

PART ONE

Trompe l'Oeil Nature

Any attempt to demonstrate that nature exists would be absurd; for, manifestly, there are many natural beings.

ARISTOTLE, *Physics* 193A3–4

*Vi que não há Natureza
Que Natureza não existe,
Que há montes, vales, planícies,
Que há árvores, flores, ervas,
Que há rios e pedras,
Mas que não há um todoa que isso pertença,
Que um conjunto real e verdadeiro
E uma doença das nossas ideias.*

*A Natureza é partes sem um todo
Isto é talvez o tal mistério de que falam.*

I saw that there was no Nature,
That Nature does not exist,
That there are mountains, valleys, plains,
That there are trees, flowers, grasses,
That there are streams and stones,
But that there's not a whole to which this belongs,
That a real and true ensemble
Is a disease of our ideas.

Nature is parts without a whole.
This perhaps is that mystery they speak of.

Fernando Pessoa, *Poemas de Alberto Caetano*

Configurations of Continuity

It was in the lower reaches of the Kapawi, a silt-laden river in upper Amazonia, that I began to question how self-evident the notion of nature is. Yet nothing in particular distinguished Chumpi's house from other habitat sites that I had earlier visited in this region of the borderlands between Ecuador and Peru. As was the Achuar custom, the dwelling roofed by palms was set in the middle of a clearing mostly covered by manioc plants and bordered on one side by the rushing river. A few steps across the garden brought one to the edge of the forest, a dark wall of tall trees encircling the paler border of banana trees. The Kapawi was the only way out from this horizonless circular space. It was a tortuous and interminable route and it had taken a daylong journey to reach Chumpi's house from a similar clearing inhabited by his closest neighbors. In between lay tens of thousands of hectares of trees, moss, and bracken, dozens of millions of flies, ants, and mosquitoes, herds of peccaries, troops of monkeys, macaws and toucans, and maybe a jaguar or two: in short a vast nonhuman proliferation of forms and beings left to live independently according to their own laws of cohabitation. Around midafternoon, Chumpi's wife, Metekash, was bitten by a snake as she emptied the kitchen waste into the undergrowth overlooking the river. Dashing toward us, her eyes wide with pain and terror, she shrieked, "A lancehead [the name of this snake], a lancehead! I'm dead, I'm dead!" The whole household took up the cry, "A lancehead, a lancehead! It has killed her, killed her!" I injected Metekash with a serum and she went to rest in a small confinement hut of the kind customarily erected in such circumstances. Such an accident was not uncommon in this region, especially in the course of tree felling, and the Achuar were resigned, with a kind of fatalism, to the possibility of a mortal

outcome. All the same, it was, apparently, unusual for a lancehead snake to venture so close to a house.

Chumpi seemed as distressed as his wife. Seated on his sculpted wooden stool, his face furious and upset, he was muttering in a monologue in which I eventually became involved. No, Metekash's snakebite did not result purely from chance; it was vengeance sent by Jurijri, one of the "mothers of game" who watch over the destinies of the forest animals. After a long period when his only means of hunting had been a blowpipe, my host, by dint of bartering, had eventually managed to lay his hands on a shotgun, and using this shotgun, he had, on the previous day, effected a massacre of woolly monkeys. No doubt dazzled by the power of his weapon, he had fired at random into the group, killing three or four animals and wounding several more. He had brought home only three monkeys, leaving one mortally wounded, lodged in the bifurcation of a large branch. Some of the fleeing monkeys, peppered by shot, were now suffering helplessly or might already have expired before being able to consult their monkey-shaman. By killing, almost wantonly, more animals than were necessary to provide for his family and by not bothering about the fate of those that he had wounded, Chumpi had transgressed the hunters' ethic and had broken the implicit agreement that linked the Achuar people with the spirits that protected game. Prompt reprisals had duly followed.

Endeavoring, somewhat clumsily, to dissipate the guilt that was troubling my host, I pointed out that the harpy eagle and the jaguar have no qualms about killing monkeys, that life depends on hunting, and that, in the forest, every creature ends up as food for another. But, clearly, I had not understood at all.

Woolly monkeys, toucans, howler monkeys—all the creatures that we kill in order to eat—are persons, just as we are. The jaguar is likewise a person, but is a solitary killer that respects nothing. We, the "complete persons," must respect those that we kill in the forest, for they are, as it were, our relatives by marriage. They live together among their own relatives; nothing they do is by chance; they talk among themselves; they listen to what we say; they intermarry in a proper fashion. In vendettas, we too kill relatives by marriage, but they are still relatives. They too can wish to kill us. Likewise with woolly monkeys: we kill them for food, but they are still relatives.

The innermost convictions that an anthropologist forges regarding the nature of social life and the human condition often result from a very particular ethnographic experience acquired while living among a few thousand individuals who have managed to instill in him doubts so deep concerning what he had previously taken for granted that his entire energy is then devoted to

analyzing them in a systematic fashion. That is what happened in my own case when, as time passed and after many conversations with the Achuar, the ways in which they were related to natural beings gradually became clearer.¹ These Indians living on both sides of the frontier between Ecuador and Peru differ little from the other tribes that make up the Jivaro group, to whom they are linked through both their language and their culture, when they declare that most plants and animals possess a soul (*wakan*) similar to that of humans. This constitutes a faculty that classifies them as “persons” (*aents*) in that it provides them with a reflexive awareness and intentionality that enable them to experience emotions and exchange messages with both their peers and also members of other species, including humans. This extralinguistic communication is made possible by the recognized ability of a *wakan* soundlessly to convey thoughts and desires to the soul of another being, thereby modifying the latter’s state of mind and behavior, sometimes without it realizing this. For this purpose humans have at their disposal a vast collection of magic incantations (*anent*) by means of which they are able, from a distance, to affect not only their fellows but also plants, animals, spirits, and even certain artifacts. Conjugal harmony, good relations with relatives and neighbors, successful hunting, the making of fine pottery and effective curare (a hunting poison), a garden filled with a wide variety of thriving plants: all these things depend on the relationships that the Achuar have managed to establish with many different interlocutors, both human and nonhuman—relations that ensure that these others are well disposed to them, thanks to the power of their *anent*.

For the Achuar, technical know-how is indissociable from an ability to create an intersubjective ambience in which regulated relations between one person and another flourish: relations between a hunter, animals, and the spirits that are the masters of hunted game; between the women, the garden plants, and the mythical figure that engendered the cultivated species in the first place and continues to the present day to ensure their vitality. Far from being no more than prosaic food-producing places, the forest and the cultivated plots constitute theaters of a subtle sociability within which, day after day, humans engage in cajoling beings distinguishable from humans only by their different physical aspects and their lack of language. However, the forms of this sociability differ depending on whether it is directed toward plants or toward animals. The women, who are the mistresses of the gardens to which they devote much of their time, address their cultivated plants as though they are children that need to be guided with a firm hand toward maturity. This mothering relationship is explicitly modeled on the guardianship that Nunkui, the spirit of the gardens, provides for the plants that she herself ini-

tially created. Meanwhile, the men, for their part, regard an animal that they hunt as a brother-in-law. This is an unstable and tricky relationship that demands mutual respect and circumspection. Political coalitions are in general based upon alliances with relatives by marriage, but these are also the most immediate enemies in vendettas. Blood relatives and relatives by marriage constitute the two mutually exclusive categories that govern the social classification of the Achuar and determine their relationships with one another; and the opposition between the two is reproduced in the conduct prescribed toward nonhumans. For the women, their plants are blood relatives; for the men, animals are relatives by marriage: the natural beings thus become real social partners.

But in these circumstances, is the description of “natural beings” any more than a linguistic convenience? Is there any place for nature in a cosmology that confers most of the attributes of human beings upon animals and plants? Can one speak of the appropriation or transformation of natural resources when the very activities favoring subsistence are regarded as one form of a multiplicity of individual pairings with humanized elements in the biosphere? Can one even describe as a “wild space” this forest that is barely touched by the Achuar, yet that they regard as an immense garden that is carefully cultivated by some spirit? A thousand leagues distant from Verlaine’s “fierce and taciturn god,” here nature is no transcendent element nor simply an object that needs to be socialized. Rather, it is a subject in a social relationship. It is an extension of the world of the homestead, and in truth it is domesticated even in its most inaccessible reaches.

