteria" (Emanuela Bianchi: "Receptable/Chôra: Figuring the Errant Feminine in Plato's Timaeus", in: *Hypathia* Vol. 21, N°4 (Fall 2026), pp. 124-126, quotation p. 127. The link between alterity and abnormality is salient, as well as the need to fully integrate the external (ever-wandering) instance within the field determined by a *noûs* that can never be at variance with itself.

phic discrepancy? How can we pass from difference to alterity and come back *but not again* to the impossible plot within the point of no return?

Each subversive gesture, however external it may be to mainstream Western culture, is masterfully turned into an internal difference of a pre-determined and all-encompassing *logos* and ends up being evacuated (as unacceptable or unworthy) or neutralized (as a variant of the already-known). Otherness is reduced to difference, difference becomes an internal bond of the same chain, and the multiplicity of contrasting worlds is turned into a world-integrated plurality – where "plurality" is no longer a challenge to the One but a function of the whole. *Anthropos* as universal being must be "naked", out of context, fully severed from attachments – like a body deprived of its distinctive organs. There is no exception to this norm, and its application begins on the level of elementary psychology: everyone must introject universality by means of the only valid discourse legitimating it. There is no way in which any counter-theory may disrupt the unified and stabilized space of Western logocentrism. *Any* dystonic reflection is ultimately subordinated to the syntony of the dominant game. *Any* other way of thinking is adapted to already settled parameters unquestionably deemed in consonance with a non-negotiable parameter of "reality" and "truth". As a logical consequence, normative oppositions of the type "belief vs. knowledge", "myth vs. science", "arbitrariness vs. rationality", "fiction vs. fact", or "projection vs. description" rule over the intellectual territory. No matter whether the differential instance is diachronic or synchronic. The first is explained as a relic of history, the second as an exotic curiosity, and the dominant logic is preserved to guarantee the consistency of the reputed "real" and for the sake of "truth".

Individuals experience the rules of the game not only on the level of ideas. These rules seem to display the living mechanism of a superior intellect[23], and they may turn out reassuring or oppressive depending on the individual's socio-historical and geopolitical situation. Individuals incarnating what I called metamorphic discrepancy (most labeled "outsiders") must operate within the gaps of an apparently seamless construction and conjure the powers of the threshold to broaden and (re-)shape their reduced and barely perceptible space. They must feed the inscription of difference with the force of alterity and render alterity visible and tangible through differential language. This is a juggling feat that demands great skills and remarkable endurance – both in ideas, attitudes, and actions. I presume it is for that reason that Tobie Nathan did not embark on a purely theoretical confrontation with Georges Devereux's "universal framework of reference"[24] and the ethnocentric prejudices that emanate from it. He operated instead on a clinical level with a reversal of Devereux's model. He re-situated himself within a space of alterity *opened by Devereux himself*[25] to which neither

23 The paradigmatic model of the superior intellect is the Platonic *noûs* I referred to in relation to *Timaeus*, which does not mean *at all* that all forms of Western logocentrism (or more concretely: their temporal instantiations in the notion of "mainstream culture") have had the same noetic quality throughout history.

24 Cf. Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 120. The *meta*cultural character of Devereux's notion of *anthropos* is inherently related to his normative use of (Western) Culture as a universal parameter of reference. His laconic sentence "In order to have an ethnic identity, one has to be *human* to begin with" (*Ibidem*, p. 166) can be easily related to another generalization that clearly reveals his asymmetric idea of culture: "the human spirit functions in a more or less identical way everywhere" (*Ibidem*, p. 92). What he refers to in the last quotation is no decontextualized abstraction but a concrete (i.e. Western) idea of humankind and its spiritual productions elevated to the rang of universal reference. This normative imprint stems from Géza Róheim's work, as Devereux clearly states: "It is Géza Róheim who pointed to me that the most fundamental of modal personalities is the one emerging from our human condition" (Georges Dévereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 124). Róheim's psychoanalytic anthropology, despite the considerable field-experience on which it is based, could never leave behind the Freudian prejudice of interpreting non-Western cultures explicitly through the conceptual lens of Western modernity – mistaking a strictly descriptive task for a set of loose normative judgements (cf. his consideration on universal determinants, the unity of mankind and psychoanalysis as a discourse on human nature in general apart from local variations, in: Géza Róheim: *Psychoanalysis and Anthropology*, New York 1968 [1950], pp. 397 and 453).

25 This is something Tobie Nathan has always acknowledged, we could fairly say, to the point of reinterpreting Devereux's prejudiced views on indigenous therapies (manifest and unrestrained throughout his work) as a dissimulation mechanism. In his foreword to the French translation of Devereux's *Mohave Ethnopsychiatry: The Psychic Disturbances of an Indian Tribe* (1961), he reminds the reader that Devereux, despite his blind

the psychoanalytic doctrine nor the ethnographic method could ever do justice. His operation was focused on a new type of clinical intervention in which not only the (alter-)intelligence but mainly the *agency* of foreign cultures comes to the fore. "Clinical ethnopsychiatry as I have developed it over the last two decades", writes Nathan in *Ethno-roman* (2012), "is in line with the transformations of French society. I was one of the first who drew attention to the impact of new populations and the unheard-of dynamism of their presence, to the specificity *of the invisible beings that had followed them so far*"[26]. This aspect, central to Nathan's ethnopsychiatric enterprise, sheds light *from below* on forces of transmutation hitherto rendered invisible. It is like a chthonian upsurge that disrupts the established order and recontextualizes its elements without any recourse to sublimation, far from the biased rationality of old models[27]. At the same time, the inclusion of denied or rejected agency informs and reshapes the countertransferential space of both psychoanalysis and ethnology, enabling an experimental variant – or rather a reverse-side – of both disciplines. It must be said, though, that Tobie Nathan's masterful insertion of the *outside* within an established and seemingly well-delimited method took considerable time and effort, and neither hesitations nor self-contradictions or even acts of betrayal were spared in that attempt. How else could one venture to transition from method to anxiety and from anxiety to an unprecedented re-elaboration of the countertransferential blind spot, a sub-version that renders the space of alterity considerably wider than a gap or an interstitial hole?

*In ethnopsychiatry, the inclusion of denied or rejected agency informs and reshapes the countertransferential space of both psychoanalysis and ethnology, enabling an experimental variant – or rather a reverse-side – of both disciplines*

## THE GATES OF THE ETHNIC UNCONSCIOUS

Tobie Nathan fell under the spell of Georges Devereux in the context of May 68. He was twenty years old when the name "Devereux" came to his ears for the first time in a student barricade[28]. When he met him in 1969, he was caught as in a spell and pulled out of the revolutionary effervescence of the context. He replaced his untamed readings in freudo-marxism by the refined thought of that conservative outcast who strove to purify Freudian psychoanalysis with the objective rigor of physics and preached classical ethnology instead of Marxist sociology. "He dismantled me like a puppet to the point where I was no longer capable of distinguishing my thoughts from his thoughts. My writings of that time bear his stamp. In reading them, one could not tell which one of us was the author. I was stupefied by his presence"[29]. Tobie Nathan's *dis*location of Devereux's

---

confidence in the progress stemming from European Enlightenment, respected and passionately studied the therapeutic systems of foreign ethnic groups. He goes so far as to say that Devereux's recourse to a rather scientized psychoanalysis was a strategy to get indigenous theories across to Western readers without generating resistances and open their minds to the complexity of other cultures (cf. Tobie Nathan: "Devereux, un hébreu anarchiste", préface à Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychiatrie des indiens Mohaves*, Paris 1996, p. 17). That Devereux himself opened the space of alterity in which the specific knowledge of the others can be seen at work, is something that nobody can deny. Affirming that the same person whose intellectual project opened the field ascribed a set of values to that field coinciding with the intrinsic potential of the operations carried out in it (many of them escaping to a great extent our intelligibility strategies) seems to me too generous a gesture of recognition, and even a distorting exaggeration.

26 Tobie Nathan: *Ethno-roman*, p. 331, my emphasis.

27 "What is on trial here is neither the culturalist approach, nor system-building, nor psychological testing, but the *unconscious use* of sound methodological devices *primarily* as defense mechanism and only *incidentally* as (sublimatory) scientific techniques" (Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*, p. 100).

28 Cf. Tobie Nathan: *Ethno-roman*, pp. 37-38.

29 Tobie Nathan: *Ethno-roman*, p. 128.

complementarism can hardly be understood without considering this previous *re*location within Devereux's universe. From the very beginning, ethnopsychiatry was for Nathan much more than a theoretical model. It was a learning process that transformed his attitude to the world, led him away from his previous errancy, and rekindled a flame in the niche of his ancestral past. The wild concoction of romantic socialism, aesthetic experiments, sexual liberation, and revolutionary militancy that impregnated the atmosphere of May 68 did not remain, under the spell of Devereux, mere expressions of Tobie Nathan's disorientation. They became the object of his own ethnopsychiatric research. Under Devereux's mentorship, he was led to an unprecedented confrontation with the type of countertransference Devereux had exposed in his book *From Anxiety to Method*. Not only the one taking place as a reaction of the researcher to the affects mobilized by the object[30] but also that of the unconscious layers revealed by an elaboration of that reaction, mainly in the interaction with patients and their socio-cultural environment: an elaboration that renders collective formations visible – those which not only frame but also influence and shape what is usually taken to be purely idiosyncratic. Devereux taught Nathan that good work on countertransference leads from the personal elaboration of one's own anxiety and identifications to the much more complex (and in many ways unpredictable) field of an ethnic unconscious.

The result of Tobie Nathan's confrontation is his doctoral thesis, *Sexualité idéologique et névrose* (*Ideological Sexuality and Neurosis*, 1977), which Devereux himself praised as a groundbreaking work on *intra*-cultural ethnopsychiatry[31]. It is legitimate to ask whether the rubric *intra*cultural is adequate for the case, since it presupposes a similar cultural background between the therapist and his patients[32]. Was the (migration) background of the rebellious Tobie Nathan *essentially* the same as the university students who became – for the purpose of that study – his psychoanalytic patients and sociological objects of study? The "spell of Georges Devereux" consisted in relocating an errant young student (Nathan) within the space of a Western discipline (ethnopsychiatry) for the sake of scholarly legitimation. But the relocation could never have amounted to a fusion of worlds. Something remained withdrawn from Nathan's object of study and rendered a difference of another type increasingly perceptible through the openings of his socio-cultural countertransference[33]: the disruptive gap between the apparently perfect match of two disciplines (psychoanalysis and ethnology) and presumably fated communion of two researchers (Devereux and Nathan).

Devereux was himself an outsider, but – unlike Tobie Nathan – an aristocratic one who claimed to be more competent than his fellow colleagues in the realization of their shared ambition: the universalization of European enlightenment. He was too cosmopolitan for the French intellectual milieu, but he had grown out of the same standards of excellence *and civilization*. He saw Nathan, an outstanding talent neglected by the system,[34] as the ideal candidate for the extension of *his own* ethnopsychiatry, which he considered "the most comprehensive of Human Sciences"[35]. Almost twenty years after the publication of his doctoral thesis, Nathan would refer to his earlier "captivity"

30 Cf. Georges Devereux: *From Anxiety to Method in the Behavioral Sciences*, The Hague: Paris 1967, p. 3

31 "Tobie Nathan [...] inaugurates here the practice of an authentic ethnopsychiatric psychotherapy of an *intra*-cultural type through the treatment of patients belonging to his own culture" (Georges Devereux: Préface à Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, Paris 1977, p. X).

32 "I must point out that the recently coined term 'intracultural psychiatry' indicates the type of psychiatry that uses cultural insights as therapeutic levers in psychotherapeutic situations where the cultural background of the patient and that of the psychotherapist are essentially the same" (Georges Devereux: *Psychothérapie d'un Indien des Plaines: Réalité et rêve*, trad. by Françoise de Gruson and revised by Georges Devereux, Paris 1998,) p. 41.

33 "I think that one of the biggest stumbling blocks in dealing with this type of patients does not come from the patient but from the therapist, who is forced to become aware of his own social and cultural transference" (Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, pp. 141-142).

34 The institutional reason for Tobie Nathan's project on intracultural ethnopsychiatry in the French territory was the fact that he had not received financial support to cover fieldwork abroad (in this respect cf. Georges Devereux: Préface à Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. XI).

35 Georges Devereux: "L'ethnopsychiatrie", in: Georges Devereux, Tobie Nathan (eds.): *Ethnopsychiatrica, 1.1*., Grenoble 1978, pp. 7-13, quotation p. 7.

in the following terms: "He [Devereux] thought that we needed to study and respect traditional techniques of care without neglecting their irrational character, the fact that they were phantasmatic productions of a cultural group"[36]. Of course, the Tobie Nathan of the 1990s had already followed a long path in *inter*cultural ethnopsychiatry and conceived some polemical innovations. Back in the 1970s, he was still dealing with his immediate past, and the task of expanding Devereux's thought absorbed him almost entirely. *Almost*. There was still room for differential insights that enabled him to perceive (through the ancestral niche rekindled by the practice of ethnopsychiatry) what remained inaccessible to a scholarly approach like that of Devereux.

Tobie Nathan's *Sexualité idéologique et névrose* is neither a critique of freudo-marxism (Wilhelm Reich and Herbert Marcuse) nor an analysis of the alliance between human sciences and political ideologies in the French intellectual milieu of the 1960s. The term "ideology" is taken not only in the sense of a world vision, but mainly as a normative system of behavior[37]. More specifically, the analysis focuses on the new cultural mold offered to the French of the 1960s as a "frame" to contain irrational phenomena (unconscious impulses, dreams, and atavistic phantasies) that threaten to destabilize not only mental health but also the order and functioning of society. Focusing on the communitarian sex ideology of the period (a normative system of liberation and a therapy against bourgeois repression), Nathan avails himself of an important concept in Devereux's ethnopsychiatry, that of "ethnic disorder", in an attempt to make sense of the unconscious underground of that ideology. This leads him to conclude that there is nothing new in it but that, rather, it is an inversion of an old code[38]. With regard to its therapeutic aspect, the ideology *in vogue* proves hasty, wild, too unstable to offer a solution to the psychological anxiety affecting the (uprooted and disoriented) youth, but still functional in ways that would mislead psychiatric expertise. Here is where the notion of "ethnic disorder" becomes relevant.

The term "ethnic disorder" was defined by Georges Devereux in his 1956 essay *Normal and Abnormal*: "In situations of stress, the culture provides the individual with instructions for misbehavior. [Ralph] Linton calls such instructions 'models of misconduct'. It is as if the group told the individual: 'don't do that, but if you do it, go about in this fashion' [...] Ethnic disorders precisely constitute patterns of misconduct"[39]. The examples provided by Devereux refer to non-Western societies – *amok* among the Malasians, *berserk* of ancient Scandinavians, *imu* of the Ainus, etc.[40]. Nathan extends the application of Devereux's concept to the context of May 68 with considerable awareness of the challenges involved in such a task. He is part of the ethnic unconscious submitted to analysis, that is, his countertransference is not limited to an individual dimension but implies an elaboration of his place in the cultural setting of the research he is conducting. The ideology of communitarian sexuality is for him an ethnic disorder, that is, "a structured and complete set of symptoms that the culture puts at the disposal of its members", enabling them thus "to express an intra-psychic conflict and display a pseudo-solution without excluding them from the community"[41]. This is not only – I

36 Tobie Nathan: "Devereux, un hébreu anarchiste", préface à Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychiatrie des indiens Mohaves*, p. 16.

37 "Ideology is not merely a world-conception but also a normative system of conducts, a moral doctrine. Contemporary ideologies, in this sense, do not differ much from the precedent ones. They work on the constitution of a new framework where our everyday behavior may be placed" (Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 2).

38 "It is absurd to imagine that one would be able to modify so brutally and arbitrarily, on the basis of dictates, the solid frame of ancestral habits that structures everyone's psychology. We may therefore know the reason why this new code is no creation but an inversion of the old one: the creation of a new code is a collective and long-term endeavor" (Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 5).

39 Georges Devereux: "Normal et Anormal", in: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, Paris 1977, p. 34. These ideas are taken from Ralph Linton, cf. his book *The Study of Man: An Introduction*, New York 1936, p. 433.

40 *Amok* is a Malay term that refers to a state of destructive or homicidal frenzy. *Berserkr* in Old Norse means a frenzied state of rage. *Imu*, for its part, is an Ainu term referring to a sudden fright and a subsequent trance state.

41 Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 5.

would even say not *really* – a cultural diagnosis but a declaration of loyalty to Devereux's doctrine. Not so much of political loyalty (Devereux's ideas violently clashed with the ideology of May 68)[42] as of *epistemic* solidarity. In fact, the concept of ethnic disorder is exemplary of Devereux's epistemological exclusivism and reveals his ethnocentric position. It permits to establish an insurmountable difference between a culturally framed expression of psychopathological symptoms (ethnic disorder) and an epistemologically-based process leading to the cure of a conflict (psychoanalysis). Ethnic disorders may serve as frames of contention or synthetic integrators of individual pathologies, but they mask the original conflict and display an artificial symptomatology to regulate an excessive level of anxiety and tension[43].

The epistemic adherence to Devereux's conception in Nathan's early exercise of ethnopsychiatry stands out throughout his whole argumentation. The ethnic identity of the social group subjected to analysis rests on the heritage of modern liberalist European Christianity, which the effervescence of May 68 intended to topple. The specific form of social negativism[44] articulated by the leftist ideology had a strong impact because its language could successfully vehiculate (that is, contain and at the same time feed) the idiosyncratic phantasms that would otherwise give way to uncontrolled acts. The ideology of communitarian sex represented an ethnic segment offering a phantasmatic scenario "mainly at the disposal of the youth"[45], but the scope of the problematic was much broader. It concerned an articulation of social negativism at the crossroads between the irrational heritage of the past and the turbulent action of the present. For a proper elucidation of the problem, Tobie Nathan resorts to the historical phenomenon of romanticism, which in his eyes encapsulates different layers of historical negativism. He pinpoints examples of "romantic" (i.e. idealist and irrational) impulses in his clinical cases[46] and draws parallels between the leftist critique of capitalism in the context of May 68 and the romantic critique of rationalism in the XIX century. Frenzied subjectivity, cult of the imagination and dreaming, apology of the night, attraction to death, orgiastic sex and other cultural indicators can be historically traced from the leftist movement in Paris back to romanticism and, even further, to the demonology emerging from the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. All of them were "life conception[s] professing a cult of the reverse-side"[47].

What can that *reverse-side* be if not what transpires in the passage from the neurotic symptomatology - that makes up the privileged object of psychoanalysis (guilt, distress, obsessions) - to forms of narcissistic decompensation (borderline states and addictions and the group of psychoses) with its performative enactments and supernatural beings?[48] The unpredictable extension of this

42 In *Ethno-roman*, Tobie Nathan retells the emblematic story of Devereux's participation in a debate at the Odeon theater in Paris, where he warned the "revolutionary youth" of May 68 against the course they were taking and was immediately branded as a fascist (cf. Tobie Nathan: *Ethno-roman*, pp. 41-42).

43 Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 7. Cf. Georges Devereux: "What underlies an ethnic disorder is not only the particular psychodynamic configuration which determines its etiology, but also a particular ethnic character conditioned in a way that enables the subject to get rid of several and *diverse* subjective problems by means of an only and exclusive complex of symptoms" (Normal et anormal, in: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 52).

44 Social negativism is also a very important concept for Georges Devereux: "Every society has not only functional aspects through which it affirms and maintains its integrity but also a certain number of beliefs, dogmas, and tendencies that contradict, deny, and undermine the essential functions and structures of the group – and sometimes even its very existence" (Georges Devereux: Normal et anormal, in: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 34). Tobie Nathan emphasizes the fact that opposition to the social norm is not random but negatively determined by the scope of the social norms themselves (cf. Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 51).

45 Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 57.

46 The semantic extension Nathan ascribes to the term "romanticism" enables him to find structural parallels in different clinical cases based on specific features connecting idiosyncratic conflicts with a shared cultural code, like exacerbated social critique, rejection of hierarchy, obsession with authenticity, and esthetization of despair (cf. Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, Chapter IV: Les données cliniques, pp. 127-211).

47 Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 218.

48 In Freud's terminology (most precisely in the context of his analysis of Daniel Paul Schreber's *dementia paranoides*), narcissistic neurosis became an equivalent of psychosis, cf. Sigmund Freud: "Psychoanalytische Bemerkungen über einen autobiographisch beschriebenen Fall von Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)",

passage points in the direction of the metamorphic discrepancy I referred to earlier. In a clinical exploration, the field of the ethnic unconscious may display much more than what is conceded by the theoretical model regulating it. Tobie Nathan realized *from the very beginning* that the more "psychotic" the asocial tendency, the stronger the libidinal investment (cathexis) in the ethnic unconscious[49]. In Devereux's view, the ethnic unconscious is ultimately an empty mold, and the real problem is always to be sought on an idiosyncratic level. If the projective mechanism happens to become autonomous (as in the case of psychoses), one is faced with an exhibition of the ethnic unconscious. In such a case, psychoanalysis should resort to its complementary pair (sociology or ethnology) to account for *the socio-cultural aspect* of the pathology in question instead of acknowledging the limits of its own epistemic reduction[50]. Tobie Nathan shows his loyalty to Devereux when he states "our time encourages the expression of neurotic disturbances with the aid of certain mechanisms corresponding to schizophrenia"[51]. He privileges the neurotic spectrum for an explanation of the internal functioning of such ethnic disorders[52], which is an indirect declaration that ethnopsychiatry remains bound to the "scientific core" of psychoanalysis. But is that feasible in terms of clinical intervention? Once the gates of an unknown field like the ethnic unconscious are opened, does it make sense to barricade oneself in one's own cultural lens instead of re-adapting the vision to what emerges there?[53]

*Tobie Nathan realized from the very beginning that the more "psychotic" the asocial tendency, the stronger the libidinal investment (cathexis) in the ethnic unconscious.*

## THE SACRED PORTION

Earlier I referred to the unprecedented confrontation faced by Tobie Nathan in the context of his doctoral thesis. Unprecedented not only for him but also for ethnopsychiatry as a clinical dispositive, and certainly with unthought-of effects for Devereux. The scope of Nathan's work turned

---

in : *Gesammelte Werke VIII*, pp. 297-299.

49 "The content of psychotic delusions is mostly taken from the cultural domain, while it is much more unusual and quite limited in the case of neurosis" (Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 11).

50 The complementarist resort to a sociological description enables Devereux to re-legitimate the normativity of his psychoanalytic interpretation. This type of dogmatic attitude led him to incur in absurd analogies, like that of the shaman and the psychotic child. In his view, the "utility" of the shaman for the social group does not lie in his mastery of traditional healing techniques but in the fact that he is, like a psychotic child in relation to its family, a *fou par procuration*. The shaman's own pathology being anchored in a portion of the ethnic unconscious of his group, he absorbs the idiosyncratic pathology of its members – which does not disappear but remains latent. Like the psychotic child, the shaman is for Devereux no healer but a disturbed individual who becomes a psychological scapegoat (cf. Georges Devereux: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 28). The fact that Devereux recognizes the "utility" of the shaman forces him to accept the "ethnic validity" of that function but also to propose, in consonance with his epistemological exclusivism and ethnocentric normalcy criterion, a de-pathologizing strategy. Here is where his argumentation reaches the summit of absurdity: "A psychotherapy of the shaman would not require that he should be deprived of his ethnic character [...] [but rather] deal with his shamanic character, searching to de-shamanize him without cutting into the structure of his ethnic character. It should be an effort to activate his capacity of re-adaptation by destroying his pathological adaptation" (*Ibidem*, p. 76).

51 Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 139.

52 Deviating from the Freudian terminology, Nathan resorts to Heinz Kohut's *The Analysis of the Self* (1971) to establish a strategic distinction between narcissistic neurosis (a pathology characterizing the phenomena he analyzes) and psychosis (episodic extensions of those phenomena mindful of tribal supernaturalism). This distinction seems to underline even more Devereux's methodological line, but as we shall see, it cannot secure the ethnopsychiatric field within the original framework provided by Devereux.

53 This would (paradoxically) do justice to Devereux's own definition of mental health: "The bedrock of mental health is not adaptation in itself, but the capacity of the subject to successive re-adaptation" (Georges Devereux: *Essais d'ethnopsyciatrie générale*, p. 75).

out to be much broader than what his mentor would have reckoned with, and the effects of that confrontation led to a methodological torsion of ethnopsychiatry – from the hostility of an inherited cultural asymmetry based on epistemological exclusivism to a radical hospitality toward alterity involving a progressive symmetrization of (Western and non-Western) methods in dealing with individual distress and socio-cultural disorder. This would emerge only in 1986 with the publication of Tobie Nathan's *La folie des autres* (*The Madness of the Others*), but certain signs appeared very early, as early as in the context of his doctoral thesis. The process leading to a dislocation of Devereux's complementarism had been triggered from the very beginning. Tobie Nathan's confrontation with his countertransferential blind spot was not limited to merely facing his own social negativism in the context of May 68[54]. It was an exploration of the ethnic unconscious beyond the veil of a "mystified disorder" that Devereux ascribed to it.

Devereux's preface to *Sexualité idéologique et névrose* concludes with a rather hyperbolic reference to an article on which Tobie Nathan was working at that time, *Le traitement analytique des psychoses* (*On the Analytic Treatment of Psychoses,* 1978)[55]. He praises Nathan's "new voice – that of science" and explicitly appoints him as his successor in "the endless struggle in favor of Reason [...] at the service of the Real"[56]. The capital letters in Devereux's text reveal the qualitative difference Devereux attributed to scientific standards. Such conviction usually leads to the normative distinction between "scientific" and "ethnic", which implies that the validity of science should apply to *any* context, irrespective of how deep the inscription of cultural values can be for a collective balance and functioning. Nathan's exploration of ethnic disorders, faced with the challenge of psychosis, ended up changing the status of the ethnic unconscious *despite the weight of his personal countertransference* (namely his pledge of allegiance to Devereux).

Let us analyze the situation more closely. The basis of Nathan's reasoning is that neurotics create private symptoms while psychotics find a source of inspiration for their delusions on a collective level (i.e. in their culture). In doing so, they are renouncing their own truth and proclaiming instead "an unconscious truth of the culture, preferably that of their interlocutor [the therapist]"[57]. From a theoretical point of view, the "truth" of the patient lies in the depths of his/her idiosyncratic unconscious, or more precisely in the singular narrative that emerges from the mechanism of "repression". In his article of 1978, Nathan writes (with the intention of reaffirming his Devereux position) that the cultural material welling up in the delusions of a psychotic patient may display "a seducing and fascinating mask" but ultimately remains "an unreal and inauthentic lure"[58]. From a clinical point of view, however, the question changes considerably. The therapist must offer the patient his own identity as transferential support, which presupposes fumbling through the patient's ethnic unconscious to counterbalance *on the level of primary processes* the delusional contents that invade him. Nathan's patient in his article on psychosis experienced himself as a mutant during his first psychotic crisis, and in the second he encountered the Devil and was asked to make a pact with him. As a mutant he felt himself superior – the first man stemming from a future generation – and had strong affective associations with Nazism[59]. As a devil worshipper, and despite a demystification attempt with a Rabbi[60], he demanded from the analyst a counter-appeal to God as part of a resti-

54 This exploration was extensively made in Nathan's *Et si c'était une nuit*.

55 "Tobie Nathan telephoned me to share the main ideas of an article he is working on. Very soon the wind from the high peaks seemed to brush against me. I was not any longer the master listening to a brilliant student; I had the intoxicating experience of being the student of my former student" (Georges Devereux, préface à Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. XIII).

56 Georges Devereux, préface à Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. XIII.

57 Tobie Nathan: "Le traitement analytique des psychoses", in : *Etnopsychiatrica 1.1*., p. 19.

58 Tobie Nathan: "Le traitement analytique des psychoses", in : *Etnopsychiatrica 1.1*., p. 19.

59 The patient asks Nathan: "Do you think I am a Nazi?", and since the latter remain silent, he adds: "Are you a Jew?" (Tobie Nathan: "Le traitement analytique des psychoses", in : *Etnopsychiatrica 1.1*., p. 17).

60 The patient says: "I was really afraid of Satan. I went to see my Rabbi to tell him of my fear. He told me that Satan was an invention of Christians and that the devil did not exist for the Jews" (Tobie Nathan: "Le traitement analytique des psychoses", in : *Etnopsychiatrica 1.1*., p. 17).

tuting course of action[61]. If ethnic disorders are defined as a phantasmagoria, they nonetheless become a placeholder of identity with concrete effects both on the individual and on the environment (including the person of the analyst). Nathan compares this phenomenon with shamanism and introduces a terminological shift: psychotics suffer from a "*sacred* disorder"[62], since they experience a cultural scenario subjectively and suck all persons around them into that space.

At this point, Tobie Nathan is faced with the paradox of having to find (as a therapist intellectually anchored in psychoanalysis) a cultural link of "neutralized affects", but this neutralization can only take place by giving credit to the content of his patient's "sacred disorder" *within himself*. He therefore resorts to the concept of "appersonation" to emphasize the analyst's capacity to lend his own portion of "ethnic unconscious" to the patient without falling into the trap of identification[63]. But the "sacred" part of the ethnic unconscious where the mythical beings of different cultural strata come to life and take the upper hand does not lend itself to meta discursive subterfuges. In fact, its manifestations challenge the psychoanalytic conviction that an alleviation of symptoms takes place when repressed contents are brought back into conscious awareness. This may work for (some) neuroses but not for psychoses, since in the face of the material conjured by such disturbances, one does not know where the ethnic unconscious ends – and *eo ipso* where it may lead the analyst.

One of Tobie Nathan's conclusions in his article on psychosis is that the ethnic unconscious is not only a descriptive category (as stated by Devereux) but rather "a kind of psychic agency capable of playing a certain role in intrapsychic dynamics"[64]. It is in fact redefined as "a psychic instance with a certain dynamic potential"[65]. Its phantasmatic turmoil is deemed autonomous, something that constrains thinking away from the usual sum of repressed contents belonging to a specific cultural group. The limit of the psychoanalytic countertransference is clearly expressed in Nathan's doctoral thesis: to bridge the gap that prevents the sort of identification leading to a *folie à deux*: "It is sometimes difficult not to plunge into Narcisse's fountain with certain psychotic patients; but at least we know in advance that the whole thing is a delusion"[66]. Here the prejudice becomes quite clear, but his own confrontation went beyond that limit. The ethnic unconscious seems to require the therapist to abandon his obsession with the possibility or danger of a *folie à deux*, since there is (on the level of a "sacralized" ethnic unconscious) no dual aspect in analyst-patient dynamics. It is the third, *the other* (autonomous, multiple, complex) that calls for a renewed focus of attention and a different approach, since *it was already there before the question of repression emerged*. This dilemma is older than Nathan and Devereux. Despite his dogmatic adherence to Freud, Géza Róheim was led by his own fieldwork in Australia to a similar dilemma, which he formulated quite resolutely in his book *The Gates of the Dream* (1952): "the question is whether symbolism is conditioned by repression or whether it is an intrinsic part of *the primary process which would exist even if there were no repression*"[67].

*For Tobie Nathan, the ethnic unconscious must be redefined as a psychic instance with a certain dynamic potential, and its phantasmatic turmoil is deemed autonomous.*

61 Tobie Nathan: "Le traitement analytique des psychoses", in : *Etnopsychiatrica 1.1*., pp. 16-17.

62 Devereux defined sacred disorders as characterized by an excessive dose of supernaturalism, something which fascinated ethnographers and "has hindered the understanding of the psychiatric status of the shaman" (Georges Devereux: "Normal et Anormal", in: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 14).

63 Cf. Tobie Nathan: "Le traitement analytique des psychoses", in: *Etnopsychiatrica 1.1*., p. 21. Nathan's main source is Otto Sperling, who openly acknowledged that, in the analytical literature of his time, many instances of appersonation were taken to be examples of identification and pleaded for a sharper differentiation of the concepts, since their economic value is entirely different (cf. Otto Sperling: On Appersonation, in: *The International Journal of Psycho-Analysis, Vol. 25*, London (January 1, 1944), pp. 128-132, especially p. 128). The concept of appersonation goes back to Eugen Bleuler's book *Dementia Praecox, oder die Gruppe der Schizophrenien* (1911).

64 Tobie Nathan: "Le traitement analytique des psychoses", in: *Etnopsychiatrica 1.1*., p. 39.

65 Tobie Nathan: "Le traitement analytique des psychoses", in: *Etnopsychiatrica 1.1*., p. 22.

66 Tobie Nathan: *Sexualité idéologique et névrose*, p. 141.

67 Géza Róheim: *The Gates of the Dream*, New York 1969 [1952], p. 121. My emphasis.

For Nathan, Róheim's question poses a riddle, certainly more challenging than that of the Sphinx[68]: What is the primary process that, in displaying two sides of the same coin, reveals the coin's *third* side? The two sides of the "Freudian coin" (fully shared by Devereux) are repression and the unconscious. If the primary process is the language of the unconscious, its expression and scope show that the obverse and reverse side are not sealed together but glued to an in-between layer. The extension of psychoanalysis to questions of anthropology discloses that layer and focus on it (as in the case of Róheim's fieldwork in Australia), revealing a cleft into which repression and the unconscious are sucked and flipped over – irrespective of the psychoanalyst's effort to keep the two sides irrevocably glued to each other. In Devereux's epistemic exclusivism, psychoanalysis has primacy over ethnology in the same way as "nature" (as given reality) comes before "culture" (as constructed reality) or the internal gaze (on the individual) precedes the external gaze (on society). But Tobie Nathan's contribution to the historical development of complementarism challenged the conservative imprint of its origins, and Devereux's hierarchy was gradually inverted. In *La folie des autres* (1986), Nathan wrote that ethnology has primacy over psychoanalysis; in *Fier de n'avoir ni pays ni amis...*(1993), he declared that all theories of psychopathology emerge from observations lacking anything "natural". Psychoanalytic knowledge appears as something "constructed" and "relative", like the knowledge arising from *any* other mechanism of influence (whether divination methods, possession cults, spiritism, or animal magnetism). In *La Damnation de Freud* (*Freud's Damnation*, 1993), a play Nathan co-authored with Isabelle Stengers and Lucien Hounkpatin, a Yoruba researcher called Gabriel Babatundé pronounces a hard verdict on psychoanalysts: "They speak of sexual desire to the ones who seek them for help, and that happens even when they didn't ask for any of that [...]. Now, talk to somebody in earnest about his sexual desire, and here is what happens: he forgets father, mother, grandfather, grandmother, God and the devil. Simple and efficient [...], even more efficient than the Gospels"[69].

We could say that in Nathan's work, especially after *La folie des autres*, therapeutic validity becomes gradually independent from the "scientific" status of the theory in question. The "inauthentic lure" he mentioned in his 1978 article can no longer be identified with the ethnic unconscious. On the contrary, it applies to any theory that hinders an adventurous (for Nathan "anti-colonial") exploration of that field. In that exploration, what would be the destiny of the therapy? Where should the therapist arrive if not at the core of the person? A vertiginous descent, the core being no idiosyncratic inner space but a niche of manifold and relational provenance below the earth, where the memory is stored and extends even beyond human history. The bedrock of Tobie Nathan's countertransferential elaboration, which inaugurates a new and quite controversial period of his ethnopsychiatric work, is the place of the origins, the place of creation. No unity of any kind, but a dynamic composite of forces known as "reservoir of the ancestors"[70].

*La folie des autres*, published in 1986, is a transition book. It contains a considerable shift in perspective (made explicit in the title: the madness *of the others*); it emphasizes (against Devereux's principle that psychoanalysis is "applicable to the whole of humanity"[71]) the specificity and importance of traditional therapies, their etiologies and techniques[72]. In the "madness of the others", there

68 Géza Róheim: *The Riddle of the Sphinx, or Human Origins*, London 1934. The mythological richness related to the figure of the Sphinx in all its cross-cultural variants is brought to a common denominator in "the mother of the hero" (*Ibidem*, p. 17). Róheim's interpretation of the slaying of the monster as an evolutionary feat to get rid of man's atavistic shackles reinforces a classical view of the *anthropos* that eventually proved inacceptable to Tobie Nathan, whose work became increasingly focused on an exploration of the Protean field of alterity (the feminine, the foreign, the daimonic other-than-human).

