

REPRESENTATION, RE-PRESENTATION, OR ONTOLOGY IN AMAZONIA AND NEW GUINEA?

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Introduction

This paper is a heuristic evaluation of a potential link between Amazonian and New Guinean musical cosmologies that employ voice modifiers to represent spirit voices. It is a work in progress, weighted towards New Guinea, where I lived for six years. All of my information about the Amazon, on the other hand, comes from anthropological and ethnomusicological publications. What makes the Amazonian literature so compelling are its mediated forms—the sound and video recordings that enable one to enter into the experience of rituals in a more profound way than would be possible through words alone.

First I will discuss the parallels between some Amazonian and New Guinean musical cultures, and then consider the multivalent use of the Nekení term for ‘spirit.’ One of its uses involves the abandoning of logic (from a mainstream European perspective). In conclusion, I propose a possible shaping force that both of the regions share: a rainforest soundscape.

Parallels Between Amazonia and New Guinea

At the beginning of the 20th century, when anthropologists began digesting the first ethnographic work from Amazonia and New Guinea, they were taken by the remarkable parallels between societies in the two regions. Both had systems based around a men’s house, excluded women from paramount religious practices, and had similar myths about the history of control of the spiritual power. (I use the term ‘religious’ to refer to a formalized cosmology that has elements specifically marked as different from mundane things.) There are two apparent causes for such parallels: diffusion or polygenesis. In 1920, anthropologist Robert Lowie argued for diffusion, but scholars lost interest in diffusion studies soon afterwards (Gregor and Tuzin 2001a:1). Likewise, with the retreat from comparative methods, the question of polygenesis remained largely untouched until 1996, when Thomas Gregor and Donald Tuzin organized a conference to explore the parallels in light of the now hugely expanded body of ethnographic work conducted over the course of the 20th century. In order to make the project manageable, they focused on gender, an ideal topic because it constitutes one of the main forces that shape both the secular and sacred institutions of small-scale societies in the two regions.

My own interest in the parallels took a leap forward when I obtained Luis Fernandez’ recording of Enauené-Naué music from Brazil and played excerpts of it to Serieng villagers in New Guinea, where I was conducting my fieldwork. The Seriengs were amazed and delighted to discover music that they said was just like theirs, yet it came from a distant part of the world. They told their friends from other villages about it, and a few leaders came to my house and asked to listen to the recordings. Those visitors were also surprised to hear such similar music, and they sometimes named particular songs that they felt were the same.

From an ethnomusicological standpoint, the most striking feature of the similarities is the use of voice modifiers. Such instruments are rare in the world, and the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (now *Grove Music Online*) is just now planning to add an entry for them,

for the first time. They are found mostly in Africa, the Amazon, New Guinea, and Siberia. To put things in perspective it is important to note the diversity of cultures in the two regions under consideration. New Guinea has approximately 1,100 languages, of which perhaps 100 use voice modifiers. The Amazon basin has approximately 200 languages, of which I have not been able to estimate how many use voice modifiers, though it appears to be a relatively small percentage.

Three of the Amazonian cultures with strong parallels to New Guinea are the Enauené-Naué, Nhambiquara, and Arara. Enauené-Naué men use voice modifiers they call *toreukuri*. Fernandez' notes suggest that the term '*toreukuri*' refers to both a large instrument played with buzzed lips (making it a trumpet rather than a voice-modifier, unless the voice is employed simultaneously and is louder than the buzzed-lip sound), and a presumably smaller cracked tube (Fernandez 1995:16, track 2 at 2:32, and track 10; see also Valadão 2007: at 36:18-37:18). Nhambiquara men represent spirit voices using voice modifiers whose sound is nearly identical to the smaller *toreukuri* (Fernandez 2005:33-34 and track 19); unfortunately, I could not find the Nhambiquara name for those instruments. The similarly named *tereret*, a voice modifier of the Arara people of the Amazon, sounds much like the larger instrument described by Fernandez (Estival 1995:track 12). Neken men of Papua New Guinea employ both a larger instrument (discussed below), sounding similar to the larger Brazilian examples, and a small bamboo tube that is cracked in order to produce buzzing sounds almost identical to the smaller Brazilian voice modifiers (Reigle 2001:CD2 track 1 at 6:55-7:55). This latter instrument is called *tereri*, a name remarkably close to the terms used in Brazil.