The Achuar certainly draw distinctions between the entities by which the world is peopled. But the hierarchy of animate and inanimate objects that results is not based upon the degrees of perfection of the beings in question or upon the differences in their appearance or any progressive accumulation of their respective intrinsic properties. Rather, it is based upon the variations in the modes of communication that are made possible by an apprehension of perceived qualities that are unequally distributed. In that the category of “persons” includes spirits, plants, and animals, all of which are endowed with a soul, this cosmology does not discriminate between human beings and non-human beings. All that it does is create a hierarchical order according to the levels of the exchange of information that is reputed to be possible. The Achuar themselves obviously occupy the peak of this pyramid: they see one another and communicate in the same language. Dialogue is also possible with members of the other Jivaro tribes that surround them and whose dialects are more or less mutually intelligible, although it should be recognized that misunderstandings—either fortuitous or deliberate—do occur. With Spanish-

speaking whites, as with neighboring peoples speaking the Quichua language, and also with ethnologists, the Achuar do meet and communicate, provided a common language exists. But mastery of that language is in many cases imperfect on the part of the interlocutors whose maternal language it is not; and this introduces the possibility of a semantic discordance that places in some doubt any correspondence between the faculties of the two parties that would set them both on the same level of reality. The further one moves away from the domain of "complete persons" (*penke aents*), who are defined principally by their linguistic aptitude, the more distinctions become emphasized. For instance, humans recognize plants and animals that, if they possess a soul, are themselves capable of recognizing humans. But although the Achuar can speak to them, thanks to their *anent* incantations, they do not immediately receive a response, for this can be communicated only through dreams. The same applies to spirits and certain mythological heroes. These are attentive to what is said to them, but in general they are invisible in their original form and so can be fully engaged with only in the course of dreams or hallucinogenic trances.

"Persons" able to communicate are also arranged in a hierarchy according to the degree of perfection of the social norms that govern the various communities to which they belong. Some nonhumans are very close to the Achuar because they are reputed to respect matrimonial rules identical to their own. Such is the case of the Tsunki river spirits and a number of species of game (e.g., woolly monkeys, toucans) and cultivated plants (e.g., manioc, groundnuts). On the other hand, there are some animals that enjoy sexual promiscuity and so constantly reject the principle of exogamy: howler monkeys and dogs, for example. The lowest level of social integration is occupied by solitary creatures: Iwianch spirits, who embody the souls of the dead and roam through the forest alone, and also the great predators, such as jaguars and anacondas. Yet, however distant they may seem from the laws of ordinary civility, all these solitary beings are the associates of shamans, who use them to spread misfortune or to oppose their own enemies. Although they are positioned on the boundaries of communal life, these harmful beings are not considered wild, because the masters whom they serve are included in society.

Does this mean that the Achuar would not recognize any entity as natural within their own ambience? Not exactly. The great social continuum that includes both humans and nonhumans is not entirely inclusive, for some elements in the environment communicate with no one, since they do not possess souls of their own. Most insects and fish, grasses, mosses, and brackens, and pebbles and rivers thus remain outside the social sphere and outside the network of intersubjectivity. In their mechanical and generic existence they

perhaps correspond to what we call “nature.” But does that justify our continuing to use this notion to designate a segment of the world that, for the Achuar, is incomparably more restricted than what we understand by that word? In modern thought, furthermore, “nature” only has meaning when set in opposition to human works, whether one chooses to call these “culture,” “society,” or “history,” to use the language of philosophy and the social sciences, or “anthropized space,” “technical mediation,” or “*oikumene*,” to use a more specialized terminology. A cosmology in which most plants and animals share all or some of the faculties, behavior, and moral codes ordinarily attributed to human beings is in no sense covered by the criteria of any such opposition.

Do the Achuar perhaps constitute an exceptional case, one of the picturesque anomalies that ethnography occasionally discovers in some remote corner of the planet?² Have I, out of a lack of perspicacity or a desire to be original, not been able or not wished to see the actual way in which they treat that dichotomy between nature and society? Just a few hundred kilometers to the north, in the Amazonian forest of eastern Colombia, the Makuna Indians present an even more radical version of a theory according to which the world is resolutely nondualist.³

Like the Achuar, the Makuna classify human beings, plants, and animals as “people” (*masa*) whose main attributes—mortality, social and ceremonial life, intentionality, and knowledge—are in every way identical. Within this community, distinctions among living beings are based on the particular characteristics that mythical origins, diets, and modes of reproduction confer upon each class of beings. They are not based on the greater or lesser proximity of those classes to the pinnacle of achievement that the Makuna would exemplify. The interaction between animals and human beings is likewise conceived as a relation of affinity, although this is slightly different from the Achuar model, given that among the Makuna a hunter regards his prey as a potential marriage partner rather than as a brother-in-law. However, the Makuna ontological classifications are far more flexible than those of the Achuar, by reason of a faculty of metamorphosis that is attributed to all: humans can become animals, animals can change into humans, and animals of one species can change into animals of another species. Their taxonomic grasp of reality is thus always contextual and relative, for the permanent swapping of appearances makes it impossible to attribute stable identities to the environment’s living components.

The sociability that the Makuna ascribe to nonhumans is thus richer and more complex than that recognized by the Achuar. Just like the Indians themselves, animals live in communities, in “longhouses” that tradition situates

at the heart of certain rapids or inside hills that are precisely mapped. They cultivate manioc gardens, move about in canoes, and, led by their chiefs, perform rituals every bit as elaborate as those of the Makuna themselves. The visible form of animals is really just a disguise. When they get home, they shed their appearance and deck themselves in ceremonial feathers and ornaments, thus ostensibly becoming the “people” that they have never ceased to be even as they swam in the rivers or roamed through the forest. This knowledge that the Makuna have relating to the double life led by animals is part of the teaching dispensed by their shamans, who are the cosmic mediators to whom society delegates the care of relations between the various communities of living beings. However, the premises upon which this knowledge is based are shared by one and all. Although they are, in part, esoteric, they nevertheless structure the conception of their environment that all the nonshamans share, and they dictate the manner in which the Makuna interact with that environment.

Many cosmologies analogous to those of the Achuar and the Makuna have been reported from the forest regions of the lowlands of South America.⁴ Despite clearly detectable differences in their internal organization, all these cosmologies, without exception, draw no clear ontological distinctions between, on the one hand, humans and, on the other, numerous animal and plant species. Most of the entities that people the world are interconnected in a vast continuum inspired by unitary principles and governed by an identical regime of sociability. Relations between humans and nonhumans in fact appear to be no different from the relations that obtain between one human community and another. They are partly defined by the utilitarian constraints of subsistence, but they adopt different forms that are peculiar to each of the tribes and thereby serve to differentiate them. The Yukuna, a group speaking an Arawak language who are adjacent to the Makuna of Colombian Amazonia, provides a good illustration.⁵ Like their neighbors who speak a Tukano language, the Yukuna have developed preferential associations with particular species of animals and particular varieties of the cultivated plants that provide them with their main foodstuffs. The mythical origin of the Yukuna and, in the case of the animals, the houses that these share are all situated within the limits of the Yukuna tribal territory. To the shamans falls the task of supervising the ritual regeneration of these species—species that are, in contrast, prohibited for the Tukano tribes that surround the Yukuna. Each tribal group is thus responsible for protecting the specific populations of the plants and animals that provide its nourishment. And this division of tasks helps to define local identities and systems of interethnic relations of the various tribal groups, for these vary according to their links with different nonhumans.