69 Tobie Nathan, Isabelle Stengers, Lucien Hounkpatin: *La damnation de Freud*: Paris 1993, ppp1-52.

70 Tobie Nathan, Lucien Hounkpatin: *La guérison yoruba*, p. 88.

71 Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 82.

72 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres : traité d'ethnopsychiatrie clinique*, Paris 2013 [1986], p. 3.

are two factors to consider which psychoanalysis hides from view: the patient's pre-understanding of the disturbance and the local interpretation models – which are not meta-discursive but rather inherent to their techniques[73]. The moment these elements became part of Tobie Nathan's practice and reflection, he left the intracultural type of ethnopsychiatry that had been the object of his previous research and embarked on an inter- and meta-cultural enterprise based on his clinical experience with migrants and his research voyages to study traditional techniques with the intention of restituting the richness of the migrants' background – which was also his own ancestral past – in a space where such cultural elements were almost banned on principle. Regarding his therapeutic practice, it should be borne in mind that since 1979 Tobie Nathan had been in charge of ethnopsychiatric consultations at Bobigny, a zone in the northeastern suburbs of Paris with a significant concentration of migrant population. This is reflected in the clinical observations presented in *La folie des autres,* not only because foreign patients play a significant role but mainly because, even in the case of French patients, there is an emphasis on the cultural entities brought to the consultation and their importance for the therapist's main insights into the analytic process[74]. This marks a considerable distance from Devereux's approach, in which such entities were not considered in their specific functionality for the therapy but subsumed under the intelligibility framework of psychoanalysis. The question of Nathan's Egyptian background, usually overlooked[75], is here of utmost importance. The encounter between two distant cultures is in his view fraught with misunderstandings and overloaded by tension because the dominant pole operates with presuppositions that emerge from the very historical asymmetry that perpetuates and reinforces an ever-widening gap. An everyday scene in his autobiography illustrates this point very well. During the defense of Nathan's thesis at the University of Nanterre in 1983, an improbable encounter took place, "that of Serge Labovici, president of the International Psychoanalytic Association, advisor to princes, the man who was then restructuring psychiatry studies in France", and Nathan's father, "a small immigrant with an accent who carried the rough edges of Egypt"[76]. The latter introduces himself with the words "I am his father", and Lebovici says, to the old man's perplexity, "you can be proud", adding right away "of your son, I mean, you can be proud". To which Nathan writes: "Lebovici had immediately attributed to him a psychology of ordinary petit-bourgeois, of a father wanting to benefit from his share of the glory", but his father's intention had been quite another: "to inform the learned Jew Lebovici that he was in the presence of the petitioner's father. He probably considered it his duty, just as when a boy, during his *bar mitzvah*, his religious initiation, goes up to the Torah, holding the sacred texts for the first time. [...] What kind of world was that in which the initiation of a young man before the assembled community took place without mentioning the name of his father? Was it a world of

73 François Laplantine exposes this aspect with great clarity. The systematization of etiological models based on the objectivity criterion of modern science excludes *on principle* both the patient's pre-understanding of the disturbance and the local interpretative models, the first one because of its experienced (i.e. non-reflexive) character, and the second one because its interpretative norms do not require an epistemological break with the experienced reality but are – on the contrary – embedded in the techniques of intervention (cf. François Laplantine: *Anthropologie de la maladie*, Paris 1986, pp. 37-38).

74 That is the case of a French patient called Patrick, an eight-year-old boy who suffered from a savage, uncontrolled and disquieting form of aggression. During the therapeutic sessions he manifested a crazy excitement, which escalated to such a point that, one day, he grabbed Tobie Nathan's lighter and set fire to an overflowing paper basket, dancing around it and grimacing. Nathan decided to remain quiet and wait. At last the boy shouted "the witch, she is there, I will haunt her, she must go", revealing thus the hidden actor of the scene: "It was only at that moment that I realized that the boy had been secretly living in the company of that witch for years [...] Patrick was not only delusional [...], he had borrowed a relatively structured cultural element found in children's tales and developed it in his own way" (Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 91). The witch becomes in Nathan's analysis the third actor of the therapeutic process.

75 This aspect is overlooked because it appears Nathan's novels and is therefore considered "a separate corpus" of autobiographical, aesthetic, and to a certain extent historical but not clinical or anthropological significance.

76 Tobie Nathan: *Ethno-roman*, p. 162.

apes or dogs?"[77]. Local knowledge, tradition embedded in popular wisdom, and collective solidarity contend in that scene with scholarly specialization, that sacralized distillation of bourgeois society whose small-minded traits are intertwined in the universal achievements it preaches. Bridging that gap (between the Egyptian culture of his past and the French culture of his present) was for Nathan not only a question of attitude and (re-)education but also an eminently therapeutic task.

In *La folie des autres*, one of Nathan's main purposes is "to show that ethnopsychiatry enriches psychoanalytic clinic and, in a broader sense, the practice of psychotherapy"[78]. To accomplish that task, it is not enough to say that "the traditional *doctor* and the psychoanalyst are housed under the same banner", or that "they approach material of the same type (psychism and its disorders) using comparable tools"[79]. When he states that ethnopsychiatry is *not* psychoanalysis applied to other cultures, he is clearly departing from Devereux's heuristic view of psychoanalysis[80] and from any remnant of cultural evolutionism in the practice of clinical psychology. But the main question remains as to how that comparison between psychoanalysis and traditional methods may be best carried out. The Tobie Nathan of the middle 1980s is no longer the man of the 1970s still captured by the spell of Georges Devereux, but he is not yet what he would become in the 1990s with publications like *L'influence qui guérit* (*The Influence that Heals*, 1994), a book in which he ravages the psychoanalytic foundations of his previous work and develops a radically pluralist and constructivist theory of influence. At the time of *La folie des autres*, he stands in the gap between two worlds, holding the tension that fills that interstitial space. The symmetrization of methods contaminates the psychoanalytic dispositive to the point of allowing the entrance of alternative epistemologies into that space; however, Nathan still advocates Devereux's thesis of "the psychic universality of mankind"[81] as a rule of thumb. This is untenable if we think that some traditional etiologies would defy the idea of "the human", even on the level of physiological traits deemed "pre-cultural"[82], and that no patient within the clinical dipositive created by Nathan ever speaks as a "universal human being" but as a Yoruba, Soninké, Douala, Bakongo, or Bambara[83]. But it could also be regarded as a challenging and most interesting moment in Nathan's work: his effort to *open psychoanalysis* to the overwhelming effect of non-naturalistic[84] theories of influence.

---

77 Tobie Nathan: *Ethno-roman*, p. 163.

78 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 3.

79 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 3.

80 Cf. Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 4.

81 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 3.

82 Totemic etiologies establish ancestral links between humans and non-humans based on analogical traits and not on any criterion of physicality or interiority in consonance with epistemic categories such as genetic inheritance or brain constitution. These ancestral links are not only decisive in making a diagnosis but observable on a level retraceable to symptoms. Tobie Nathan gives an example of this in an interview: "One day, when I asked that friend [Yoruba from Benin] who his ancestor was, he told me it was a crocodile. I asked him how he knew that his ancestor was a crocodile. His answer was that if he ever ate crocodile meat, he would immediately become mad. That he would immediately lose his mind" (Tobie Nathan: "The Psychiatrist Tackling Migrant Mental Health", in: *TRUEAfrica*, November 06, 2015: trueafrica.co/article/tobie-nathan-the-psychiatrist-tackling-migrant-mental-health

83 Cf. Tobie Nathan: *L'influence qui guérit*, Paris 2001 [1994], p. 114. This is the most important and interesting aspect of Nathan's clinical dispositive, which goes in the opposite direction of any *reductio ad unum* postulating a common basis (the genetic human, the Platonic idea, the Gnostic divine, etc.) to ensure a coherence in the face of differences. The pragmatic and performative (i.e. therapeutic) value of this complexification method, inspired by the making of fetishes in West-Africa, was brilliantly expounded by Bruno Latour in his book *Sur le culte modern des dieux faitiches* (2009).

84 I take "naturalism" in the sense given to this term by Philippe Descola, "a fundamental modality of schematization of experience [...] definable by means of a continuity of the physicality of the world entities and a discontinuity of their interiorities" (Philippe Descola: *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris 2005, pp. 241-242). Within this *ontological* (not representational) framework, what distinguishes humans from non-humans is reflexive consciousness, subjectivity, the capacity to symbolize, to sum up: *all that creates culture in the classic sense also used by psychoanalytic thought* (as opposed to a detached screen of objectifiable qualities called "nature" which lends itself to "neutral" research). In this sense, non-naturalistic theories of influence are those in which such

## THE ECOLOGICAL NICHE OF THE OTHERS

"Of all types of psychology and psychopathology", writes Tobie Nathan in 1986, "only psychoanalysis can be compared with traditional therapeutic techniques, since it is the only one whose object is exclusively built on human psychic material as opposed to any other material of experimental, biological, or chemical origin"[85]. Magical thinking, association of ideas, transference, and performative language are some of the elements which offer a common ground between psychoanalysis and traditional therapies. They urged Nathan to change the axis, to *dis*-locate Devereux's complementarism, passing from the old and cautious conceptual pair "psychoanalysis-ethnology" to a new and rather adventurous conceptual pair: "psychoanalysis-traditional therapies". How can the transition successfully be made from two Western sciences to a combination of Western and indigenous science? The distance between them must be bridged with clinical dexterity and a good dose of analogical (*not* comparative) insight. Nathan's methodological shift implies, as a first step, a re-reading of psychoanalysis. Devereux thought that the exercise of psychoanalytic therapy should be based on an ideal of "absolute science"[86]. It is true that he could very well distinguish between an ideal and a concept. He recognized, for example, that even if physics provided the cultural foundations for that ideal, the extension of that specific methodology as a general model for the sciences of human behavior (especially psychiatry) was not possible[87]. Still, his approach to psychoanalysis was characterized by a tendency to purify the discipline from what he thought of as "irrational elements". He condemned Freud's interest in telepathy, the concept of death-drive, and the significance of phantasms and delusions to break with a certain illusion of "knowledge" on the part of the analyst[88]. He insisted on the implementation of standardized psychiatric nosology to grasp and effectively deal with any kind of cultural disorder[89] – ignoring or denying the alienating role in which the patient is secluded by such procedures. In the case of indigenous etiologies, he discarded any clinical relevance and ascribed them a certain (certainly random!) empirical validity only if the results could be brought *in any way* in consonance with the objectivity parameters of Western science[90]. His stubbornness on the question of science must have weighed heavily on his own practice of psychoanalysis, which he totally abandoned when he settled in France in 1963 to focus entirely

---

ontology is not valid, not because of a question of different belief or world-representation, but rather because the modality of distribution of beings in the world is pre-reflexively schematized in a different way, leading to animistic, totemistic or analogical correspondences.

85 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 3.

86 Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 331.

87 "The more psychiatrists persist in adopting a limit case [physics] as a model of thought whose research object is too complex to be useful, the slower their progress will be toward a true science of the total organism" (Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 334).

88 Recalling Devereux's peculiar behavior, Tobie Nathan reveals an important aspect of his mentor's appreciation of Freud's work: "When he spoke in private, he described all ethnologists as clowns – with exception of Marcel Mauss –, all psychologists as crackpots – with exception of Freud, and even then, *only until 1915*" (Tobie Nathan: Georges Devereux et l'ethnopsychiatrie clinique, in: *Nouvelle revue d'ethnopsychiatrie 35/36*: Petit manuel de psychothérapie des migrants (5), Paris 1999, pp. 7-18, quotation p. 8. My emphasis).

89 "I affirm once and for all that my ethnopsychiatric typology is perfectly compatible with the scientific nosologies of psychiatry" (Georges Devereux: Normal et Anormal, in: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 13).

90 This does not mean that Devereux didn't value ethnographic study of the cultural specificities related to such healing methods (a study he himself carried out in an eminent way); nor does it mean that he denied the fact that Western science is also located within a specific culture. The problem is that Devereux's idea of "Culture" (written in capital) as an all-encompassing but also normative notion happens to coincide with what Western modernity has achieved in terms of scientific progress. Scientific progress may be located within Western culture, and Western culture is the historical origin of scientific progress, but its values are cultural in the general, all-encompassing and normative sense. Thus, they are entitled to modify other ways of configuring the world, even if they deprive them from their specific traits (as in the case of a de-shamanization of a shaman or the elimination of supernatural agency in certain indigenous techniques of healing whose empirical aspects happen to coincide with the results of scientific inquiry), cf. Georges Devereux: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 76, and *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, p. 336, respectively.

on a theoretical elaboration of ethnopsychiatry.

Tobie Nathan's development was quite the opposite. His ideas were gradually modified by clinical experience to the point of breaking the spell of his mentor and reconstructing ethnopsychiatry on a different methodological axis. The differences between Devereux and his young disciples (amongst whom Tobie Nathan was the chosen son) are summarized in his preface to the second edition of *La folie des autres*: "We wanted to do clinical work, he wanted to elaborate a general theory of the human; we wanted to talk about our migrant patients, he insisted on his Indians and ancient Greeks; we wanted to debate the issue of psychoanalysis in France, which was then contentious; he thought it was definitely established, prosperous, serene[91]". In *La folie des autres*, Nathan struggles to retain the psychoanalytic conceptuality – which he later abandoned altogether. However, his way of conceiving the exercise of psychoanalysis differs considerably from the latter's reputation *as a scientific doctrine*. The space of phantasms and delusions as well as their enactment in the patients' symptomatic can never be subsumed or "neutralized" by the knowledge of the analyst; they must be taken *as a dynamic and complex environment* whose logic challenges the epistemological exclusivism inherent to Western forms of therapy. If every symptom is a culturally coded message, and the cultural factor plays a decisive role both in the understanding and treatment of the disturbance[92], the pluridisciplinary exercise of ethnopsychiatry must include exogenous etiologies with the aim of understanding their logic and intrinsic value *including the scope of their practical effects*. In this sense, Nathan's recalibration of psychoanalysis inverts Devereux's approach to it. Instead of using the conceptual tools of psychoanalysis as operative concepts in the field of ethnology (as Devereux did and he himself had done in his doctoral thesis), he picks out some of its historical elements and shows their potential for self-revision. He inevitably complies with Devereux's asymmetric view of etiological theories[93], but he works at the same time on a gradual elimination of the prejudices inherent to the psychoanalytic doctrine in its confrontation with so-called "primitive psychology". A book of transition like *La folie des autres* is always the record of a struggle and, retrospectively seen, a testimony of assumed contradictions.

In what follows, I will mention two examples of the way in which Nathan rehabilitates psychoanalysis as a potential tool for symmetrization. The first concerns his approach to Freud. Nathan does not focus on what this author inherited from Edward B. Tylor and Georges Frazer (namely cultural evolutionism in the consideration of ethnic religions) but rather on what brings him close to Marcel Mauss, that is, his descriptive approach to magic as a technique and not as an irrational superstition[94]. When Freud resorts to Frazer's terminology inmentioning the magical procedures of similitude and contiguity[95], the interesting point is the analogy he establishes between those two principles responsible for the efficacy of magic and the association of ideas as condition for the efficacy of the analysis[96]. This is clinically relevant, especially if one develops that line of reasoning

91 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, préface à la 2e édition : Vingt ans après. Développement de l'ethnopsychiatrie clinique en France : espoirs et embûches, p. IX.

92 Cf. Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 39. Taking the symptom as a culturally coded message implies, among other things, renouncing the conviction that there is an "intrapsychic" explanation of that symptom – in which case the notion of interiority would be related to the *one* "nature" (of the psyche) underlying a plurality of cultures (expressions of that psyche), a "nature" exclusively deciphered by a science whose specific cultural trait is, paradoxically enough, to declare itself "neutral", that is, independent of any cultural context and therefore free from any specific cultural trait.

93 For example, when he writes (comparing the demonological theory of psychic disturbances and psychoanalysis): "The psychoanalytic theory is truer and less projective" (*La folie des autres*, p. 14). This statement presupposes that *any* exogenous etiology (typical of non-Western therapies) implies an unconscious occultation of the true endogenous (i.e. psychodynamic) origin of the disturbance.

94 Both aspects are contained in Freud's famous essay *Totem und Tabu* (1913), a book that, according to Nathan, inaugurated the type of ethnopsychiatric reflection systematized by Devereux.

95 Cf. Sigmund Freud: *Gesammelte Werke IX: Totem und Tabu*, Frankfurt 1999, p. 105.

96 Tobie Nathan, *La folie des autres*, p. 12. Nathan adds that the principles of similitude and contiguity corresponds further to Freud's primary mechanisms of dream-work: condensation and displacement.

further, as Nathan does, with the aim of turning its inherent prejudices into ethnologically functional insights. The principles of similitude and contiguity, writes Nathan, have an analogous correspondence with the primary mechanisms of dream-work, condensation and displacement: "We can infer, on the basis of this data, that magic derives its effectiveness from the fact that it subjects the elements of the real world to the same treatment as those of the psychic world; it renders them psychic through displacement and condensation. The analysis of this concordance anticipates the famous article by Lévi-Strauss on symbolic efficacy"[97]. Saying that Freud's *Totem and Taboo* anticipates some aspects of Lévi-Strauss' thinking is a daring statement, especially considering Levi-Strauss' assessment of that work[98]. The second example of Nathan's functionalization of psychoanalysis concerns Géza Róheim, whose fieldwork in Australia was an invaluable *prima materia* for a structural reelaboration of Freud's simplistic analogy between the "primitive" and the neurotic. The result of Róheim's contribution is a considerable displacement of comparative parameters: it is not the "primitive" as individual that resembles the neurotic, but the collective activities of societies deemed "primitive". This difference is indeed essential, since collective activities are structuring instances of meaningful elaboration for a whole group, whereas neurotic compulsion is a private reenactment and rather absurd iteration of drive-related forces[99]. Róheim's observations on the parallels between shamanism (as a cultural institution) and the sequence of infantile phantasms of destruction and reparation described by Melanie Klein proves this point. Shamanism appears for Róheim as the first culturally sanctioned profession resulting from the transmutation of infantile destruction phantasms into successful defense mechanisms[100]. Psychoanalysis after Róheim's fieldwork, concludes Nathan, is no longer a systematic interpretation of "primitive cultures" by means of a direct analogy with modern patients but a technique of inquiry that reaches far beyond its own initial presuppositions[101]: "The psychic elements that, in a certain society, appear in unconscious form (dreams, neurotic symptoms), will take another form in a different society, like a mythic elaboration or a ritual"[102]. The decisive link here is neither the tension between individual and society nor a certain continuity between archaic habits and new pathologies, but rather the "manipulation" of the unconscious (in traditional societies) and its exogenous manifestation, the emergence of an environment configuring a modality of alterity that escapes all previous attempts at conceptualization.

The introduction of that radical instance of alterity and the repeated attempts to do justice to its environment are elements that, already in a book like *La folie des autres*, distinguish Nathan's approach from that of his mentor. The madness of *the others* can never be fully subordinated to the understanding of *our own* normativity. These "others" are other patients and *not only patients*. They carry a whole cultural constellation with(in) themselves: their heritage, their doctors, their thinking, and their cultural entities – including the local therapeutic choices that inevitably co-shape the scene (regardless of its material location) where illness and treatment are displayed. When Devereux declares the shaman severely neurotic or psychotic in temporary remission (according to the culturalized or de-culturalized traits exhibited by each case[103]), he relies on a specific psychoanalytic read-

97 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, pp. 12-13. Nathan refers to Lévi-Strauss' article *Sur l'efficacité symbolique* (published for the first time in the *Revue d'histoire des religions* in 1949).

98 Cf. Claude Lévi-Strauss: *Les structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Paris 2002 [1949], pp. 192, 107 and especially pp. 562-564.

99 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, pp. 17-18.

100 This aspect had been recognized by Devereux, though with considerable reservations: "The chaman provides his patient with a whole series of culturally sanctioned defenses (restitution symptoms) which can be, from an ethnopsychiatric point of view, appropriate and soothing. This permits him to deal with the idiosyncratic conflicts that assail him. For this reason, we cannot consider the shaman's accomplishments a 'psychiatric cure' in the strict sense of the word (Georges Devereux: Normal et anormal, in: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 18).

101 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, pp. 18-19.

102 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 19.

103 The more culturalized the manifestations of the pathology, the closer the shaman would be to a neurosis (and hence to a disturbance more easily codifiable by the defense mechanisms of his culture). A de-cul-

ing of stress, trauma, and defense mechanisms. "Stress" refers to the harmful or destructive forces reaching an individual, while "trauma" concerns the results of the impact of those forces, including both the individual and the cultural reaction to it. Devereux states that each traumatic reaction implies a temporary upsurge of primary processes and a response of the individual organism (through symptoms) and the culture (through models of misconduct) to "fix the anxiety and face the conflicts provoked by the traumatism"[104]. Anxiety is the line he draws to retain the Freudian theorization of primary processes encircling the energetic imbalance within the intrapsychic domain[105]. He is therefore constrained to ignore the relevance of certain traditional etiologies pointing to relevant factors on the external-side of the psychic membrane as well as to complex and elaborated ways of dealing with them. Nathan's further development after *La folie des autres* shows that, if ethnopsychiatry displaces Devereux's complementarist method toward a serious consideration of indigenous or ethnic therapeutic knowledge, not only the topology of the disturbance must be reversed but also the character of the intervention and the clinical dispositive that is expected to deal with it. Accepting an irreducible instance of alterity forces the psychotherapist to an interactive method with special focus not on the patient but on the third instance – and by extension the "environment" in the face of which a rigidly intrapsychic model literally collapses. Since the 1990s, Tobie Nathan has worked on a theoretical formulation of this transition between the intrapsychic etiology of *anxiety* [*angoisse*] and interactive etiology of *fright* [*frayeur*].

The passage from an individual therapy focused on the interiority of psychic processes to a more ecological therapy open to the (visible and invisible, human and non-human) environment of the patient is anticipated but not fully developed in *La folie des autres*. At that moment, Tobie Nathan was already engaged in the clinical redefinition of ethnopsychiatry and the progressive invention of a new therapeutic dispositive, but the transition leaned heavily on a re-reading of psychoanalysis. This can certainly be seen as a remnant of Nathan's attachment to Devereux and therefore a hindrance or even a dead end. As I pointed out before, Nathan himself broke with psychoanalysis later and frowned upon its hermeneutic reductionism, asymmetric presuppositions, and emphasis on interiority – all aspects which do not allow the opening of the relational field so important to ethnopsychiatry. His attention would later shift toward possible correspondences between traditional techniques of healing and cognitive behavioral forms of therapy[106].

The place of psychoanalysis in Nathan's intellectual work is certainly conditioned by his relationship with Devereux, and would perhaps have been different if he had considered other approaches which do not openly clash with the extraneous knowledge that come to light in the type of traditional therapies that nurture his own pluridisciplinary approach. Maud Mannoni, for example, was – in a certain way like Tobie Nathan – experientially related to the social errancy of "foreigners"[107]. She pleaded for the recovery of a forgotten language brought back to the analyst

---

turalized symptomatology, on the contrary, implies for Devereux much more idiosyncratic and highly delusory behavior, a privatization rendering the disturbance *dis*functional to the balance of the social group.

104 Georges Devereux: *Essais d'ethnopsychiatrie générale*, p. 73.

105 One should remember, in this respect, Freud's verdict about the source of anxiety in his *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1917): "Transformation into anxiety, or more precisely: discharge in the form of anxiety, is the immediate vicissitude of the libido subjected to repression" (Sigmund Freud: *Gesammelte Werke XI: Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse*, Frankfurt 1999, p. 425). This is a clear theoretical choice in which the "anchoring point" of anxiety (cf. Jean Laplanche: *Problématiques I: L'angoisse*, Paris 1980, p. 105) clearly shows Freud's rejection of extra-psychic factors (with exception of the obvious ones he ascribes to the psychoanalytically irrelevant *Realangst*) for the sake of preserving a model compatible with the expectations of scientific discourse.

106 Cf. Tobie Nathan: "Georges Devereux et l'ethnopsychiatrie clinique", in: *Nouvelle revue d'ethnopsychiatrie* 35/36, p. 18.

107 Maud Mannoni spent part of her childhood in Ceylon, raised by a Sinhalese nanny known as Ayah, from whom she was abruptly separated when her family returned to Europe. Ayah's world was one of Hindu myths, close relationship with animals and plants, and playful moments with the local children. This shaped Maud Mannoni's sensibility deep enough to render her foreign to urban life in Europe: "Until the age of six, I wandered through a fascinating outer world, invulnerable to any sense of danger. Then came the event that

by the patient (i.e. the *stranger*)[108], the type of language that forces the analyst out of the comfortable position of procedural therapy and reveals the common ground between the demonic force of psychic disturbance and the demiurgic powers of restitution. Such aspects seem quite solidary to Tobie Nathan's attempt in *La folie des autres*, where psychoanalysis is said to be, if adequately exercised, "a great anthropology"[109]. And its adequate exercise begins where the limits of a Western model are acknowledged before the clinical demands of the ethnopsychiatric field: "The temptation is great to reduce witchcraft to projection, initiatic dreams to hallucinations, or manifestations of possession or bewitchment to hysterical symptoms, since they are similar processes. However, it is not the subject that is the theater *but the culture*, and it is essential not to shatter the only referent point that enables the patient to experience and express his/her affliction"[110]. These words are not simply the recognition of a cathartic function of culture but of the effective reality that the agents of madness generate in the pluriversal niche opened by ethnopsychiatry. •

---

shattered my universe, the separation from Ayah, felt like an abandonment, all the more terrifying because no words accompany it. In this distress that came over me, I could no longer recognize who I was, where I was going. I didn't know what was happening to me" (Maud Mannoni: *Ce qui manque à la verité pour être dite*, Paris 1988, pp. 13-14).

108 "The patient, far from bringing us back to a part of ourselves, becomes then *the stranger*" (Maud Mannoni: *La théorie comme fiction : Freud, Groddeck, Winnicott, Lacan*, Paris 1979, p. 11).

109 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 210.

110 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres*, p. 211. This reflection is also in consonance with Maud Mannoni's attitude to such fundamental aspects of psychotherapy: "What guarantees truth is found in practice" (Maud Mannoni: *Le symptom et le savoir*, Paris 1983, p. 70).



# INTERVIEW WITH ROBERTO BENEDUCE
# UNSUBMISSIVE THINKING: THE SCANDAL OF ETHNOPSYCHIATRY

by Adrián Navigante

## FIRST PART

*Roberto Beneduce is a leading figure of contemprary ethnopsychiatry and an anthropologist with broad fieldwork experience in Subsaharan Africa (Mali, Cameroon, Uganda, Mozambique) as well as a solid theoretical background that surpasses by far the (for him complementary) fields of psychology and ethnology. He studied psychiatry and anthropology in Italy and France, completed his doctorate under the supervision of Marc Augé at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales (EHESS), became professor of anthropology at Turin (Italy), and in 1996 founded the Frantz Fanon Center at Turin and Naples (the clinical branch of the Frantz Fanon Association), which offers psychotherapeutic treatment and psychosocial support for patients with a migrant background, refugees, and victims of torture or political persecution. Roberto Beneduce is the author of remarkable publications on anthropological, ethnopsychiatric and geopolitical subjects, such as* Frontiere delle identità e della memoria *(1996),* Trance e possessione in Africa *(2002),* Etnopsichiatria: sofferenza mentale e alterità fra storia, dominio e cultura *(2007),* Archeologia del trauma *(2010), and* Frantz Fanon: Psychiatry and Politics *(2019).*

**Adrián Navigante:** Roberto Beneduce, I have spent part of the winter immersed in your writings, which I had read only fragmentarily before the occasion of this dialogue, and the first thing I must say is that, beyond the rare combination of interdisciplinarity and solidity that struck me over and again (you are probably one of the last authentic Italian humanists!), each one of your books reveals how empathic your approach is to "the other". I want to begin with the human dimension of that otherness whose declension is complex and quite challenging: migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, but also foreigners with different skin colors, habits, and behavior who are permanently exposed to something you get some inkling of while doing fieldwork. I mean "emphatic" in a realistic and – I daresay – elegant way. The common denominator of those others, whatever their origin and attachments, is suffering and violence – outrageous enough to leave a wound that will never heal. Now, in dealing with that challenge, you sensibly avoid the temptation of pitiful condescendence and socio-political opportunism that I have found in some other authors. You venture into the world of these others with quite an unprejudiced attitude, avoiding at the same time any willful rhetoric of exoticism, for example in dealing with culturally coded disturbances like witchcraft or possession, both of which, in a Western context, easily fall into the worst commonplaces of esoteric and dogmatic discourse. This is also true of the ethnographic dimension of your work. My last dialogue with Paul Stoller[1] revolved around his idea of a "shared anthropology". I would say that your work is rather an "underground anthropology", to use an expression that provides the subtitle of one of your books[2] and serves as a counterweight to the nosographic definition of "trauma" – which results from a reductionist approach you clearly contest. Underground anthropology seems to me an adequate first step to approach your ethnopsychiatry, because that "underground" is for you both individual and collective, personal and historical. What's more: certain layers remain fully inaccessible to the hermeneutic protocols of conventional therapy. We are far beyond the Freudian Acheron[3] and even some far-reaching insights that followed it, like the innovations of anthropological and transgenerational psychoanalysis (Géza Róheim, Maria Torok, Nicolas Abraham). Your book on trauma contains – or rather displays – what I would call a "distinctive African gesture": you "open the term" the way an African healer "opens a name" to see the many layers of human and non-human, factual and mythical history encapsulated in it: family relations, clan intricacies, village conflicts, riddles of ancestry, confraternities of spirits, and supernatural warfare. This "opening" is a risky but necessary reaction to the general indifference that transpires in the medicalization of trauma[4], especially in the case of patients from a foreign culture (who are your daily interlocutors at the *Centro Frantz Fanon* in Italy). It is risky because it compels therapists to step out of their clean comfort zone delimited by "psychological factors" and "biological determinants" and enter the im-

1 See *Interview with Paul Stoller: The Other's Way*, in: *Transversal Paths*, *Issue 3 (July 2025)* und *Issue 4 (December 2025)*: https://interstices-ctt.com/transversalpaths.

2 Roberto Beneduce: *Archeologie del trauma: Un'antropologia del sottosuolo* (*Archeologies of Trauma: An Underground Anthropology*), Bari: Roma 2010. A new edition with an additional chapter (to which we will refer in what follows for the quotations) was published in 2019.

3 The epigraph of Freud's epoch-making book *Die Traumdeutung* (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, 1900) reads: *flectere si nequeo superos, Aqueronta movebo*, literally: "if I cannot bend the superiors (the gods above), I will stir up the Acheron". This is a quotation from Virgil's *Aeneid* (VII, 312), where the Acheron, that is, the mythological river of Hades, is used as a metaphor (or rather a metonymy) for the underworld. This is confirmed by Freud himself in a letter to Werner Achelis dated January 30, 1927: "You translate 'Acheronta movebo' as 'moving the citadels of the earth', but it means to 'stir up the underworld'" (Sigmund Freud, letter to Werner Achelis, quoted in: *The Revised Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IV: The Interpretation of Dreams (First Part)*, Maryland: London 2024, ed. by Mark Solms in collaboration with Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, Editor's introduction, p. xiii, note 1).

4 In fact, Beneduce's book *Archeologie della memoria* is the result of a seminar he held in 2009 at the university of Sorbonne with the title "the social production of indifference" (cf. Roberto Beneduce: *Archeologie della Memoria*, p. 3, note 1).

pure and sometimes quite turbulent domain of collective memory and oblivion, cultural idioms and explanations, popular diagnoses and treatments. To put it briefly: underground anthropology implies in many ways the emergence of a postcolonial anthropology of subjectivity[5]. I would like to know, in general terms (we will go deeper into this specific problem as our conversation unfolds), the meaning and scope you attribute to that postcolonial *anthropos*, whether another kind of *logos* should emerge to shed light on the underground layers your ethnopsychiatric work discloses, a *logos* able to include (instead of erase) the most concrete and dramatic aspects of personal experience embedded in history, and to what extent non-Western parameters of knowledge (for example those of traditional medicines) should be not only considered as valid, but also submitted to a process of progressive "symmetrization".

**Roberto Beneduce:** The question you raise touches on a central theme of my research and reflections, and undoubtedly the issue of suffering and violence is a complex that has continued to challenge me for years—undoubtedly since my university days (first as a medical student, then as a psychiatry resident who has never stopped frequenting places of abandonment, threat, and danger). But the "empathic" dimension you attribute to my approach, I conceive of it not only in relation to the various figures of otherness that you have rightly highlighted based on some of my writings ("migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, but also foreigners with different skin colors, customs, and behaviors"), but rather in relation to the condition of the oppressed, whatever the cultural background, nationality, or legal status of my interlocutors. This means that in my research or clinical work, in Italy or other countries, it has not only been the different theories of illness or treatment that have engaged me, nor the various epistemologies of evil or conflict, but also and above all the psychology, experiences, and ideologies of individuals belonging to marginalized groups, minorities, or dominated classes. Working in a mental health center in one of the poorest and most dilapidated areas of Naples, at the heart of an intricate web of crime, ghettoization, and social exclusion, I could not help but observe, for example, the interplay of multiple forms of violence and oppression that crush the lives of women and men from childhood onward. I wondered about the psychological impact of this universe of constraints, threats, and fear, and I asked myself how their "individuation" was shaped by it. Today this concept is being revisited thanks to the rediscovery of Gilbert Simondon's philosophy and the parallel drawn between his idea of a process (individuation, precisely) that is never definitive, never taken for granted, and Ernesto de Martino's conception of a human condition that can never be assumed once and for all as a given and obvious[6]. In fact, the condition of suffering in contexts of chronic violence—such as those often experienced by members of the working classes, residents of an abandoned urban periphery, or immigrants awaiting a permit, and exposed to every kind of violence (racist, institutional, economic, workplace, etc.)—has never ceased to challenge me. How can we understand the forms of individuation in such conditions of risk and structural uncertainty? How does the human assert itself when one is born and lives within a web of humiliation, violence, coercion, and denial? What forms do the crisis and the dialectic between the pre-individual and the individual take? Against the backdrop of key concepts in philosophical and clinical thought

*I conceive my empathic approach not only in relation to the various figures of otherness in my writings (migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, foreigners with different skin colors, customs, and behaviors) but rather in relation to the condition of the oppressed, whatever the cultural background, nationality, or legal status of my interlocutors.*

5 Cf. Roberto Beneduce: *Archeologie del trauma*, p. 15, note 14: "underground anthropology, the way it is intended in this book, is essentially connected with an anthropology of subjectivity as well as with contributions that are usually placed within the rubric of post-colonial studies".

6 Paolo Virno: "Moltitudine e principio di individuazione", in Gilbert Simondon: *L'individuazione psichica e collettiva*, ed. by Paolo Virno, Roma 2001, p. 287.

(Sivandon's allagmatics, Fanon's sociogeny)[7] I have sought to trace the processes through which the suffering being transforms its experience, and when it perceives its becoming as threatened, resorts to complex metamorphoses to survive in a world that is itself in transformation.

In that neighborhood, where I worked for years as a young psychiatrist, mothers prevented their children from going out alone, forcing them to play in the stairwells of the buildings where they lived, for fear that they might get caught up in gang feuds and shootings.

Do you remember the first page of Toni Morrison's book, *Beloved*? There is a number, 124, which is the house number of the home inhabited by a woman and the spirit-child who haunts her, a house "full of a baby's venom." The women in the house knew it, and so did the children, and all the abject horror of slavery seems to find an arithmetic trace in that house number that once existed. This page makes me think of a particular experience. I was working in a neighborhood of Naples whose name evoked fear, "167," named after the law that had launched a public housing project in previous years. As if, by synecdoche, that number encapsulated a world of psychological suffering, of misery, of institutional neglect—the experience of an ordinary apocalypse. Everyone knew it—those who lived there as well as those who worked there, hoping to emerge unscathed.