This extraordinary similarity of nomenclature may stem from an onomatopoetic imitation of the instruments' sounds, but it could also support the hypothesis of diffusion rather than polygenesis-in other words, that the instruments shared a common origin. Cognates within instrument categories (voice modifiers) are surprising enough to merit investigation, but it is the existence of multiple parallel factors that suggests a relationship across the two regions. One of these factors is similarity in the sounds produced, including timbre, melody, and speech modification.

In addition to cracked-tube modifiers, other types of voice modifiers appear within a single culture. Among the rarest types of voice modifiers are those made from gourds-a material used for such instruments only in a few places in Africa, a few in New Guinea (Reigle 2001), and a few in the Amazon (Fernandez 1995:17, 30, and track 4). While the Enauené-Naué *aluahkó* consists of a single calabash approximately half a meter in length (Fernandez 1995:30), the *kaapu naing*, or 'mother of the spirits' gourd voice modifiers from the Rai Coast of Papua New Guinea are constructed quite differently, with specially grown elongated gourds glued together to form a one-meter conical tube (Reigle 2001:CD2 track 1 at 3:45).

The important thing about the voice modifiers discussed here is that they constitute a focal point in the traditional religion of both the Amazonian and New Guinean cultures that use them. The men use them to produce spirit voices. For groups such as the Nhambiquara of the Amazon and the Neken of New Guinea, the sacred instruments are kept hidden from women.

Representation, Re-presentation, or Ontology?

Symbol—Enactment (requires inviting spirits)—Existence (quantum mechanics; string theory)

The location of spiritual power in the instruments is not the only parallel between these Amazonian and New Guinean cultures. Some of them share similar myths regarding the location of spiritual power. For example, first the power was held by women who controlled the musical instruments; they did not take care of them properly, so the women willingly gave them to the men, who in turn forbade the women from seeing the instruments.

I observed Nekeni religious practice between 1988 and 1997. Their term *Kaapu* has four major meanings: ancestor spirits, sacred instruments, sacred songs, and the religious system itself. Men use the sacred instruments to create spirit voices, but in doing so, the voice absolutely is the voice of the ancestors. This causes a problem for me, because a thing cannot be simultaneously another, different thing. At least that is the basic assumption underlying the European philosophical tradition that I inherited. European philosophers use the term ‘logic of essences,’ a type of modal logic, to describe the concept that ‘everything is what it is and not another thing.’

When I pointed out to Nekeni men that it was their own voice that sounded through the sacred instruments, they replied that, yes, they knew that, but it was nonetheless the ancestors’ voice. In other words, it was not both theirs and their ancestor’s voice simultaneously, but rather it was completely their ancestors’ voice, regardless of the fact that they used their voice to create it.

This type of simultaneous being is an important topic in anthropology, but seems to have fallen by the wayside in mainstream European philosophy. While reading a book by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (1971), one of the chief investigators of this apparent discrepancy between European and early-technological societies’ worldviews, I was struck by how well the descriptions he assembled matched the ideas I had witnessed in New Guinea.