If the sociability of humans and that of animals and plants are so inti-

mately connected in Amazonia, that is because their respective forms of collective organization stem from a common model that is quite flexible and that makes it possible to describe interactions between nonhumans by using the named categories that structure relations between humans or that represent some relations between humans on the model of symbiotic relations between other species. In the latter case, which is rarer, the relationship is not designated or described explicitly, since its characteristics are reputed to be familiar to everyone, thanks to their generally shared botanical and zoological knowledge. Among the Secoya, for example, dead Indians are thought to perceive the living in two different forms: they see men as oropendola birds and women as Amazon parrots.⁶ This dichotomy, which organizes the social and symbolic construction of sexual identities, is based upon the ethological and morphological characteristics peculiar to the two species; and the classificatory function of those characteristics thus becomes clear, since the differences in the appearance and behavior of nonhumans are used to emphasize the anatomical and physiological differences between human men and women. Conversely, the Yagua of Peruvian Amazonia have elaborated a system for classifying plants and animals that is based on the relations between species, according to how they are defined by various degrees of consanguinity, friendship, or hostility.⁷ The use of social categories to define relations of proximity, symbiosis, or competition between natural species is particularly interesting here in that it largely extends to include the plant kingdom. Thus, big trees maintain a hostile relationship: they provoke one another in fratricidal duels to see which will be the first to give way. Hostile relations likewise prevail between bitter manioc and sweet manioc, with the former seeking to contaminate the latter with its toxicity. Palm trees, on the other hand, maintain more pacific relations of an avuncular or cousinhood type, depending on the degree of resemblance between the species. The Yagua—like the Aguaruna Jivaros⁸—interpret morphological resemblances between wild plants and cultivated ones as indicating a kinship relationship, although they do not claim, on that account, that the similarity indicates that the two species share a common ancestor.

The diversity of the classificatory indicators used by Amerindians to account for the relations between organisms shows just how flexible boundaries are in the taxonomy of living beings. For the characteristics attributed to the entities that people the cosmos depend not so much on a prior definition of their essence but rather on the positions that they occupy in relation to one another by reason of the needs of their metabolism and, in particular, their diet. The identities of human beings, both living and dead, and of plants, animals, and spirits are altogether relational and are therefore subject to muta-

tions and metamorphoses depending on the point of view adopted. In many cases it is said that an individual of one species apprehends the members of other species in accordance with his own criteria, so that, in normal conditions, a hunter will not realize that his animal-prey sees itself as a human being, or that it sees the hunter as a jaguar. Similarly, a jaguar regards the blood that it drinks as manioc beer, while the monkey-spider that the cacique bird thinks it is hunting is, to a man, nothing but a grasshopper, and the tapirs that a snake considers as its preferred prey are really human beings.⁹ It is thanks to the ongoing swapping of appearances engendered by these shifting perspectives that animals in all good faith consider themselves endowed with the same cultural attributes as human beings. To them, their crests are feathered crowns, their pelts are clothing, their beaks are spears, and their claws are knives. The roundabout of perceptions in Amazonian cosmologies engenders an ontology that is sometimes labeled “perspectivism,”¹⁰ which denies a privileged point of view from on high to human beings and holds that multiple experiences of the world can cohabit without contradiction. In contrast to modern dualism, which deploys a multiplicity of cultural differences against a background of an unchanging nature, Amerindian thought envisages the entire cosmos as being animated by a single cultural regime that becomes diversified, if not by heterogeneous natures, at least by all the different ways in which living beings apprehend one another. The common referent for all the entities that live in the world is thus not Man as a species but humanity as a condition.

Might the apparent inability to objectivize nature of many Amazonian peoples be a consequence of the properties of their environment? Ecologists certainly define a tropical forest as a “generalized” ecosystem that is characterized by an extremely wide diversity of animal and plant species, with small numbers of each that are very widely dispersed. Thus, out of roughly fifty thousand species of vascular plants present in Amazonia, fewer than twenty or so grow spontaneously in groups together, and where they do, that is in many cases an accidental result of human interference.¹¹ Immersed as they are in a monstrous plurality of life-forms that are seldom to be found all together in homogeneous groups, possibly the forest Indians gave up the idea of embracing as a whole the disparate conglomeration of entities that constantly clamor for the attention of their senses. Forced to settle for a mirage of diversity, they perhaps found no way of dissociating themselves from nature because they could not discern its profound unity, which was obscured by the multiplicity of its singular manifestations.

A rather enigmatic remark made by Claude Lévi-Strauss may indicate an interpretation of this type. He suggested that the tropical forest may be the

only environment that might allow one to attribute idiosyncratic characteristics to each member of a species.¹² Differentiating each individual as a particular type (Lévi-Strauss calls this a “mono-individual”) is certainly something that *Homo sapiens* is adept at doing, by reason of his ability to develop whatever personalities are acceptable to social life. However, the extreme profusion of animal and plant species could equally encourage this process of singularization. It was perhaps inevitable that, in an ambience as diversified as the Amazonian forest, people’s perception of relations between individuals that are apparently all different should take precedence over the construction of stable and mutually exclusive macrocategories.

Gerardo Reichel-Dolmatoff also suggests an interpretation based on the peculiarities of the environment when he defends the idea that the cosmology of the Desana Indians of Colombian Amazonia constitutes a kind of descriptive model of the processes of ecological adaptation, formulated in terms comparable to those of a modern systemic analysis.¹³ According to Reichel-Dolmatoff, the Desana conceive of the world in the manner of a homeostatic system in which the quantity of energy expended, that is, the “output,” is directly linked to the quantity of energy received, the “input.” The biosphere’s provision of energy comes from two main sources. The first source is the sexual energy of individuals, which is regularly repressed by ad hoc prohibitions. This energy returns directly to the global capital of energy that irrigates all the biotic components of the system. The second source is the state of health and well-being of humans, which results from a strictly controlled diet and engenders the energy necessary for all the nonbiotic elements of the cosmos (e.g., it makes the movement of the celestial bodies possible). Each individual is thus conscious of constituting but one element in a complex network of interactions that take place within not only the social sphere but also the entirety of a universe that tends toward stability: in other words, a universe whose resources and limits are finite. This imposes upon every individual ethical responsibilities, in particular that of not upsetting the general equilibrium of this fragile system and never using energy without rapidly restoring it by means of various kinds of ritual operations.

But the principal role in this quest for a perfect homeostasis falls to the shaman. In the first place, he intervenes constantly in human subsistence activities to ensure that they do not imperil the reproduction of nonhumans. The shaman will thus personally check the quantity and degree of concentration of the plant poison prepared for fishing in a particular segment of the river, or he will rule upon how many individual animals may be killed when a herd of peccaries is located. Furthermore, the rituals that accompany such hunts for food will present “occasions . . . for stocktaking, for weighing costs

and benefits, and for the eventual redistribution of resources." In these circumstances, the shaman's "book-keeping shows the general system of inputs and outputs."¹⁴

Such a transposition turns the shaman into a seemingly knowledgeable manager of an ecosystem, and the whole collection of religious beliefs and rituals into a kind of practical treatise on ecology; and its validity seems questionable. A shaman's conscious application of a kind of estimated optimization of the rare means available may correspond well enough to certain neo-Darwinian models that are applied in human ecology. However, that is not easy to reconcile with the fact that the Desana, like their neighbors, the Makuna, ascribe to animals and plants most of the attributes that they recognize themselves to possess. It is hard to see how those social partners of human beings could suddenly, in particular circumstances, lose their status as persons and be treated as no more than accounting units to be distributed on either side of a balance sheet of energy. There can be no doubt that the Amerindians of Amazonia possess a remarkable empirical understanding of the complex interrelations between the organisms within their environment and that they use that knowledge in their survival strategies. Nor can there be any doubt that they make use of social relations, in particular kinship, to define a whole range of interrelations between nonhuman organisms. However, it seems unlikely that these characteristics stem from their adaptation to a particular ecosystem that, thanks to its intrinsic properties, somehow provides an analogical model that makes it possible to work out how the world is organized.