I still perfectly remember the names and faces of those weary lives, of those unsettled destinies: Antonio, Cristina, Vincenzo, Aldo, Donato... I let their struggle speak to me, penetrate me, just as it had years earlier during my internship at the Frullone psychiatric hospital in Naples. There, too, I had met men and women who stubbornly refused to bow to a fate of misery, arbitrariness, and indifference. Their "no" could take infinite forms (a "no" to having a bullet removed from their body; a "no" to sleep; a "no" to the father's command, a "no" to being a normal mother when nothing around her was normal...), all the way to the extreme forms of alienation, withdrawal, or, conversely, an endless dialogue with a threatening world that echoed in infinite voices and called out with infinite signs. It was during those years that the secret project of an anthropology of the underground took shape, one that increasingly drove me to explore other forms of knowledge, other techniques used to tame the pain and loneliness of the dispossessed. This condition has many names and many facets. In discussing the experiences of patients diagnosed with schizophrenia, Basaglia repeatedly uses an expression—one that has become famous and draws on phenomenological vocabulary—to describe the catastrophic experience of "being at the mercy of the world," "at the mercy of the unknown". This expression is not very different from that of being "acted upon by," proposed in those same years by Ernesto de Martino.[8]

*It is the experience of fragility we most often encounter in our patients which calls for action: when they feel dominated by ungovernable forces, unable to envision their own future, to inhabit the world.*

This is also where the project—now at the center of a broad spectrum of research, interests, and sensibilities—takes shape: to carry out an act of radical decolonization that is not merely "academic", beginning with a "symmetrization", as you suggest, which, beyond the obvious recognition of other forms of knowledge, experiences, and subjectivities, defies the persistent horizon of "epistemic injustice", whose manifestations, as I will attempt to explain later, are manifold. It was with these patients, even before my work with patients from other countries or during my research in West Africa, that I began to "work" with discourses and interpretations in which references to witchcraft, magical acts, and malevolent spirits were intertwined with job loss, loneliness, or accounts of traumatic experiences (job loss, violence suffered years earlier, the feeling of an ever-loom-

7 Gilbert Simondon: *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*, Minneapolis, 2020; Frantz Fanon: *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York 2008.

8 Franco Basaglia: "Il mondo dell'incomprensibile schizofrenico attraverso la *Daseinsanalyse*. Presentazione di un caso clinico", in *Giornale di psichiatria e Neuropatologia*, 81, 471, 1953, now in *Scritti, 1953–1980*, Milano 2003; see also Roberto Beneduce and Simona Taliani: "La migrazione come palinsesto della salute mentale" in Mario Colucci (ed.), Che *cos'è la salute mentale*, Torino 2026.

ing threat). There is a famous phrase that Ernesto de Martino left us, and which perhaps sums up on its own the condition I never cease to think about: "being acted upon by." This is, after all, the experience of fragility we most often encounter in our patients, and it calls for action: when someone feels dominated by ungovernable forces, unable to envision their own future, to inhabit the world.

The dimension of the notion of "trauma" that is perhaps most in need of a new theory is its futurity: in other words, trauma is not merely a past event, but the persistent impossibility of moving beyond the quagmire of terror, of being overwhelmed, of risk. And the history of the present is not lacking in examples of this violence. Trauma colonizes the future, and it is this liberation of the future that a decolonial clinic should bring about...

**Adrián Navigante:** Difficult as it may be, it would be profitable to circumscribe your domain and understand what kind of ethnopsychiatry you practice. The history of the discipline, owing to its different and even contradictory trends, resists clear and simple definitions, and I would say that already the semantic of the term is more complicated than it seems at first sight. Its etymology (which goes back to three Greek terms: *ethnos*, *psyche* and *iatreia*) does not help much. The Greek word *iatreia* refers to medical treatment (*iatrike* means "medicine" and *iatros* "doctor"), but in a much broader sense than we think of it nowadays. It may include any kind of treatment that seeks to restore the psychophysical balance of a person (the Greek verb *iaomai* entails the idea a restitution in the sense of "making whole" again). The word *psyche* is even more complicated to delimit. Hard-core scientists associate that term with the mind, and from that perspective the restitution of balance intended in ethnopsychiatric sessions would be reduced to the domain of mental disturbances, sometimes with an inflated focus on neurocognitive aspects. However, we know that any such delimitation, which you explicitly oppose[9], is rather an amputation of reality than an objective approach to it. There are disturbances in the face of which the commonly accepted parameters of individual psychology collapse (spirit possession in West Africa, death by fright in South America, touch of power in South Asia, among many others). Some mechanisms of influence, especially in non-Western societies, fully ignore the reductionist approach largely "naturalized" in our mainstream cultural setting. In depth psychology, the psyche is an organ of relation embedded in a living environment and containing layers of collective history impossible to locate in the mental domain of an individual. To complicate things further, there is, in the compound "ethnopsychiatry", the word *ethnos*, which may well refer to family, clan, tribe, race, regional or cultural group. Now, apart from the impreciseness of the etymology, there is the problem presented by the history of the term. Ethnopsychiatry has a double and paradoxical birth-certificate in the year 1953 with the publication of John Colin Carothers' book *The African Mind in Health and Disease: A Study in Ethnopsychiatry*[10] and Louis Mars' article *L'ethnopsychiatrie et la schizophrenie en Haïti*. Carothers was a South-African-born British psychiatrist whose research on the African mind can be seen as a compendium of colonial prejudices clothed in scholarly arguments[11]. Louis Mars was a Haitian psychiatrist trained

9 The hegemony of a purely psychological interpretation of subjectivity appears to Roberto Beneduce not only as a cultural reduction but also as a form of biopolitics (in the Foucaultian sense of the inscription of power mechanisms – which can only be grasped in a historical-political sense – on the level of the individual's autonomy, beginning with the body as one of the basic constituents of individual subjectivity), cf. Roberto Beneduce: *Archeologie del trauma*, p. 60.

10 John Colin D. Carothers: *The African Mind in Health and Disease: A Study in Ethnopsychiatry*, Monograph Series n. 17, WHO, Geneva, 1953.

11 The bibliographical references to contemporary studies on racial diversity, from cultural aspects to brain morphology, prove the book's validity as compendium. Even if Carothers acknowledges the fact that it is "notoriously doubtful how far any morphological features of the brain are essential for mental functioning" (John Colin Carothers: *The African Mind in Health and Disease*, p. 75), he embraces the thesis that the inferiority of African people with regard to Europeans can be deduced scientifically from parameters like brain size, weight, shape, and fissuration (cf. Carothers, *Ibidem*, pp. 75-80). It must be said that this thesis was not the general rule among ethnologists and psychiatrists of the time. Carothers does not ignore but openly rejects, for example, research conducted by American anthropologist Melville Herskovits (whose relevance is undeniable in the field) precisely on that subject, which points in the opposite direction (cf. Carothers, *Ibidem*, p. 76). Frantz Fanon, a

both in his own country as well as in France and the United States, whose research on popular healing practices of his own land, framed in what was called "animistic cults", took the opposite standpoint to Carothers. Mars not only took seriously phenomena regarded by the colonial heritage as pathological and superstitious but also focused his attention on local interpretations of them, recognizing the invaluable contribution of such interpretations to the understanding of the internal logic, specificity, and complexity of such phenomena[12]. This double birth certificate of the term ethnopsychiatry anticipates in many ways the inner tension of its exercise throughout the XX century. Georges Devereux, whose role in establishing the foundations of contemporary ethnopsychiatry is undeniable[13], remained attached to ethnocentric prejudices, such as the association of traditional healers (notably shamans) with pathological cases[14]. One of his direct disciples, Tobie Nathan, whom you knew personally, took a radically opposite direction – progressively disembarrassing himself from psychoanalysis (an unsurpassable landmark for Devereux!) and adopting a radical version of epistemological relativism severely criticized both by psychoanalysts and by anthropologists (notably Elisabeth Roudinesco, Christine Henry, and Didier Anzieu[15]). Finally, there is a terminological fluctuation concerning the disciplines involved in the exercise of ethnopsychiatry, even in the formulation of the term itself. In Georges Devereux's complementarist approach, the conceptual pair "ethnology-psychoanalysis" is sometimes replaced by "sociology-psychology", whereas psychiatry is rather left aside. The compound he prefers, also used in Tobie Nathan's early writings, is "ethno*psychoanalysis*". This supposes an exclusion of psychiatry as a medicalized science. In his early book *La folie des autres* (*The Madness of the Others*), the first edition of which goes back to 1986, Tobie Nathan goes back to this point: "Of all types of psychology and psychopathology, only psychoanalysis can be compared with the therapeutic techniques of traditional societies, thus being susceptible of being exported or receiving inputs from them. It is the only [form of psychotherapy] whose object is exclusively the psychic material of human beings, which implies leaving aside any material of experimental origin – biological, chemical, etc."[16]. Where would you situate your work within this complex and quite diversified field? What is your own understanding of the notions of *psyche*, *ethnos*, and *iatreia* (beyond their usual and rather shallow definitions) and the parameters to hold to in dealing with this conflict-laden and multifaceted segment of history?

---

central figure in the work of Beneduce, poignantly referred to Carothers' prejudiced view of Africans in the following terms: "In order to be properly understood, Dr. Carothers established quite a vivid comparison. He asserts that the normal African is a lobotomized European [...|. His explanation, which has become part of the education policy in the meantime, seems to be in the final analysis the following: the disposition of brain structures in North-African people accounts for their laziness, intellectual and social inaptitude, and quasi-animal impulsivity" (Frantz Fanon: *Les damnés de la terre* [1961], in: *Œuvres*, Paris 2011, p. 667).

12 The contents of Louis Mars' 1953 article reappeared in a broader and more systematic elaboration a year later in his book-length essay *Introduction à l'ethnopsychiatrie* (published in the *Bulletin de l'association médicale haïtienne*, vol. 6, n°2, 1954). Many of those insights were already contained in his 1946 book *La crise de possession dans le Vodou: Essai de psychiatrie comparée*, where the term with which he designates his method is not "ethnopsychiatry" but "comparative psychiatry".

13 Roberto Beneduce devoted an entire chapter of his book *Etnopsichiatria* (2007) to Georges Devereux, whose work "represents without any doubt the most significant contribution to the development of ethnopsychiatry, both in the definition of the discipline's specificity and the construction of its methodological strategies" (Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria: sofferenza mentale e alterità fra storia, dominio e cultura*, Roma 2007, p. 117).

14 The fact that the shaman uses cultural material with success does not prevent Devereux from associating his behavior with neurosis and even paranoia (cf. Georges Devereux: *Ethnopsychanalyse complémentariste*, Paris 1985, p. 305).

15 Elisabeth Henry: "Le cas de l'oncle Tobie", in: *Psychopathologie africaine, XXVIII, 1, 1997*: 107-111 ; Didier Fassin : L'ethnopsychiatrie et ses réseaux : l'influence qui grandit, in : *Genèses, 35, 1999*, *L'Europe vue d'ailleurs*, pp. 146-171 and Les politiques de l'ethnopsychiatrie : La psyché africaine, des colonies africaines aux banlieues parisiennes, in : *L'homme, 153, janvier-mars 2000*, pp. 231-250. Elisabeth Roudinesco's critique is encapsulated in an interview for the magazine *Raison Politique* (2007/1 (N°25), 2007, pp. 147-177, especially pp. 170-172).

16 Tobie Nathan: *La folie des autres : traité d'ethnopsychiatrie clinique*, Paris 2013 [1986], p. 3.

**Roberto Beneduce:** First and foremost, it is necessary to say something about the name of a discipline that was contested and criticized even in the early years of its emergence, and which, having emerged within the colonial context, has long perpetuated its violence. I am thinking in particular of Frantz Fanon's short article "Considérations ethnopsychiatriques" (1955), in which the author highlighted the racist prejudices of ethnopsychiatry (not only those of Carothers, but also of the Algiers school: Antoine Porot and his students). The racism of ethnopsychiatry is of a particular kind: it is both the brutal trivialization of the suffering of the Other, that is of indigenous patients and the meaning of their symptoms, to which no meaning is attributed whatsoever, and the capacity to express a political consciousness. And, alongside this trivialization of the symptom, colonial ethnopsychiatry carries out a systematic pathologization of culture itself, described and interpreted using a lexicon that sees barbarism, superstition, backwardness, and infantilism everywhere. It is important to recall what Antonio Gramsci wrote in his *Quaderni del Carcere* (*Prison Notebooks*) regarding the judgment that the ruling classes applied to protest movements: in them, they saw nothing but individualistic behaviors afflicted by barbarism or pathology.[17] This is a 'diagnosis' that we could literally apply to colonial ethnopsychiatry. With a single gesture, colonial ethnopsychiatry thus erases the meaning of suffering and the value of local cultures, as well as the value of political protest evident in possession rituals and, more broadly, in the work of many practitioners of so-called "traditional medicine": true leaders who cared for patients and their communities and, at the same time, promoted a form of political consciousness against the Whites, against the colonists, urging people, for example, not to pay taxes. Shamans and healers, whom Georges Devereux and other ethnopsychiatrists were content to view in their fragility and only as the tragic heroes of an unequal struggle against evil, were in reality decisive figures in the realm of not only physical illness but also psychological, social, and political suffering.

*Colonial ethnopsychiatry erases the meaning of suffering and the value of local cultures, as well as the value of political protest, for example, in the work of many practitioners of so-called 'traditional medicine'.*

It is against the backdrop of this ethnopsychiatry—characterized by the same denial, by the same legal fiction of the colonial project—that another ethnopsychiatry emerges: critical, radical, and bearing other names and other pioneers. Yes, in that sense, Louis Mars could be called the Haitian Lambo... It is no coincidence: his father was an ethnologist who knew the culture and society of the Antilles quite well.

Mars realized that ethnopsychiatry, as a discipline concerned with crisis and alienation, could only operate within the context of conflicts, uncertainties, and violence linked to local history and events. He thought that concepts were conceived and named through a complex landscape of metaphors rooted in motifs, images, and discourses shaped by historical events. Decisive in this sense were slavery, the plantation system, colonial violence, and the ever-changing demon of dispossession, which I could summarize as follows: the French slave traders, the sugarcane plantation owners, the U.S. military, the criminal leaders of Port-au-Prince, and the power-hungry dictators.

Aside from Frantz Fanon, who took a keen interest in the techniques of healers and local interpretations of illness upon his arrival in Blida (Algeria), we must turn to the Italian tradition—still relatively unknown—which finds its leading figure in authors like Ernesto de Martino, although

17 In *Quaderni del Carcere* (Vol. XXV ed. by Valentino Giarratana, Turin 1977), Antonio Gramsci recalls how Davide Lazzaretti—a republican who led a popular protest movement imbued with profound religious and prophetic themes—was treated: "In an article published in the *Fiera Letteraria* on August 26, 1928, Domenico Bulferetti recalls certain aspects of Davide Lazzaretti's life and cultural background (...) this was the cultural norm of the time: instead of studying the origins of a collective event, and the reasons for its spread and its collective nature, the protagonist was isolated and one limited oneself to writing a pathological biography of him, all too often starting from motives that were unconfirmed or open to different interpretations: for a social elite, members of subordinate groups always have something barbaric and pathological about them)" (Roberto Beneduce's translation).

other names (for example Vittorio Lanternari, Michele Risso, and Alfonso Maria di Nola) should also be mentioned.

This research offers a thorough reflection on the condition of subaltern groups—the peasant masses grappling with the misery and violence of large estates. In the face of threats such as hunger, poverty, an unpredictable future, and illness, magical thinking offers a form of reassurance against the anguish of existence and historical becoming.

Ritual healing is how a history, always experienced as an impending threat or as an experience of an oppressive past, is suspended. De Martino thinks that the therapeutic rite can protect and heal precisely because it brings about an "institutional dehistorification."

Against the backdrop of this insight, de Martino carefully investigates the shamanism of Eurasian traditions and local categories of crisis. Medical knowledge receives—partially due to another type of research (the one conducted by Métraux in Haiti and taken up by de Martino himself)—the recognition that had previously been denied to it.

One could therefore argue that ethnopsychiatry has far more than a "dual and paradoxical birth certificate". But among these multiple origins, we can discern a persistent absence. In fact, few studies are concerned with the various eco-politics and eco-psychologies, with the distinct conceptions characteristic of each society—not only regarding illness and its causes, not only regarding therapeutic efficacy or techniques for combating crises, but also regarding the relationship with objects, with power, with other beings—living or not—and with the world. For me, thinking about ethnopsychiatry means working with the political and psychological ecologies of a particular community and era, seeking the formation—within specific bodies of knowledge and cosmologies—of the definitions of the human that structure the conception of illness and its treatment, the pedagogies that govern the crisis and the various phases of existence. But it is not possible to understand the latter if the former are considered merely as marginal or contingent aspects. To my knowledge, few ethnopsychiatrists have worked on these interconnections and their historical dynamics. Ernesto de Martino offers a unique contribution in this regard. His research on ritual weeping and funeral rituals, as well as his studies on magic and ritual healing (ranging from the study of a cult of possession to various forms of cultural, religious, political, and psychopathological apocalypse), are exemplary cases of the ethnopsychiatry I have in mind. The peasant societies of southern Italy found in de Martino's reflections a particularly original ethnopsychiatric approach: interdisciplinary, systematic, capable of connecting symbolic logic and local knowledge, and always permeated by a historical perspective. This is why Tobie Nathan's proposal, while interesting and original, fails to provide a satisfactory framework capable of encompassing all these dimensions. It leaves the task of serving as a "lever" in the care of immigrant patients solely to "culture" (regardless of how one chooses to define it). As for the criticisms directed at Nathan's model, this is essentially my view.

*For me, thinking about ethnopsychiatry means working with the political and psychological ecologies of a particular community and era.*

On an epistemological level, they are extremely weak. The criticism regarding the metaphorical and non-referential value of certain expressions or terms, for example, is entirely incapable of understanding what in therapy is truly a metaphor, a signifier, an image... These are criticisms that may perhaps have, up to a certain point, some anthropological or linguistic basis,[18] but they are entirely incapable of grasping what is at stake at the heart of psychotherapy, of shamanic healing, of a ritual. And so, it is like talking at cross-purposes... But there is another aspect I would like to mention. Precisely because ethnopsychiatry cannot ignore the historical-political dimensions that define its scope and effects—for all the reasons I briefly outlined earlier—this debate alludes to those dimensions without managing to bring them clearly to the fore: neither from one side nor from the other.

18 Yannick Jaffré: "L'interprétation sauvage", *Enquête*, 1996, 3, pp. 1-12.

Pitting culture against the "Republic", "community" against the nation-state, should have made it evident that the realm of suffering and care is *always* capable of questioning borders, identities, kinship ties,[19] loyalties, but above all the very legitimacy of the modern state and its institutions. This, alas, no one seems to have understood...

**Adrián Navigante:** I would like to deepen our reflection on your own conception of ethnopsychiatry. You devoted two books specifically focused on it[20], a prolific essay that I would define as a historical and systematic introduction to the discipline, and a concise and somewhat atypical dictionary in which different "tectonic layers" of the field (names of authors, key concepts, relevant institutions, and cultural entities) are disclosed as roads of exploration within a sort of transcultural labyrinth. In your first book, *Etnopsichiatria*, published in 2007, you expose, to use your own words, "not only how ethnopsychiatry *is or has been* but also how it *should be* according to the author's view of it"[21], and for this purpose you underline three fundamental axes: history, anthropology, and migration. Now, these axes contain more than what the reader might assume at first sight. The question of history does not reduce itself to knowing the origins of the discipline and its intrinsic relationship with the Western colonial project; it requires a more nuanced and thorough gaze to detect living remnants of past attitudes in modes of thinking and discourse concerning the treatment of non-Western patients (and cultures in general) today, as well as to grasp the roots of the hostility shown by some non-Western specialists toward a somewhat naturalized epistemological and cultural absolutism. The anthropological dimension opens the broad and very complex field of "traditional medicines" and requires a study of such systems *from within* to avoid patronizing notions like "culture-bound syndromes"[22] and the well-known partition "belief (of the others) vs. (our scientific) knowledge", but the central task involved in that level of reflection is, once again in your own words, "where to look for the intelligibility parameters (i.e. the meaning) of a symptom, a form of knowledge, a healing gesture, but also of institutional processes that guide and rule over the destiny and social use of illness"[23]. The third component in your triad is not a discipline like the two former ones (history and anthropology), but a phenomenon that, over the last decades, has become a heated political issue in Europe: migration. This phenomenon did not belong to the ethnopsychiatric reflection and practice of the past, so it does not coincide with its history. In the same way, the category of "migrant" didn't have any relevance in classical anthropology to think and understand "the other". However, the later visibility of the question of migration displays an unprecedented intensity with unforeseen effects, namely the collapse of self-contained notions of "self" and "other", ethno-differential purity standards used (and abused) in past contexts, and a form of geopolitical comfort that colonial countries thought eternal. History is no longer the same; and anthropology has a supplementary task if we bear in mind the question of migration. What do you think is the scope of those changes? How do they affect contents, methods, and attitudes in dealing with patients – both *abroad* and *at home*? What do they defy in your own way of "securing your domain" and

19 Cf. Andras Zempléni: "De l'ouverture du groupe consanguin à la fermeture de l'ethnie. La délimitation rituelle de la société et du groupe de déscendance Senoufo", *Psychopathologie africaine*, 1993, 3, 363-376.

20 Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria: sofferenza mentale e alterità fra storia, dominio e cultura*, Frece 2007 (second and third editions Roma, 2019, 2023); *Breve Dizionario di Etnopsichiatria*, Roma 2008 (second edition 2016).

21 Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria*, pp. 11-12.

22 This medical rubric encompasses affective, behavioral, and cognitive manifestations seen in cultural settings alien to the West and indigenously defined as illness or affliction. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM)* displays a taken-for-granted opposition between the adjectives "cultural" and "clinical", the former applied to disturbances related to *other cultures* and the latter to the nosological entities of Western psychiatry (which are delimited from any culture-related phenomena because of their scientific status). The fifth edition of the DSM has replaced the concept by three others: "Cultural idiom of distress", "Cultural explanation or perceived cause", and "Cultural syndrome", arguing that they "offer greater clinical utility" (*DSM-5-TR*, Washington 2022, p. 16), but the asymmetrical distinction between the "clinical" (objective, scientific, uncontaminated by cultural factors) and the "cultural" (ethnic, local, non-scientific, subjective) remains intact.

23 Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria*, p. 16.

"stabilizing" your practice? Do they allow *at all* any bridge between the "unconscious ethnocentrism [*etnocentrismo inconsapevole*]"[24] you warn against, which is many times applied in the treatment of foreign patients (and also in the ethnographic study of foreign populations) and the "critical ethnocentrism [*etnocentrismo critico*]"[25] which you deem a reasonable and realistic point of balance in the exercise of ethnopsychiatry?

**Roberto Beneduce:** By citing history, anthropology, and migration as the dominant thematic axes of ethnopsychiatry, I am intentionally blending heterological dimensions (in the sense that Michel de Certeau[26] gives to this term). Working with patients, regardless of their nationality or culture, from a historical perspective, means infusing every clinical gesture, every interpretation—I would even say every glance and every act of listening—with a dual awareness: regarding the historical roots of experience, emotions, the ways of thinking and feeling of the people we encounter on the one hand, and on the other hand paying attention to the ways in which each person relates to the world and to their own body, as well as to the historical matrices of the very categories (the very "forms") through which we perceive and name symptoms, crises, and behaviors. This requires an exercise not so much in historical relativization—which is trivial in itself—as in *genealogical sensitivity*. It is an antidote to perspectives that often elude the depth of historical sedimentation at work in our feelings, reactions, and gestures. This being shaped by time and by others is, at its core, the basic recognition of a small alienation of which we must be aware because it frees us from the risk of a dangerous innocence (thinking we are the demiurges of ourselves). This does not, of course, mean imagining the past as a boulder that determines every act, every category, and every experience. Fanon rebelled against this idea of a past that would make us slaves to everything that preceded us. More simply, it means being aware of the processes that govern our being in the world. As for the anthropological dimension in the clinical work of ethnopsychiatry, this is the most obvious aspect, already signaled by the prefix *ethno-*, but precisely as such it is also more difficult to put into practice, for various reasons (including the one already highlighted by Marie-Cécile and Edmond Ortigues and by Georges Devereux himself. One cannot simultaneously be a psychoanalyst and an ethnologist, asking the patient questions about their culture, at the risk of turning them into an ethnographic subject. This is one of the most complex epistemological issues in clinical ethnopsychiatry and, it must be admitted, one that remains largely unresolved. Perhaps the secret lies in conceiving a different way of doing ethnography. And then it also becomes possible to imagine a different clinic: a clinic that is no longer content to apply to the Other what we believe we already know (our diagnostic categories, our psychology, our interpretation of dreams), but tries to redraw the boundaries of their world and ours. In this ceaseless crossing, even what seemed like simple ethnographic information becomes "agents of transformation"—words that act upon experience because they are already reshaping it. A slow and endless work of metamorphosis, which knows it must redraw imaginaries, memories, and relationships. In this process of recreating the "sense of things", care takes on a truly sacred character. And this requires a time and intensity that challenge the routine of certain diagnostic procedures, the superficiality of encounters that prescribe psychotropic drugs to a patient one barely knows. In this sense, care takes on a truly sacred character: this is what I try to emphasize when I attempt to explain what clinical ethnopsychiatry is.

Every clinical act proceeds on the basis of certain ontological assumptions. A good example of this is when we take illness as an objective reality defined and susceptible of being cured by resorting to certain tools proven effective, together with a definition of effectiveness valid everywhere. We have learned, however, thanks to research conducted as early as the last century, that the cultural dimensions of experience radically influence even what at first glance seems easy to define as a

24 Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria,* p. 16.

25 Roberto Beneduce: *Breve Dizionario di Etnopsichiatria*, Roma 2016, p. 64. The category of "critical ethnocentrism" stems from Ernesto de Martino (cf. Ernesto de Martino: *La fine del mondo*, Torino 1977, p. 333).

26 Michel de Certeau: *Heterologies. Discours on the Other*, Minneapolis 2000.

pathological state. Raymond Williams[27] proposed a concept that is precious to my ethnopsychiatry: that of sedimentation. There are fluctuating emotions that have not yet settled into a category, that have not yet received a diagnostic label. It is precisely around these fluctuating feelings that the complex interplay of symbolic, political, and economic forces of a particular society and epoch is composed. De Martino investigated this in the phenomenon of tarantism. And this is undoubtedly one of the most important chapters in medical anthropology and ethnopsychiatry. The axis of migration is equally decisive for me, not only because it lays bare this confrontation experienced by each individual, but also the forces (and violence) of host societies and their institutions.

In this sense, a single word says it all: migration is an epistemological and sociological "revealer" of our societies.

One needs only think of racism, whose victims continue to increase (among seasonal workers, or simply on the streets of our cities), the militarization of borders, deportation policies, and the administrative detention of foreign nationals without residence permits. But migration is also a revealer of something else.

It is in fact directly linked to processes of capitalist accumulation, especially those associated with extractivism (land conflicts, pollution, etc.), and more generally to the tragedy of the Anthropocene, Wastecene[28], Global War. The climate crisis and migration are increasingly interconnected (desertification, reduction of cultivable lands, etc.). Today, migration, beyond what it has always evoked (the search for work or a better life, flight from war zones, attempts to escape the intolerable constraints imposed by cultural traditions, etc.), has become, above all, the unsettling specter of a global threat that we perceive as increasingly grave and inexorable. And this specter (climate crisis, rising sea levels, desertification, environmental contamination, global war, a sense of the end of the world, etc.) must be incorporated into the framework of clinical ethnopsychiatry on the same footing as ancestral constraints, anxieties related to witchcraft, or the consequences of transgression. Finally, the ethnopsychiatry of migration cannot overlook the role and responsibility that our own psychological-psychiatric knowledge has played and continues to play in obscuring conflicts, threats, and contradictions. We saw this responsibility of psychological-psychiatric knowledge clearly during the colonial era. But it continues to operate today, with the same logic of denial, when it adopts categories such as PTSD, vulnerability, and resilience without leveling its j'accuse against the violence of the laws and institutions that regulate migration or the right to asylum. The migration clinic I envision in my ethnopsychiatry is, in fact, confronted not only with foreign patients suffering from disorders that defy our diagnostic categories, but also with the ignorance and unconscious racism of our healthcare institutions, which are a mirror of the host societies as a whole. In this sense, ethnopsychiatry must also address the denial of the economic-political processes at the root of the massive production of refugees and immigrants. The term "unconscious ethnocentrism", mirroring the critical ethnocentrism promoted by Ernesto de Martino, aims to highlight the need to recognize in healthcare providers the unconscious roots of moral attitudes, diagnostic demands, and interpretations, as well as the denial of those processes that hold host societies, their economic policies, and their development models directly responsible for migratory processes. Charles Mills coined the term "epistemology of ignorance"[29] to describe a characteristic of white, racist societies, and what

27 Raymond Williams: *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford 1977.

28 Marco Armiero: *Wasteocene. Stories from the Global Dump*, Cambridge 2021.

29 "But for the Racial Contract things are necessarily more complicated. The requirements of "objective" cognition, factual and moral, in a racial polity are in a sense more demanding in that officially sanctioned reality is divergent from actual reality. So here, it could be said, one has an agreement to misinterpret the world. One has to learn to see the world wrongly, but with the assurance that this set of mistaken perceptions will be validated by white epistemic authority, whether religious or secular. Thus in effect, on matters related to race, the Racial Contract prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable to understand the world they themselves have made" (Charles W. Mills: *The Racial Contract*, Uthaca, 1997, p.18).

he has most recently defined as "global white ignorance"[30]: the arrogant claim to solve (or cure) the problems they themselves have created. As one can easily guess, the ethnopsychiatry I like to imagine is not content merely to understand the cultures to which patients belong and treat their symptoms more appropriately. It seeks to recover the relationships and traces that colonial domination and epistemic racism have scattered or humiliated. It seeks to restore dignity to the remnants, and from these to attempt to rebuild possible alliances and new kinships, as we have learned to repeat for years with Donna Haraway.[31]

I believe that ethnopsychiatry today cannot avoid incorporating into its practices elements that were just emerging in research from the last century, and which today, however, impose themselves with a new urgency. This requires the development of a different eco-political sensibility to fully grasp what is at stake in the discourse of shamans or other therapeutic professionals. But also of patients, as I have learned from an experience that has long troubled me. And this is why we are increasingly speaking of *eco-ethnopsychiatry*.

**Adrián Navigante:** Your research on traditional medicine, which began in 1988 and has been pursued to the present, covers an ample cultural extension (Mali, Cameroon, Eritrea, Mozambique, and Democratic Republic of Congo). In 1997 you founded the *Associazione Frantz Fanon* in Turin, and a year later your book *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria* (*Frontiers of Identity and Memory*) was published, which not only concentrates a decade-long ethnographic experience in Sub-Saharan Africa, but also consolidates a specific theoretical and clinical orientation. This is probably encapsulated in the expression "epistemological impermanence [*provvisorietà epistemologica*]", which in a way translates your capacity (and courage) "to open interrogations at the edges of specialized competences, accompanied by restlessness and desire as sole fellow travelers to explore new territories"[32]. This is very close to what I call "transversal thinking", and I would therefore emphasize that your movement unfolds not so much *at* the edges but *across* the edges, not only edges of specialized fields but also of entire world-configurations. This is precisely where a discipline like ethnopsychiatry can be said to stand for a "loss of innocence"[33]. There are many levels here, and I will try to be careful not to mix them and render my point confusing or saturated with different contents. Let's focus on the first level, which is the problem of easy (epistemological) answers to difficult (anthropological) questions – however elaborate those "easy answers" may look like within their respective fields. The example you give in the introduction to your book, that of a Cameroonian woman suffering from panic attacks and schizoid disturbances who was treated at the clinical center of your Association[34] deserves to be mentioned in this sense, because it is paradigmatic of what Tobie Nathan calls "ethno-clinical mediation"[35]. The social dimension of the woman's suffering – related to the circumstances of her immigration and sojourn in Italy, the forced detachment from her land and tradition, and the precarious survival strategies in a foreign (European) context – contains elements that cannot be rendered intelligible only by means of our own "local epistemologies", whether a sociology of the Italian politics of integration, a history of African immigration in Europe, or a psychoanalytic exploration of the patient's repressed contents. Such elements demand an opening to the reverse-side of what is officially considered "the whole picture". In your dialogue with that patient,

30 Charles W. Mills: *Global White Ignorance*, in Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (eds.), *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, New York 2007, pp. 217-227.

31 Donna H. Haraway: *Staying with the troubles. Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, 2016.

32 Roberto Beneduce: *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria: Etnopsichiatria e migrazioni in un mondo creolo* [1998], Milano 2004, p. 17. All quotations referring to this book are extracted from the revised and enlarged edition of 2004.

33 This expression appears in the introduction written by Beneduce to the second edition of the book in question: "Ethnopsychiatry, or the Loss of Innocence [L'etnopsichiatria, o la perdita dell'innocenza]" (Roberto Beneduce: *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria*, p. 9).

34 The *Centro Frantz Fanon* is the clinical section of the *Associazione Frantz Fanon*, which focuses on counselling service, psychotherapy, and psychological support for immigrants, refugees, and victims of torture.

35 Cf. Roberto Beneduce: *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria*, pp. 234.

you bridge the gap between the Italian therapist and the Cameroonian patient by mentioning two complementary figures that stand for a "heterodox ethnology of Cameroon": Meinrad Pierre Hegba and Eric de Rosny. Both of them knew the realities of that country firsthand, and their valuable research (which never found its deserved repercussion among scholars) was subordinated to their spiritual vocation[36]. This is most probably what resonated in your patient, the certitude that you share something with those two figures, that you understand that her problem has other intelligibility parameters, independently of the Western, attached to them. In fact, the treatment takes a positive turn because the epistemological framework is displaced and the pathological rubric imposed by the Western institution turns into a task: the reappropriation of an inherited healing capacity running in the patient's family[37]. You dig out forgotten memories of past episodes in Cameroon (previous to her emigration[38]) involving the whole family and revealing the need for her to return to the country and assume a role of seer and healer. Now, this course of action can only be accomplished and bring good results if you leave aside the epistemological (and clinical) barriers of psychiatry, psychoanalysis, or any other model that ultimately takes for granted the universalist parameters of Western rationality. It is precisely the suspension of those parameters which enables you to take the tensions and rifts in the family as the contrary of what they seem at face value. The prospect of your patient's submission to local practices in Cameroon is not shared by two members of her family, her mother (who is a convert to evangelical Protestantism) and her brother (who sticks to secular ideas), but that does not dissuade you at all: "Many times the diffidence of relatives [...] expresses their need to take distance not from a world that has no value any longer for them, but on the contrary from something that affects them from too close"[39]. Eventually, the family's living bond with the culture of origin comes to the surface and all the members accept that, in the face of such problems, "white doctors can do very little"[40]. When you suspend your epistemological parameters in this sense, what guides you in the clinical decision to recover those obliterated layers of individual and collective memory, and how far do you go in doing justice to the invisible actors of that "theater of healing"[41] dwelling on the reverse-side of your own empirical spectrum of operations?

36 Both Meinrad Pierre Hegba and Eric de Rosny were Jesuit priests, and their careers can be seen in a relationship of complementarity: Hegba was born in Cameroon, studied in Europe (Rome and Paris), worked as a priest in Douala, and devoted life-long intellectual efforts to show the "rationality" of certain African phenomena (from shapeshifting to sorcery) in the European context. De Rosny was born in Fontainebleau, studied in France and was sent to Douala as schoolteacher to pursue missionary activities in Cameroon. Contrary to the tendency of pre-Conciliar Christianity, he delved into the local culture and became acquainted with healers, learning their art with patience and dedication, to the point of becoming himself *nganga* (a Kikongo word that can be translated as "guérisseur" [healer] or "tradipraticien" [practitioner of traditional medicine]).