Returning to the term *Kaapu*, in a similar fashion, the different meanings it takes on do not seem to function merely as multivalence, but rather, they indicate complete essences that may be revealed under certain circumstances or from particular perspectives. In order to clarify this idea, it may be helpful to consider the use of the word *Kaapu* under three guises. First, Nekenis use it in everyday speech when they want to refer to their system of religion; in this use it acts as representation, both as the name of a particular thing, and through the associations it conjures, such as the lived experiences of ritual performance, everyday discussions, etcetera. Second, there is a heightened sense of meanings during the ritual periods when the spirits are present. At those times, the entire community acts in a numinous climate—a feeling that the spirits may cause benefit or harm to everyone and therefore each person must behave in a respectful way. During such times, *Kaapu* seems to re-present itself; the ancestor spirits once again enter and affect the mundane world. The third type of experience, I believe, is that of the men who use the voice modifiers to create the ancestors’ voices. Those men insist that the sounds are the voices of ancestors, while at the same time acknowledging that they are using their own voice with which to sing through the voice modifiers.

This third type of experience moves the phenomenon out of the realm of representation, and into the territory of ontology. Holding the view that the voices are those of ancestor spirits, while at the same time acknowledging the role of the living human in their creation confounds the European logic of essences. Yet a number of thinkers have explored this territory from both science and humanities perspectives. For example, anthropologist Roy Wagner applied the concept of the hologram to his New Guinea research in his book *Symbols That Stand for Themselves*. He developed the idea further in a later book subtitled *Holographic Worldview in New Guinea and Its Meaning and Significance for the World of Anthropology*, wherein he humorously defined holography as: “The exact equivalence, or comprehensive identity, of part and whole in any human contingency, definitive of the world of subjective extensions, the imaginary spaces of human reason and explanation. ‘A perfect scale model of all the mistakes to be made in trying to figure it out’” (Wagner 2001:253).

The more scientific approaches to this breach of modal logic include quantum mechanics and string theory. Other relevant perspectives include Ken Wilber’s four-part model of holons and the Buddhist fourfold perspective of a thing: it is, is not, both is and is not, and neither is nor is not.

Conclusion

The type of logic that I witnessed in New Guinea has extraordinary parallels in Amazonia. They constitute just one part of a set of similarities that includes gender, social structure, musical instruments, and cosmology. Those parallels led anthropologists Gregor and Tuzin to dub the set of widely separated cultures as ‘Melazonia.’ After their conference comparing gender across Amazonia and Melanesia, they posited environmental factors as the shaping force that led to many of the similarities, but suggested that the mythological similarities, including the forms in which the cultures represent them, might be the least shaped by the environment (Gregor and Tuzin 2001b:337-38). After having discussed the parallels between the music cosmologies, we may now ask whether the environment may have led to or shaped the invention of voice modifier traditions.

Relying solely on the basis of observation (using only aural spectral analysis), it appears possible that the unique soundscape of tropical rainforests may indeed have influenced the forms chosen to represent spirit voices. The sonic environment contains a large proportion of high frequency components, such as the sounds from insects, birds, rain, and wind, as they reflect off shiny leaves. The choice, in this situation, of the human voice altered and amplified through a voice modifier provides the expediciencies of both increased volume and positioning within a relatively unsaturated part of the frequency spectrum. (For an example of the soundscape behind an actual performance with spirits present, please hear Reigle 2001: CD2 track 1 at 0:00 and 6:00-6:45). Support for such a thesis comes from the fact that the three regions where voice modifiers constitute a music-cosmology, namely Africa, Amazonia, and New Guinea, lie within the tropics. On the other hand, the tropical location raises the question, why didn’t all tropical cultures use voice modifiers?

To answer that question requires undertaking a fuller exploration of Victor Grauer’s hypothesis that highly valued music components may have continued across extraordinarily

long time periods (Grauer 2006). Our increasing understanding of human migrations through the use of genetic research may also provide an essential component of the necessary information on which to base a more definitive proposition regarding the possibility of monogenesis and diffusion. Until accounts of all Amazonian and New Guinean music cultures become available, however, the parallels that have surfaced to date merely provide a tantalizing beacon calling for further exploration. Meanwhile, some of the music practices in Amazonia and New Guinea demonstrate the potential for a shared view concerning the representation, enactment, and being of the spirit world.

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