The principal argument against such an interpretation lies in the existence of very similar cosmologies that have been elaborated by peoples living in a completely different environment, more than six thousand kilometers to the north of Amazonia. Unlike the Indians of the South American tropical forest, the Indians of the subarctic region of Canada exploit a remarkably uniform ecosystem. From the Labrador peninsula all the way to Alaska, the great northern forest spreads a continuous cloak of conifers in which the typical silhouette of the black spruce predominates, barely interrupted here and there by a few groves of alders, willows, silver birches, and balsam poplars. The animals are hardly more varied: the main groups of mammals are the following: herbivores (elk and caribou), rodents (beavers, hares, porcupines, muskrats), and carnivores (wolves, brown bears, lynxes, and wolverines). To these may be added twenty or so common species of birds and about a dozen of fish: far fewer than the approximately three thousand species to be found in the rivers of Amazonia. Many of these animals, such as caribou, geese, and sturgeons, are migratory and may disappear from some places for sev-

eral years, eventually reappearing in such quantities that it seems as if the entire species has temporarily come together. In short, the characteristics of the northern forest are the exact opposite of those of the Amazonian forest, for the former “specialized” ecosystem includes few species, each of which is, however, represented by a great number of individuals. Yet despite the ostensible homogeneity of their ecological environment—and also despite their impotence in the face of the famines regularly engendered by such a harsh climate—the subarctic peoples do not appear to regard their environment as a domain of reality that is clearly distinct from the principles and values that govern human social life. In the Far North, as in South America, nature is not opposed to culture but is an extension of it and enriches it in a cosmos in which everything is organized according to the criteria of human beings.¹⁵

In the first place, many features of the landscape are attributed a personality of their own. Rivers, lakes, mountains, thunder, the prevailing winds, ice jams, and the dawn are all identified by a spirit that discreetly animates them. They are so many hypostases reputed to be attentive to the words and actions of humans. But it is above all in their conceptions of the animal world that the Indians of the northern Canadian forest most resemble those of Amazonia. Despite differences in language and ethnic affiliations, the same complex of beliefs and rites everywhere governs the hunter’s relationship with his prey. As in Amazonia, most animals are regarded as persons with a soul, and this confers upon them attributes in every way identical to those of humans, such as reflexive consciousness, intentionality, an affective life, and respect for ethical principles. Cree groups are particularly explicit in this domain. According to them, the social life of animals resembles that of humans and is sustained by the same sources: solidarity, friendship, deference toward elders, and, in their case, the invisible spirits who preside over the migrations of game, manage the dispersion of animals, and are responsible for their regeneration. The only way in which animals differ from humans is thus in their appearance; and this is simply an illusion of the senses, for the distinctive corporeal forms that they usually adopt are merely disguises designed to fool the Indians. When animals visit humans in their dreams, they reveal themselves as they really are, that is, in their human form. Likewise, when their spirits express themselves publicly in the course of the ritual known as “the shaking lodge,” they speak in the native Indian languages.¹⁶ As for the extremely common myths that portray the union of an animal with a man or a woman, these simply confirm the common identity of the natures of animals and humans. It is said that such a union would be impossible were it not for the fact that the tender feelings of the human partner made it possible for him or her to perceive the true form of the desired one beneath its animal finery.

It would be mistaken to regard this humanization of animals as mere intellectual playfulness, a kind of metaphorical language relevant only within the circumstances surrounding the performance of rites or the recounting of myths. Even when speaking in altogether prosaic terms of tracking, killing, and eating game, the Indians unambiguously convey the idea that hunting is a mode of social interaction with entities that are well aware of the conventions that regulate it.¹⁷ Here, as in most societies in which hunting plays an important part, it is by showing one's respect for the animals that one ensures their connivance. It is important to avoid waste, to kill cleanly and without causing undue suffering, to treat the bones and remains with dignity, and never to indulge in boasting or even to refer too clearly to the fate that awaits one's prey. Expressions referring to hunting seldom mention its ultimate end, the kill. Just as the Achuar of Amazonia speak vaguely of "going off into the forest," of "walking the dogs," or of "blowing the birds" (when it is a matter of blowpipe hunting), so too the Montagnais Indians say that they are "going to search" when they mean to hunt with a rifle or "going to see" when they mean to check on their traps.¹⁸ Likewise, in Amazonia, it is customary for a young hunter who kills an animal of a particular species for the first time to treat it according to a particular ritual. Among the Achuar, for example, the young man declines to eat the game that he has brought home, for the still fragile relationship established with this new species would be irrevocably shattered if he did not show such restraint, and his prey's fellows would in future conceal themselves at his approach. Among the Ojibwa of Ontario, the same principle appears to dictate the behavior of a novice hunter: in this case, although he will eat his catch in the company of his fellow hunters, he does so only in the course of a ceremonial meal that ends with a kind of funerary ritual that disposes of the animal's remains.¹⁹

A hunter's relationship with animals may take other forms over and above these marks of consideration: seduction, for example, in which the prey is seen as a lover, or magic coercion that annihilates the animal's willpower and forces it to approach the hunter. But the most common of such relationships and the one that best emphasizes the parity between humans and animals is the bond of friendship that the hunter establishes over time with one particular member of the species. This forest friend is regarded as a companion who will serve as an intermediary among his fellow creatures, who, without balking, will then expose themselves within the range of a shot. No doubt it does involve a minor act of treachery on the intermediary's part, but this is of no consequence to his fellows, as the hunter's victim will soon be reincarnated in an animal of the same species, provided its remains have received the prescribed ritual treatment. For whatever the strategies employed to incite an

animal to expose itself to a hunter, when the prey delivers itself up to the one who will consume it, it is always out of a feeling of generosity. The animal is moved by the compassion that it feels for the sufferings of humans, creatures that are vulnerable to famine, who depend upon itself for their survival. Far from being nothing more than an episodic technical manipulation of the autonomous natural environment, here hunting involves a continuous dialogue during which, as Tim Ingold observes, “both human and animal persons are constituted with their particular identities and purposes.”²⁰

Further north still, in the regions almost devoid of life except for the peoples who speak an Eskimo language and who have learned how to live there, an identical perception of the relationship of humans to the environment appears to prevail.²¹ Humans, animals, and spirits all coexist there; and the reason that humans can feed on the animals, thanks to the benevolence of the spirits, is that the game offers itself to those who truly desire it, as is the case among the Cree. Inuit hunting rites and birth rites indicate that souls and flesh, which are so rare and so precious, circulate ceaselessly between different components of the biosphere, defined by their relative positions, not by an essence given for all eternity. Game is necessary for the production of humans—as a foodstuff, of course, but also because the souls of harpooned seals are reborn in human children; and, in just the same way, humans are necessary for the production of certain animals: the remains of the dead are left out for predators; afterbirths are offered to seals, and the souls of the dead sometimes return to the spirit in charge of marine game. As the shaman Ivaluardjuk confided to Karl Rasmussen, “the greatest peril of life lies in the fact that human food consists entirely of souls.”²² If animals are indeed persons, eating them is a form of cannibalism that is attenuated only slightly by the ongoing exchange of substances and spiritual principles between the principal actors in the world. This kind of dilemma is not faced solely by the inhabitants of the Far North. Many Amerindian cultures find themselves faced with the same problem: how can I take the life of another who is endowed with the same attributes as myself without compromising the links of connivance that I have managed to establish with the community of that creature’s fellows? That is a difficult question that our humanist tradition has not prepared us to tackle in those particular terms; and it is one to which I shall be returning later in this work.

From the luxuriant forests of Amazonia to the glacial spaces of the Canadian Arctic, certain peoples thus envisage their insertion into the environment in a manner altogether different from our own. They regard themselves, not as social collectives managing their relations with the ecosystem, but rather as simple components of a vaster whole within which no real discrimination

is really established between humans and nonhumans. Of course, differences do exist between all these cosmological arrangements: thus, by reason of the low number of species living in the most northern latitudes, the network of interrelations between the entities inhabiting this biosphere is not as rich and complex for the Amerindians of the North as it is for those of the South. But the structures of those networks are in every way analogous, as are the properties ascribed to their various elements; and this would seem to negate the idea that the symbolic ecology of the Amazonian Indians might result from their local adaptation to a more diverse environment.

So is this a purely American peculiarity? Ethnology and archaeology repeatedly show that in the past Indian America formed part of an original cultural whole the unity of which can still be glimpsed behind the effects of fragmentation brought about by colonial history. Clear evidence for this is provided by myths, with all their variations, which rest upon a homogeneous semantic substratum of which it is hard to believe that it does not proceed from a common conception of the world, forged in the course of thousands of years of movements of peoples and ideas. We know very little about this pre-Columbian history, which stretches much further back than used to be believed. So modern ethnology can provide little more than disparate chronicles of those "Middle Ages which lacked a Rome," as Lévi-Strauss has put it:²³ mere traces of an age-old shared basis, elements of which are combined in many diverse ways. Could it be that a particular way of representing the relations between humans and nonhumans results from that very ancient syncretism that, even today, still works its way to the surface in a pan-American schema?