37 Roberto Beneduce mentions this case also in his book *Corpi e saperi indocili* (*Disruptive Bodies and Knowledge Forms*) and explains that the woman is a *khamsi*, a term that Eric de Rosny translates as "notable of God", which refers to a diviner and healer receiving her powers directly from divine source without any mediation by tradition (Roberto Beneduce: *Corpi e saperi indocili: guarigione, streogneria e potere in Camerun* [2010], Torino 2023, p. 14, note 4).

38 Due to a "blockage" at school (most probably a trance episode), the patient in question is taken to a *nganga* and afterward to a seer who reveals that she has been chosen by the spirits (Roberto Beneduce: *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria*, p. 10).

39 Roberto Beneduce: *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria*, p. 11.

40 The patient's mother has been converted to another religion but knows quite well how local therapies work; her brother says he does not believe in such things but admits having turned to a *nganga* (local healer) to deal with a difficult problem; and her sister got personally acquainted with Father Hegba when the latter took a cousin of hers to a *nganga* to solve a question related to sorcery. These hidden stories of the family were revealed after Beneduce "took the time for them to be verbalized and let a feeling of alliance grow and expand" (Roberto Beneduce: *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria*, p. 11).

41 Cf. Roberto Beneduce: "Le théâtre de la guérison : entre images de combat et rédemption du passé, ou le désir de soigner", in: Gilles Séraphin (dir.): *Religion, guérison et forces occultes en Afrique : Le regard du jésuite Eric de Rosny*, Paris 2016, pp. 29-46, especially p. 29, where Beneduce defines – with Eric de Rosny – the theater of healing as "a theater which reveals the functioning of a culture". In his book *Etnopsichiatria*, he speaks of widening the "therapeutic framework" to include invisible beings like *djinns*, though not as "technical instruments of [therapeutic] communication" (Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria*, pp. 274-275).

**Roberto Beneduce:** This is a question of paramount importance. What drives me to engage with repressed (or suppressed) memories? What strikes me in the discourse of a patient who seems uncertain even in the use of his or her native language? There are certain principles that guide me in this choice.

First, I understand clinical work as an endeavor aimed at making accessible once again what has been silenced, removed, or foreclosed, and thus rendered inaccessible, for whatever reason. Many factors are implied in this foreclosure: evangelization, colonial domination, the discrediting of local knowledge and interpretations, the hegemony of Western psychiatric discourse, epistemic violence... But the most significant principle, without any doubt, is the choice not to trivialize complex experiences by reducing them to formulae or categories that merely put a label on doubts, suffering, and crises. It is a laborious process, an act of epistemic justice that seeks to re-examine the meaning of discourses, symbols, objects, and forms of knowledge often humiliated and marginalized. If Miranda Fricker has highlighted epistemic violence by examining the legal framework in relation to gender issues,[42] we could adopt the same perspective to consider the status of "minor knowledges", particularly local medical knowledges. Fighting against the medicalization of conflicts and embracing the project of an endless repoliticization of suffering is fundamental to my ethnopsychiatry. But this goal does not concern only foreign populations.

*I understand clinical work as an endeavor to make accessible once again what has been silenced, removed, or foreclosed in the patient. Many factors are implied in this foreclosure: evangelization, colonial domination, the discrediting of local knowledge, the hegemony of Western psychiatric discourse, and epistemic violence.*

Starting from a systematic examination of the cases I have followed in recent years, I realize that the same goal applies to our native population: it must also be freed from the diagnostic proliferation and diagnostic abuse that have characterized the recent past. Criticism of medicalization therefore means reflecting on what lies behind the proliferation of diagnoses. It would suffice to recall the multiplication of the number of diagnoses in the DSM, from its first edition in 1952 to the most recent ones. There we would find evidence of this classificatory anxiety, which perhaps more than anything else highlights the structural weakness and, at the same time, the arrogance of Western psychiatry.

**Adrián Navigante:** I would like to approach my previous question of the epistemological parameters of ethnopsychiatry from another angle, which will take us, I hope, a step further in an attempt to rethink certain presuppositions that are still taken for granted when, in my opinion, they should be interrogated in the light of decolonial thinking (I am mainly thinking of Aníbal Quijano). For this purpose, I will resort to two entries from your *Breve dizionario di etnopsichiatria*: "ethnocentrism" and "cultural relativism", not only because the tension between these two concepts is one of the most challenging aspects of the debate around ethnopsychiatry but also because that tension is present practically in all your books. You clearly reject the kind of ethnocentrism exercised by colonial power (in this case psychiatry, and by extension anthropology) with their purpose of reifying "the others" as an inferior, deformed, or unachieved version of the European "self"[43]. Whether by means of the medicalization of psychic disturbances to isolate them from their socio-historical and political background, or through the universalization of certain categories of the dominant culture as a reference frame to distinguish the "normal" from the "pathological" irrespective of any contextual inscription, you criticize the "naturalization" of a single perspective (reputed scientific and ob-

42 Miranda Fricker: *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, Oxford 2007.

43 Beneduce's work focuses mainly – though not exclusively – on the third colonial wave of the XIX century in Africa, in which the main actors were Britain, France, Belgium, and Germany. Today other terms like "Western colonialism" (a designation which includes the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand) or "the Global North" (still broader, including countries like Japan, Israel and South Korea) are more adequate – but still controversial – to deal with the complexity of the colonial problematic.

jectively valid) and its strict separation from the manifold "cultural" or "ethnic" variants (deemed to be rooted in belief and/or superstition)[44]. This said, this position does not lead you to embrace cultural relativism, which you reject in any form going beyond the strictly delimited domain of language, namely the linguistic relativity principle of linguistic anthropologists Benjamin Whorf and Edward Sapir[45]. You show yourself skeptical to a tendency, in ethno-clinical mediation, to *experimentally* permeate the Western clinical model with the "native's point of view"[46]. The danger for you does not lie in including local etiologies (like spirit possession or sorcery) as hermeneutic tools to deal properly with a whole cultural complex looming behind certain idiosyncratic symptoms (instead of concealing that complex through the application of Western categories, like depression or paranoia)[47]. It is rather related to the contents of such etiologies, or more precisely to the way they are brought to the clinical space and "hybridize" already standardized therapeutic techniques. I must be precise here, at the risk of being over-long. In your book *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria*, you write that hybridization of therapeutic techniques (referring to the ethnopsychiatric practice of Tobie Nathan at the Center Georges Devereux in Paris) is something you can share *in principle*, that is, only insofar as it points to a valorization of the patient's cultural background and corresponds, on the clinical level, to the patient's own situation (hybridity as the main characteristic of migrants)[48]. At the same time, you warn against its dangers: culturalist (meta-empirical?) scotomization of other central aspects of the patient's conflict (mainly of sociopolitical and historical relevance), quasi-divinization of the therapist (who may end up exercising a demiurgic form of "interventionism"), and reification of the evasive, changing, and problematic notion of "cultural identity". The clinical alternative you offer seems to be contained in your book *Etnopsichiatria*, where you state that the etiological instance (in that specific case "possession by *djinn*"[49]) must be framed in a peculiar communicative device where such beings may have *a discursive place*. But any such instance must not become in itself a *technical instrument* of that communication beyond the framework of verbalization, for example through the implementation of either exorcistic or adorcistic treatments – if that were the case, you would need traditional healers not only as cultural mediators but also as co-therapists. Even if you recognize that the experience of something like possession is inscribed in the body and has concrete effects, you don't accept the "otherness" that inscription points to as anything other than *a metaphor*, because replacing "metaphor" by "entity" in the social construction of that experience could re-introduce the sterile question of "belief". Now, if I insist on this aspect in detail, it is because my interest is precisely *not* in belief but in the scope of the clinical device you operate. What the clinical setting and the therapeutic techniques that compose it mostly reveal is the epistemological foundations of the project in question. Here I come back to Quijano. Don't you think that these foundations remain attached to a colonial narrative aimed at standardizing "reality" as a naturalized term – when "reality" is in fact a mainstream adaptation function to the cultural norms of a specific culture (in this case Western modernity)? Can't ethnopsychiatry, as the hybrid and creatively provisory discipline

44 Cf. Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria*, p. 48: "The expression [transcultural psychiatry], predominantly used by psychiatrists, would mean the comparative study of illnesses, syndromes, or therapeutic devices in different cultures. Here, the role assigned to Western psychiatric knowledge has an exclusive privilege, as well as its epistemological validity – the centrality of which is never questioned".

45 Beneduce accepts the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis not only because it frames the question of cultural difference within the strict parameters of linguistic determination, but mainly because it refers, at least in its weaker version, to the difficulty, *not the impossibility*, of translating experiences, perceptions, and emotions from one specific linguistic code to another (cf. Roberto Beneduce: *Breve dizionario di etnopsichiatria*, p. 103).

46 Roberto Beneduce: *Breve dizionario di etnopsichiatria*, p. 103.

47 "Experience demonstrates that a rash attempt to *convert* patients familiarized with another universe of cure and a different semantics of suffering and disorder can usually have the effect of intimidating them and causing them to drop out of our counselling service" (Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria*, p. 272).

48 Roberto Beneduce: *Frontiere dell'identità e della memoria*, p. 248.

49 A useful definition of *jinn* in the field of ethnopsychiatry was provided by Tobie Nathan: "invisible being susceptible of occupying the body of a person or family and control[ling] their psychic functioning with the aim of obtaining a compensation from the human side: a sacrifice, an altar, or the foundation of a cult" (Tobie Nathan: *Du commerce avec les diables*, Paris 2004, p. 11).

it is, work at the interstices of alterity to the point of questioning those foundations without falling back on forms of "reification"? To conclude my long question, I would like to resort to an author you have already mentioned, with whom you have a strong affinity (of sensibility, intellectual ethos, approach, and even ancestry[50]): Ernesto de Martino. This reference is inevitable, since you use a concept coined by him in his posthumous texts, "critical ethnocentrism"[51], to ward off the dangers and possible aberrations of a "romanticism of differences"[52] derived from cultural relativism. In your own words, critical ethnocentrism "intends to underline the conscious acceptance of the limits, deviations, and risks inherent to a dogmatically ethnocentric perspective as well as the need to admit a small dose of ethnocentrism, not in a moral sense but rather as ineluctably incorporated values, modes of cognition, systems of judgement, and implicit epistemologies which will necessarily guide our encounter with the cultural Other"[53]. These words translate an important aspect of De Martino's thought, namely his historicist bent to *sublate* (in the Hegelian sense of *Aufhebung*) the "scandal" of the ethnographic encounter with the other. But De Martino also intended to go beyond those limits, not only programmatically (if we think of publications like those of *Collana Viola*[54]) but also quite personally in his own confrontation with "magism [*magismo*]". In his dialogue with Adolfo Omodeo and Benedetto Croce, he seems to ascribe an unsuspected anthropological value to *the negative of history*. The negative no longer as a category of dialectics but rather as a disquieting instance of discontinuity in the face of his interlocutors' historicist *logos*[55]. De Martino counts the art of magic within the varieties of historical imagination, and he refers to it as *the lost physiology of the spirit*[56], a negative force that, if retrieved, threatens to disrupt the commonly accepted idea of history and progression. Ritual devices, mythic narratives, power objects, and supernatural forces compose this field, in which the idea of "sympathetic nature" is not at all associated with blind instinct. From this perspective, magism appears as "a kind of natural history represented and acted out, if not quite by plants and animals who contributed to its unfolding, largely by humans who were close to those plants and animals, and therefore more capable than we are to re-make it"[57]. On a therapeutic level, could that "dialogue with the *Unheimlich*"[58] you talk about – referring to De Martino's valorization

50 Both Ernesto de Martino and Roberto Beneduce have a Neapolitan family history.

51 Cf. Ernesto de Martino: *La fine del mondo* [1977], Torino 2019, p. 326: "Only the West has produced a true and proper ethnological interest, in the broad sense of a need to systematically confront one's own culture with others, synchronic and alien to it. But this confrontation cannot be carried out but in the prospect of a critical ethnocentrism, in which the Western (or Westernized) ethnologist accepts the history of his/her own culture as unit of measurement of the foreign cultural histories".

52 This term stems from Solange Faladé: Rapport sur le fonctionnement de l'Institut d'ethnopsychopathologie africaine, in : *Cahiers d'Études Africaines (Extraits), Vol. 4, N°16*, 1964, pp. 603-620, quote p. 618. Beneduce quotes her report in his critical observations of the Fann ethnopsychiatric clinic in Dakar under the direction of French military psychiatrist Henri Collomb (cf. Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria*, Chapter 6, pp. 147-182). Some parallels can be found between his critique of that project and that of Tobie Nathan's clinical dispositive at the Centre Georges Devereux in Paris, mainly regarding the "epistemological risks" of not sticking to "a rigorous methodological dispositive" (Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria*, p. 156).

53 Roberto Beneduce: *Breve dizionario di etnopsichiatria*, pp. 64-65.

54 *Collana Viola* (*The Purple Series*) was a collection of religious, ethnological, and psychological studies edited by Cesare Pavese in collaboration with Ernesto De Martino and published by Einaudi. This series found repercussion in a readership that turned out to be broader than imagined (cf. Pietro Angelini: Introduzione, in: Cesare Pavese ed Ernesto de Martino: *La Collana Viola: Lettere 1945-1950*, Torino 2022, p.9) but also stumbled upon antagonistic reactions of left-wing intellectuals, mainly with the accusation of irrationalism. For Beneduce's appreciation of this project, cf. *Etnopsichiatria*, p. 217.

55 On February 24, 1941, Adolfo Omodeo – who represented the Neoidealist current of thought going back to Giovanni Gentile and Benedetto Croce – wrote to De Martino the following reflection concerning the latter's work on *magismo*: "Magism is not so much a classification scheme as a spiritual attitude [...]. From a strictly logical point of view, the history of magism does not exist, because history can be made from the positive and not from the negative. Magism is a power we are deprived of in the process of reason" (Ernesto de Martino: *Dal laboratorio del 'mondo magico'. Carteggi 1940-1943*, ed. by Pietro Angelini, Lecce 2007, p. 85).

56 Ernesto de Martino: *Dal laboratorio del 'mondo magico'*, p. 62.

57 Ernesto de Martino: *Dal laboratorio del 'mondo magico'*, p. 63.

58 Roberto Beneduce: *Etnopsichiatria*, p. 227.

of the operative models of magic on an unconscious level – involve more than a *modus loquendi* of de-historicization, namely the possibility of extracting what Tobie Nathan calls "therapeutic operators" or "cultural inductors"[59] – so important for the clinical practice – from individual symptoms?

**Roberto Beneduce:** What you describe is perhaps the most challenging and slippery terrain in ethnopsychiatry, especially when considering its clinical dimension. And this compels me, too, to make a brief digression. The opposition between critical ethnocentrism and cultural relativism—obvious in some respects—has for some time now begun to strike me as unsatisfactory, if not risky.

Linguistic-cultural relativism has often been applied in a superficial or naive manner by those who have understood it simply as a way of thinking about and naming a world that remains the same for everyone. And this has meant, in some cases, introducing symbols and techniques from other symbolic, cultural, or therapeutic universes into clinical practice as mere "grafts". In fact, beyond the Sapir-Whorf model, what must be kept in mind is that the world in which we live is itself made up of the categories with which we name it (or to put it another way, these categories are not external to it but contribute to its structure and its becoming). That there are different worlds, as argued by Viveiros de Castro's "natural relativism", is therefore not so difficult to imagine, provided we do not slip into a new nominalism and recognize instead that what really matters are the relationships between worlds, "points of view," and intentionalities—not only those of human beings but also of non-human and more-than-human beings. The importance of this entanglement is what transfeminist ecopolitical studies have been suggesting for years, but not only that.

In addition to the extraordinary work of Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, which offers us a rich perspective for considering other ontologies (the Yanomami ontology, in particular), I would like to recall a passage from Pierre Herbart's *Le Chancre du Niger*, a scathing exposé that, as early as 1939, highlighted the violence and folly of the colonial project in the Sahel (the devastating consequences of monocultures and the displacement of people and animals without any concern for environmental constraints, with a tragic impact on the health of its communities). The book could be considered a pioneering work of eco-politics. In it, an African *savant*, referred to as a *féticheur*, provocatively challenges the white man, saying: "All the dialectics of you philosophers, all the art of your poets (...) do nothing but try to restore to you what you have lost and which I possess: a connection with the universe, the thread that runs from being to things (...)". In response to Herbart's remark ("Do you believe, then, that there is no way out for white people?"), the man replies: ""There is none for black people either. Almost everything has already been lost (...) It is inhuman to be merely a man (...) I believe that the curse, the lost paradise of this ruin, is the fall from the plural to the singular."[60]

But the response of the healer with whom Herbart converses also seems to me to contain a peculiar expression of an end-of-the-world kind of thinking, with a core of "melancholy" that deserves to be grasped in all its political significance.

There are therefore philosophies with which we should engage, which for too long we have contented ourselves with reducing to mere beliefs and customs. And in these philosophies, the project of operating within and with the totality of the world of which one is a part constitutes an essential principle both of forms of experience and historical consciousness and of the healing practices carried out by healers and shamans.

I fully agree with your suggestion, starting from Ernesto de Martino's thoughts on magism as expressed in the book edited by Piero Angelini, *Dal Laboratorio del 'Mondo magico'*.[61] Perhaps it is a matter of conceiving magism differently and, as Perig Petrou has suggested with regard to Mexi-

59 Cf. Tobie Nathan: *L'influence qui guérit* [1994], Paris 2001, pp. 61-67.

60 Pierre Herbart: *Le Chancre du Niger*, Paris 1939.

61 For more on the recent English translation of *La fine del mondo* (*The End of the World*, 2024), see Roberto Beneduce: "The third bank of the river. Loss, crisis and transcendence in Ernesto de Martino's The End of the World", in: *Dialectical Anthropology*, 2026, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10624-025-09805-8.

co,[62] to conceive of the strategies of ritual healing as specific forms of "co-activation" of beings and forces at work in the world. It is also necessary to recognize that the multiplicity of worlds and their "thousand plateaus," as well as the need to conceive of becoming as a key notion, are not merely contributions of the finest Western philosophy but an awareness that has long permeated diverse philosophies and psychologies.

**Adrián Navigante:** I think it necessary, knowing what you owe as ethnologist and psychiatrist to his work and person, to speak about Eric de Rosny. You devoted two inspiring essays to him, written in French: *Le théâtre de la guérison* (*The Theater of Healing*) and "*L'arbre vétuste et grandiose": Sur les pas d'Eric de Rosny* (*The old and glorious Tree: In the footsteps of Eric de Rosny*). In these texts you raise many interesting questions related to his "ethnology of implication"[63] and the lesson you learned from it. Earlier I spoke about your emphatic and simultaneously realistic approach to "the other", and I presume what inspired you to nurture that rare quality of empathy in your remarkable attempt to understand foreignness, alienation, violence, and suffering was your personal encounter with Eric de Rosny. Maybe I should make it clear that what I mean in this case by "empathy" has little to do with an emotional identification with the other. It is rather a specific mode of attention and care that prevents the ethnographer from reducing the other either to a mere object of study or a dim coloration for his/her own phantasms, and which demarcates what I would call a humanist (ethno-)psychiatrist from the prototype of health administrators. Concerning ethnology, I perfectly understand your delimitation of Eric de Rosny from both Marcel Griaule and Michel Leiris[64], as well as your focus on the "dramatic" dimension of his involvement with the world of local healers in Douala. Dramatic, it seems to me, in two senses: firstly because, as you point out, Eric de Rosny's purpose was not to demonstrate the existence of an African culture but rather *to exercise* one of the central functions of *that culture*: healing[65]. Secondly because that dramatization is inscribed in a much broader context, that of traditional medicine in Africa and its theater of the night, what you call "the labyrinth of *ndimsi*"[66]. It is interesting to note that you refer to this social drama as both "tragic" (with Edmond and Marie Ortigues) and "epic" (with Michael Taussig). To tell you the truth, I have difficulty in relating "tragic" to the context of Eric de Rosny's work and that of his African friend and mentor called Din. Where would be the *harmartia* of traditional healers? Where would be their *hybris*?[67] If the tragic dimension were to be deduced merely from the cathartic effects of their treatments (which seems to me too excessive a reduction of the work performed by *ngangas*),

62 Perig Pitrou, *Le chemin et le champ. Parcours rituel et sacrifice chez les Mixe de Oaxaca (Mexique)*, Nanterre: 2017. See also Marie Mauzé, Perig Pitrou (eds.), Reconfigurer le vivant: des organismes aux artefects, Cahiers d'anthropologie sociale, Paris, 2001, 19.

63 A term used by André Marty, which does not merely refer to Eric de Rosny's factual immersion in the field (Douala, Cameroon) but mainly to his self-reflection on the special role he had (Jesuit priest among traditional healers) and the ones assigned to him by the local people around (priest, healer, sorcerer, colonialist, etc.), cf. André Marty: "Eric de Rosny: « Travail de Dieu » et sorcellerie, du bon usage de l'ambigüité", in: *Religion, guérison et forces occultes en Afrique*, pp. 55-68, quote p. 55).

64 Beneduce speaks of a "true encounter" with the other in the case of Eric de Rosny, which he distinguishes from Marcel Griaule's "anthropology of booty and gift", which combined the plundering of sacred objects for French museums with the construction of a dam in Sanga), and the "introspective ethnography" of Michel Leiris, where the self-infatuated narrative leaves little space to a restitution of the other (Roberto Beneduce: L'arbre vétuste et grandiose… Sur les pas d'Eric de Rosny, in: Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont, Jean-Daniel Morerod, Jérémie Blanc (eds.): *Cultures et guérisons. Éric de Rosny l'intégrale Vol. 1*, Neuchâtel 2022, pp. 65-79, reference p. 73.).

65 Cf. Roberto Beneduce: L'arbtre vétuste et grandiose, p. 72.

66 Roberto Beneduce: L'arbtre vétuste et grandiose, *Ibidem*, p. 73. Eric de Rosny defines *ndimsi* in the following way: "it is what surpasses the ordinary gaze and knowledge of mortals. We would say that it is the bottom and underside of things [*le dessous des choses*], the world of secret intentions and hidden plots [*dessins caches*]" (Eric de Rosny: *Ndimsi: ceux qui soignent dans la nuit*, Yaoundé 1974, p. 18).

67 In the context of Greek tragedy, the word *hamartia* could be translated as "flaw" or "shortcoming" (of contingent origin but with fateful consequences), and *hybris* refers to an excessive arrogance or overconfidence mainly in the face of the gods, which results in the hero's downfall.

the adjective "dramatic" in the modern sense would suffice. I suppose you resort to the specific connotation related to the Oedipal conflict, mainly in the sense given to it by Edmond and Marie Ortigues in the context of their work in Senegal, namely a minimal structure of relationality that discloses an essential aspect of human suffering (related to anxiety) identifiable in any cultural context[68]. However interesting that reference may be, it still strikes me as reductionist, and I want to ask you whether you find in the tragic aspect something more than or different from what I see: a "Europization" of the complex "theater of healing" referred to. The epic aspect, on the contrary, is much clearer to me, because it refers to an art of complexification of the material presented by the patient with the intention of saturating it to the point of reversal and restitution. You follow Taussig in this respect, mainly when he says (referring to shamans in South America): "Epic theater aimed not at overcoming but at alienating alienation"[69]. Taussig's phrase points to the binding power of the fragment, to a reconstruction of an impossible whole (the passage from disturbance or disorder to cohesion and balance) through the debris with which such healers operate. You say that this "impossible", in the case of *ngangas*, is made possible through a heterogeneous assemblage, following a logic of *fétiches* – hence your use of expressions like "vertiginous disruption of habitual cognitive and physical borders" and "heterogenous mixture of elements"[70]. Your point is to show that what the *ngangas* do is no performative hocus pocus, but *re-enacted history*. I want to know in which way this epic register of traditional healing in Douala can be compared to what Tobie Nathan and Lucien Hounkpatin say about the "complexification procedure"[71] carried out by Yoruba Babalawos (in treatments based on IFA divination) to dig out the collective hidden from the individual manifestation, and how many temporal layers (and contents) compose that "reenacted history" you talk about.

**Roberto Beneduce:** The way in which de Rosny interprets the distinctive character of a culture in the act of care strikes me as a prism capable of reflecting countless epistemological and clinical questions. I would like to address at least two of them here. The fact that ritual healing always involves a matter of life and death—a tragic dimension—requires a radical shift away from perspectives that have focused exclusively on techniques, their effectiveness, and the materials used, ultimately neglecting what they were actually intended to achieve: combating alienation, the threat of death, and the danger of being excluded from social life with no possibility of redemption as de Martino suggested. A peasant from Basilicata shared with Ernesto de Martino the verses of a lullaby sung at birth, which aptly expressed the experience of the oppressed classes: "'*I am in this world as if I were not there, they have put me in the book of the missing*'".[72] I will try to summarize these issues in another way: the tragic issue I often evoke in my work essentially concerns the condition of the oppressed, of those who must contend with illness and the threat of death everywhere; the epic dimension of healing serves to recall one of the distinctive features of ritual healing, to be considered alongside other aspects, like techniques of influence and remedies. In this sense, it is true that an epic dimension takes center stage. The patient is no longer a passive victim but a fighter, a soldier called upon to face his enemies. Eric de Rosny, like Jeanne Favret-Saada, places great emphasis on this. But we can grasp this aspect in all its radical complexity and risk only if the shaman's gesture—alienating alienation (as Michael Taussig would put it), co-activating the world (in words of Perig Pitrou),[73] or transforming care into a struggle (to use an expression by Eric de Rosny)—is also

68 Marie and Edmond Ortigues: *Œdipe africain* [1966], Paris 1984, p. 279.

69 Michael Taussig: *Shamanism, Colonialism, and the Wild Man: A Study in Terror and Healing* [1987], Chicago 1991, p. 329. Cf. Roberto Beneduce: Le théâtre de la guérison, pp. 39-40 (his reference to Taussig).

70 Roberto Beneduce: Le théâtre de la guérison, p. 40.

71 "The Babalawo's procedure is additive, and sometimes even multiplicative. In fact, it is a complexification procedure, never a reduction as in the so-called 'scientific' conceptions" (Tobie Nathan, Lucien Hounkpatin: *La parole de la forêt initiale*, Paris 1996, p. 29).

72 Ernesto de Martino : *L'opera a cui lavoro. Apparato critico e documentario alla "Spedizione etnologica" in Lucania*, Lecce1996, pp. 97–98.

73 Perig Pitrou: Le chemin et les champs, cit. see also Perig Pitrou: "Figuration des processus vitaux et co-activité dans la Sierra Mixe de Oaxaca (Mexique)", *L'Homme*, 2012, 202, pp. 77-111.

understood as the effort to re-enact in every act of care the history of the world and its memory, the commitment to re-shape a particular world and a particular place... It is with these aspects in mind that, based on my research conducted with Dogon healers—and in particular working with one of them, Ambainde—I have suggested that therapeutic and ritual work could be conceived as a form of "iatro-mnestics", that is, a delicate interweaving of temporalities, shared memories, and knowledge, or the careful evocation of historical events, ecological metaphors, and mythological figures. "Iatro-mnestics" is closely related with "iatro-topia", that is, the use, during the ritual, of references to sacred places, toponyms, geographies interwoven with knowledge of plants, the presence of water sources, and soil characteristics: a veritable "sung map". Of course, I'm aware that the couple "tragic/epic" has its limits in other societies or religious traditions. Take for instance the ability of Buddhism to effectively balance and correct individual destinies broken by violence, displacement, and violence.[74] Or the stubborn resistance of Indian minorities against dispossession, land grabbing, genocide and Nation State racism.[75] In all these cases, we have to renounce adopting tragedy and epics as the only horizons of human experience and ritual healing, and learn instead from other epistemologies of history. Italian anthropology must come back to de Martino's heritage and his notion of "end of the world", but from another point of view. Unfortunately, it persists in its theoretical slumber and, in many cases, it merely offers philological exercises about de Martino's or other scholars' work without infusing new life into them or limits itself to reproducing a mummified research agenda (for instance, about cultural patrimonies and UNESCO regime). And often overlooks the issues that a decolonized anthropology should urgently address: those of the genocide in Palestine, for example.

*I have suggested that therapeutic and ritual work could be conceived as a form of "iatro-mnestics", that is, a delicate interweaving of temporalities, shared memories, and knowledge, or the careful evocation of historical events, ecological metaphors,, and mythological figures.*

The fact that "care" expresses the exercise of culture in its most important aspect inevitably prompts us to reflect on our Western culture. Is its exercise still that of care? Does it really succeed in this task? These questions do not allude to the degree of therapeutic effectiveness of Western medical technologies, which are undoubtedly extraordinary and even "magical" in some cases. The issue is more nuanced, much more complex. I am wondering whether Western culture, and its raw material (neoliberal capitalism), is instead highlighting an abdication of the principle identified by Eric de Rosny as peculiar to *every* culture. If we consider what the practice of Western culture actually is, we are tempted to think less of the ways of caring and more of the condition of the people that compose it: depression, suicide risk, daily violence, structural racism, and the proliferation of traumatic experiences. Western culture—if this term still makes sense, given the heterogeneity that characterizes it—seems to conceal, behind proclamations of human rights, individual freedom, and the triumph of desire, an inability to care in the sense suggested by Eric de Rosny.

These aspects help us rethink mental health issues from a different perspective, as suggested, for example, by Mark Fisher, Cyntha Cruz, Vladimir Safatle, and Sarah Morrison with regard to depression and the responsibility of Capitalism; by Stef Craps in relation to trauma; and by Jonathan Metzl when he analyzed the racial dimensions of a diagnosis (that of schizophrenia) in the United States...[76] In my opinion, this perspective is fully consistent with the project of a critical and radical

74 Sara E. Lewis: *Spacious Minds. Trauma and Resilience in Tibetan Buddhism*, Ithaca 2019.

75 Audra Simpson: *Mohawk Interruptus. Political life across the Borders of Settler States*, Durham 2014.

76 Stef Craps: *Postcolonial Witnessing. Trauma Out of Bonds*, New York 2013; Cynthia Cruz: *The Melancholia of Class. A Manifesto for the Working Class*, New York 2021; Mark Fisher: *Capitalism Realism: Is there no alternative?*, New York 2009; Jonathan Metzl: The Protest psychosis. How Schizophrenia became a black disease, Boston 2009; Sarah Morrison: "Depression, Capitalism, and Radical Care", *New Zealand Society* 2025, 40(2), pp. 16-29; Vladimir Safatle, Nelson da Silva Junior, Christian Dunker (Orgs.): *Neoliberalismo como gestão do sofrimento psíquico*, São Paulo 2021.

ethnopsychiatry, aimed at considering both discourses and practices related to psychological suffering in other societies and those characteristic of the West.

**Adrián Navigante:** There are diverging accounts of Eric de Rosny's trajectory and status, even among authors that agree on the undeniable value of his work. I am not so interested in the labels ascribed to him as in what the different appreciations reveal, namely the question of *authenticity* (to which you devoted an entry of your *Breve Dizionario di Etnopsichiatria*[77]) in the encounter and confrontation with "the other". For Jacques Fedry, Eric de Rosny's initiation was subordinated or fully integrated into his first initiation in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola. He explicitly declares that "Eric de Rosny did not become a *nganga* [shaman of the Bantu world]; he remained the Jesuit priest he had always been"[78]. According to Fedry, Eric de Rosny did not learn anything new but received a gift, the gift of a "vision"[79] that sensibilized him even more in his pastoral work. This differs considerably from other perspectives, like the one in Peter Geschiere's personal testimony, according to which Eric de Rosny accepted the lessons of *ngangas*, became one of them, and to a certain extent exercised (in a fruitful but also problematic tension with his Christian background) that specific art of healing[80]. When André Mary speaks of the "ethnology of implication" I alluded to earlier, he mentions a central aspect of the interrogation I want to share with you concerning Eric de Rosny. The key phrase here is "good use of ambiguity"[81]. Mary's view is quite differentiated. He says that Eric de Rosny is not a *nganga*, neither a traditional one nor a modern charismatic one, because both variants imply a negotiation with the power of sorcery (a power to harm) as a condition of possibility (also) to heal[82], whereas Eric de Rosny does not negotiate at all. This is not a question of theology, inculturation, or occultism, but *an ethical question* that turns out to be the guiding thread of his hybrid *parcours*. For Mary, Eric de Rosny is authentic not because he ultimately remained a Christian despite his immersion in a Pagan religion, or because he delved into the traditional world of local healers in Douala despite the dogmatic barriers of Christianity. He was authentic because he held the tension of difference in a singular balance which existentially challenged him. This tension was not one of two poles (European Christianity vs. African animism) but a conflict-laden dynamics of three components: Christian religion, African healing tradition, and European ethnology. In fact, they are – at least in Eric de Rosny's life – paradoxically woven together[83]. Are you saying something

77 Roberto Beneduce: *Breve dizionario di etnopsichiatria*, pp. 31-32.

78 Jacques Fedry : "La recherche et la pratique d'Eric de Rosny éclairées par la spiritualité ignatienne" , in: *Religion, guérison et forces occultes en Afrique*, pp. 47-54, quote p. 53.

79 This vision is codified in different African traditions as "the four eyes" or "double view". The two eyes used by ordinary people enable us to see in daylight, whereas the other two are cast opened at death or – in the case of healers – in life through an initiation process that enables *ngangas* to see in the night, that is, in the world of the invisible (to detect the cause of maladies and disorders, usually related to the action of sorcery). The anthropological translation of this esoteric aspect of African traditions could well be "expanded field of vision" (cf. Peter Geschiere: Compte-rendu de Rosny (Éric de) – La nuit les yeux ouverts, in: *Politique Africaine, N° 66*, 1997, pp. 152-154, reference p. 153).

80 Peter Geschiere: "Eric de Rosny et la violence du monde nocturne", in: *Religion, guérison et forces occultes en Afrique*, pp. 83-95, especially pp. 89 and 94, where Geschiere speaks of the long learning process that Eric de Rosny's initation implied as well as of his awareness of the dangers and consequences of the exercise of the traditional medicine of *ngangas*.

81 André Mary: "Eric de Rosny: « Travail de Dieu » et sorcellerie, du bon usage de l'ambigüité", in : *Religion, guérison et forces occultes en Afrique*, pp. 55-68, quote p. 55.

82 "The circle of the sorcerer and counter-sorcerer is in fact well known in the Fang tradition and widely in Africa: how is one supposed to detect the actions of sorcerers and fight against them without being – or having been – himself a sorcerer?" (André Mary : "Eric de Rosny: « Travail de Dieu » et sorcellerie, du bon usage de l'ambigüité", p. 60.

83 "He does not show himself as [a Catholic] priest but he does not hide it. He is initiated but not exactly like 'the Africans'. He knows that he is taken for a *nganga* [...] but he does not claim to be one. He observes and conducts inquiries but he is no ethnographer" (André Mary: "Eric de Rosny: « Travail de Dieu » et sorcellerie, du bon usage de l'ambigüité", p. 61).

similar when you speak of Eric de Rosny's "heterologic path"[84]? It seems to me that you value the way he manages to recompose a specific form of knowledge (that of traditional medicine) through the amalgam of different historical and socio-political elements composing it, a structure to which I would also ascribe *a threefold arrangement*: ancient cults (local animism), new religions (Christianity), and modern thinking (white schools)[85], but I suspect there is more in what you say than I have been able to summarize, especially if we ask ourselves what the salient point is in Eric de Rosny's "construction of authenticity".

**Roberto Beneduce:** From what I was able to gather during my long exchanges with Eric de Rosny, and based on what I saw when I was with him in Yaoundé and Douala, what must be emphasized above all is the need to cross a border, to tear down a wall—a need that de Rosny had experienced not in Cameroon but in Algeria, during the years of the colonial war, amid the distance and contempt the French army held toward the Algerians. The image he depicts in *Les yeux de ma chèvre* (*The Eyes of my Goat*) could not be more eloquent: it is the encounter between some French soldiers and a wounded, captured mujahideen; the description of a silence, of gazes that question one another in a time of violence and death. I believe that de Rosny sought to transcend the accursed barrier that colonialism had erected (he arrived in Cameroon when Algeria was not yet independent), and he would do so by embarking on a project to understand that knowledge long humiliated, ridiculed, and criminalized: the knowledge of local healers. This aspect cannot be trivialized. His ethnology does not concern just any aspect of Douala, Bassa, or Bulu culture... His gaze is directed squarely at the question of suffering and evil, of conflict and social violence, of illness and healing. Here, he rediscovers the true meaning (and the failure) of a culture. Certainly: he is and remains a Jesuit, but a different kind of Jesuit who will not be content to celebrate the Mass and convert people as his ancestors had done. It is he who allows himself to be converted by healers already converted to Christianity but who are themselves different from their ancestors, determined to break down walls and divisions. The "good use of ambiguity" André Mary speaks of reminds me in some ways of Viveiros de Castro's "controlled equivocation". A controlled equivocation,[86] yet placed at the service of the project to know and traverse other worlds of experience. As opposed to what Jacques Fedry writes (a Jesuit himself, let us not forget), I believe one can imagine de Rosny's path as a genuine apprenticeship. Of course, it wasn't easy to recognize this aspect. De Rosny was summoned by the Bishop of Douala and an ecclesiastical "council" to justify himself and prove that he was not violating the principles of his religious order. He was forced, so to speak, to distinguish himself from the *nganga*... When he told me this, it made me think that ordinary people knew de Rosny was not a "mere" missionary, a "mere" priest, or even a "mere" *nganga*. They turned to him expecting something more. In his person, he embodied a dual power (that of Christianity and the White man, and that of the *nganga*). Only by keeping this in mind can one understand why he was invited by local radio stations in Douala to speak about witchcraft, listen to local people's anxieties, and offer them guidance on how to deal with difficult situations. He systematically received people suffering from serious problems who sought "spiritual help" from him, with all the fertile ambiguity that this expression has carried throughout the course of evangelization (spiritual and mystical powers are also the ways in which the powers of witchcraft are locally defined...). And what is even more important to keep in mind is the fact that de Rosny had been fully accepted by the notables of Douala as their equal and invited to participate in the important annual Ngondo ceremony,[87] where, dressed in traditional attire, he

84 Roberto Beneduce: "« L'arbre vétuste et grandiose… » sur le pas d'Éric de Rosny", p. 67. With the adjective heterologic Beneduce alludes to the meaning of that concept by Michel de Certau, as the arrangement of an intermediate space which paradoxically serves as a foundation of ethnographic work (cf. Michel de Certeau: *La culture au pluriel*, Paris 1993, p. 17).

85 Roberto Beneduce: "« L'arbre vétuste et grandiose… » sur le pas d'Éric de Rosny," p. 69.

86 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: "Perspectival Anthropology and the Method of Controlled Equivocation", in: *Tipití*, 2(1):3-24.

87 The Ngondo is a festival celebrated on the banks of the Wuri River that honors the history of the

sat beside the Prince of Douala.

**Adrián Navigante:** I still wish to linger on the aspect of "authenticity" related to Eric de Rosny's ethical decision – which according to André Mary results in his good use of ambiguity. This will enable me to elaborate, I hope, a rather complex question about your own demarcation line between a descriptive narrative (ethnographic or psychiatric) and the inevitable value judgments that emerge from that narrative. Let's proceed in two steps: one specifically related to the case Eric de Rosny and another more general one related to what you thematize as "construction of authenticity". To begin with, one could easily affirm that the "authentic" aspect of Eric de Rosny lies in his avoidance of two extremes: 1. An excessive identification with the foreign tradition he became familiar with, which inevitably becomes one-sided and may lead to overlooking blind spots, discontinuities, and tensions permeating it; and 2. a reckless acceptance of external elements to that tradition which, in the inevitable dynamics of change brought about with evangelization and colonization and perpetuated in post-colonial times, actively contribute to an internal fragmentation and eventual disintegration of the contents handed over and recreated within the frame of local teachings[88]. Eric de Rosny never reified the reality of the traditional healers in Douala by conveying a homogeneously idealized picture of their practice, but he actively cared for the survival of the specific knowledge transmission and way of living that had held that society together for many centuries. I see a dilemma here, and I honestly wonder whether the ethical aspect highlighted by André Mary as the mark of Eric de Rosny's authenticity does not paradoxically reintroduce, in an unexpected historical loop, the "tragic aspect" I tended to discard in my previous question. It is Eric de Rosny's discernment in favor of an initiation to enter the secret space of the *ngangas* and against an open acceptance of the ambivalent underground that constitutes their practice that strikes me as tragic, for it seems to me that his decision, which may understandably trigger admiration on an individual level, dramatically reenacts the problematic alliance of evangelization and colonization. Jacques Fedry is very explicit in this respect: "He [Eric de Rosny] did not say to his patients, like the healers, 'I will make a protection armor for you [against sorcery]' but 'you already have an armor, your faith in Jesus Christ'"[89]. Given the fact that Fedry was a Jesuit priest, it is not difficult to grasp the internal consistency of his remark. What can be nobler, after all, than renunciation to a logic of perpetual violence (grounded in the institution of sorcery as the basis of traditional societies) through a symbolic reference (Jesus Christ), the realization of which implies the definitive and ultimate abolition of mimetic violence? It is in a way the realization of René Girard's interpretation of "the scandal of Christianity"[90], which surely found deep resonance in Eric de Rosny. It is a strongly

*By fostering a diplomacy between worlds that met and, more often than not, clashed, local healing has always played a decisive political role.*

---

coastal peoples, the Sawa, and the powers associated with the water spirits: Jengu or Mami Wata (Roberto Beneduce, Corpi e saperi indocili).

88 Beneduce quotes in this respect a passage from Eric de Rosny's book *Les yeux de ma chèvre (The Eyes of my Goat,* 1981*)* in which Eric de Rosny regrets the accumulation of magical, astrological and further esoteric products from Europe, Egypt or India, as well as pseudo-apocrypha from fake-Bibles and imaginary medieval Popes at the home of modernized *ngangas* in urban areas (Roberto Beneduce: « L'arbre vétuste et grandiose… » sur le pas d'Éric de Rosny, p.70).

89 Jacques Fedry: "La recherche et la pratique d'Eric de Rosny éclairées par la spiritualité ignatienne", p. 53.

90 Girard's references for his idea of the Christian scandal is Saint Paul, who says that a crucified god is a scandal for the Jews and a crazy idea for the Pagans (1 Cor 1:23), and Matthew (18: 7-8), where the passion is identified with the scandal for all people (including Jesus' own disciples). The cross is a *skandalon*, says Girard, because people will never understand a weak god who humbly suffers what is inflicted upon him (cf. René Girard : *Celui par qui le scandale arrive*, Paris 2011, p. 140), and it is the inversion of the founding stone of mimetic desire (Satan), which constitutes human relations on the basis of rivalry and violence. The passion is a scandal, explains Girard, because with Christ's crucifixion that violence is fully concentrated on the one who breaks the mechanisms, and the violence implodes (René Girard, *Ibidem*, pp. 138-139).

apologetic thesis revolving around the idea that Christianity's truth, that is, the disclosure – and eventual abolition – of the mimetic logic of violence (whose mechanism constrains people to focus on a "guilty" agent behind misfortunes of any kind) puts a definitive end to the perpetual reproduction, in archaic societies, of a scapegoat logic (war against sorcerers) to ensure the balance of the social group as well as of a sacrificial mechanism (no restitution without destruction), which structures and preserves the sphere of the sacred. However, there are certain subtleties in Girard's thinking which need to be recalled. In his last book *Achever Clausewitz* (English version *Battling to the End*), he writes the following: "Christianity demystifies the religious [the archaic religious = the sacred] and this demystification, good in the absolute, has turned out to be bad in the relative, since we were not prepared to assume it"[91]. What Christianity generated was the elimination of a mechanism that sacralizes violence, but historically that mechanism did not lead to a counter-mimetic logic which would be the imitation of Christ by humanity. It has turned out to be the contrary: violence without the religious framing of the sacred. Historically it has taken different forms: evangelization, colonization, imperialist wars, religious and political fundamentalism, etc., but Girard concentrates his reflection on historical Christianity, and he says that his modality was not Christic but sacrificial, only without the contention framework of the "archaic sacred". Luís Mallart, who worked very close to Eric de Rosny's field in Cameroon, is for me an invisible counterpart who needs to be mentioned here. He was also a priest, but he renounced his missionary activities because the weight of history conditioned what he had taken to be "good ethical views". His autobiography *Soy hijo de los Evuzok* (1996) is an extraordinarily lucid account of the tragic conflict I am trying to articulate with regard to Eric de Rosny's trajectory. Mallart writes that nothing justifies depriving others of their beliefs and their cultural foundations in the name of a higher, or nobler, or – even worse – "true" religion[92]. He also quotes historical documents which prove that the local healers were considered devil worshippers, their treatments were forbidden, and severe punishments were established for those Africans who consulted them[93]. This historical continuity between evangelization and colonization[94] led Luís Mallart to think that the major problem in dealing with the Evuzok was not the ambiguity of their world view, their blood sacrifices, their polygamy, or even their sorcery, but the imposition of a hegemonic power implying the progressive destruction of their tradition as a superior value scale. From this point of view, the difference between the fracture implied by Eric de Rosny's exercise of Christianity within the space of the *ngangas* and the progressive contamination of the local space by esoteric and religious gadgets of modernity does not seem to me so clear. Aware of your knowledge and sensibility for history (which is a totally absent dimension in many anthropologists exclusively attached to their positive data and their subsequent description), I would like to know your position on this very complex question involving the relationship between an art of understanding and its ideological nuances, an ethical position relativized and sometimes invalidated by its historical basis, and the responsibility of the actors playing an unresolved conflict of cultures.

**Roberto Beneduce:** The issues raised in your question are numerous, and I do not believe I have the authority to answer them all satisfactorily. Regarding Girard, I will simply say that the difficulty in finding answers to certain conundrums also stems from the—not always widely acknowledged—necessity of viewing the historical, political, religious, psychological, and epistemological dimensions of a problem such as sacrificial violence as inextricably intertwined. Conversion to a religion, the new ethical principles it introduces, and what Christianity did during the colonial era, for example, always give rise to a violent epistemological clash as well, which does not seem to me to have attracted the interest it deserves. Yet, evangelization in Africa, beyond its betrayal of

91 René Girard: *Achever Clausewitz : Entretiens avec Benoît Chantre* [2007], Paris 2011, p. 10.

92 Luís Mallart Guimera: *Soy hijo de los Evuzok: La vida de un antropólogo en Camerún*, Barcelona 2007, p. 55.

93 Luís Mallart: *Soy hijo de los Evuzok*, pp. 196-197.

94 "What did it mean for me to be a missionary? With the time, the words *convert* and *evangelize* left the same bad taste in my mouth as the verbs *colonize* and *de-civilize*" (Luís Mallart: *Soy hijo de los Evuzok*, p. 62).

Christ's example, also brought to light a dramatic confrontation between epistemologies. As for the question of authenticity/tradition/change, I would say that while the authors we have mentioned agree that this is a problem no society can escape, we can add that the task of anthropology is to identify the strategies adopted in each instance—the specific "politics of authenticity". Local healing knowledge ("traditional medicine") and its practitioners (shamans, healers) have, for their part, reflected on these dynamics by occupying what might be defined as a role of transition and mediation, of exchange and translation. By fostering a diplomacy between worlds that met and, more often than not, clashed, local healing has always played a decisive political role. And it did so with the full awareness that the ambiguous space characterizing issues of ritual healing, its remedies, or witchcraft, had to be governed. The members of the Society of Traditional Healers of Douala, to which Eric de Rosny contributed, had published a book of remedies and recipes (*Male ma makom*, literally: "friendship alliance") with the aim of making them accessible and thus promoting the medical knowledge and wisdom of their ancestors. The characteristics of the association, founded in the last century thanks to the efforts of Cameroonian Baptist and Protestant pastors who, although belonging to different groups—Balimba, Duala, Bakoko, Balimba, Bassa—all spoke the Duala language (the one chosen by the German Protestants), are very telling and also reveal something significant to better understand Eric de Rosny's own choice. One of its members, Reverend Kingwe Kwa, was the head of a Baptist parish in Douala but also a renowned healer. In other words, he was a convert to Christianity who had not given up being a healer and practicing traditional medicine. The association's primary aim was to preserve the tradition of the *ba-bole-miaga*, "those who make remedies". It functioned as a genuine training school aimed at fostering the goal of healing and helping society combat its ailments. Anyone could join freely, but at a certain point it became clear that not everyone shared the same knowledge or the association's goals. While some pastors limited their interest to pharmacopoeia, others had different aims. It became evident that the association risked being drawn into another realm—that of the *ndimsi*, the world of the invisible and the night: an ambiguous and threatening space. They later realized that those remedies could be used for nefarious purposes and debated at length the possible uses of that knowledge. It was finally decided to put an end to that experiment, but it remains interesting for us to consider the doubt that animated that group and that debate, at the intersection of the religious and the medical. Was there a risk of opening the association to moral and religious practices incompatible with Christianity? However, others might ask: why use remedies if they are deprived of part of their power? What power are we talking about? Discourses on healing, ancestral knowledge, and the religious dimension of certain practices coexisted with a purely political register, long the object of repression by colonial power. In addition to that, the issue of secrecy arose, demanding a wise solution: the withdrawal of the book. Authenticity, tradition, innovation, and change can only be fully understood when viewed as a dynamics within which diverse interests, forms of knowledge, and actors clash. It is a theater in which discordant voices confuse the actors on stage, often forcing them to perform a script and a different role from the one they were taught to play.

Within that shift in power dynamics, countless strategies (mimicry, masking, appropriation, ritual regulation, etc.) come into play to determine what is authentic and what is not. In the case of local medical knowledge, one quickly realizes how heavily the presence of white people, Christian churches, and colonial powers has weighed. Traditional medicine is a jumble of discourses and practices that has had to reproduce itself within a forest of epistemological, moral, and political contradictions. For me, this is an exceptionally eloquent metaphor for the politics of authenticity and tradition, and above all for the role played by the issue of secrecy: a metaphor that can also be applied to our dialogue.[95]

**Adrián Navigante:** My previous question bring me now back to the entry "authenticity – construction of authenticity" in your *Breve dizionario di etnopsichiatria*. If you allow me, I would

95 Cf. Roberto Beneduce: *Corpi e saperi indocili*, pp. 297-299.

like to bring certain elaborations of yours in that book into our dialogue, since they provide a very interesting perspective on the subject. The difficulty the reader may have with your dictionary is that you provide a description of a concept, a person, or a situation, and at the same time an implicit discussion of it through the sources you quote. As you know, not all readers delve into the sources, so I allow myself to reconstruct the discussion contained in that entry the better to formulate my question. The central idea you wish to convey is the following: what is called "authentic" (with regard to a culture or a tradition) is many times the result of an unconscious denial or ideological concealment of the intricacies of history, the dynamics of change, the presence of external influences, and the importance of invention in the culture being studied. In this sense, terms like "identity", "attachments", "tradition" and "community" become suspicious, as being the result of artificial, romantic, or ideological projections rather than of concrete research[96]. This artificial construction of authenticity affects to a great extent the idea of "traditional medicine", and you resort to six authors by way of critical reassessment: Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Benedict Anderson, Achille Mudimbe, Johannes Fabian, and Jane Guyer. The idea behind that choice of authors (which is not explicitly expressed in your Dictionary) could be summarized thus: In their book *The Invention of Tradition* (1983), Hobsbawm and Ranger demonstrate that the notion of tradition is not what many people take for granted, namely an ever-existing primordial corpus of homogeneous contents essentially unchanged throughout history. Achille Mudimbe's book *The Invention of Africa* (1983) is the application of that critical interrogation to a specific cultural context: Africa. Benedict Anderson's book *Imagined Communities* (1983) demystifies the homogeneous and potentially dangerous notion of "community" (due to the identitarian overtones that can be attached to it). Fabian's essay *Popular Culture in Africa: Findings and Conjectures* (1976)[97] calls our attention to the fact that popular culture is not the result (or a fragmentary product) of a deracinated tradition – nor the consequence of Westernization. Finally, Jane Guyer's article *La tradition de l'invention en Afrique équatoriale* (2000)[98] deals with prejudices in the Western characterization of "tradition", mainly concerning the question of oral transmission and the pre-modern schemes attached to that term). There is no doubt that there are phantasmatic notions of "tradition", as for example when the noun is capitalized or the adjective "perennial" is added to it. At the same time, it seems to me that taking the opposite extreme and seeing the internal cohesion and regularity of certain transmission lineages (called *sampradāya* in the religious complex of South Asia), or the preservation of identity groups and their values (mainly through a sacred dispositive, like possession or divination in African and African diaspora religion) *throughout historical change* as the superimposition of an imaginary construct detached from reality, does not do justice to the real challenge of thinking other modes of being in the world. Hobsbawm and Ranger explicitly distinguish their notion of "tradition" (or rather the ideology of invariance related to it in modern societies, mainly by conservative groups) from that of "custom", which they apply to so-called traditional societies. It is worth quoting a central passage in this respect: "The object and characteristic of traditions, including invented ones, is invariance. The past, real or invented, to which they refer, imposes fixed (normally formalized) practices, such as repetition. Custom in traditional societies has the double function of motor and fly-wheel. It does not preclude innovation and change up to a point, though evidently the requirement that it must appear compatible or even identical with precedent imposes substantial limitations on it"[99]. On the other side of the spectrum, Jane Guyer's expression "the tradition of invention" contains a valuable critique of taken-for-granted schemes of interpretation in Western scholarship when confronted with societies (in her case mainly in Equatorial Africa) requiring a radical modification of them[100].

96 Roberto Beneduce: *Breve dizionario di etnopsichiatria*, p. 32.

97 This essay is an article published in the journal *Africa* (N°48, Issue 4, pp. 315-334).

98 Published in: *Politique Africaine 2000/3 N°79*, pp. 101-139.

99 Eric Hobsbawm, Terence Ranger: *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983 p. 2.

100 Jane Guyer: La tradition de l'invention en Afrique équatoriale, in : *Politique africaine 2000/3 N°79*, p. 101.

Interpreting oral transmission through the lens of analphabetism, the structuring role of the collective as the absence of singularization, or dependance on tradition as infantilism and lack of social expertise are good examples of a prejudiced interpretation at the core of Western scholarly elites[101]. My feeling is that, very often, scholars cannot get rid of the presupposition that change, contingency, plurality, and variation can *only* be interpreted through models of Western modernity. What they are after is not the specificity of those changes, or the experience and elaboration of those changes, but a constructed and in my opinion rather artificial opposition between a rigid idea of tradition (which they discard, also leaving aside real features in the groups they study) and an "implicitly prescriptive" openness to *their own* "(de-)construction of authenticity", namely the generalized application of (post-)modern methodologies to whatever phenomena is studied. Don't you think that the challenge does not lie so much in thinking categories like change, heterogeneity, plurality, and contingency through models provided by our history (sanctioned by historical landmarks like Enlightenment, colonization, industrialization, or globalization) as in making an effort to grasp the internal dynamics within each specific culture out of the hermeneutic challenges that the culture's own specificity demands?

**Roberto Beneduce:** This topic has been on my mind for years, for various reasons. The model proposed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger helps us understand that the notion of tradition—in the sense contained in the term "custom"—is appropriate for thinking that it is not a matter of simply reproducing norms, knowledge, and memories (what I prefer to call "ceremonial heritage", that is, to be clear, those celebrated during parades, festivals, and commemorative events) but rather of putting what is known and practiced—through the institutions that act as its guardians—at the service of addressing new problems and new threats. For this reason, Jane Guyer's notion helps us broaden our reflection by suggesting, through the example of marital alliances and polygamous marriage, how the choice of a spouse was made in Central Africa with the aim of incorporating new techniques, new expertise, and new knowledge—in addition, of course, to creating new political alliances. This same objective guided the selection of adolescents who were to undergo the circumcision ritual on the same date, the choice of the ritual expert who would perform it and who would subsequently become members of a solid network of alliances governed by a non-aggression pact. We are not far from that idea of "kinship" suggested by Donna Haraway, although in her work the need to build kinship networks even with non-human persons is particularly emphasized.

*We need to think the internal dynamics of other cultures beyond the boundaries of Western temporality and its dichotomies (tradition vs. invention, or stability vs. change).*

In this sense, I fully agree with the suggested need to think these dynamics and categories beyond the boundaries of Western temporality alone and its dichotomies (tradition vs. invention, stability vs. change). To understand the profound nature of these processes, we need, in other words, to think of them within heterogeneous and conflicting temporalities and forms of historical consciousness, "beyond colonial time"[102], beyond the capitalist temporality of the West. •

101 Jane Guyer: La tradition de l'invention en Afrique équatoriale, pp. 102-103.

102 Mark Rifkin: *Beyond Settler Time. Temporal Sovereignty and Indigenous Self-Determination*, Durham 2017. Beneduce finds this text particularly useful in illustrating the struggle over time between colonizers and the colonized, and in showing how societies confronted with the apocalypse of genocide have sought to resist this "end time" by preserving other temporalities, other rhythms, and other strategies of memory.

**Alessandro Montefameglio**
University Vita-Salute San Raffaele (Italy)



# BAROQUE AND MUD

*In this essay, Alessandro Montefameglio presents the historical phenomenon of Baroque as a transhistorical regime of form generation rather than as a historically-circumscribed style. Beginning with Eugeni d'Ors' conception of Baroque as an aeonic principle, and culminating in Néstor Perlongher's neobarroso, his essay reconstructs a genealogy centered on the relation between form and matter. Special attention is devoted to a series of material figures — the swamp, the forest, and mud — that designate the generative ground from which forms emerge and to which they remain constitutively linked. Within this trajectory, Giambattista Vico's "ingens sylva" occupies a pivotal position, and Néstor Perlongher's notion of neobarroso is of particular significance, not as a new stylistic variant of the Baroque but as the point at which the logic of proliferation and heterogeneity reaches its most radical consequences.*

"I'm doing all this because I have one dream.
The opera. The great opera in the jungle"

**W. Herzog, Fitzcarraldo**

## ONE, MANY BAROQUES[1]

Rereading, nearly a century later, the oracular words that Eugenio d'Ors devoted to Baroque during the celebrated *Décades de Pontigny*, later collected in 1944 in *Lo barroco*, one realizes that the history of styles, so often inclined to the crime of taking names too seriously, was there presented with a rare opportunity: to free Baroque from the historical reductionism that still weighs upon its interpretation today.

When d'Ors spoke at Pontigny, Baroque had enjoyed scarcely half a century of recognition since the theoretical framework that Heinrich Wölfflin had provided in 1888 with Renaissance und Barock; a full century, if one traces the story back to the unwitting complicity of Charles de Brosses, who, during his voyage en Italie, had employed for the first time the adjective 'baroque', with anything but neutral intent, to express his bewilderment before the ingenious logic of Rome's Palazzo Pamphilj.

Seated at the table of that Cistercian abbey in the Burgundian countryside, a table around which Gide, Valéry, Eliot, and the Mann brothers either had gathered or would gather, d'Ors overturned space and time. And he did so through the dizzying projection of an ancient Alexandrian term into an indeterminate future: the *aeon*. What is an aeon? An aeon is that in which "lo permanente tiene una historia" and, at the same time, that in which "la eternidad conoce vicisitudes"[2]. An eminently Christological category, it designates the point at which participation in divine eternity becomes intertwined with the fact of belonging to the flesh and mud that cover the earth. Yet it is also an ingeniously Goethean term, for it illuminates, through the lens of the Faust as a "drama universal", the trajectory of a constant protagonist, "que no es ni una mujer ni una serie de mujeres, sino el *Ewig-weibliche*, el Eterno Feminino"[3]. From this intertwining of genealogies emerges something more than mere comparative erudition. What begins to take shape is a conceptual palimpsest whose full scope remains only partially explored, together with a decisive insight into the status of the Baroque itself. The Baroque ceases to appear as a style rigidly confined to a particular historical epoch and instead reveals itself as a configurative principle capable of traversing different times and places.

D'Ors' proposal has unfortunately paid, as often happens with the most fertile intuitions, the price of its own eccentricity. Too far removed from the historicist frameworks that long governed the major categories of art history, it was gradually pushed to the margins in favour of interpretive models less vulnerable to the charge of metaphysics and more firmly grounded in the security of philological evidence.

---

1 This article grew out of a number of conversations and shared reflections during the workshop *Pluriverse: an Ecosophic Diaspora in the Making?*, held at the Labyrinth in November 2025. I am especially grateful to Adrián Navigante for his generosity, and the conversations we shared there about Baroque and, in particular, *neobarroso*. I am equally indebted to his paper *Feces of Sophia: On a Twofold Regime of Impurity*, some of whose themes find an echo in these pages. My thanks also go to Juan Rivera, who offered me a glimpse of the Baroque in the Andean regions, in a gesture that totally fits the spirit of this inquiry, and to Amanda Viana de Sousa, for a philosophical dialogue that began then and continues to this day.

2 Eugenio d'Ors: *Lo barroco*, Madrid 1993, p. 64 ("the permanent has a history, eternity undergoes vicissitudes").

3 *Ibid.* ("who is neither a Woman nor a lineage of women, but the *Ewig-weibliche*, the Eternal Feminine").

Yet the century called upon to define the historical Baroque, painstakingly tracing its boundaries and genealogies, thus coincides with the century in which Baroque re-emerges on the stage of form. It is also the century of Neobaroque[4], the very Neobaroque that Gilles Deleuze evokes in *Le pli* (*The Fold,* 1988), through a peculiar temporal inversion in which the past appears charged with a future that does not yet belong to it. What proves decisive in this context, especially in relation to a discourse such as that of d'Ors, is Neobaroque assumes two distinct – if not radically different – meanings depending on the cultural and geographical context in which it arises.

What is generally designated as 'Neobaroque' within the traditional heartlands of the historical Baroque — the western Mediterranean, or quasi-Mediterranean Europe — is understood first and foremost as a revival of the Baroque style, conceived in the forms it had developed and brought to maturity within the Italian and Spanish aesthetics of the seventeenth century. Just as Neoclassicism, in its most immediate formulation, coincided with the re-emergence of the canonical forms of Greco-Roman art, so Neobaroque is here understood essentially as the recovery of a style — or, more precisely, of a particular conception of style — together with the formal consequences that flow from it[5].

Alongside these positions — destined to find one of their most fully developed formulations in the 1980s through the work of Omar Calabrese, who gave particularly rigorous theoretical definition to the features of contemporary Neobaroque, freeing it from the notion of a mere revival of historically codified forms and recognizing instead its own autonomous morphological logic — Neobaroque also developed a second, more radical genealogy. Following a line of flight that carries it beyond the Euro-Mediterranean horizon within which the phenomenon of Baroque had traditionally been conceived, it found its most intense, and perhaps most decisive, formulation in Latin American culture.

*'Neobaroque' within the traditional heartlands of the historical Baroque is understood as a revival of the Baroque style, conceived in the forms it had developed and brought to maturity within the Italian and Spanish aesthetics of the seventeenth century.*

Significantly, poetry here precedes philosophy. In the 1950s, the great Brazilian poet Haroldo de Campos coined the term *neobarroco* not merely to describe the fragmentary and combinatorial poetics of figures such as Mallarmé, Joyce, and Pound, but also to name a deeper question concerning the very constitution of Brazilian cultural identity and its 'hybrid origins'.

But what, precisely, do these 'hybrid origins' mean? Significantly, for Haroldo de Campos, Baroque is not simply a stylistic phase of European culture transplanted into the New World. Rather, it coincides with the matrix of Brazil's historical and symbolic formation. The expression refers to the constitutively composite nature of Brazilian civilization, shaped by the intertwining — at once traumatic and generative — of Indigenous, African, and European traditions, as well as of heterogeneous languages, cults, imaginaries, and perceptual regimes. From this perspective, Baroque appears as the first formal *dispositif* capable of giving coherence to such heterogeneity, embracing contradiction, excess, proliferation, and syncretism as positively constitutive principles.

The Neobaroque developed by de Campos rests precisely upon this intuition. Rather than a survival of the past, the Baroque designates — much as it does in d'Ors — an operative structure, a logic of contamination and metamorphosis that continues to re-emerge in the fragmentary, polycentric, and translingual forms of contemporary writing. It is in this light that his appeal to figures such

4 Cf. Alessandro Montefameglio: *Neobaroque*, in *International Lexicon of Aesthetics*, vol. 6, Milano 2024 (also on: lexicon.mimesisjournals.com/international_lexicon_of_aesthetics_item_detail.php?item_id=140).

5 It is hardly surprising, moreover, that architecture should have become one of the principal theoretical laboratories for this first formulation of Neobaroque. If architecture had provided one of the privileged fields through which Wölfflin, in *Renaissance und Barock*, defined the formal specificity of the Italian Baroque, it is once again to architecture that attention turns when the concept of the Neobaroque begins to acquire a more precise theoretical shape.

as Mallarmé, Joyce, and Pound should be understood. De Campos recognizes in them practitioners of a linguistic poetics grounded in montage, stratification, proliferating networks of reference, and the dissemination of meaning; a practice that bears striking affinities to the plural nature of Latin American historical experience. Within this framework, contemporary Brazilian culture finally ceases to appear as a peripheral or incomplete derivative of Europe and instead emerges as one of the privileged sites in which modernity becomes conscious of its own underlying structure: a civilization that, rather than seeking to overcome its distance from a presumed logic of origin, makes productive and anti-dialectical heterogeneity the very condition of its existence.

De Campos' intuition found one of its most natural continuations in the context of the so-called *New World Baroque*[6]. Its banner was carried by the so-called "Cuban triumvirate" of the Neobaroque, composed of Severo Sarduy, José Lezama Lima, and Alejo Carpentier. The story of this Cuban triumvirate[7] — a story that, at least if one follows the Western trajectory of Sarduy's philosophical activity, would see him become an active participant in the structuralist and post-structuralist Paris of the second half of the twentieth century, where the historical Baroque and the contemporary Baroque were brought into a singular alignment — concerns us here only indirectly, by way of tangency. This tangency is first and foremost one of inheritance, yet it also possesses sufficient elasticity to carry Sarduy's Parisian project back across the Atlantic. Marking a decisive triangulation between Brazil, Cuba, and Argentina, the Argentine poet and anthropologist Néstor Perlongher developed the poetic notion of the *neobarroso*, a concept destined to transform, in a highly productive manner, the idea of the Neobaroque elaborated by his predecessors. Sarduy's influence is by no means concealed: "Como buena parte de la literatura cubana contemporánea, también el barroco cubano florecería en el exilio, gracias, en buena parte, a la grácil prosa de Severo Sarduy. Es el mismo Sarduy quien lanza en circulación, en un artículo de 1972, el término *neobarroco*: disipación, superabundancia del exceso, 'nódulo geológico, construcción móvil y fangosa, de barro…'"[8].

The *barro* at stake here is that of the Río de la Plata.

> Hablamos de neobarroco y neobarroso. ¿Por qué neobarroso? Estas torsiones de jade en el jadeo sonarían rebuscadas y fútiles (brillo hueco que tan sólo empaña la intrascendencia superficial) en los salones de letras rioplatenses, desconfiados por principio de toda tropicalidad e inclinados a dopar con ilusión de profundidad la melancolía de las grandes distancias del desarraigo.[9]

The transition from *neobarroco* to *neobarroso* is therefore far more than a mere terminological variation. It marks both a geographical and an ontological displacement. Sarduy's 'tropical' Baroque, still permeated by Caribbean luminosity, encounters the muddy shores of the Río de la Plata and settles there as sediment. The brilliance of the jewel gives way to the opacity of mud; the lightness of proliferation to the weight of a material that retains within itself traces, residues, and detritus. The substitution of a single syllable thus contains an entire poetics. *Barro* is not simply a material. It is what remains after the waters have receded, what accumulates, what renders the boundaries

6 Cf. Monika Kaup, Lois P. Zamora (eds.): *Baroque New Worlds. Representation, Transculturation, Counterquest*, Durham 2010.

7 Kaup / Zamora: *Baroque New Worlds*, p. 10.

8 Néstor Perlongher: *Prosa plebeya: ensayos, 1980-1992*, Buenos Aires 2008, p. 97 ("Like much of contemporary Cuban literature, the Cuban Baroque too would flourish in exile, owing in large measure to the graceful prose of Severo Sarduy. It was Sarduy himself who, in an article published in 1972, set the term *neobaroque* into circulation: dissipation, the superabundance of excess, a 'geological nodule, a shifting and muddy construction, made of mud…'").

9 Perlongher: *Prosa Plebeya*, p. 97 ("We speak of the *neobaroque* and the *neobarroso*. Why *neobarroso*? These jade-like twists within a panting breath would sound contrived and futile (a hollow brilliance that merely obscures superficial insignificance) in the literary salons of the Río de la Plata, instinctively suspicious of all tropicality and inclined to endow the melancholy of uprootedness and great distances with an illusion of depth").

between surface and depth indistinct. If the Neobaroque found its privileged image in the endless folding of forms, the *neobarroso* discovers in mud a different figure of complexity: not the fold, but the deposit; not the crystal, but the sediment; not the transparency of artifice, but the impurity of matter in perpetual transformation. Perlongher does not abandon the Neobaroque project. Rather, he draws it downward, toward the earth, toward that liminal zone where forms lose their sharp contours and begin to intermingle. The mud of the Río de la Plata thereby becomes far more than a geographical reference: it becomes the material correlate of a poetics of hybridity, contamination, and instability.

One might wonder at this point, when the cultural skein we have been following seems to have become so entangled as almost to lose its loose end, whether the connections between the historical Baroque and the transhistorical Baroque (as it appeared in d'Ors' vision, between the aeon and the 'Eternal Feminine') between the European Neobaroque (particularly in the formulations of Calabrese and Sarduy's work) and the Cuban Neobaroque, and finally between the latter and Perlongher's *neobarroso*, have not by now become too attenuated to remain convincing.

The answer is decidedly no. The centrifugal fortunes of this constellation are sustained by no unifying principle and by no encyclopaedic category capable of gathering within itself what appears dispersed. Authors such as Sarduy and Perlongher are fully aware of the constants that accompany Baroque through its multiple transfigurations. Yet the heart of the matter lies elsewhere. What comes into play are modes of connection that do not coincide with the identification of dialectical invariants or with the search for syntheses capable of subsuming under the umbrella of a concept what would otherwise remain unrelated. The thread running through these metamorphoses belongs to a different order. It unites through transformation, prolongs a movement, transmits a tension. From Baroque to Neobaroque, and from Neobaroque to *neobarroso*, a particular way of generating forms, of traversing differences, of converting heterogeneity, flows into a constructive principle. What propagates itself is a dynamic, a power of variation. Its identity is that of a body that continually incorporates its folds, its sediments, its mutations. What remains at work throughout, in short, is always 'a sick woman'[10].

## A PIECE OF WOOD, A SWAMP

If one is unwilling to concede that Baroque dismantles the Aristotelian notion of substance, one might at least grant that it turns it into mud.

Before confronting an ontology, we are confronted with a material principle. Baroque subjects the static ontology of substance to a progressive process of fragmentation. What unites such different gestures — Spinoza's infinite substance, Leibniz's monadology, Tesauro's symbolic universe, Vico's poetic history etc. — is a common imperative: to set in motion what had appeared immobile, to electrify what seemed incapable of conducting force. At the risk of excessive schematization, this transformation may be described through at least four movements, whose demonstration we shall not attempt here:

1. From substance to force → being is no longer conceived primarily as that which endures, but as that which operates. Entities are defined by their productive capacity, their activity, their internal energy.
2. From identity to expression → a thing is no longer what it is, but what it expresses, continually referring beyond itself to something other than itself.
3. From essence to metamorphosis → form tends always toward transformation,

10 "[...] en el mismo sentido dentro del cual Michelet decía que 'la mujer es una eterna enferma' (in the same sense that Michelet said 'woman is eternally ill')" (Ivi, p. 66).

figure always toward multiplication. Being resides in the morphogenetic process rather than in any fixed state.