Attractive though it may seem, the hypothesis of American exceptionality does not stand up to examination. One has only to cross the Bering Strait, in the direction opposite to that taken by the migrations that brought the ancestors of present-day Amerindian populations all the way from eastern Siberia to Alaska, to see that the hunting peoples of the taiga formulate their relations with the environment in a very similar manner.²⁴ Among the Tunkus, the Samoyeds, the Xant, and the Mansi, the whole forest is believed to be animated by a spirit. This usually takes the form of a large member of the Cervidae family but it may also manifest itself in many other incarnations. Trees too may possess souls of their own or may constitute plant doubles of certain humans, which is why it is forbidden to fell young trees. In the Buryat language the spirit of the woods is known as "Rich-Forest" and it may take two forms. One is positive, provides game for humans, and wards off their sicknesses. The other, often presented as the son or brother-in-law of the former, in contrast disseminates misfortune and death and spends its time hunting down human souls and devouring them. The ambivalence of Rich-Forest

(which is equally characteristic of the configurations of “masters of game” among Amerindians) forces humans to take multiple precautions in their relations with the wild animals for which this double figure acts as a guardian.

The animals themselves all possess souls, identical in principle to those of humans—that is to say, a principle of life that is relatively autonomous vis-à-vis its material body. This makes it possible for a hunted animal’s spirit to wander about, especially after its death, in order to ascertain from its fellows that it will, if necessary, be avenged. The animals’ social organization resembles that of humans: the solidarity between members of the same species is assimilated to the supportive duties of members of the same clan, while the relations between species are described in the same way as the relations between different tribes are. Among the furry animals, certain individuals exercise control over their companions and are recognized as their “masters.” Because they are bigger and more beautiful, it is they who best embody the characteristic features of the species that they represent and so are the species’ preferred interlocutors with human hunters who request them to concede a few of their fellows as hunted prey. Such prototype figures are also present in indigenous America.²⁵ Their existence establishes a hierarchy in each animal community, as if it were necessary for there to be an intermediary between the master-spirits and the underlings—an intermediary of identical status to that of the human hunter—so that negotiations can unfold on an equal footing.

The relations that Siberian peoples entertain with the animal world vary according to the partners involved. Hunting for large cervids—in particular wild reindeer and elk—implies an alliance with the Spirit of the Forest, who is represented as a provider of women. By copulating, in his dreams, with this Spirit’s daughter, the hunter consummates this alliance and wins the right to receive benefits from his father-in-law. Symbolic though it may seem, this link through marriage is reputed not to be totally imaginary. Because of the ability to travel during sleep that is attributed to souls, union with the daughters of the Spirit of the Forest at least takes on the air of a relationship between two persons. And, given that it is important not to arouse the jealousy of Rich-Forest’s young ladies, men abstain from all sexual relations with their human wives before setting out on a hunting trip. To encourage generosity on the part of the father-in-law or other spirits who provide game, in the evening, in their invisible presence, the long stories that they love are told, while the smoke rising from the pipes of the hunters is agreeable to their impalpable nostrils.

Marriage alliances with animals other than cervids do not work, so it is necessary to take all kinds of precautions so as not to alienate them defini-

tively. Cunning is one ploy: for example, one loudly proclaims that a member of another tribe is responsible for the death of an animal that one has oneself killed or, better still, to preserve his anonymity, the hunter wears a mask. As in America, hunters show moderation in their catch, conceal their intentions, take care not to name their quarry, and use euphemisms to refer to the kill. Such subterfuges are imperative in order to deter the hunted animals or their representatives from taking revenge. Proper treatment of a consumed animal's remains is just as important as in the Canadian subarctic, and for similar reasons: life continues so long as the bones subsist, so by placing the animal's intact skeleton, its skull, and in some cases its genital organs on little constructions in the forest, one is assured that its soul will return to the common stock of its species and will thereby produce the birth of another individual. To the extent that the bodily envelope is no more than an appearance, a transitory clothing that can be reconstituted from the framework of bones, the hunter does not destroy the hunted animal but simply appropriates its flesh in order to eat it. Furthermore, before being deposited in the forest, the animal's skull will have been taken to the hunter's home and installed in a place of honor. In the presence of relatives and neighbors who are invited for the ceremony, a party is organized in honor of the animal's soul. The celebration is punctuated by ceremonial thanks to the animal's soul, and it is encouraged to return among its fellows in order to persuade them too to visit the human beings.

For the exchange to be truly equitable, however, it is necessary to restore to the animals whatever has been taken from them, namely their meat. There are two ways of doing this. As among the Inuit, the human dead are exposed on a platform far from human habitation, so that predators may eat their remains. But a more direct way of feeding the animals is to take in the offspring of wild species and tend to their needs. Among Mongol peoples, these household animals are known as *ongon*, a name that is also given to figurines, generally representations of animals, which are said to act as intermediaries with the Forest Spirit and persuade it to allow good hunting. These effigies are kept close to the hearth and have to be treated in a considerate fashion, cheered by jokes and, above all, regularly fed. So they are smeared with fat and blood, and scraps of meat are placed in the cavities representing their mouths or in other purpose-built pockets. By feeding the various kinds of *ongon*, the hunters win their favor and at the same time discharge their debt to the animals that they hunt. As for the latter, through their domesticated emissaries they can rest assured, day after day, that the humans are punctiliously fulfilling their obligations.

In Siberia, as in America, then, many peoples seem resistant to the idea of

a clear separation between their physical environment and their social environment. For them, these two domains that we normally distinguish are facets that are hardly contrasted within a continuum of interactions between human and nonhuman persons. So what? you might say. Are not America and eastern Asia part of one and the same cultural cluster? Did not the peoples who crossed the Bering Strait in the Pleistocene already bring with them a whole array of ideas and techniques that have no doubt been developed and enriched by subsequent waves of migration? It is not surprising that traces of it are to be found here and there between Siberia and the Tierra del Fuego.

The theory that certain material and ideological features of Amerindian cultures were diffused from Asia is by no means new. And to some extent, it is well founded. As early as the beginning of the twentieth century, research carried out by the Jesup expedition established the existence of a veritable North Pacific civilization. Archaeological evidence testifies to its unity, a product of several thousand years of migrating populations and intense exchanges in a vast region centered on the Bering Strait and extending from the south coast of the Okhotsk Sea all the way to Vancouver Island.²⁶ There is no reason why institutions and beliefs forged in the northern Pacific melting pot should not have spread well to the south of present-day Canada, in particular the feature most readily associated with eastern Siberia, namely shamanism.

We should remember that the term *çaman* comes from the Tungus language and that the first descriptions of shamanistic trances were provided as early as the seventeenth century by Russians who had traveled in eastern Siberia.²⁷ Ethnology, which took over this term in the early decades of the twentieth century, has tended to unify within a single descriptive category a whole collection of features originally identified in Siberia but reputed to be present in the “primitive religions” of other regions of the world, in particular America. The theory is that a shaman is a mediator between human beings and spirits with whom he can, at will, enter into contact by means of a voyage of the soul (in a trance or a dream) that enables him to mobilize their help in such a way as to prevent or ease the misfortunes of humans. Some authors have represented shamanism as a veritable conception of the world, a singular system for interpreting events that is based on an alliance between humans and deities;²⁸ or they have believed it to express the symbolism of a relationship with nature that is characteristic of hunting peoples.²⁹ If we adopt such a view, it becomes possible, on the basis of a common shamanistic inheritance, to explain many troubling similarities in the ways that Amerindians and Siberians conceive of their relations with the environment. Attributing souls to plants and animals, establishing relations with spirit mediators, exchanging food and identities with nonhumans: all such behavior is thus, in the end,

regarded as manifesting a more general system of interpreting misfortune and remedying it that is centered upon the personality of an individual reputed to possess particular powers. This system is said to have originated in northern Asia, then spread into both North and South America with the arrival of immigrants from Siberia, thereby engendering cosmologies that are, seemingly, very similar.