4. From individual entity to network → the world becomes an open, never closed, system of connections.

This background becomes all the more intelligible when one identifies within it, by way of an approach that only superficially appears to be a metaphorical expedient, a material question. A question that was condensed into an image of remarkable visual power by a philosopher who has very little to do with the Baroque, namely Immanuel Kant. In the *Critique of Judgment*, Kant writes: "while exploring a marshy terrain, one may find, as has occasionally happened, a piece of worked wood"[11].

It will be recalled that, in this passage, Kant is not interested in the materiality of the elements involved (the swampy mud and the wood), but rather in the fact that the piece of wood discovered is hewn (*behauenes*), that is, that it appears to have been fashioned artisanally, 'as if by art', by nature itself, a circumstance of considerable and problematic interest for anyone investigating the ontological and genetic conditions of art (*Kunst*) in general. Yet once detached from its Kantian background and, if possible, from the author's actual intentions, the conceptual pair of swamp and wood acquires an unusual force for our argument.

Now, the piece of wood emerging from Kant's swamp carries with it a history far older than that suggested by the anecdote. Behind it one can discern the long history of the Greek *hyle*, a word that for centuries preserved a double affiliation. On the one hand, it denotes the forest, the woodland, the vegetal thicket — a meaning already attested in Homer; on the other, it refers to wood destined for fire, construction, and transformation. A single word thus encompasses both the undifferentiated ground from which forms emerge and the material that offers itself to their shaping. As is well known, Aristotle chose it to designate one of the fundamental concepts of his philosophy: the substratum (*hypokeimenon*), matter, the underlying substance already acknowledged by the Presocratics. But why is the substratum bound up with substance?

*To relate wood not to the forest but to the swamp is to carry out a decisive displacement within the universe of* hyle*, that is, to subject form to an invisible history, one that unfolds not in the original locus of the forest but in a place where* hyle *already appears torn away from its immediate naturalness.*

For substance to be substance, it must possess at least two characteristics: (i) it must exist in itself, that is, it must be something separable; (ii) it must be individuable as a 'this here'. The substratum possesses the consistency of substance — its existence in itself — without, however, fully possessing its individuation. It is not yet a 'this here', a determinate 'thing', but it can become one; it can receive a form, it can enter the world of named and recognizable things. Its nature consists precisely in this availability. In this sense, wood-*hyle* occupies an intermediate position: it already harbours a vocation toward form.

Why do we connect all of this to Kant's passage? In what way does this cultural and conceptual constellation operate within it, however subterraneously, however unconsciously? From an Aristotelian perspective, Kant's piece of wood functions as something more than a mere substratum. It is not simply matter; rather, it presents itself as matter that already bears the imprint of a form, the mark of a workmanship that renders it recognizable and, therefore, individuable. At the risk of undermining the idea that art belongs exclusively to the sphere of human activity — and a fully Baroque author would readily maintain that art is not an exclusively human affair — Kant thus finds himself confronted with a material that seems to have received from nature itself the formal seal that allows it to be distinguished from the background out of which it emerges.

11 The complete sentence is: "Wenn man bei Durchsuchung eines Moorbruches, wie es bisweilen geschehen ist, ein Stück behauenes Holz antrifft, so sagt man nicht, es ist ein Produkt der Natur, sondern der Kunst" (Immanuel Kant: *Kritik der Urteilskraft*, § 43, Stuttgart 2004, p. 229).

To relate wood not to the forest but to the swamp is to carry out an even more decisive displacement within the universe of *hyle*. It means subjecting form to an invisible history, one that unfolds not in the original locus of wood (the forest), but in a place where *hyle* already appears torn away from its immediate naturalness. The swamp already indicates the possibility of a more complex dimension beyond the solid materiality of the forest, a still darker ground.

Now, even before referring to the particular natural properties of swamp and wood — the former's capacity to preserve and the latter's capacity to be worked — the distinction between the two elements confronts us with another distinction, one no less fundamental: that between the undifferentiated and the differentiated. The swamp (the muddy wetland) represents an undifferentiated ground without which the emergence of anything determinate would be impossible. In functioning as an 'organic broth' that both transforms and preserves materials, the swamp makes possible the appearance of something as something, providing every form with the material ground from which it can emerge and against which it can be recognized.

The abyssal effort — an effort that can no longer be entrusted to philosophy alone and must instead call upon the aid of literature — to account for a condition as elusive as that of the swamp was the aim of one of the most important novels of the twentieth century, namely *La palude definitiva* ('The Definitive Swamp') by Giorgio Manganelli. A descent into the labyrinthine and visionary universe of the swamp, Manganelli's posthumously published novel (although the term 'novel' might be somewhat inadequate) abandons the comfort of the distinction between the formless and the sign of form. Manganelli's 'definitive' swamp is a pure — though intensely material — space of proliferation, undecidability, drift of meaning, and metastasis of both real and symbolic possibilities, in which preservation occurs through fragments, remnants, and misunderstandings. In this sense, Manganelli's swamp, unlike Kant's, is indeed a condition, but a condition that always exceeds the forms that emerge from it.

The philosophical apparatus capable of accounting for this passage can therefore no longer be entrusted to a transcendental *idealism*, but rather to a transcendental *empiricism*, once again marking the victory of matter over the concept. At the beginning *Différence et répétition* (*Difference and Repetition*, 1968), Gilles Deleuze succeeds in capturing with remarkable precision the terms at stake in this empiricism, precisely by short-circuiting the resolving dialectic between an undifferentiated ground and differentiated form.

> L'indifférence a deux aspects : l'abîme indifférencié, le néant noir, l'animal indéterminé dans lequel tout est dissout — mais aussi le néant blanc, la surface redevenue calme où flottent des déterminations non liées, comme des membres épars, tête sans cou, bras sans épaule, yeux sans front. [...] La différence est cet état dans lequel on peut parler de la détermination. [...] Mais au lieu d›une chose qui se distingue d'autre chose, imaginons quelque chose qui se distingue — et pourtant ce dont il se distingue ne se distingue pas de lui. L'éclair par exemple se distingue du ciel noir, mais doit le traîner avec lui, comme s'il se distinguait de ce qui ne se distingue pas. On dirait que le fond monte à la surface, sans cesser d'être fond. [...] La différence est cet état de la détermination comme distinction unilatérale.[12]

12 Gilles Deleuze: *Différence et répétition*, Paris 2011, p. 43 ("Indifference has two aspects: the undifferentiated abyss, the black nothingness, the indeterminate animal in which everything is dissolved — but also the white nothingness, the surface restored to calm upon which unconnected determinations float, like scattered limbs, a head without a neck, arms without shoulders, eyes without a forehead. [...] Difference is that state in which one can speak of THE determination. [...] But instead of a thing that distinguishes itself from another thing, let us imagine something that distinguishes itself — and yet that from which it distinguishes itself does not distinguish itself from it. Lightning, for example, distinguishes itself from the black sky, but must drag the sky along with it, as though it distinguished itself from that which does not distinguish itself. One would say that the ground rises to the surface without ceasing to be ground. [...] Difference is this state of determination as unilateral distinction").

In this sense, Kant's swamp may be likened to a *white nothingness*, a ground that is chaotic in its own way, from which the detached sign of form emerges, whereas Manganelli's swamp resembles, at least in appearance, a *black nothingness*: a dark, viscous ground in which orientation becomes exceedingly difficult. In reality, however, it oscillates continuously between black and white, and this very oscillation — an evidently non-dialectical oscillation — is the sign of something else, of a third term that is precisely the ground of which Deleuze speaks, a ground that "monte à la surface, sans cesser d'être fond". But what does it mean to speak of a ground that does not remain indifferent to its determinations?

Baroque is by no means foreign to this movement. The relationship between an indeterminate ground and the determinate form that emerges from it is something that Baroque confronts at an early stage in painting, beginning with Caravaggio's revolution in the use of light, where plastic, sharply defined figures seem to emerge incessantly from a dark depth that, rather than merely surrounding them, makes their very consistency possible. In his remarkable attempt to investigate the nature of this ground, Louis Marin does not turn to Caravaggio, but instead takes as his example a painting by another artist, the *Vanitas* of Philippe de Champaigne. Three *memento mori* motifs — a withering tulip, a skull, and an hourglass — immediately present themselves to the viewer. Each possesses a recognizable form; each can be named. Behind them, however, opens a black ground that makes their appearance possible and that, by contrast, escapes all nomination. The figures belong to the order of the recognizable; the ground belongs to the order of that which, while making all recognition possible, itself remains without a name. What, then, can be said of this *black*ground?

> Un fond noir. Soit, mais que représente ce fond noir ? Rien [...], nom de l'innommable, lieu d'effacement de la liste, mais dont l'annulation est en quelque manière la condition de sa production visuelle et verbale ; un rien qui est un reste ; un reste qui est en excès du pouvoir de nomination, mais où ce pouvoir trouve son impulsion. Mais si ce fond ne représente rien, il se présente en revanche comme rien ; il se présente non pas comme représentant quelque chose : il se présente. [...] La syncope de l'opacité et de la transparence se convertit là, dans ce lieu-là de cette œuvre, dans la fusion ambivalente du fond et de la surface, du tableau et de la représentation, conversion hystérique – si l'on peut dire – de la représentation de peinture.[13]

It is evident that the connection established between the Kantian ground and the Deleuzian ground, through Marin's pictorial argument, leads not merely to Baroque as a palimpsest of forms, but to the position of Baroque within a very specific region of the trajectory we have outlined. Just as Deleuzian difference — a unilateral determination that never ceases to relate to the ground from which it emerges — reconfigures the dialectical mechanism based on an identifying synthesis that resolves negativity and contradiction by sublating them into identity, so the dark ground of Baroque pictorial representation hystericizes the very foundation of representation itself.

The *black*ground of *Vanitas* is certainly the condition of every determinate appearance and, therefore, of every representation. It is the visual condition that allows the tulip, together with its name, to emerge within an inventory of things, while at the same time serving as the condition for the emergence of its meaning, that is, of its allegorical possibilities. Yet that ground cannot be named in the same way as the objects it brings forth. Indeed, even if one were to name it 'nothing', one would

13 Louis Marin: *Mimésis et description*, in "Word & Image. A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry", 4, 1988, p. 30 ("A black background. Very well, but what does this black background represent? Nothing [...], name of the unnamable, place of the erasure of the list, but whose cancellation is in some way the condition of its visual and verbal production; a nothing that is a remainder; a remainder that exceeds the power of naming, yet in which that power finds its impulse. But if this background represents nothing, it presents itself, on the contrary, as nothing; it presents itself not as representing something: it presents itself. [...] The syncope of opacity and transparency is converted there, in that very place of this work, into the ambivalent fusion of background and surface, of the painting and representation—a hysterical conversion, if one might say so, of pictorial representation").

immediately encounter the contradiction whereby that very 'nothing', as its name, would correspond to the erasure of the name itself. It can therefore no longer represent; it can only present itself. Present itself as what? As nothing — not as a thing, not even as a ground (!) — but as that 'nothing' which is said of a pre-individual, pre-nominal, and generative dimension.

The question of the name evoked by Marin is of particular interest for our argument, because it leads us directly back to the point from which our discussion began. That strange knight who serves as the protagonist of *La palude definitiva* — the final, radical remnant of a Parsifal whose horse sinks its hooves into the mire of the waste land, yet seemingly (here) without any possibility of redemption — repeatedly finds himself reflecting on the nature of the steed that accompanies him in his exploration of the swamp.

In a significant scene of the novel, the protagonist finds shelter in a house situated within the endless muddy landscape of the swamp. There he pauses to observe his horse. He observes it, but from a certain distance, regarding it as one regards something emerging from an indeterminate background, and at that moment it emerges as a figure, as a thing. Yet from the moment the horse becomes a figure and becomes a thing, the problem arises once again, the problem of the name:

> Il cavallo: da che siamo giunti a questa casa, il cavallo si è appartato; non saprei come altrimenti descrivere il suo contegno; esco dalla casa, e lo scorgo, lontano forse un centinaio di metri, immobile, il volto, così debbo chiamarlo, verso la casa, ma del tutto indifferente. Non è lontano, ma lo spazio che mi divide da lui è palude irrimediabile [...]. Cavallo, cavallo; che strano nome per questo essere prodigioso, nel breve percorso prima di raggiungere la palude, ho provato a chiamarlo corsiero, e con quei nomi che usano, come Morello, o Baiardo. Ora rido a pensarci. A quei nomi non rispondeva, ma ora capisco che non v'è, non vi può essere nome cui risponda [...]. Frugo fra i miei ricordi scolastici e mi chiedo se io in verità non abbia a che fare con un cavallo, ma con la cavallinità. Ora, la cavallinità non può chiamarsi "Morello" né può essere corsiero [...]. Ma l'idea che io non sia venuto a cavallo ma sul dorso della cavallinità – che spiegherebbe il suo innaturale silenzio – mi affascina; o forse è un gioco per resistere alla palude?[14]

The failure to assign a name — whether proper or common — to his steed allows the protagonist of *La palude definitiva* to realize that, within the ontology of the swamp, there exists an unbridgeable gap between name and thing (Baroque authors would say: between *res* and *verba*), just as unbridgeable is the spatial distance that, within the swamp, separates the impassive animal from the gaze that observes it. The persistence of a substance outside the network of nomination renders every act of individuation impossible, whether specific individuation (Morello) or generic individuation (steed). Names do not work. In an innocent, last attempt, the protagonist turns to his school memories, that is, to the instruments of Platonic metaphysics. He imagines that what stands before him is not an empirical individual but the very essence of the horse, horsehood itself. If this were the case, the problem of the name would change radically, since it would no longer name the individual but its essence. The difficulty is that this defence is only imaginary, for the knight immediately realizes

14 Giorgio Manganelli: *La palude definitiva*, Milan 1991, pp. 43-45 ("The horse: since we arrived at this house, the horse has kept to itself; I wouldn't know how else to describe its behavior; I go out of the house and I glimpse it, perhaps a hundred meters away, motionless, its face — so I must call it — toward the house, but utterly indifferent. It is not far, but the space that separates me from it is an irremediable marsh [...]. Horse, horse; what a strange name for this prodigious being. On the short stretch before reaching the marsh, I tried calling it steed, and with those names they use, like Morello, or Baiardo. Now I laugh thinking about it. It did not respond to those names, but now I understand that there is no, there can be no name to which it would answer [...]. I rummage through my school memories and ask myself whether I am in truth not dealing with a horse, but with horseness. Now, horseness cannot be called 'Morello' nor can it be a steed [...]. But the idea that I did not come by horse but on the back of horseness — which would explain its unnatural silence — fascinates me; or perhaps it is a game to resist the marsh?").

that the term 'horsehood' is itself nothing more than yet another name, and one to which the horse 'does not respond'. With the failure of the Aristotelian individual ('this horse here') and the failure of the Platonic universal (horsehood), both substance and Idea collapse. This is a first, radical step toward understanding the fundamental law of the swamp: resistance to the mud is impossible.

Thus, the intuition embodied in the terms introduced by Kant in the *Critique of Judgment* proves, beyond its specific context, richer than it might at first appear. At the golden centre of late eighteenth-century reason, poised between the end of the age of the historical Baroque and the beginning, a century later, of the contemporary Neobaroque, Kant's image causes the entire field of resonances we have brought into play to reverberate within the figures of the swamp and the wood. It is within this tension, running subterraneously through the entire constellation of authors and images we have invoked, within this mobile region, suspended between emergence and submergence, between Kantian *hyle* and the definitive swamp, that Baroque is situated. Yet what summons it into view is a further step. A step which, without settling either into a substantialist conception of *hyle* or into the irredeemably impermanent one of the swamp, confronts us with a further dynamism. And this dynamism can only be expressed through a 'Baroque *hyle*' and a 'Baroque swamp'.

## THE SYLVA, THE NITROUS MUD

If there is one place in the Baroque where *hyle* and mud enter a particularly fruitful relationship, it is Giambattista Vico's *New Science*[15]. The reference is, more specifically, to a passage of the 1744 edition of the Neapolitan philosopher's work, namely the opening of the section entitled *Del diluvio universale, e de' giganti* ("On the Universal Flood and the Giants"):

> Gli *Autori dell'Umanità Gentilesca* [...] dovetter andar' a dissolver' i matrimoni, e disperdere e Famiglie coi *concubiti incerti*; e con un *ferino error* divagando *per la gran Selva della Terra*; [...] *per campar dalle fiere*, delle quali la gran Selva ben doveva abbondare, e per *inseguire le donne*, ch' in tale stato dovevan esser selvagge, ritrose, e schive; e sì, sbandati per *truovare pascolo, ed acqua, le madri abbandonando i loro figliuoli*, questi dovettero tratto tratto *crescere senza udir voce umana, nonché apprender' uman costume*: onde andarono in uno *stato* affatto *bestiale*, e *ferino*; nel quale le *madri*, come *bestie* dovettero *lattare* solamente i *bambini*, e lasciargli *nudi rotolare* dentro le *fecce* loro proprie, ed appena *spoppati abbandonargli per sempre*; e questi dovendosi rotolare dentro le loro *fecce*, le quali co' *Sali nitri* maravigliosamente ingrassano i campi, e sforzarsi, per *penetrare la gran selva*, che per lo fresco Diluvio doveva esser *foltissima*; per gli quali *sforzi* dovevano *dilatar' altri muscoli* per tenderne altri, onde i *Sali nitri in maggior copia* s'insinuavano ne' loro corpi; e *senza alcuno timore* di *Dei*, di *Padri*, di *Maestri*, il qual' *assidera il più rigoglioso dell'età fanciullesca*, dovettero a dismisura *ingrandire* le *carni*, e l'*ossa*, e crescere vigorosamente *robusti*, e sì provenire *Giganti*.[16]

15 The connections between Vico and the Baroque, and in particular the recognition of Vico as one of the major exponents of 'Baroque thought', have been well established at least since the second half of the twentieth century. The bibliography on this subject is extensive. Here, we shall limit ourselves to citing three of the most recent contributions in this direction: Giuseppe Patella: *Ingegno Vico*, Pisa 2022; Marco Carmello (ed.): *Acuto intendere. Studi sul Barocco e Vico*, Milano 2021; Mario Papini: *Conatività barocca / conatività vichiana*, ed. by Alessandro Montefameglio, Roma 2025.

16 Giambattista Vico: *La Scienza Nuova. Le tre edizioni del 1725, 1730, 1744*, Milano 2012, p. 912 ("The *Founders of Gentile Humanity* [...] had to dissolve marriages and break up their families by *promiscous intercourse*; and began *roving wild through the great Forest of the Earth*; [...] *escaping from the beasts*, with which the great Forest must have abounded, and to seek women, which must have been wild, indocile and shy in that state; they separate each other *searching for animals, and water, with mothers abandoning their children*, these these would

The scene is a famous one. According to Vico, at the origins of the history of the *gentile nations* there lies not a natural condition in the sense that modernity would come to understand it, but a catastrophe. The Universal Flood marks a rupture, an event that interrupts the continuity of human history and delivers the Earth into a new condition. When Vico imagines the beginnings of post-Adamic history, the world still appears harsh, cluttered, and difficult to inhabit. Nature does not present itself as an order readily available to humankind; rather, it appears as a dark and excessive power that must be slowly traversed and interpreted. The gentiles who populate this landscape are not primitive human beings in the modern sense of the term. They do not represent a humanity that precedes civilization; they embody a humanity that has drifted away from its own origin. They are the descendants of men who had once known God and who, in the course of their dispersion, had lost all memory of him. Their condition therefore possesses a radically different character from the states of nature imagined by Hobbes or Rousseau. It is not an original situation but a condition of decline and oblivion.

*According to Vico, human beings, no less than the forest itself, are a chemical-agricultural product, the fruit of a primordial humus, but this very materialist scenario becomes the occasion for the emergence, from the nothingness of matter, of the fullness of soul and God.*

Vico provides two images to describe the feral condition in which these fallen semi-humans, reduced to a bestial state, find themselves: the first is the image of the forest, the second that of excrement and nitrous salts. In this context, the 'anthropic' and the 'natural' elements seem to coalesce to the point of becoming indistinguishable. Just as the Earth appears overgrown and gone wild, covered by a dense forest — its soil muddy and saturated, its air humid and pestilential — so fallen humanity wanders across it like an animal, without God and without language. The children of men, abandoned by their mothers and left to grow up in a feral state, roll in their own excrement during infancy, soiling and at the same time fertilizing the ground. In the chemical and biological imagination of a thinker born at the end of the seventeenth century, this act carried implications far greater than those perceived by readers who approach Vico's pages with modern suspicions.

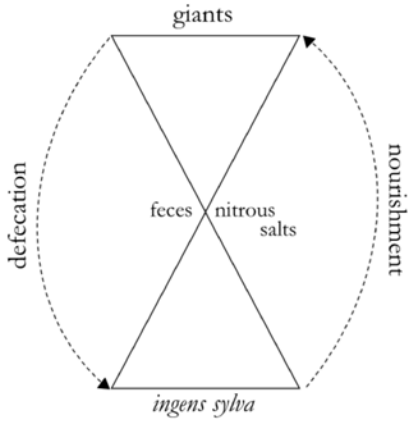
That feces, like any decomposing organic material, possessed the capacity to fertilize the soil was a well-known fact. Seventeenth-century chemistry — one may think of figures such as Robert Boyle, Thomas Willis, or Robert Hooke — added a further element to this understanding: saltpetre, or potassium nitrate, regarded as a kind of dynamic principle of nature, responsible for the fertility of the earth, the growth of plants, combustion, and even certain vital processes. Within this theoretical horizon, the world appears traversed by a single generative force, capable of manifesting itself equally in vegetation and in animal and human life.

Vico's imagination, which it would be a serious mistake to translate into terms other than its own, proceeds precisely by analogy. If excrement and nitre nourish the earth and increase its luxuriance, they can, by an 'analogical law', nourish human beings as well, to the point of endowing them with gigantic proportions. The gigantism of the first humans therefore does not belong to the order of the marvellous; it belongs instead to a logic of growth that encompasses, without distinction, the soil, the forest, and the human body. In this sense, human beings, no less than the forest itself, are a chemical-agricultural product, the fruit of a primordial humus composed of earth, organic matter,

---

have had to *grow without ever hearing a human voice, nor learning any human custom*: thus they *became* utterly *bestial* and *feral*; in this state *mothers*, just as *beasts*, must merely have *nursed* their *babies*, and let them *wallow naked* in their own *filth*, and as soon as they were *weaned*, *abandoned them forever*; and since they had to wallow within their own *filth*, which, together with the *nitrous Salts*, wonderfully enrich the fields, and the *efforts* they made to *penetrate* the great forest, which had to grow *extremely dense* from the Flood, *flex these and that muscles*, and make their bodies *abundantly* absorb the *nitrous Salts*; and, *without any fear of Gods*, of *Fathers*, of *Teachers*, which would have *restrained the excesses of youthful age*, they had to *grow* their *flesh* and *bones* beyond measure and become vigorously robust, thus becoming *Giants*"). On the subject of nitrous salts, feces and humanity cf. Mario Papini: *Uomini di sterco e di nitro*, in: Papini, op. cit., pp. 409-516.

saltpetre, moisture, and — here lies the vitally animal and anthropic element — autonomous physical exertion. It is therefore hardly surprising that the brute creature who is postdiluvian humanity should become a giant: by analogy, it must correspond to the luxuriant abundance of the *sylva* through which it wanders in a feral state.




Yet at the very moment when the landscape of Vichian history seems to be delivered over to a kind of raw materialism, almost Lucretian in flavour, where the theological and spiritual elements appear effectively absent, precisely because they seem irreducible to the muddy presence of a 'total *hyle*' that denies any possibility of transcendence, that very materialist scenario becomes the occasion for the emergence, from the nothingness of matter, of the fullness of soul and God.

The moment in which Vico locates the origin of the fear of God and, at the same time, the origin of humanity's symbolic and linguistic capacity is well known for its extraordinary poetic force. One might even venture to say that, in that scene, the revelation of God and the revelation of humanity to itself coincide. Something awakens within the rough and corpulent bodies of the first men's breaths of a human soul, destined to inaugurate the entire course of history. This is the celebrated scene in his *New Science* in which the first men, summoned by the crash of a thunderclap, raise their eyes to the heavens for the first time. What they hear is not yet a natural phenomenon. It is a voice. Or, more precisely, the roar of a presence that appears to them at once similar to themselves and incomparably superior. Terrified, they interpret that peal as the sign of a will. Thunder thus becomes the first great symbol in human history, and the name of Jupiter emerges as an attempt to give form and language to what, only a moment before, had manifested itself solely as anonymous power.

Yet from the *timor Dei* there arises not merely the first fragment of symbol and language: from it there also emerges a new way of inhabiting the world, exemplified by what Vico calls *sensi comuni* ('common senses'). Three gestures define them: the belief in a higher power (corresponding to the birth of the idea of Providence governing the course of history), the practice of burying the dead, and the conception of a stable union with a specific woman, from which the future institution of marriage would arise. For Vico, these three common senses constitute anthropological constants destined to accompany the emergence of every civilization, since within them is manifested the first symbolic organization of human experience, the moment at which the world ceases to be a collection of scattered impressions and begins to be ordered according to shared forms.

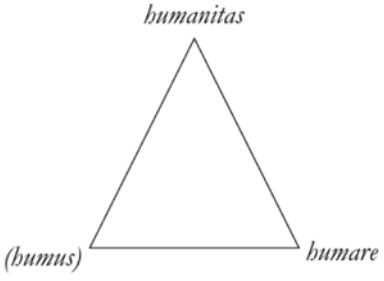
Of these three common senses, one is of particular interest for our purposes: the practice of burying the dead. Vico's portrayal of a pre-civil condition — bestial and devoid of spirit, in which the divine has not yet appeared to transform wandering through the forest into the foundation of a nation, that is, of a civilization — is strikingly vivid: «*s'immagini uno stato ferino, nel quale restino insepolti i cadaveri umani sopra la Terra ad esser' esca de' corvi, e cani*; che certamente con questo *bestiale costume* dee andar di concerto quello d'esser' *incolti i campi*, nonché *disabitate le città*; e che gli uomini a guisa di porci anderebbono a mangiar le ghiande colte dentro il marciume de' loro morti

congionti»[17].

The theme of eating — and specifically of eating acorns — is not merely a picturesque motif; it possesses a philosophical rigor of its own. The feral state in which pre-civil humanity finds itself goes hand in hand with the absence of an agricultural civilization — one based on the cultivation of grain — and therefore with the absence of cities and settled communities. Acorns are the spontaneous food of the forest, something gathered without labour, technique, or transformation. To eat grain, by contrast, implies cultivation, waiting through the cycles of growth, preservation, and harvest. Behind bread, in other words, lies an entire world of cultural mediations (culture deriving from the Latin *colere*, 'to cultivate'), whereas behind the acorn lies the immediacy of *hyle*.

Pre-civil humans, however, do not merely feed on acorns: they gather them from putrefying corpses. Food and the dead body are brought into an almost unbearable proximity. If this occurs, it is not because pre-civil humanity cultivates a horrific taste for necrophagy or necrophilia, but for a much simpler reason: if the dead remain on the surface of the earth, thereby becoming part of the very environment from which the living draw their nourishment, any real and symbolic distance between body and earth disappears. The substantiality of the world is thus reduced to the indifference of matter, that is, of *hyle-sylva*.

The forest — that generative matter, that dark and formless place, that transcendental mixture, that mire. Just as excrement nourishes the earth, and just as the salts of the earth nourish and transform the body, so too the body — the corpse — becomes indistinguishable from the earth and thus becomes another element within that cycle of decay and absorption that constitutes feral life. It is therefore no coincidence that burial, earth, and humanity are, for Vico, intimately linked. Nor is this explained solely through the factuality of the symbol, but through one of the few laws that truly matter for Vico: the etymological law. *Humanitas* ('humanity') derives not so much from *humus* ('earth') as from *humare* ('to bury').




Just like the dark ground of the *Vanitas* interpreted by Marin, Vico's *sylva* does not merely represent the setting within which the first acts of human history take place. It is the great generative repository of history itself. Human beings emerge from it just as figures emerge from the black background of Philippe de Champaigne's painting: they acquire consistency, receive a name, assume a form. Yet, like those figures, they never cease to belong to that from which they originate. The forest, indeed, possesses a singular prerogative. Although it precedes every determinate form, it does not coincide with a mere absence of form. Within it, possibilities ferment, differences accumulate, future configurations are prepared. The gods, languages, institutions, myths, and cities: everything that the *New Science* unfolds in the course of its narrative appears as a gradual emergence from this primordial ground. History does not stand in opposition to the forest; it constitutes one of its possible flowerings. For this reason, the *ingens sylva* cannot be interpreted as a mere residue

17 *Vico: La Scienza Nuova*, p. 897 ("Let one conceive a feral state in which human bodies lie unburied upon the earth, becoming prey to crows and dogs. With such a bestial practice there would surely accord the neglect of the fields, and, still more, the abandonment of cities. Men, like swine, would wander in search of acorns, gathering them from the very rot of their deceased kindred").

of human prehistory. It continues to accompany history throughout its entire development, as an inexhaustible reserve of symbolic energy. If the civil world represents the realm of distinct forms, the forest preserves their material memory, the dark ground from which they draw nourishment and toward which, at least virtually, they may always return.

## THE ULTRAMATERIAL DESTINY OF BAROQUE. BEGINNING OF AN INQUIRY

Could it be that this very humid and earthy constellation allows us to grasp the deeper significance of some of the later Latin American elaborations of Baroque? What we are suggesting — and this must be stated clearly — is in no way the proposal of a historical, let alone a philological, connection. Although both Vico's and Perlongher's philosophies are profoundly bound to the historical circumstances of a particular space and time — philosophies *within* history as much as philosophies *of* history — our interest does not lie in tracing lines of cultural reference, influence, or inheritance. Rather, it lies in dwelling within that more uncertain field where thought seems to free itself, at least in part, from the proper names that host it and from the coordinates that fix its belonging. And this field is, in its own way, not only a forest but also a muddy surface.

From this perspective, the transition from Vico's *sylva* to Perlongher's *barro* — from Baroque to Neobaroque — appears not as a mere metaphorical analogy, but as a transformation occurring on the same plane. Retracing, with a certain elasticity, the path of our argument, Ezequiel Zaidenwerg invokes Robert Pogue Harrison while speaking of Perlongher, and, in particular, the preface to *The Dominion of the Dead*: "To uncover what I call the humic foundations of our life worlds. A humic foundation is one whose contents have been buried so that they may be reclaimed by the future. The humic holds in its conserving element the unfinished story of what has come to pass"[18].

*Could it be that the most humid and earthy constellation allows us to grasp the deeper significance of some of the later Latin American elaborations of Baroque?*

As in Vico's *New Science*, the corpse is anything but a marginal element in the poetics of the *neobarroso*; indeed, it occupies a strategically important ontological position. The dead who traverse Perlongher's writing are never entirely dead, just as the living are never entirely separated from the domain of death. Between the two poles there opens an intermediate zone, a kind of threshold in which the very distinction between life and death begins to weaken. This is particularly evident in the recurring presence of figures such as the *desaparecidos* — for what is a *desaparecido*, after all, if not a dead person deprived of burial, a dead person who remains upon the 'surface of history'? In both cases, the corpse escapes its conclusive function. It does not constitute the end point of a story but rather the point from which a new circulation of images, memories, and meanings continues to proliferate.

From this perspective, the centrality of the corpse must be understood in relation to matter. What interests Perlongher is not so much death as an individual event, but the condition of the body once it has been returned to the processes of contamination and transformation. The corpse occupies precisely that region in which the organic and the inorganic become difficult to distinguish. It is still a body, yet already earth; it retains a form, yet is progressively dissolving it. In it, a material continuity manifests itself, which precedes the separation between the living and the non-living.

Surface of the earth and surface of history thus become difficult places — if it is still possible to speak of places at all — in which depth, constituted by sedimentation, separation, stratification, and memory, gives way to a line of indistinctions running through the dichotomies that govern dialecti-

18 In Ezequiel Zaidenwerg: Néstor Perlongher y sus cadáveres: del neobarroso a la necropoética, in: *Cuadernos de literatura*, 38 (2015), p. 443.

cal processes of identification. This is certainly a philosophy and a poetics of the margin, populated by 'marginal' figures — one need only think of the question, of central importance for Perlongher, of homosexuality, sexual hybridity, and, consequently, the marginalization of bodies. Yet it is also a philosophy and a poetics of remnants, in which what emerges at the surface is not the sepulchral and institutional sign of a memory preserved and organized, but rather a residue, a dispersed trace, atemporal and exposed.

We can readily understand that if this is the line of surface that 'defines' Perlongher's earth, then stasis, no less than aridity, represents the quality most remote from it. It must be a line of earth in motion, organically metamorphic; that is, it must be — or become — *barro*, the mud of an estuary. One can hardly overstate the metaphysical duality that characterizes this mud. Analogously to the Baroque *sylva* outlined by Vico and just before Manganelli's swamp — the dark and generative ground underlying the action of every history, to which the circulation of peoples spirally returns, and the magma that conditions the emergence of every form — the mud of the Río de la Plata likewise functions as a condition. *Barro* is not the opposite of form; it is what prevents form from definitively closing in upon itself. For this reason, it may be understood as the condition of both history and form. It is an origin, certainly, but a permanent origin: an origin that diffuses itself throughout every point of history, thereby dissolving itself as a properly determinate beginning. An origin that *never begins*.

It is from this perspective that one can also understand the resonance exerted upon Perlongher by the poetics of Haroldo de Campos and Lezama Lima. Their Baroque presents itself as a *dispositif* of proliferation: textual proliferation above all, but also the proliferation of connections, images, and cross-references. What emerges is a conception of form irreducible to unity and closure, a form that grows through addition, contamination, and deviation. Baroque thus becomes the name of a productivity of the heterogeneous. It is not merely a poetics of mixture, but a genuine heterogenesis, in which creation coincides with the capacity to generate differences, to multiply the lines of development of a form without reducing them to a unifying principle. From this perspective, law loses the rigidity that made it indistinguishable from identity: it embraces the movement of variation.

One might ask, at this point in the argument, what it means to situate Perlongher's work upon this threshold, and in what way such an operation might contribute to outlining the architecture of a future line of inquiry. A first formulation, inevitably provisional, might be the following: *barro* constitutes the ultramaterial destiny of Baroque. Such a destiny does not coincide with one of the many forms that Baroque assumes in the course of its history. *Neobarroso* — no less than *New World Baroque*, Brazilian or Argentine Baroque — does not represent a new entry destined to enrich the catalogue of Baroque manifestations, according to that taxonomy of forms which still lingers in the pages of d'Ors[19]; it does not simply designate *another* Baroque. *Neobarroso* indicates the point toward which Baroque appears to tend when followed through to its most borderline consequences.

How far, indeed, can that movement be carried which Wölfflin, gazing upon the marble Rome of Bernini and Borromini, recognized as the very heart of Baroque form when, in *Reinassance und Barock*, he wrote that the Baroque always seeks 'a vast and weighty mass'? Where does the Baroque of cathedrals, of the "gardens of Coimbra"[20], of architectural verticality and lush nature lead, if not to an obscure *sylva* and, from the *sylva*, to the telluric vocation of *barro*? From worked stone to the forest, from the forest to *barro*: as though the ascending movement of Baroque had harboured from the very beginning a secret telluric vocation. *Neobarroso*, in other words, is what happens when the proliferation of form becomes an infinite proliferation of matter. The question, then, cannot but ask what philosophy, and what philosophy of history, might arise from a matter that, from below, never ceases to proliferate. •

19 Eugenio d'Ors: *Lo barroco*, pp. 91-92.

20 D'Ors: *Lo Barroco*, p. 33.



# INTERVIEW WITH SHÃWÃHU TIMÁ (VOVÔ JOÃO) and TIKA MATXURU WANIPASHUTIYA **YAWANAWA HEALERS**

by Amanda Viana de Sousa

*The Yawanawa (a term which means "peccary people") are an Indigenous people of the Amazon rainforest, located in the Rio Gregório Indigenous Territory—shared with the Katukina-Pano (currently known as Noke Kuin, or "true people")—in the state of Acre, Brazil.*

*The Yawanawa belong to the Pano linguistic family. Currently, Portuguese is the predominant language in the villages, though the native Yawanawa language is still spoken by elders and some adults, who also communicate fluently in Portuguese. Although fewer than a third of the Yawanawa people speak their own language—a situation resulting from colonial oppression throughout their history and the subsequent devaluation of their traditions—, nowadays a growing number of discussions and initiatives aim at preserving and revitalizing their linguistic heritage.*

*The Yawanawa do not constitute a single, isolated lineage. Historically, they have absorbed members of other Pano-speaking groups (such as the* Shawãdawa, Iskunawa, Rununawa, Sainawa, *and* Kaxinawá*) through marriage, alliances, and migration.*

*The history of contact between the Yawanawa and non-Indigenous society dates back to the early decades of the 20th century. It was driven by the incursions of Peruvian and Brazilian rubber tappers in search of sap (latex) from rubber trees. Throughout that period, the Yawanawa faced an imminent risk of extinction, which was exacerbated by the prohibition of their cultural practices, a direct consequence*

*of the system of enslavement in the rubber groves and of proselytizing missions.*

*According to data from* SIASI *(Indigenous Health Care Information System) and SESAI (Special Department for Indigenous Health)—both linked to the Indigenous SasiSUS (Health Care Subsystem) of the Brazilian Ministry of Health—, the Yawanawa population is currently estimated at approximately 1,200 people (the last census, in 2020, recorded a population of about 849 individuals for this group).*

*Since the late 20th century, the Yawanawa have led a strong movement to reclaim and demarcate their traditional lands, as well as to retrieve and expand their traditions. The initial demarcation of the territory took place in 1984; it covered 92,800 hectares and was consolidated by an expansion in 2023 resulting in the occupation of a current area of approximately 187,400 hectares. This successful struggle resulted not only in the legal securing of their territory but also in the expulsion—in the early 1980s—of missionaries and representatives from the company PANACRE (Paraná Company for Agricultural, Livestock, and Industrial Colonization of Acre), which had purchased their lands during the 1970s.*

*The Yawanawa are internationally acclaimed for their strong cultural resurgence and for ushering in a new chapter in the history of Indigenous movements in Brazil. This trajectory is defined not only by the demarcation of their territory, the revitalization of their traditions, and the consolidation of their autonomy and self-organization, but also by their emergence as global figures in spirituality who promote rituals, celebrations, and a profound sharing of their traditional knowledge, as with their use of forest medicines and sacred chants.*

*Shãwãhu Timá, affectionately known as Vovô João, embodies the living memory of Yawanawa historical protagonism. A guardian of traditional knowledge, he preserves his native language, his ancestral songs, the stories of his people, and the wisdom of forest medicines. Alongside internationally renowned political leaders such as Chief Nixiwaka Biraci Brasil Yawanawa and Tashka Yawanawa, Vovô João has emerged as one of his people's greatest living spiritual authorities. At the age of 79, he undertook one of the most exalted and rigorous spiritual diets: that of the* muká *plant. Today, at 93, he is the eldest of his people, and he conducts healing ceremonies not only in Brazil but also in Europe. Furthermore, he shares his profound wisdom with new generations and visitors from around the world at the Shãwãhu Center, a cultural space created by him in Amparo Village.*

*Tika Matxuru Wanipashutiya (in Portuguese his name is Manuel da Silva Filho), 57, is the eldest son of Vovô João and devotes his life to the spiritual and traditional studies of his own lineage. He has performed the* muka *and* runũwã *diets (twice in each case), and today he serves as one of the principal guardians, representatives, and teachers of the Yawanawa language. He currently lives with his family in Amparo Village, and he actively contributes to the preservation and the strengthening of his culture.*

*Amanda Viana de Sousa conducted long interviews with Shãwãhu Timá (Vovô João) and Tika Matxuru Wanipashutiya at the Shãwãhu Center (Amparo Village) on the occasion of one of her research trips in January/ February 2026. The two texts that follow contain a selection from the main contents.* [1]

1 Cf. Vinnya, Aldaiso Luiz. Ochoa, Maria Luiza Pinedo. Teixeira, Gleyson de Araújo. (Orgs.) *Costumes e Tradições do Povo Yawanawá. Comissão Pró-Índio do Acre* / Organização dos Professores Indígenas do Acre. – Rio Branco, 2006; Pérez-Gil, Laura. *O sistema médico Yawanáwa e seus especialistas: cura, poder e iniciação xamânica.* In: Cad. Saúde Pública, Rio de Janeiro, 17(2):333-344, mar-abr, 2001; pib.socioambiental.org ; cpiacre.org.br .

## INTERVIEW WITH SHÃWÃHU TIMÁ (VOVÔ JOÃO)

**Amanda Viana:** Who is Vovô[2] João?

**Shãwãhu Timá:** Vovô João's real name is Shãwãhu, but I feel very happy when everyone calls me "Grandpa". I feel grateful for this very special recognition.

**AV:** Could you share a little about your roots and your life journey? I would like to know about your ancestry and the place where you were born.

**ST:** I am Shãwãhu Yawanawa. I was born and raised at the headwaters of the Gregório River, in the region known as *seringal* (rubber plantation area) called *Kaxinawa*. It was in this region that I put down roots, raised a family, and lived for a long time. Being born as an Yawanawa was the greatest source of strength for me. I lived out our customs intensely, savoring traditional foods and drinks. I fondly remember my mother: she made *caiçuma*[3] and *pamonha*[4], she molded clay vessels, plates, and cooking pots, she wove straw baskets, mats, and sieves, and she built small tables and large storage containers. I grew up to witness our tradition. My father was a guardian of our people, he could craft arrows, bows, and war clubs—the weapons the Yawanawa used for hunting and defense. We were always together. Whether for gathering shellfish, working in the fields, or clearing the forest, the Yawanawa people always moved together. The same was true for the women: they camped where they worked and prepared food together, and they returned only at dusk. No one would leave early or head out before my father gave the order to pack things up. At the end of the day, he announced to everyone that work would continue the next day. I witnessed all this. As time passed, the Yawanawa culture became ingrained in me, and I fully embraced our way of life. I have always had deep respect for my elders. Even now, at 93, I would never move past someone older than me. Furthermore, I let people work without disturbing them with idle conversations. I only speak to them when they finish their work. In the past, marriage was built on family alliances: a daughter's destiny was mapped out by her father while she was still in her cradle. Relying fully on her family, she never followed the dating habits that rule white society today but passed straight from childhood to marriage. Following the Yawanawa tradition, parents taught their children how to hunt and gather firewood. By observing the character of the young men around, fathers could choose proper partners for their daughters. They would say: 'This is a good man; you will marry him'. The young woman would accept the decision out of respect for the tradition. In my childhood, it was common to see men with more than one wife. The most striking aspect was how the wives supported one another. They lived harmoniously without any rivalry or struggle. In the Yawanawa culture of that time, a man was expected to build his own house when he got married. Alternatively, at the father-in-law's request, the couple could live with the wife's family and remain closely connected to both parental lines. After the elders passed away, the Yawanawa culture changed considerably. Today, practices such as polygamy are prohibited to prevent conflicts and rivalries.

**AV:** What is your father's name?

**ST:** In Portuguese, it's Antonio Luiz. In Yawanawa, it's Ushunawa.

**AV:** And your mother's name?

**ST:** Panany.

**AV:** Was your father a *pajé*[5] (shaman)?

---

2 *Vovô* in Portuguese means "grandpa".

3 A traditional fermented beverage constituted by manioc or corn.

4 A sweet corn mush.

5 *Pajé* is an Indigenous word derived from the Tupi language that designates a healer, a blessing-giver, or a ritual specialist capable of communicating with non-humans for specific purposes. In the anthropological

**ST:** He was a highly respected *pajé*, deeply versed in traditional medicine and the art of incantations. When treating someone, he would first look into their symptoms. Then, he would apply his healing methods by using natural remedies or incantations over *caiçuma* to restore his patients' health.

**AV:** Does that run in the family? Has this ability to heal people been handed down over the generations? Did your father learn from your grandfather?

**ST:** Yes, I follow the footsteps of my father, who was a very powerful *pajé*. However, when I was born, my biological father handed me over to someone else. It was my stepfather—also a highly renowned and powerful *pajé*— who raised me. That was a somewhat different upbringing, but I had a very good childhood.

**AV:** What is your stepfather's name?

**ST:** Yuaxi. He was also a *pajé* of great reputation. I grew up surrounded by formidable and dangerous men.

**AV:** Why dangerous?

**ST:** Because the *pajés* are strong. There lies the danger.

**AV:** Do you mean that they can heal but also kill?

**ST:** Those people have the power to heal but also to cause harm merely because of the power of their thoughts.

**AV:** Did *pajés* in the past also have to follow specific dietary rituals?

**ST:** Yes. When I was a boy, I had the opportunity to take a very close look at forest diets. The starting point was the *mamã* (*caiçuma*)[6]. Then followed the *nane* (jenipapo)[7] diet. Only after that were they ready to choose their final path: the mystery of the *muka* (a special vine plant)[8], the power of the *shupa* (datura)[9], or the strength of the *runũwã* (anaconda), in addition to which they also had to decide between practices involving the anaconda's saliva or its heart.[10]

**AV:** Did they ever perform healing work on you?

**ST:** Yes, of course. When I was a boy, a *pajé* put stones inside me so I would inherit his power. However, my mother told me that I wouldn't be able to handle the fever that normally results from that process. So, the *pajé* ended up removing most of the stones. If I had passed that test, I would be like him now. At my age, I realize how much I missed out on learning from my father. When we are young, we rarely stop to listen and learn. We prefer playing and ignoring the *pajés*' wisdom. Now, I think my father could have taught me what I am lacking, and I carry the burden of that regret. If only I could go back in time... But it's too late, and those *pajés* are gone.

**AV:** Who was the *pajé* who inserted stones into your body? Was he your father or your stepfather?

**ST:** I was born with the assistance of the late João Grande, a *pajé* whose true name was Masherua. My mother gave birth to me by his side. He carried a mystery within. When he slept, his breath turned into a whistle. And when his spirits drew closer, the night was suddenly

---

literature, the term *pajé* has been translated as "shaman".

6 *Mamã* is the Yawanawa word for the *caiçuma* (drink made of manioc).

7 *Nane* is the Yawanawa word for the *jenipapo*, an Amazonian unripe fruit, from which a juice is extracted to be ingested and applied on the skin during the diet's initiation process.

8 *Muka* is the most sacred vine plant among the Yawanawas; its roots are similar to a potato with a very bitter taste. There are different forms of *muka* diet. The most powerful is to ingest a piece of its roots, followed by one year of diet with rigorous restrictions.

9 It seems that *shupa* is the plant 'datura', a very strong shamanic plant, used in the past among the Yawanawa to heal and harm.

10 The diet related to the *sucuri* (anaconda) consists of ingesting its saliva or a piece of its heart. After that the initiate must follow for a specific time several restrictions.

filled with an immense clamor, like the sound of heavy footsteps treading on dry straw. He kept a massive boa constrictor that slept in the corner of the house during the day and roamed around at night. When he passed away, the serpent vanished. I grew up at the feet of three famous *pajés*, but since I didn't really care about those things back then, I ended up learning very little from them.

**AV:** You mentioned that you did the *muka* diet back in 2012. What was your main reason for embarking on such a rigorous commitment at 79 years old?

**ST:** Driven by the desire to fulfill a purpose and with the intention of honoring the memory of my ancestry of healers, I asked myself: 'Do I really want to go through life without learning and building anything related to my own ancestry?' It took me twelve months of rigorous physical and spiritual preparation to do that. It was a mature decision, far from impulsive. When my spirit was ready, I went to my nephew Nixiwaka, our great leader today[11], and announced: 'My son, I want to take the *muka*'. Quite shocked by my request, he asked me: 'Uncle, are you serious? Do you really want to take the *muka*?' My response was firm: 'Yes, I do'. It was in 2012 that I began that diet. I am grateful for the teachings of the *muka*, which transformed my life. I, who knew nothing about medicinal plants, chants, or storytelling, learned the art of all these things through that diet. The *muka* was a master who decided to transmit vast knowledge to me. But even so, I don't claim to know much. What I have learned is enough, though. Anyone can pursue this path to accomplish those goals, but it demands responsibility. It's a serious matter that requires hard work, respect, and care. Nothing valuable is built overnight. You need dedication and humility to progress on the path, and that is exactly how I did it.

*I was born with the assistance of the late* pajé *João Grande. He carried a mystery within. When he slept, his breath turned into a whistle. And when his spirits drew closer, the night was suddenly filled with an immense clamor, like the sound of heavy footsteps treading on dry straw.* — **ST**

**AV:** You told me once that the *muka* revealed to you the knowledge of certain plants...

**ST:** Yes, I was granted that knowledge. I knew almost nothing before, but everything changed after the *muka* diet. Now I have knowledge of some Yawanawa plants and medicines, but I never wrote it down or recorded it. All this learning is safely stored in my memory and my heart.

**AV:** And how did *muka* teach you knowledge about the plants?

**ST:** Through dreams.

**AV:** Would you mind explaining that a bit more?

**ST:** Whenever I lack the knowledge of the exact plant needed to heal a specific illness, I seek the healing plant or plants in my dreams. As soon as I see them in my vision, I wake up and keep my focus fixed upon them. Then, I head into the forest to search for them. Sometimes, it takes a long time to find them, but once that happens, I gather them and give them to the person in need.

**AV:** Once you shared with me that, in your childhood, your uncle taught you much about medicinal plants, including those used against snakebites.

**ST:** Yes, that was actually with my brother and my brother-in-law. My brother's name is Kamashaka; in Portuguese, he is called Antônio Luiz Novo. In my youth, we used to go for walks together and he would show me certain plants, explaining in detail what they were used for. It was from him that I first acquired that type of knowledge. Later, I shared a similar experience with my brother-in-law. Little by little, I absorbed their knowledge of plants and

11 Nixiwaka Biraci Brasil Yawanawa is a renowned political and spiritual leader of the Yawanawa people in Acre (Brazil) of our time. Since the 1980s he has been fighting for the rights and the autonomy of his people. Under his leadership, the Yawanawa obtained official recognition of their ancestral territory. Now, he is also a well-known spiritual leader and has engaged himself in ecological debates in Brazil and Europe.

their healing properties, observing and learning from those beings, especially from *muka*. That is how I carved out my own path.

**AV:** What is *muka* after all?

**ST:** *Muka* is a well-known plant that grows as a sprawling vine, from which we harvest small potatoes. Have you ever seen one in the forest?

**AV:** Yes.

**ST:** Right there near the school[12], there's a large *muka* plant. *Muka* is unique and truly sacred. It's not a plant we cultivate; it grows spontaneously. There are two of them in that area. There used to be another one right over there, close to my grandson's garden, but the boys cut it down when it was just a small sapling, without knowing it was a *muka*.

**AV:** It is said that this plant carries deep wisdom and acts as a guardian of ancestral forest knowledge, a potent medicine, and an important teacher for Indigenous healers. How can one grasp the profound mystery that involves *muka*?

**ST:** To be honest, I don't know for sure. I feel that *muka* acts as a spirit awakening within those who ingest the plant. This is forest knowledge, handed down by our ancestors. When you ingest *muka*, you don't speak lightly; your words carry ancestral weight, inspire respect, and have a power that make certain things come true. The plant also demands that you silence the noise of mundane conversations. That is why isolation is necessary during the diet: to keep the environment protected and free from profane words. As soon as we ingest *muka* and commit ourselves to the plant, the forest transforms itself, already in the very first week. Tree trunks that once stood still, for example, become people watching us. Roots and leaves come to life and take shape—turning sometimes into boas (large snakes), sometimes into figures that smile at us in the dark. Such visions are strong and last for nearly a week.

**AV:** It is said to be essential to keep a positive mindset right after taking it.

**ST:** Exactly. That is essential.

**AV:** What is *uni*?

**ST:** *Uni*[13] is medicine; it should not be consumed in any manner at all. My father always taught us that using it is very serious. We would commune with it to recite incantations—whether in the chanting of the *mamã* (*caiçuma*), the *nane* (jenipapo), or in our silent spells. When someone fell ill, may father resorted to *uni* in order to find out possible ways to heal the sick person. One must do that with respect. Bringing together *uni* (*Banisteriopsis caapi*) and *kawa* (*Psychotria viridis*) is entering into ceremony. According to the Yawanawa tradition, *uni* was born from the human body itself, at a time when death was still unknown. One day, a leader named *Ruwa* and his people went hunting in the forest. They would go hunting together. Since they lacked modern weapons, they traveled long distances on foot and used their own voice (shouting) to lure their prey. Drawn by the cries, the animals ran toward the *igapó* (a flooded area of the forest) and became trapped on an island, where they were finally struck

12 Indigenous school education in Brazil is guaranteed by the 1988 National Constitution and regulated by legislation such as the 1996 *Law of Guidelines and Bases of National Education* (LDB) and the National Education Council Resolution 3/99. It is also addressed in the National Education Plan approved in 2001. The purpose of the Indigenous school extends far beyond formal literacy within the national education system. It serves as a political instrument of resistance, territorial defense, and cultural strengthening. The presence of schools in Indigenous villages is grounded in community agency and autonomy, as well as in the valorization and defense of territory and identity (featuring bilingual education in Portuguese and Indigenous languages). It involves a pedagogy with a distinct curriculum, adapted to the communities' traditions and rhythms of life. Cf. https://pib.socioambiental.org/

13 *Uni* is the Yawanawa name of the vine *Banisteriopsis caapi*, and it also stands for "Ayahuasca", an Amazonian brew consisting in a combination of the *Banisteriopsis caapi* vine and the plant *Psychotria viridis* (called *kawa* by the Yawanawa). The leaves of *kawa* contain DMT and the vine *uni* acts as a key that unlocks the psychoactive effects of these leaves. The name *uni* is used by the Yawanawa to convey part of their traditional medicine and rituals.

with arrows. The leader *Ruwa* said to his group: 'Go after the prey, I will remain here close to the *igapó* awaiting them in order to shoot them with arrows.' When the others had left, he and his wife set up an ambush on the lagoon's island and waited for their prey. Soon afterward, a tinamou appeared, and he shot it with an arrow. His wife picked up the bird and he kept watching. Then, he spotted many turtles coming to the water's surface, along with a swarm of insects resembling butterflies—I don't know their name in Portuguese—also flying over the water. As soon as he saw that, his vision blurred and he suddenly passed out. Not knowing what was going on, his woman approached him: 'What's wrong?' she asked, but he didn't answer. Leaving him there, she ran away to call for help. When she reached the group, she yelled at them: 'Please come with me right now, I don't know what has happened to our leader!' They all rushed over to see him lying on the ground. They brought a hammock, put him in it and brought him to their *shuhu* (ceremonial longhouse)[14], and only then did he recover consciousness. When *Ruwa* returned, he asked the others: 'Where is the tinamou I killed?'. His wife replied that no one had touched the prey, since they were all terrified and did not know what had happened to him. The man asked them to make food quickly, because he wanted to eat the tinamou with green bananas. The woman stood up and went to fetch the bananas to prepare the meal. At that very moment, he fell on the floor and died. Overcome with fear, the family members began to argue about what to do with the body. One suggested throwing it into the water, and another proposed burning it, but both ideas were rejected. They decided to bury him instead. They dug a grave in the middle of the *shuhu* and moved away from their village. They moved to another place. Sometime later, their cousin dreamed of *Ruwa*, who addressed these words to him: 'Where you buried me, many things have grown. Go and look!' After waking up, he pondered the message for a while, and he finally set out for the burial ground at dawn. When he arrived there, he found that something had changed: *uni*, *shupa*, and *nawe* (tobacco)[15] had pushed up from the ground. Several plants had sprouted where *Ruwa's* body had been buried. He invited the people to witness the scene and afterward decided to seek out *Ruwa*. They resolved to consecrate the *uni*. After preparing the *shaka uni* (a special kind of *uni*), they started the consecration and simultaneously made *rume* (*rapé*)[16]. From the very moment in which the ritual began, they stopped consuming food and *caiçuma*, devoting themselves entirely to the *uni* and *rume*. After a long period of time, the *uni* became so abundant that it could be found everywhere: under their houses, on the way to the port, and in the gardens. They felt that, at last, they were ready to follow the steps of *Ruwa*. Almost everyone—men, women, and children—drank the *uni*. Only one person refused to do it: *Vata Txanu*. By the way, consuming the brew is a practice that begins in early childhood, something entirely permitted in these days. As support in their long journeys, they prepared their medicines: *uni*, *rume*, *nawe*, *shupa*, and *yutxi* (pepper)[17]. When they had to ascend the sky, they asked: 'Who is going to ask another people to serve us *caiçuma*?' *Vata Txanu* hadn't taken *uni* because he didn't want to starve. He had plenty of ripe bananas, went fishing, and ate the fish by himself. He would always offer food to his wife, but his mother-in-law wouldn't let her eat anything. So, they said to *Vata Txanu*: 'Call the people of the next village and warn them about our journey and our need of *caiçuma*'. He replied: 'I'll go and come back soon'. So, he ran as fast as he could until he was close to the next village. At that moment, a woman approached to fetch water. He found her attractive and made a pass at her, but she retorted: 'Not now, wait for me here. I'll take this jug of water and be right back.' He agreed and waited. Meanwhile, the woman had taken a different route and had gone to another place. He heard the sound of a signal—*boom*,

14 The Yawanawa longhouse used for performing ceremonies, rituals, political and other traditional encounters.

15 Yawanawa name for tobacco plant.

16 *Rume* (rapé) is a powder mixture containing ashes of tobacco plant and/or some tree-trunk and/or herbs. The Yawanawa prepare their *rapé* by using only tobacco plant and the tree-trunk ashes of an Amazonian tree called *Tsunu*.

17 A Yawanawa pepper used for shamanic purposes.

*boom*—and realized that the group was already leaving, so he ran to warn the other people: 'I came to tell you that they asked you to prepare the *caiçuma*, as they are already rising up to the sky!' 'Why didn't you come early? We barely had time to get ready'. They ran, but they realized that the others were already going through the bush to reach the 'trail to the sky'. They heard the sound once again —*boom, boom*... When they reached the 'trail to the sky', the path began to zigzag wildly. They had to put *nawe* (tobacco) in their mouths and blow it to level out the path. The following month, wasps infested the path, so they blew *rume* to ward off the danger. Further ahead, a *cumaru*[18] tree obstructed the path. Someone suggested setting it on fire, but they didn't do that. They all sat down to rest. Two sisters made drawings on the tree, one on each side. The elders say these drawings have survived until now. Somehow, they pursued their journey until they reached a river impossible to cross. They blew *nawe* (tobacco) and *yutxi* (pepper), and the path opened. Upon reaching the spirit house in the sky, they looked into the distance and saw their leader *Ruwa.* Two women were painting him with *nane* (jenipapo), one on each side. The women noticed the visitors' arrival and alerted the leader, who remained indifferent. They provided benches and mats to accommodate everyone, but the seats broke under their weight. It was clear that they didn't belong there. They were ordinary people, flesh-and-blood beings, not spirits. Without looking at them, *Ruwa* demanded: 'Why have you come here? Go back to your place. Everything you brought with you, is running out. Leave!'. 'We want to follow you, since you are our leader', they replied. After receiving their leader's orders, they agreed to turn round and go back. Along the way, one of them said: 'Let's not return to the same place but seek another forest, for disease reigns there'. They sat down and waited. It was then that they heard a bird chirping, which said: 'This place is no good; it is full of evil'. They walked on and stopped to listen to another bird, who sang '*hiri, hiri, hiri, hiri*'. They concluded that this place was not good either, since there was disease in that forest, and so decided to move on. They walked further, sat down to listen, and hearing no song at all but only silence, they decided to stay there. Then they began cutting down trees to make a clearing. The Yawanawa elders say that these ancestors are still alive; they never truly died, they are just very old. The *uni* turned into the body of *Ruwa*, and today everyone drinks it. My father took it exclusively for spiritual work, and he used *rume* in the late afternoon when he returned from work.

*Death is a farewell with no return. Those who depart never return. Life does not extend beyond its end. We get rid of the body and turn into spirit and memory. From then on, dreams become perhaps the only possible space where we can meet again.* — **ST**

**AV:** What does death mean to you?

**ST:** Death is a farewell with no return—the ultimate end of the physical being. Those who depart never return. Life does not extend beyond its end. We get rid of the body and turn into spirit and memory. From then on, dreams become perhaps the only possible space where we can meet again.

**AV:** If it is like that, why is the *pajés*' cemetery in the *Aldeia* (village) Sagrada such a strong place?

**ST:** Because the shamans' spirits dwell in that place.

**AV:** So, the shamans' spirits are truly present there...

**ST:** Yes, they are.

**AV:** Do those spirits talk to you?

**ST:** In my dreams. My father told me once, before he passed away, that we should scatter *rume* and *uni* over his grave. This was a common ritual at the time, a custom that maybe hasn't been preserved as it should over time.

**AV:** You lived in a period when the missionary presence was very strong in the Yawa-

18 *Dipteryx odorata.*

nawa territory. How do you recall the coexistence with missionaries and the impact of evangelization—especially regarding the use of your own language and the practice of traditional rituals?

**ST:** Judging from my own experience and from what I can observe today, I see a massive shift in how missionaries operate. What they did to us and the restrictions they imposed in the past were extremely severe and rigid. No father would ever do that to his own children. They banned our sacred chants, the *uni*, and the use of *rume*. For me, that was wrong. It violated our traditions. They took absolute control and prohibited everything. Some Yawanawa accepted this, but the missionaries I knew were uncompromising and allowed absolutely nothing from our culture. I had already a family to support when I encountered those missionaries holding the Bible. One day, they asked me to dig up an *itaúba* tree[19] stump to build a house. I invested a full day of grueling work, chopping and splitting the wood with an ax. And what was my reward? A tiny pocketknife. I had worked all day, carried timber on my back, and in the end they gave me a very small blade in exchange. Those were the conditions of my own survival. By the time the missionaries settled here, my father had already passed away. When the missions took control of the village, it was my brother, Raimundo Luiz, who was in charge of everything. But when my nephew Nixiwaka—our great leader nowadays—returned to the village after thirteen years, he sent them all away. He didn't let them stay. There were those who said: 'When the missionaries leave, we will all die for lack of medicine'. Back then, the missionaries brought Western medicines. I remember Nixiwaka saying that we wouldn't die because our own people would become nurses and health agents. That is exactly what happened. After the missionaries left, the young Yawanawa sought education in the city and returned qualified—like Mariazinha and my daughter Lídia, who still practice that profession to this day. I saw the missionaries passing through here, but I also saw our community regain control of its own health issues as soon as they left.

**AV:** What do you think of the expanding presence of evangelical congregations within the Yawanawa territory, notably in the *Aldeia* Amparo[20]?

**ST:** I think everyone should follow their own path! That thing doesn't bother me so much now. I know that some people frown upon it. Our leader Nixiwaka and my oldest son, Tika, disapprove. On the other hand, Abraão, the pastor of *Aldeia* Amparo, who is also my cousin, went down that road and founded his own church. That doesn't bother me. Sometimes loneliness hits hard on ceremony days without any of my daughters around, but I soon reflect and say: it's good. Everyone follows their own path. That's how I see life.

**AV:** There's a mutual understanding here in the village about that issue, right? I've heard that, to preserve local harmony, there's a commitment not to schedule ceremonies during the time of evangelical services.

**ST:** I consider that understanding essential. On their worship days, out of respect, we do not perform our rituals. Similarly, during our practices, Abraão interrupts the evangelical services and waits for us to finish. Far from antagonizing us, he attends to honor the moment, introduce himself, and shares a meal. Our relationship is built on mutual respect.

**AV:** Do you receive Christians seeking guidance and healing, both physical and spiritual?

**ST:** Yes, when those people seek my help, I try to help them with my healing skills, which involve a combination of practices. If a little girl falls ill, has a tumor, or is bitten by a snake, I do my work. I have Abraão's support: even though he's a pastor, he doesn't antagonize what I do; he supports it.

---

19 *Itaúba* (*Mezilaurus itauba*) is a large tree native to the Amazon—rising to 20 or even 40 meters—renowned for its extremely dense and durable hardwood.

20 *Aldeia Amparo* is the third Yawanawa village along the Gregório River, led by the chief Veera (Shawahu's son) and his wife Shaya.

**AV:** You went through a lot of struggles during the time of the rubber tappers[21]. I know that the work you did was exhausting and the reality in the rubber fields was marked by dependence and exploitation, often compared to slavery. How do you look back on that experience today?

**ST:** Life as a rubber tapper was exhausting. We cleared trails and roads in the forest to extract latex, yet we still had to pay rent to our boss. We could produce up to 100 kg of rubber, but he kept all of it for himself. We didn't earn a single penny. Our boss insisted that the rubber belonged to him and gave us no right to complain. We were even forced to buy our own tools—bowls, latex basins, and cutting knives—and, at the end of the year, we never received any money. I kept accumulating debts. The boss owned every drop of our sweat. My life was marked by the grueling labor of tapping rubber trees. I worked all day, often pushing deep into the forest until nightfall. Back home, the routine continued by the furnace. I would finish smoking the rubber around nine o'clock and only then could I take a bath, while my wife and mother prepared dinner. By two in the morning, I was already up, ready to start the cycle all over again at dawn. We lived under the boss's strict rules: every fortnight, our supply of goods depended strictly on our rubber production. I faced all that with resilience. Do you want to know about our rest and sleep hours? Let me tell you: to make my hammock, I had to cut four thick branches of the same height, size up a few other pieces, and tie them all together with vines. I wove it myself. Once it was ready, I lined it with dry banana leaves, dumping them all inside. That was my bed. I had to lie down right there and sleep. The next day, I was ready for work. If I hadn't done that, I wouldn't even have had sufficient energy to start the day. I didn't carry kerosene or a firearm. That's how I lived. And it wasn't just me. It applied to all workers! And what about my clothes? We had no thread, no needle, nothing. My mother would patch old rags together using latex milk, creating a layer thicker than bull leather. That was the only piece of cloth I had to wear, as there was no alternative. I worked really hard. After the rubber tapping season ended, I started working as a day laborer: hunting and clearing the bosses' fields.

*Life as a rubber tapper was exhausting. We cleared trails and roads in the forest to extract latex, yet we still had to pay rent to our boss. We could produce up to 100 kg of rubber, but he kept all of it for himself.* — **ST**

**AV:** Did you keep up a relationship with the rubber plantation owners after the rubber boom ended?

**ST:** Yes, back then, there were still bosses. I remember the name of one of them, Antônio Bento. He lives in Tarauacá[22].

**AV:** Is he still alive?

**ST:** Yes, he's still alive. I remember the time he refused to give me a liter of kerosene and a kilo of salt, claiming I hadn't hunted enough for him! He wouldn't even sell those things to me. But what could I do? The only option was to ask my neighbor for help. I have had a very difficult life. After my father passed away, our Yawanawa family dispersed, everyone went his own way. When Nixiwaka arrived, he brought us all together again. But later we separated once again.

**AV:** What led the Yawanawa people to the decision of splitting communities again?

**ST:** Land demarcation, which happened not so long ago. We didn't really decide anything

21 The rubber boom in Acre, consisting in the profitable extraction of latex from the rubber tree in the Amazon rainforest, took place during two historical periods marked by high international demand for latex: the First Cycle (1879–1912) and the Second Cycle (1942–1945). Even after the rubber boom period, though on a very lower scale compared to it, the latex extraction business continued, and it was characterized by the exploitation of the rubber tappers by their bosses and land owners.

22 Taraucá is situated about 381 km from the Acre state capital, Rio Branco. It nestles deep in the Amazon rainforest close to the Gregório river, which marks the entrance to the Yawanawa territory.

but grew apart gradually, each of us seeking our own space to live and work, for living all together in a single village was no longer sustainable. We used to be 70 people, but today we've grown to more than 1,000.

**AV:** When did you leave *Aldeia* Sagrada and move to *Aldeia* Amparo?

**ST:** First, I left *Aldeia* Sagrada and moved to Nova Esperança. I lived alongside Nixiwaka for a long time. Later, my son Inácio Veerá and my daughters moved to another village, Amparo, and I went along with them. Eventually, I decided to go back to *Aldeia* Sagrada, and I went back and forth a few times. It went on like that until I fell ill and made a final decision: 'No, I want to stay close to my family'. That was in 2015. From then on, I kept working right around here until I retired. As time went on, Pekã Rasu, Pai Nani Kateyuve and Felipão (an Italian friend) invited me on my first trip in Brazil and to Europe, and I could see what they do firsthand. Today, I have my own group and my life has improved a lot. Now I have my own house, a comfortable bed, and I'm living in good health.

**AV:** Have you ever lived in the city?

**ST:** Yes, I lived in Tarauacá for a year and spent some time in Feijó, but I couldn't adapt to those places. Each place has its own culture, very different from ours. I realized that nothing compares to the land where I was born and grew up. That is why I decided to return, and I have remained here ever since.

**AV:** And so, you decided to create the *Shãwãhu Center*, a space in the forest to welcome visitors...

**ST:** The idea of creating a center came to me while I was at *Aldeia* Amparo. Shortly afterward, I went on a trip with Pekã Rasu, Paka Shahu, and Pai Nani Kateyuve. Upon my return, that desire grew stronger. I couldn't build a large center of my own at *Aldeia* Amparo, so I decided to submit that project to the village chief—my son, Inácio Veerá—for the land that used to be Abraão's field, which was located a bit farther away from the village itself. He, however, initially disagreed with the project, fearing it would divide our community. I quickly replied: 'No, my son, my intention is not to divide. My purpose is rather to build something greater and lend a hand to our village'. Yet, my son remained reluctant. He said: 'No, I don't agree with this at all'. Even in the face of his refusal, I had that land cleared. I made a second trip and insisted on my decision: 'My son, I have prepared the ground, and that is where I will make my home'. Yet his answer remained the same. He refused to support me. 'Ah, my son, only God knows! If it is His will, I will build my own place. I have grown used to living alone, and I no longer want to live here, in the middle of Amparo'. He remained silent. I made one more trip, and upon my return, I ordered the construction to start—something to which he had still not agreed. He realized that I wouldn't give up. Finally, he said: 'All right, Dad, there's nothing I can do. You're getting on in years and don't want to stay in the house I built for you here at Amparo'. To which I replied: 'No, my son, this place is yours, and I only want what belongs to me. I don't want to split things with *Aldeia* Amparo. That's why I'll help you in whatever way I can.' That was how he agreed. When I made a last trip, he didn't even bring up the subject. Since 2022, I've opened this little center and gradually got everything organized—a struggle I continue to this day. Taking care of my own project—especially the kitchen and the *shuhu*—brings me great peace of mind. God willing, I'll pursue this effort further and further. To reach this point, at my age and with this positive attitude is something that only a few can achieve. Today, I feel really well.

**AV:** You decided to open this space not only for your own retreat, but also to welcome visitors, hold ceremonies and experiential activities, and offer dietary retreats. What inspired you to welcome others here?

**ST:** I realized that, if I stayed in my son's village, I wouldn't be able to accomplish my plans. I wanted a space of my own to welcome friends and hold my ceremonies in peace, without facing objections. I decided to fight for that. Today, my wish has come true, and my only purpose is to work undisturbed without bothering anyone, respecting everyone's space, and continuing to cultivate the ancestral sense of this place.

**AV:** Many non-Indigenous people in search for healing, self-knowledge, and a purpose in life come to you. However, your work goes beyond those aspects. It is a defense of the forest and the Indigenous peoples worldwide—not just the Yawanawa. Do your visitors also align themselves with this political cause of the forest and Indigenous communities? How do you see this connection?

**ST:** If they get my intention, they are fulfilling my greatest dream. I am deeply grateful. This space was created precisely for that purpose: to welcome them with their needs, but also to provide support for ourselves. The name of this place is Shãwãhu Center, and I sincerely hope it becomes well known and recognized everywhere.

**AV:** Who did you invite to help you with this project?

**ST:** I invited my grandson Txana Pexa and his family. Ever since I started working, he and his wife have always supported me. He is a young man who has greatly encouraged me. He is a good person. He looks up to me as a father and takes great care of me. It is not just Txana Pexa who works with me; my youngest son, Runuyna, does too.