This diffusionist hypothesis, upheld in particular by Mircea Eliade, implies a number of presuppositions, some of them contradictory.³⁰ To represent shamanism as a form of archaic religion defined by a few typical features (the presence of individuals who have mastered the techniques of ecstasy and can communicate with the supernatural beings that delegate them their powers) presupposes that one ascribes to the person and actions of the shaman an exaggerated role in the establishment of the way in which a society tries to give meaning to the world. It is as though one proclaimed the unity of Brahmanism, Greek religion, and Christianity on the grounds that a priest plays the central role, for he is the instrument of the liturgical mediation with the divine that is marked by a real or symbolic sacrifice. But, in Indian America at least, the part that shamans play in the management of relations with the various entities that inhabit the cosmos may be altogether negligible. Both in the subarctic region and in many Amazonian societies, relations between humans and nonhumans are mostly personal ones that are maintained and consolidated in the course of the existence of each and every member of the society. The bonds of connivance between individuals are frequently beyond the control of ritual specialists, whose tasks, where they exist, are in many cases limited to treating physical illnesses. It is therefore rash to affirm that a dominant conception of the world is the product of a religious system centered on one particular institution, namely shamanism, the effects of which may be restricted to a quite limited sector of social life. The diffusionist thesis furthermore implies, *a contrario*, that the cosmological configuration usually associated with shamanism ought to become blurred and then disappear the farther away one gets from the geographical zone where it originated—unless, of course, one considers that each and every form of deliberate mediation with supernatural entities stems from shamanism. But that would be an absurd position that would make shamanism the ancient basis of all religions and at the same time a totally empty concept given that, by encompassing too many different phenomena, it would be unable to define any of them in a meaningful fashion.

To protect ourselves against the attraction of a more reasonable diffusionism—that is, one that would not extend to the entire planet—we must distance ourselves from the idea of a hypothetical source of hypothetical

shamanistic civilizations. So let us move more than six thousand kilometers to the south of eastern Siberia, crossing Mongolia, China, and Indochina, to reach the humid tropical forest of the Malay Peninsula. It is inhabited by a collection of ethnic groups speaking Môn-Khmer languages. The Malaysians refer to them as the Orong Asli (“the aboriginal peoples”). They live by hunting (with blowpipes) and gathering and the slash-and-burn cultivation of domesticated plants originating from tropical America, such as manioc and sweet potatoes. They inevitably put any Amerindian specialist in mind of many familiar features: the same techniques involving an extensive use of natural resources, the same dispersed habitat, the same fluid social organization. But it is above all in their representations of their relations with plants and animals that the Orong Asli present striking resemblances with the peoples we have examined above. As an example, let me take the Chewong, a small ethnic group in the hinterland of Pahang Province, whose symbolic ecology is known to us thanks to the research of Signe Howell.³¹

Chewong society is not limited to the 260 individuals of which it is composed, for it extends far beyond the ontological frontiers of humanity to encompass a myriad of spirits, plants, animals, and objects that are reputed to possess the same attributes as the Chewong themselves and that the Chewong describe collectively as “our people” (*bi he*). Despite their different appearances, all the entities within this forest cosmos mingle together in an intimate and egalitarian community that, as a whole, stands in opposition to the threatening and incomprehensible world outside, which is inhabited by “different people” (*bi masign*): Malaysians, Chinese, Westerners, and other aboriginal peoples. Within this saturated intimacy of social life, the beings that share the same immediate environment perceive themselves as complementary and interdependent. The ethical responsibility for ensuring that things run smoothly is assumed collectively as the function of each individual’s actions—for allegiance to a moral code characterizes the conduct of all those that possess a reflexive consciousness (*ruwai*), whether they be human or nonhuman. For the Chewong, the reason certain plants and certain animals are “people” (*beri*) is partly because they are endowed with the same cognitive and moral capacities as themselves and partly because in certain circumstances their bodies may appear identical to the bodies of humans. *Ruwai* constitutes the true essence of a person and its principle of individuation, for the body is nothing but clothing that can be temporarily put aside, particularly during dreams. However, when the *ruwai* goes wandering, it does so in the form of a physical embodiment without which it could not be seen or recognized by other *ruwai*. While the *ruwai* of humans may be embodied in the form of a reduced model of a real body, a kind of homunculus, the *ruwai* of plants and animals, in con-

trast, takes the form of a human body rather than the “clothing” of its own species. Furthermore, while the *ruwai* of a human is unable to inhabit the body of another human, it may, on occasion, take on the appearance of a plant or an animal. Not only do distinctions between the natural, the supernatural, and the human have no meaning for the Chewong, but even the possibility of dividing reality into separate stable categories becomes illusory since one can never be sure of the identity of the person, whether human or nonhuman, that is masked by the “clothing” of another species.

There is, however, one attribute of beings that endures whatever changes they undergo and that, without their realizing it, distinguishes them by dividing them into homogeneous groups. Each class of persons endowed with a *ruwai* is believed to perceive the world in its own particular manner, by virtue of the particular characteristics of its faculty of sight. For example, it often happens that a Chewong in the forest falls into a trap that some spirit has laid to capture wild pigs. But as his eyes are “hot,” unlike those of the spirits, which are “cold,” he will not realize what has happened to him, except to the extent that his body feels the painful consequences of his fall. Nevertheless, humans are not particularly disadvantaged, for illusion cuts both ways: one race of spirits reputed to feed on a species of canna sees this plant as a sweet potato; so when the Chewong cut down cannas, those spirits see only porcupines rooting up sweet potatoes. Similarly, when a dog eats the excrement that it finds beneath houses, it is convinced it is devouring bananas; elephants, meanwhile, regard one another as human beings. The mode of vision of each species is considered to be a characteristic of its *ruwai* that is unaffected by individual metamorphoses, so that a Chewong who adopts the clothing of a tiger will continue to see the world with the eyes of a human. There is patently a parallel here with the relativism in matters of perception among Amerindians: the identity of beings and the texture of the world are fluid and contingent, resistant to any classification seeking to freeze reality in accordance with the sole evidence of appearances. The Chewong are probably dualists, but in a manner very different from ours: rather than distinguish, deep down, between humans and nonhumans, they draw a line of demarcation between what is near and what is distant, between, on the one hand, communities of persons of heterogeneous aspects who nevertheless share the same mores and habitat and, on the other, the mysterious periphery where other languages and other laws hold sway. Their dualism is of a concentric nature that tones down discontinuities close to home, the better to exclude those beyond the boundary; whereas ours is diametrical and draws absolute distinctions, the better to be inclusive.

The ease with which the Chewong accommodate a world in which nature

and society are not separated into different compartments is in no way exceptional in Southeast Asia. In Malaysia itself, ethnographic sources sketch in comparable pictures of other aboriginal peoples, such as the Batek Negritos in the center of the peninsula³² and the Ma' Betisék in the mangroves of Selangor.³³ Wazir-Jahan Karim tells us that, for the latter, "the exploitation of plants and animals as food resources is fundamentally wrong because it is conceived as the exploitation of humans as food."³⁴ The same goes for regions farther east, eastern Indonesia, for example, among the Nuauulu on the island of Seram. In his study of the way in which they classify fauna, Roy Ellen concludes that it is impossible to pick out any Nuauulu taxonomy conceived of as a separate domain, that is to say, independent of a more all-encompassing cosmic order, similar to the "chain of being" of the ancient world.³⁵