**AV:** What does the forest mean to you?

**ST:** The forest is my life and my health. It is my food and my refuge. It is our living pharmacy, an inexhaustible source of healing and quality of life. That is why I love it deeply.

**AV:** Do you have a message that you want to transmit to non-Indigenous people?

**ST:** Here I am, Vovô. Part of my story has already been told. Now, I take this moment to greet my friends. I am Shãwãhu. I live in the forest, by the Gregório River, and I send a big hug to all my friends, in Brazil and also in Europe. I really want you to hear my message. My heart rejoices here at *Aldeia* Amparo—the land where I live and celebrate life alongside my sons, daughters and grandchildren. It is from here that I seek new horizons. To anyone reading this message, I send my sincere and heartfelt greetings. I speak with complete seriousness and the truth of someone who lives in the forest—my home—at *Aldeia* Amparo, within the Shãwãhu Center. To those who wish to visit and get to know this place, I say: my doors are open! I am ready to welcome each of you, my friends. Here, you will never lack shelter, food, or drink. I am writing this message so that you do not forget me, for I view each of you as a friend and a brother. I am getting my place ready, and my doors will always be open whenever you wish to visit me. A big hug to everyone reading this message from Old Shãwãhu—and may God bless you!

*The forest is my life and my health. It is my food and my refuge. It is our living pharmacy, an inexhaustible source of healing and quality of life. That is why I love it deeply.* — **ST**

## INTERVIEW WITH TIKA MATXURU WANIPASHUTIYA

**Amanda Viana:** Dear Ticá, as Vovô João's eldest son, you are responsible for leading the way and setting an example to your siblings. Looking back on your journey, what are the most important lessons and duties you took on in the past, and which responsibilities emanating from them do you feel you still carry today?

**Tika Matxuru Wanipashutiya:** As the eldest son, my main responsibility and most important goal have always been to understand the origins, history, and meaning of the Yawanawa tradition. Above all, I have sought to honor the existence and life journey of every Yawanawa, keeping in mind that the people's memory is built on learning, respect, and harmony, passed down from generation to generation.

**AV:** You have a long history in the *Aldeia* Sagrada. I can imagine that living there has been a profound experience. What echoes has this place left in your memory, and what teachings do you carry with you today?

**TMW:** I was born and raised in *Aldeia* Sagrada. Although I have also lived in Nova Esperança and *Aldeia* Amparo, a big part of my life belongs to in that special place called *Aldeia* Sagrada, known as *Seringal Kaxinawá*, during the period of the rubber boom. At that time, a large part of the Yawanawa territory had been purchased and leased by Paranacre[23], a company from Paraná (the name is a combination of the names of the two Brazilian states, Paraná and Acre). The rubber barons leased the lands stretching from the BR highway to the headwaters of the Gregório River. My father was a rubber tapper, and from an early age my brother and I learned from him how to produce rubber. When he stopped extracting latex, we took over the production until that cycle finally came to an end. With the end of the rubber period and the departure of the evangelical missionaries from the New Tribes Mission of Brazil[24]— after 40 years of land occupation—, our community took charge of its own destiny. To strengthen our Yawanawa identity, we decided to gather in a single large village under the guidance of our great chief Nixiwaka, who was working hard on the re-unification of our community and establishing connections with the non-Indigenous world. It was a period marked by the effort to live together as Yawanawa people, to preserve our knowledge, to reclaim our identity, to sustain ourselves, and to love our territory. That is how *Aldeia* Sagrada was born. There we could not only grow as a population and ensure the preservation of the Gregório River territory, but also recognize the value of our communal living, the importance of an economic autonomy, and certainly the need for cultural preservation. *Aldeia* Sagrada has a special meaning for us because it was the place where the Yawanawa were reborn and could live on their ancestral lineage. Our leader Nixiwaka named the old *Seringal Kaxinawa* "*Aldeia* Sagrada" in reverence to our ancestral *pajés* and elders who dwell there. In that village, our material and spiritual ancestry coexist, guiding our rituals and preserving the wisdom of the Yawanawa spiritual world. While their bodies rest in that land, three of our elders keep this legacy vibrantly alive.

**AV:** According to the book written by Vinnya Yawanawa, the contemporary political trajectory of the Yawanawa people is marked by some fundamental milestones of cultural and territorial disputes. The first occurred in 1977 with the first recognition of the Gregório Rive Indigenous Territory (TI), which was officially delimited in 1984 with 92,800 hectares. Right after that, the Yawanawa founded the first village, Nova Esperança. Around 2004, in the face of their population growth, the Yawanawa submitted a formal request to FUNAI[25] for the review and expansion of their boundaries. According to Vinnya, in 2006, FUNAI officially recognized the expanded boundaries of the Yawanawa Indigenous Territory which came to have an area of approximately 187,400 hectares and a perimeter of 239 kilometers. This process of demarcation was consolidated in September 2023 under President Lula's administration, correcting historical boundaries and ensuring the Yawanawa's integrity and full possession of their traditional lands.[26]

**TMW:** The true development of the Yawanawa population was ostensible only after 2004. Given our population growth, the expansion of our territory became essential to keep our tradition, culture and language alive, just as our ancestors. In the past, our community was very small. We were no more than sixty people, and there were no children. Our territory today

23 *Paranacre* (Paraná Company for Agricultural, Livestock, and Industrial Colonization of Acre) was an agricultural and timber company founded in the 1970s. Based in Acre, the company operated until 2004, when the company was the subject of lawsuits and investigations. It became historically associated with socio-environmental problems, land conflicts and work exploitation in the Amazon. Cf. https://niepmarx.blog.br/MM/MM2025/AnaisMM2025/T34.pdf.

24 New Tribes Mission of Brazil, also known as *Ethnos360*, founded in 1953, is a highly controversial evangelical fundamentalist organization condemned by different kinds of indigenists; it focuses on the evangelization of Indigenous populations in the Amazon, even the so-called uncontacted groups – who are immunologically vulnerable to the diseases brought by the missionaries.

25 FUNAI: *The Brazilian Governmental Agency for Indigenous Affairs*.

26 Vinnya, Aldaiso Luiz. Ochoa, Maria Luiza Pinedo. Teixeira, Gleyson de Araújo. (Orgs.) *Costumes e Tradições do Povo Yawanawá*. Comissão Pró-Índio do Acre / Organização dos Professores Indígenas do Acre. – Rio Branco, 2006, p. 14.

spans over 93,000 hectares. Old maps reveal how limited our original territory was. What were once the Kaxinawa and Sete Estrelas rubber-tapping areas have been transformed into the current *Aldeia* Sagrada and *Aldeia* Sete Estrelas. This territorial and demographic consolidation represents our greatest achievement and the most significant difference compared to 2004. We can freely retrace the paths of our ancestors—who mastered the river and gave it their own names—, we rediscovered our own history with affection and respect, and we became proud of having that identity. We had not ventured to settle downstream from the Marajá river; yet, wherever they walked, everything already bore a name. The Marajá stream located near Yawarani village—up the tributary of the Gregório River—was known to the elders as '*Variya*'. There is also the *Karia*, another stream, and wherever their forebears penetrated in the forest, they gave names to the beings around them. Our ancestors left their seed so that we might carry on with our tradition. That is why we safeguard every place they inhabited. Lake fishing is a central activity in the lives of the Yawanawa, engaging the entire community—from children to elders. Using *tingui*[27], a native tree yielding a milky sap that facilitates fishing, the group gathers for an event that combines tradition and subsistence. It was during one of these periods of collective sharing, on the banks of a lake, that our leaders recognized the urgent need to expand our lands. Without intermediaries, our leaders personally submitted their request for territorial expansion to FUNAI and the Brazilian government. This marked the second major phase of the struggle for our rights.

**AV:** Nowadays you live at *Aldeia* Amparo. For what reasons did you move there?

**TMW:** Moving from *Aldeia* Sagrada to Amparo was a personal choice. I had excellent facilities and a large house there, but I no longer felt connected to the place. The cost of living and the work involved made it difficult to sustain myself. Now, we rely heavily on the town for basic logistics, such as fuel for hunting and gathering wood. The village is wonderful, but my priority today is strengthening family ties and living close to my father, brother, and cousins. I lived very well with my cousin, Chief Nixiwaka—the great architect of Yawanawa policy—, yet I did not feel truly fulfilled. Our relationship was not based on prejudice, discrimination, and disrespect, but on mutual honor and desire to contribute to a common good. Nevertheless, I felt the need to return to my father's side. His body and mind are showing signs of weariness, yet he remains steadfast as the guardian of our traditional knowledge. Moreover, since my childhood, I have always been passionate about learning the Yawanawa language. Nowadays, when I visit other villages, I do not find people with whom I can communicate in our native tongue. Yet, in my father, I find the center—the very source—of our language. It is with him that I can unfold our traditional knowledge. He is the embodiment of the Yawanawa spirit expressed through his actions and his connection to the sacred. I see myself as a mirror of him on this journey, for we share the same purpose: to protect and honor the heritage that our ancestors entrusted to us. The decision to come to *Aldeia* Amparo was also driven by a desire to create a new space beyond our own home. As a father, I want to expand our way of life by including the sacred use of medicines—consecrating *uni* and *rume*, and singing with my daughters. It is a personal calling that I seek to share with kin, friends, and visitors. We are building and opening a new place so that everyone can gather and take part in these sacred practices.

**AV:** You did four rigorous diets: two with the *muka* plant and two with *runũwã* (anaconda) in Yawanawa. What motivated you to embark on that?

**TMW:** These diets are as profound as Yawanawa knowledge itself. My entire life has been guided by a calling to practice a form of communal solidarity and cultivate our language. As an Indigenous person, I have no other path, no other worldview and even my appearance is Indigenous: I am a Yawanawa. I carry our tradition, our culture, our customs, and our language within me. Why, then, should I not focus on my spiritual power and my legitimacy as a son of this land? Our ancestors taught us the profound importance of plants like *muka* long ago. About eighty years ago, it was unknown to our people, until our Chief Nixiwaka had

27 *Magonia pubescens.*

a vision and brought it back. We began to perform diets according to our tradition between 1999 and 2000. My cousin Yawakuni, our friend Antonio from Mexico and I were the first of our generation to have this experience, bringing back the spiritual importance of *muka*. My father always took care of us, and his love, respect, and affection were also evident in the care he took regarding our *muka* diet. Before my diet using this plant, I did not truly possess the Yawanawa spoken language; after that, the gift of speech was given to me. It was a special gift, received not from human hands, but from a spiritual presence. The language that had vanished with the death of my grandparents and uncles—and which my father carried with him on his journeys—returned to me. The *muka* retrieved the language of my ancestors and planted it in my heart. This legacy is everything I am and everything I have today. Later, when our Chief Nixiwaka and my relatives decided to perform the *muka* diet once more, I also did it again to better attune myself to the plant and strengthen the roots that had already taken hold within after the first diet. Over time, I felt a need to go further. I asked my father for permission to undertake the *runũwã* diet here at *Aldeia* Amparo, but he did not allow it. However, because it was my purpose and calling, I sought the snake, *runũwã*, to begin the diet with it. I asked for—and received—that power. I took that *vana* (a spiritual force)—the anaconda's saliva—and planted it within my heart. Through these diets, I received the sacred knowledge of the chants, the prayer melodies, and the *vekush* (healing blow) itself. I undertook each of these diets twice. Although I do not consider myself fully prepared, I carry within my heart the *vanas* that took root there: the *muka* and the *runũwã*. They guide my spiritual mind and direct my steps. That was my great harvest! Today, thanks to the diets inherited from the experience of the ancient Yawanawas, I am able to care for my father, my children, my siblings, and the entire family that attends our ceremonial grounds and rituals.

**AV:** Some anthropologists and researchers assert that, in the forest, everything is human—or rather, everything is a subject endowed with intention and agency. From this perspective, the forest is a network of interrelationships that eludes Western science. How do you view this perspective?

**TMW:** While the non-Indigenous view plants merely as objects or commodities—and are therefore incapable of interacting with them—, Indigenous wisdom teaches us that the forest is one great family. Plants are alive, feel pain, know love, and possess the gift of healing, sharing their life force and native essence. For the Yawanawa people, the forest is not merely a collection of trees. Our guardians of medicinal knowledge treat the forest with profound respect, knowing that every part—from root to stem, from leaves to flowers—fulfills a vital function. Take the *muka*, for instance: to the elders, it is not a mere resource, but a living member of the forest. The Yawanawa language holds specific expressions for greeting the *muka* flower and asking permission to ward off ailments. It is from this sacred relationship that we can get medicine from them. The healer selects the precise plant for each ailment and administers cures using exact techniques: preparing compresses, infusions for drinking, healing juices for application to wounds, or steam baths. The healing process encompasses a wealth of both practical and spiritual knowledge. For the Yawanawa, the forest is a living being and a sacred body that keeps life in balance. Every being has its importance and purpose; forest fruits, for example, ensure sustenance for all: we nourish ourselves from the forest, and what we do not consume nourishes and strengthens animals such as monkeys and birds. Large animals—such as deer, wild pigs, and tapirs—as well as tortoises, pacas, and agoutis, feed on the forest's fruits. Today, the Yawanawa people are deeply respected for their reciprocal relationship with the forest. They preserve it because they recognize its vital generosity: the forest yields food, while the fauna—including birds—act as seed dispersers, spreading life far and wide. For the Yawanawa, the forest holds this profound significance, reflecting a perfect

*While the non-Indigenous view plants merely as objects or commodities—and are therefore incapable of interacting with them—, Indigenous wisdom teaches us that the forest is one great family.* — **TMW**

symmetry of knowledge. The Yawanawa's relationship with wildlife goes far beyond mere subsistence; it is a coexistence rooted in care and protection. Hunting is currently a restricted practice. We respect animal life and recognize that there are spiritual limits to hunting. Every creature—whether living in a group or alone—has its own space and deserves due respect. Human beings bear the responsibility of stewardship; one does not kill what one will not eat. The Yawanawa hunt solely to sustain their households and families, never just for the sake of killing. This relationship between the forest, the animals, and humankind is grounded in balance. The forest is preserved so its wildlife can find the food, water, and shelter needed to reproduce. Thus, the forest itself ensures human subsistence and enables people to take care of their elders. Everything within it serves a purpose, and every plant or animal embodies the sacred role of providing sustenance.

**AV:** A prime example of this was our conversation about the *Samaúma*[28] tree (*Ceiba pentandra*). You told me that it used to be very wild, but that over time, the Yawanawa began to engage in a dialogue with it, forging a friendship so they could help one another. Another demonstration of this respect is the reverence you showed when you spoke to us about the *muka* plant, which requires a responsible relationship. Western logic, on the other hand, commodifies nature: the *Samaúma*, for instance, can be viewed merely as timber for the city, while *muka* can be treated as an object of biochemical analysis...

**TMW:** The essence of *muka* eludes the white man's logic. It is composed of spirituality, ancestry, tradition, and living culture. While science today attempts to decipher the biochemical mechanisms behind *uni* visions, the challenge posed by *muka* is even greater. No laboratory or biochemical analysis can translate it; *muka* reveals itself only through spiritual study. The same holds true for the animals and the *Samaúma*—that giant that towers over our Amazon rainforest. It possesses magnificent timber and an imposing beauty, yet it also harbors its own dangers. Today, the *Samaúma* has become a powerful ally. Sitting beneath its canopy, partaking in *rume*, embracing the tree, and making it feel cherished at the ancestral altar—this is an act of reverence. It is a way of honoring tradition and the sacred moment. Ultimately, that is what it is all about: the profound relationship between human beings, the forest, and all its creatures.

**AV:** As you very well know, for over five hundred years the forest and its Indigenous peoples have faced the destructive impacts of colonization. Unfortunately, this cycle of violations persists through illegal mining, predatory logging, currently, oil exploration, and the unchecked expansion of agribusiness—evident in the conversion of land into pasture along the Gregório River to the borders of the Yawanawa territory. This reality not only triggers a severe socio-environmental crisis in the region but also compromises the balance of our Mother Earth. Europe, for instance, retains very little of its primary forests. Given this scenario, how can the Yawanawa world-configuration—which maintains an intrinsic relationship with the land—offer pathways to address this socio-environmental crisis?

**TMW:** From my perspective, preserving the forest is an absolute necessity. After all, the very reason why we live in demarcated territories is environmental. Today, not only the Yawanawa but all Indigenous peoples are forced to engage with the world of institutional politics, even against their will. We are compelled to participate in a system that is alien to us, electing governments and lawmakers through mandatory voting. Often, we rely on a politician's support and find ourselves obliged to vote for them. The only guarantee for our territories is related to the observance of the laws that the Brazilian government has created. It concerns our own existence as Indigenous people and our commitment to our ancestral traditions. Unfortunately, some of our traditional practices are getting lost. For example, some of our traditional foods have vanished from our daily lives and remained only in our memory. Yesterday, however, my wife prepared a special dish to honor that ancestral heritage: fish wrapped in leaves. The Brazilian government and any institutional authority have to

28 Samaúma (*Ceiba pentandra*) is one of the giant trees of the Amazon rainforest. It is about 70 meters height and is considered a sacred tree by many Indigenous groups in the Amazon rainforest.

re-evaluate its actions and ensure the security required to keep our culture alive. This means preserving and safeguarding our territory across its demarcated extension. We must pay attention to the real impact of the white man's policies in our villages. Today, the social projects of President Lula's administration include everyone, regardless of class or appearance. However, administrations change, and uncertainty remains. We do not know what the future holds or what will happen with policies regarding Indigenous people, that is, with our territory and the forest. We do not know what kind of decisions the white man will make.

**AV:** Some destructive actions are probably not based on white man's utilitarian perspective but rooted in his separation from the Earth. While the Indigenous worldview perceives the planet as a field of interconnections and natural elements as kin, Western modernity has severed the subject (exclusively human) from the object (inanimate nature). This has led to the Earth being treated merely as a source of raw materials to be exploited for the sake of economic growth. How can the Yawanawas traditional knowledge and practical actions help us to mitigate this process of division, instrumentalization, exploitation, and destruction?

**TMW:** First, the logic of life in the Yawanawa communities is not based on capitalist agriculture, commercial logging, or mining. Our focus is our own subsistence and the preservation of our land. Communal infrastructure is directly dependent on the forest—when the corresponding forest area has not been completely destroyed. In contrast to large-scale plantations of 10 to 20 hectares, Yawanawa agriculture relies on family-run subsistence plots—known as *roças*—cultivating crops such as bananas and manioc. How can we mitigate the destruction of the Amazon rainforest? The answer is simple: by preserving the integrity of the forest!

The capitalist world is drawing the Yawanawa in, and that creates contradictions. At times, we have been criticized because we are building houses with industrial aluminum roofs and processed lumber—elements that represent the very logic of exploitation that destroys our land. But there is no denying that these new materials made life much easier for our community. Previously, the Yawanawa used walking palm wood[29] for their house floors. It was extremely heavy to carry and required a great deal of effort to flatten. It also had thorns that would injure the feet of anyone walking on it. The walls were made of the little walking palm[30], and erecting a house of that size required felling about 50 palm trees. Harvesting walking palms for spans of six to eight meters was always hazardous, since splitting the trunks lengthwise compromised the structural integrity of the house. Furthermore, roofing a structure requires sacrificing up to thirty native palms. Today, we understand the impact of this practice: it is a crime against biodiversity. Every felled tree deprives wild pigs, agoutis and pacas of their food source. Our ancestors did this because they lacked the conditions we possess today. Preservation is now a matter of awareness and survival. The collaboration between Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge should be based on conscious management of the forest: taking from nature only what is necessary for subsistence, without excess. At the same time, we need to be active in supporting the forest and helping with its regeneration. For example, our river was heavily polluted, and we gradually built consensus on the need to remove the waste that reaches the village, such as paper and plastic. Today, we uphold the customs of the past and practice daily consumption based on actual needs. Thus, the cassava we harvest and the flour-making process we carry out serves the entire community. We do not supply outside markets and do we seek commercial profit, but we do not create obstacles to the businesses of the white man, either. This is how traditional peoples sustain themselves within a demarcated territory. If we were to plant rice and beans alongside manioc, deforestation would be inevitable, as it is impossible to cultivate everything together. Therefore, our answer to the State is this: a commitment to preservation.

**AV:** That is precisely what I wanted to ask you regarding these urban materials. They are not originally from this area but from some other forest. When we consider the pollution

29 *Paxiubão*, *Socratea exorrhiza*.

30 *Paxiubinha*, a smaller or younger variant of the walking palm tree.

of the river and the water you consume, or the engines and aluminum, it seems as though the city is gradually encroaching upon the forest. How do you deal with this impact? I ask this because, as you rightly mentioned, the walking palm grows here, completes its life cycle, and—upon decaying—returns to the earth through its own natural regeneration process. Aluminum, for instance, is a slow-degrading waste product. This is an urban problem that the city itself doesn't know how to solve. There is also the criticism from non-Indigenous people that you mentioned—a clear case of prejudice. They judge Indigenous people because the latter use urban materials. But if non-Indigenous people use materials that prove to be more durable, why shouldn't Indigenous people do the same? The question is: how can such things be adopted without harming or destroying the forest?

**TMW:** In the past, our people were unfamiliar with these industrialized products and materials, as well as with modern machines and tools that now transform and improve any Yawanawa setting. Following the demarcation of our land, dialogue with non-Indigenous people fostered the recognition of a shared humanity, rich in its diversity. From this exchange, mutual support for the preservation of our forest emerged. Nowadays we face the challenge of managing the new waste resulting from this contact—such as the aluminum accumulating in our villages—and translating this awareness into practical sustainability actions. In *Aldeia* Sagrada, there is a large trench—4 to 5 meters deep and 4 meters wide—used for waste disposal. Materials such as aluminum, plastics, batteries, fabric scraps, and iron are deposited there. We are currently seeking sustainable solutions to mitigate the environmental impact caused by non-biodegradable products. The dispersal of fuels and by-products into the ecosystem is inevitable. Generators release combustion byproducts into the air, while boat engines discharge fluids into the water. Ultimately, gasoline, diesel, and lubricating oils directly contaminate the rivers. Nowadays, we avoid drinking water from the river. We only take such risk in the depths of the forest, where civilization has never reached, and nature still reigns supreme. There, where only the traces of animals remain, the water is pure and harmless. Here, by the river, no one relies on its waters any longer. They are reserved solely for the ecosystem. Water for consumption comes from the city or directly from the well. The focus has shifted: our work is now devoted to cleaning up the forest, neutralizing carbon, and raising urgent awareness about waste management.

*What I sometime observe within the core of the Yawanawa family is a commodification of knowledge. It is not about valuing those who possess knowledge or have studied; rather, it is about commercializing the tradition in a superficial manner. This harms our culture.* — **TMW**

**AV:** Today, we are witnessing the expansion of centers devoted to disseminating and selling products rooted in Yawanawa tradition and spirituality to the global society. What is your position on this? Would you say the tradition is being adapted to fit the commercial models of the non-Indigenous market?

**TMW:** I prefer not to answer that question directly. I limit myself to speaking about what I participate in, what I carry out, and matters where I have the authority to act. What I sometime observe within the core of the Yawanawa family is a commodification of knowledge. It is not about valuing those who possess knowledge or have studied; rather, it is about commercializing the tradition in a superficial manner. This harms our culture. Currently, to preserve harmony and avoid unnecessary conflicts, many of our leaders—especially the most prominent ones in the territory—have chosen to distance themselves from this kind of issue. There is a body of knowledge that transcends time and is connected with our myths. This ancestral memory embodies honor, identity, and learning. This heritage cannot be reduced to a mere marketplace or a center for cultural commerce. Yet, I reject hasty judgment. The goal here is not profit from commodities but achieving dignity through survival. Only the right use of resources can ensure food on the table and balance in a world crying out for sustainability.

**AV:** How do you view the phenomenon of non-Indigenous who undergo traditional

forest diets and, upon returning to their home countries, begin conducting healing ceremonies for significant commercial gain? Where is the line between the legitimate dissemination of Yawanawa knowledge and cultural appropriation or commodification of Indigenous spirituality?

**TMW:** First of all, I wonder how we might eradicate this type of activity. It is a deceptive and irresponsible practice, and it lacks the legitimate authorization of ancestral knowledge. Even if we had the consent of elders or the greatest living shamans, the knowledge does not belong to an individual leader, but rather to the collective—to the Yawanawa. No one has the right to disseminate traditional knowledge without our authorization. The purported offering of this knowledge by those outside the community is a blatant fraud. Such practices are propagated by individuals lacking any grounding in Yawanawa ancestry, demonstrating a complete lack of cultural understanding and an inability to master the native language itself. I am opposed to the appropriation of Yawanawa rituals by *nawas* (non-Indigenous) who do not even speak the language. Without the original language, there is no connection to true spirituality—only an artificial reproduction. My position is clear: spirituality demands truth and respect for tradition.

**AV:** But wouldn't someone who has already completed the rigorous *muka* diet be authorized to conduct ceremonies?

**TMW:** Unfortunately, that is not permitted. I believe that spiritual strength is something that we cultivate for ourselves, and not for commercial purposes.

**AV:** Like me, many *nawas* venture into the forest in search of healing, wisdom, and new meaning in life. Yet we also carry the 'disease' of colonization—a reality particularly evident among Europeans. The urgent challenge lies in decolonizing minds, emotions, and actions, and breaking away from extractive logics—such as the practice of undertaking spiritual diets in the forest solely to commodify Yawanawa work in the outside world.

**TMW:** First of all, you do not have permission to appropriate this knowledge in an attempt to colonize it. The true process of decolonization lies in remaining conscious of who you are—tracing your own origins. This is what happens, for example, when people place themselves in my care for a week, a month, or even longer periods, undertaking profound diets such as the *nane* or the anaconda saliva diet. In truth, it is possible to live in the village for a year, but Yawanawa wisdom runs very deep. There are healers and *pajés* who devote their entire lives to this study before they are ready to lead spiritual work. How could someone who spends merely two weeks, a month or a few years in the forest master such knowledge? *Muka*, for instance, is a spiritual force one receives personally by planting the plant within one's own heart. Commercializing this spirituality is a grave mistake, and it is difficult to know how to guide someone who follows that path.

**AV:** On the one hand, I recognize the urgency of preserving the agency of Indigenous peoples and its *pajés*. On the other hand, I face an ethical-spiritual dilemma: if a non-Indigenous person has received healing and spiritual blessings, and someone turns to them for help, how or why should the door be closed to someone who is suffering based solely on 'ethnic' criteria?

**TMW:** I thought you had asked me about the process of mental decolonization...

**AV:** Yes, that too.

**TMW:** Mental decolonization is a process of deep healing. Upon arriving at the village, the *nawa* brings along spiritual and mental ailments—the result of the obligations, work, and exhausting pace of city life. Healing begins with centering oneself and reconnecting with the guardians of wisdom. The treatment involves periods of seclusion, medicinal baths, and ritual smudging, alongside medicines such as *sananga* (medicinal plant-based eye drops), *kapũ* (poisonous skin secretion of the frog *Phyllomedusa bicolor)*, and *uni*, preparing the body and mind for a new cycle of learning. For example, the application of *sananga* serves to open the path to learning. However, the true power of all these treatments lies in the diet. And what is a

diet in our culture? It is a special period dedicated to concentration and learning—a time when the student withdraws to absorb knowledge. When one undergoes this entire process while respecting its rules, one attains the clarity needed to see one's own reality with distinct sharpness. The restrictions of a diet are very decisive. What burdens the Yawanawa body and spirit, for instance? It is the *nawa* world, which introduced sugar, oil, and industrialized versions of staples such as rice, beans, and pasta. This shift toward packaged, chemically preserved products has created a toxic buildup that challenges the people's physical and spiritual health. Furthermore, preparing food in aluminum cookware poses risks, as the material can release toxic residues into the body—especially when the pots and pans are worn or improperly cleaned. This progressive contamination can compromise health and lead to illness. Fortunately, there are therapies and medical approaches capable of detoxifying the body. Therefore, sharing this knowledge is an act of responsibility. By raising awareness, we help prevent people from falling ill. When we help someone heal a pain based on our own tradition, we practice solidarity. However, when we transform knowledge into a market product, the level of responsibility rises. Selling knowledge demands rigorous study and a commitment to the truth. Without the solid foundation of continuous learning, the commerce of knowledge becomes fragile and unsustainable—for "lies have short legs". Ethics is the only foundation that ensures the longevity and true value of what we teach.

**AV:** Since we are talking about 'mental decolonization', how could you describe the logic of Yawanawa thought? How can we understand and translate this way of thinking associated with the rich and manifold intelligence of the forest?

**TMW:** Yawanawa thought is deeply connected to the forest, as I mentioned before. The Yawanawa work with water and animals—especially predators, such as the snake. Is the snake tame? Is it trustworthy? Certainly not. You do not trust it, but you learn to work with its energy. It shapes, teaches, and imparts power. In the same way, no one hugs a jaguar; it would attack you and eat you up. Yet, there is a profound respect for that force. Spiritually, we never leave the jaguar outside; we always carry it with us. It is treacherous, yet it dwells within us as a force, so relentless that, when evil approaches, it attacks the affliction—tearing it apart and destroying it. Human beings have the task of channeling that energy and learning to contend with both the power of the jaguar and the mystery of the serpents. We also work in harmony with water, a true phenomenon indispensable to life. A Yawanawa individual, for instance, dives three or four meters deep to fish. With all that volume of water overhead, he knows he cannot breathe, or he risks death. Water, therefore, presents a great contradiction: it is vital to us, yet it can also be deadly. The Yawanawa also work with ice and *kene* (traditional graphic patterns). They employ these processes because water possesses *kene*, and ice serves to soothe illness by cooling the body afflicted by the ailment. Inhabiting these waters are scaleless fish—featuring distinctive markings, fins, and spines—as well as snakes, with its painted patterns, and the caiman (known as *seina*), which carries a form of colic within its own body. Everything harmful is purified and absorbed by the waters. The electric fish carries a heavy charge—an intensity difficult to translate into Portuguese. The Yawanawa language can very well convey the essence of this creature: the danger and the strength that dwell in it. This fish is in a state of constant tension, and water is precisely that: a living force, a power that does not permit any comfort. The Yawanawa work with water and earth. What is our role regarding the earth? It is one of stewardship. Our earth is the great mother that gives rise to everything that flies, walks, and leaps in the forest. We have a deep understanding of the events related to the earth; we know that, in the end, everything it generates and produces will one day return to it. Everything revolving

*What burden the Yawanawa body and spirit? It is the nawa world, which introduced sugar, oil, and industrialized versions of staples. This shift toward packaged, chemically preserved products has created a toxic buildup that challenges the people's physical and spiritual health.* — **TMW**

around human life is time. The white man fails to understand that time exists as a possibility of respectful labor. Instead, he turned existence into commerce, exploiting others under the false pretense of possessing knowledge. How can ceremonies be conducted without this knowledge regarding water, earth, and the sun? Take the sun, for instance: we normally walk beneath its heat. However, those who undergo the sacred process involving *muka* and the anaconda's saliva experience an intense spiritual and physical transformation. Consequently, they can no longer expose themselves to the sun; its light burns, it can scorch them from within and trigger an uncontrollable heat. There is a story of the moon and the ice—the moon governs the months and dictates menstruation. There is a song for the moon, in which it is depicted as capable of freezing time and all things that are under its rule. Do you understand? The white man will never grasp this. You will need to return again and again to attain this knowledge. And you will find all of this preserved within this house.

**AV:** Monotheistic religions—such as, Christianity, for example—hold that, after death, humanity ascends to a plane superior to Earth, and by extension to the forest. Authors like Ailton Krenak and Davi Kopenawa criticize this view, identifying it not only as a construct of the white man based on a universal criterion of a transcendent and absolute God but also as an attempt to exercise their domination over Indigenous people. For these Indigenous thinkers, the universalist idea of God and the notion that the earthly world is imperfect ultimately legitimizes the destruction of the forest, which is erroneously viewed as disposable in light of the promised paradise of an eternal life.

**TMW:** I prefer to maintain a neutral stance on this matter. As a Yawanawa, I deeply value the sacred knowledge our ancestors left us. But at the same time I acknowledge the importance and validity of the white man's intellectual and religious background. The world is diversity. Each Indigenous people in the state of Acre, for instance, possesses its own wisdom and its own worldview, which eventually differs from that of the other Indigenous groups. The Yawanawa do not know what the future holds or what the destiny of the spirit of a person is after death. We do not know if there is a more suitable, beautiful, or rewarding place for the dead. Only the Creator of the entire universe—of earth and of space—knows this. Now, Yawanawa mythology explains the creation of *uni* through a myth: *Ruwa* was buried, and from his grave, *yutxi* (pepper), *nawe* (tobacco), and *shupa* (datura) began to sprout. Beside his arms, the *uni* vine grew. Upon dying, he transcended to the *Yama Veru Yuxi Nawahu*. This sacred place—the destination of the spirits that inhabit the human gaze—is what we call heaven. It is a celestial expanse, the gathering ground for the souls of the dead. For the Yawanawa, it is not a religious heaven, but a space. There, pain, disease, and suffering, are absent. Only peace and harmony reign. In that realm, the elders—though devoid of physical matter, withered, and ethereal—remain fully alive in spirit. This is the mythical space preserved in Yawanawa memory, a sacred dimension that transcends our concrete reality.

**AV:** What paths remain to be followed in order to restore a relationship of deep respect for the forest?

**TMW:** This question is very important because it touches the heart of our commitment to the forest. We need to preserve the forest through careful cultivation and management. The destruction that has occurred in these territories can be reversed. They can regenerate themselves. Look at our example: the Yawanawa people created hundreds of small agricultural plots to sustain themselves, but they never cleared land for cattle or pasture. That kind of devastation is not part of our history. In the *Aldeia* Sagrada, for example, the area that used to be a cultivated clearing is now a living forest, just like here. The trees are the same height, and even though the vegetation is slightly different—lighter and more open—it is still, in its own way, a dense, closed forest. So, what must we do to maintain respect for the forest? It is a constant exercise in preservation.

**AV:** Do you have a message for the *nawas*—non-Indigenous people?

**TMW:** I, Tika, have lived my life here on Earth within the Yawanawa territory. It is my intention to continue—beyond mere words—explaining our people's relationship with nature,

and I invite friends to join us on this journey. Those brothers and sisters who travel the world and know our ancestral history can bring support, dignity, and sustainability to the Yawanawa family. For only in this way will we continue to preserve what is ours and uphold what stands strong in our home. I am Tika. My purpose is to get to know this place better so that I can contribute to the preservation of the forest. Inspired by the breath of this forest, I feel honored, as a son of the Yawanawa, to protect our land and our territory. It is my wish that our friends may come to know the forest and share their knowledge, joining forces and offering support so that we may continue to protect and care for it. May this space be a living source of learning, healing, harmony, and wisdom for our entire Yawanawa family, for those who walk alongside us, and for all brothers and sisters around the world. We are here with open arms, awaiting a visit from each of you. •

INTERSTICES: CENTER FOR TRANSVERSAL THINKING

INTERSTICES-CTT.COM

*Transversal Paths* use textual or image sources either on permission from the related authors or which are free from copyright. In any exceptional case to the contrary, Alain Daniélou Foundation and Interstices, Center for Transversal Thinking are ready to acknowledge the proper source or remove the related text/picture, used for purely cultural and non-commercial purposes.

Some views and opinions expressed in the essays published in *Transversal Paths* do not necessarily represent those of the Alain Daniélou Foundation and of Interstices, Center for Transversal Thinking.

Intellectual supervision: Adrián Navigante
Editorial work: Adrián Navigante, Kenneth Hurry and Amanda Viana de Sousa
Design: Valentina Barsotti / Takk.studio
Technical support: Walter Beschmout, Christian Braut, Anand Mishra

For contributions and further questions, please contact :
info@interstices-ctt.org
© 2026 - Interstices

ISSN 2944-0807

ALAIN DANIÉLOU Foundation

interstices
center for transversal thinking