The island of Seram is separated from New Guinea by straits barely two hundred kilometers wide, so it comes as no surprise to find in Melanesia the same absence of a clear-cut boundary between humans and nonhumans. Roy Wagner provides an excellent description of this continuity: "each one of these peoples locates mankind in a world of differentiated, though basically analogous, anthropomorphic entities."³⁶ This is particularly clear among the societies of the Great Plateau, a highly distinctive biogeographical region well known for its rich and diverse fauna and flora. The cosmology of the Kaluli, for example, is governed by the same kind of perceptive realism as in Amazonia or among the Chewong: multiple worlds coexist within the same environment, inhabited by classes of distinct beings that perceive their fellows as humans but regard the inhabitants of other worlds as animals or spirits. Thus, men hunt wild pigs that embody spirits, while spirits hunt wild pigs that embody doubles of humans.³⁷ To quote a saying of the Bedamuni people, neighbors of the Kaluli, "when we see animals, we might think that they are just animals, but we know that they are really like human beings."³⁸ The situation is similar farther to the east, in the Solomon Islands. According to the 'Are'are, their shell currency, cultivated plants, pigs, fish, and men and women are all formed by more or less complete combinations of vectors of identity that, as they circulate among all these entities, link them together in a great cosmic continuum.³⁹ We are told that, in these same islands, the people of the great Marovo lagoon "hold that the organisms and non-living components of the environment do not constitute a distinct realm of 'nature' or the 'natural environment' separate from 'culture' or 'human society.'"⁴⁰

But it is New Caledonia, farther to the south and a thousand leagues from the regions where we began this inquiry, that provides the most subtle expression of the implications of a world in which humans live enveloped by their environment. We owe this knowledge to a great book, *Do Kamo*, writ-

ten over sixty years ago by Maurice Leenhardt. In it he draws our attention to a distinctive concept of a person, immersed in the abundance of a world “in which animals, men and plants make exchanges among themselves without boundaries or differentiations.”⁴¹ Without differentiations: for the Kanaks postulate an identical structure and substance for the human body and for plants. The tissues, the very processes of growth, and the physiology are in every way analogous, even if the modes of existence are perceived as being different. So this is not a matter of a metaphorical correspondence of a quite classic nature⁴² between human development and plant development. Instead, what we find is a material continuity between two orders of life, as is attested by the return of ancestors to inhabit certain trees after their deaths. Leenhardt tells us that this woody body cannot simply be a medium for a particular entity, the kernel of an individual self: embedded as it is in the environment from which it is barely distinguishable, it enables a human to know himself through his experience of the world and “without considering that he might distinguish himself from that world.”⁴³

The body is animated by *kamo*, a term meaning “life” but implying no clearly defined shape nor any essential nature. An animal or a plant is said to be *kamo* if circumstances suggest that it shares something in common with humans. As in Amazonia, humanity covers far more than the physical representations of human beings. The full scope of humanity, expressed by the terms *do kamo* (true human), is deployed in many kinds of living units distinct from humans as a species. That is why Leenhardt suggests translating *kamo* as “personage,” a principle of existence clothed in a variety of appearances, rather than the Western notion of a “person,” which presupposes a particularized awareness of the self and of a body clearly circumscribed in space. *Kamo* is defined, not by any closure, but by the relations that constitute it. So when those relations are suppressed (in the case of humans, the network of links of kinship, solidarity, and allegiance), the ego fades away, since it cannot exist in isolation, in the reflexive knowledge of its individuality. The desocialization brought about by the colonial process therefore caused dramatic upheavals, which the education dispensed by missionaries aimed to rectify. That education engendered a consciousness of individuality within an autonomous body. Old Boesoou removed all doubt on the matter in his reply to Leenhardt, who asked him about the effects of schooling: “I risked the following suggestion: ‘in short, we introduced the notion of spirit to your way of thinking?’ And he objected: ‘Spirit? Bah! You didn’t bring us the spirit. We already knew the spirit existed. What you’ve brought us is the body.’”⁴⁴

After the Americas, Asia, and Oceania, let us now turn to consider one more ethnographic continent: Africa, which seems different from the cases

examined so far in that there the boundary between nature and society seems more firm, expressed in spatial classifications, cosmologies, and conceptions of what a person is that distinguish quite clearly between humans and non-humans. The clear-cut opposition between the village and the bush thus reappears as a leitmotif in all Africanist monographs: the village is the place of social order, constructed by human labor, maintained by ritual, and guaranteed in perpetuity by a segmentary hierarchy and the presence of ancestors; the bush is a dangerous periphery, inhabited by predatory species and harmful spirits, a disorderly space that is associated with death and is an ambiguous source of masculine powers. Likewise, in Africa, wild animals are seldom endowed with an individual soul, intentionality, or other human characteristics, and when they appear in stories, it is not so much as alter egos of human beings, as in Amerindian myths, but rather as metaphors, archetypes of bad or good moral qualities. They are simply actors in ironic or edifying parables that put one in mind of European fables. Moreover, unlike what happens in other cultural areas, the interactions between humans and other natural species are seldom studied by Africanists (apart from those interested in the Pygmy peoples); and plants and animals figure mainly in analyses of dietary prohibitions, totemism, or sacrifice—that is to say, as icons that express social categories and practices and not as full subjects in the life of this world. And these African specificities were perpetuated in America when African slaves were deported there. This can be clearly seen in the different ways in which the humid forest of the Colombian Chocó is represented by, on the one hand, the Emberá Indians and, on the other, the black populations descended from runaway slaves, who have lived there since the seventeenth century, in constant contact with the Indians. For the Indians, the forest is a familiar extension of a human house, and in it, they engage in ritual exchanges of energy with animals and with the spirits that rule there. Meanwhile, the Africans regard it simply as a wild, dark, dangerous place, to be avoided as far as possible: it is the absolute antithesis of inhabited space.⁴⁵

In Part III of the present work, I shall examine the reasons that might explain this apparent exceptionality of Africa and its puzzling similarity to Europe in the manner in which discontinuities between humans and non-humans are perceived and organized. Actually, this particularism may well, in part, be a product of the intellectual habits that characterize all specialist studies in cultural areas. For these tend to encourage ethnographers to pick out from the society that they are studying those expressions of certain realities that are rendered familiar by the scholarly tradition peculiar to the region under examination, meanwhile neglecting phenomena that do not fit in easily with the interpretive frameworks that this tradition has elaborated. However,

canons of analysis do evolve along with the changes in paradigms that periodically take place in regional studies; and new inquiries in the field may then throw light upon neglected aspects of cultures that had hitherto been believed to be well understood. To cite but two brief examples, in Mali and in Sierra Leone, recent ethnographical works have detected conceptions of nonhumans that are more similar to what is familiar in America and Oceania than to the image that has for years been presented by Africanist ethnology. Thus, the Kuranko of Sierra Leone ascribe to certain individuals the ability to transform themselves into predatory animals (elephants, leopards, crocodiles, or snakes), the better to damage their enemies by attacking their livestock or trampling on their harvests. In the course of his investigations into the ontology underlying such a belief, Michael Jackson has pointed out that it rests upon a person being conceived as a fluctuating attribute produced by interactions with others rather than as an individualized essence anchored in one's consciousness of one's self and one's physical unity. The notion of a "person," *morgoye*, thus does not define a singular and stable identity but develops out of the establishment of more or less successful social relations, at a particular time, with a whole group of entities, so that the quality of a "person," which depends on position rather than substance, may be ascribed, depending on the circumstances, to humans, to animals, to bush spirits, to ancestors, to plants, or even to stones.⁴⁶ This blurring of ontological frontiers is just as remarkable among the Dogon of Tireli, who confer anthropomorphic properties upon forest plants: healers consult trees in order to acquire their know-how, and some trees, in particular the kapok, are believed to move around at night in order to strike up conversations. Stones situated in the vicinity of cemeteries are also credited with this ability.⁴⁷ The opposition between the bush and the village, which is nevertheless very clear in both these cases, can thus accommodate a multitude of mediations and crossovers, a fact that makes it unlikely that the respective occupants of the two spaces are distributed according to categories of essences that are naturally distinct.

Let us now pause in this ethnographic journey that has already borne us across many seas. Its purpose was to establish that the way of experiencing the continuity between humans and nonhumans that I had been privileged to observe in a remote corner of Amazonia was, in reality, widespread; and that it was unlikely to have emerged from a common ideological source that might have spread from one place to another and eventually come to permeate a considerable portion of the planet.

Some might object that all the peoples that I have mentioned in truth possess identical structural features that might account for the resemblances

in their respective views of the world. They live, or lived, by hunting and gathering and fishing, and many of them also cultivate tropical root crops that reproduce vegetatively. Dispersed in small communities with a low demographic level, and unable to accumulate substantial surpluses, they depend for their subsistence upon an ongoing, individualized interaction with plants and animals. In most cases the prey presents itself to the hunters in the form of an isolated individual or a small group of animals with which the hunter has to compete in cunning and skill. Meanwhile, the cultivation of cuttings differs from that of cereals in that each plant requires personal attention and is therefore invested with a manifest individuality.⁴⁸ It is therefore in no way surprising that anthropomorphic attributes are ascribed to these plants and animals that all become distinctive as they daily receive individual attention.

Furthermore, the societies that we have so far passed in review know nothing of writing, of a central political system, or of urban life. They lack institutions that specialize in the accumulation, objectivization, and transmission of knowledge and so would have been unable to carry out the kind of reflexive and critical program that made it possible for the literate tradition of some peoples to isolate nature and treat it as a field of inquiry from which to draw positive knowledge. In short, and given that it is hard to resist the convenience of evolutionism when challenging explanations based on diffusion, is it not legitimate to assume that the lack of any clear opposition between humans and nonhumans is characteristic of a certain stage in universal history from which the great civilizations have liberated themselves?

A full reply to the above argument would far exceed the scope of the present chapter. So I shall content myself with briefly invoking two examples that cast doubt upon the idea that the naturalization of the world results inevitably from the progress of knowledge made possible by writing and the increasing complexity of means of social integration.

The first example takes us to ancient India, a world steeped in rites that Brahmins are responsible for maintaining by fulfilling their task of organizing sacrifices. Let me borrow the title of a book by Charles Malamoud and say that this task consists in “cooking the world” without let or hindrance, for it is the cooking of sacrificial victims that confirms the gods in their divine status, ensures the regular succession of the seasons, and guarantees the production of foodstuffs appropriate for each different class of beings.⁴⁹ However, the sacrificial fires that the Brahmins tend are not designed to change the state of a world that is raw and natural in its original form; they do not stamp the seal of culture upon a formless material mass. All they do is recook a cosmos already transformed by the cooking effected by the sun. It is true that certain spaces seem beyond the reach of the Brahmins’ patient labor. The difference

between village and forest is very marked in Brahmin India. The “village” (*grāma*) consists first and foremost in the institutions that enable it to exist, in particular sacrifice, and so also in the means of accomplishing that: the domesticated animals, the cultivated fields, and the obligations imposed by the management of farmlands. The “forest” (*aranya*) is whatever lies outside the village, the gaps between the places that are inhabited, which are characterized not so much by a particular type of vegetation as by the exclusion of sacrifice, which is the symbol par excellence of civilization. But Malamoud shows clearly that this contrast in no way corresponds to an opposition between nature and society:⁵⁰ in the first place because sacrifice integrates wild animals, as semivictims, for—unlike domesticated animals—these are not killed but are released. This demonstrates the village’s ability to encompass the forest within its ritual space and to bring together things that might have appeared to be separate.

Second, the forest itself, in certain respects, encompasses the village. In Vedic thought, man is characterized and distinguished by the fact that he is both sacrificer and sacrificed, the officiating priest and at the same time the only authentic victim, for whom other animals are just substitutes. From this point of view, man is the chief village animal suitable for sacrifice. But he is also included among the beasts of the forest, and it is because of their resemblance to him that certain species, such as monkeys and elephants, are classified as wild animals. In taxonomies and in practice too, man is of the forest as much as of the village. His double nature finds expression in the doctrine of the stages of life that recommends that once a high-caste man has reached maturity, he should divest himself of his possessions and end his life in the forest, in ascetic solitude, adopting the state of a “renouncer.” Some texts indicate that renunciation is not a mortification of the body involving trials sent by an inhospitable nature. On the contrary, it is a way of merging with the environment, nourishing and reviving oneself there, following its rhythm and obeying its principle of existence.⁵¹ Jean-Claude Galey tells us that such teaching still exists in contemporary India: “It is not at all a case of mankind being autonomous but rather of an infinite process of transformations that, without confusing them, envisages all the different categories of living beings within the cosmos as so many links in a continuous and all-including chain.”⁵² In short, in this refined civilization nature does not appear to have acquired the status of an independent domain any more than it has among the peoples without writing of America and Oceania.

Augustin Berque’s fine study on the sense of nature in Japan leads to a similar conclusion.⁵³ The very term *shizen* by which the concept of nature is translated conveys only one of the meanings of “nature” in the West, the one

closest to the original notion of *phusis*, namely the principle according to which a being is what it is in itself: it develops according to its “nature.” But *shizen* by no means covers the idea of a sphere of phenomena that are independent of human action, for in Japanese thought, there is no place for a conscious objectivization of nature or for such a withdrawal of humanity from all that surrounds it.⁵⁴ As in New Caledonia, the environment is perceived as fundamentally indistinct from the self; it is regarded as an ambience in which a collective identity develops. Berque detects in the syntax of the Japanese language a tendency to block out the individuation of a person, in particular in the relative effacement of a grammatical subject in favor of a context of reference that covers both the verb and individual subjects. Here, the environment should be taken literally: it is what links together and constitutes human beings as multiple expressions of a complex whole that is greater than them.

Such holism helps to clarify the paradox of the Japanese garden. It may seem the height of artificiality, but the aim of this ultimate representation of Japanese culture is not to express an obsessive domestication of nature but to present a purified representation of the cosmos for the pleasure of contemplation.⁵⁵ Thanks to it, mountains and water (the sacred dwelling places of spirits and the goals of meditative excursions) are transported in miniature to places fashioned by human beings, but without losing their character or being intrusive. To reduce the landscape to the dimensions of an enclosed space is not to capture an alien nature in order to objectify it by mimetic means. It is to seek, by visiting a familiar space, to recover an intimate connection with a universe that is hard to access. The Japanese aesthetics of landscape does not express a separation between the environment and the individual but shows that the only way for nature to be meaningful is for it to be reproduced by human beings or animated by deities in such a way as to render immediately visible the marks of the conventions that fashion it. Far from being a domain of raw materiality, the garden is the ultimate cultural outcome of a long education of human sensibility.

It is time to bring this lengthy inventory to a close. Its purpose has not been to demonstrate or explain but simply to convey the fact that the modern West’s way of representing nature is by no means widely shared. In many regions of the planet, humans and nonhumans are not conceived as developing in incommunicable worlds or according to quite separate principles. The environment is not regarded objectively as an autonomous sphere. Plants and animals, rivers and rocks, meteors and the seasons do not exist all together in an ontological niche defined by the absence of human beings. And this seems to hold true whatever may be the local ecological characteristics, political re-

gimes and economic systems, and the accessible resources and the techniques employed to exploit them.

Over and above their indifference to the distinctions that naturalism fosters, do the cultures that we have surveyed present points in common in their ways of accounting for the relations between humans and their environment? No doubt they do, but not always in the same combinations. The most common procedure is to treat certain elements in the environment as persons endowed with cognitive, moral, and social qualities analogous to those of humans, thereby making it possible for communication and interaction between classes of beings that at first sight seem very different. The practical obstacles created by such a conception are to some extent overcome by drawing a clear distinction between, on the one hand, a principle of individual identity that is stable and able to manifest itself by very different means and in very different forms and, on the other hand, a transitory corporeal envelope, frequently likened to clothing, that can be donned or discarded as circumstances dictate. However, the ability to undergo metamorphosis is circumscribed by certain limits, in particular because the material form in which different kinds of persons are embodied in many cases determines perceptive constraints that cause them to apprehend the world according to criteria peculiar to their own species. Finally, these nested cosmological constructions define particular identities by the relations that institute them rather than by reference to reified substances or essences, thereby increasing the porosity of the frontiers between different classes of beings and also between the interior and the exterior of organisms. Admittedly, all this does not suffice to blur the major differences that exist between the cultures presented here as examples. But it does enable one to put one's finger on an even greater difference, the one that separates the modern West from all those peoples, both past and present, who have not considered it necessary to proceed to a naturalization of the world. The present book will be devoted to examining the implications of this difference, not in order to perpetuate it and enrich it, but rather to try to pass beyond it in full knowledge of the facts.