



The original political society

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Even the so-called egalitarian and loosely structured societies known to anthropology, including hunters such as Inuit or Australian Aborigines, are in structure and practice subordinate segments of inclusive cosmic polities, ordered and governed by divinities, ancestors, species-masters, and other such metapersons endowed with life-and-death powers over the human population. “The Mbowamb spends his whole life completely under the spell and in the company of spirits” (Vicedom and Tischner). “[Araweté] society is not complete on earth: the living are part of the global social structure founded on the alliance between heaven and earth” (Viveiros de Castro). We need something like a Copernican revolution in anthropological perspective: from human society as the center of a universe onto which it projects its own forms—that is to say, from the Durkheimian or structural-functional deceived wisdom—to the ethnographic realities of people’s dependence on the encompassing life-giving and death-dealing powers, themselves of human attributes, which rule earthly order, welfare, and existence. For, Hobbes notwithstanding, something like the political state is the condition of humanity in the state of nature; there are kingly beings in heaven even where there are no chiefs on earth.

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I am a Cartesian—a Hocartesian. I want to follow Hocart’s lead in freeing oneself from anthropological conventions by adhering to indigenous traditions. “How can we make any progress in the understanding of cultures, ancient or modern,” he said, “if we persist in dividing what people join, and in joining what they keep apart?” ([1952] 1970: 23). This essay is an extended commentary on the Hocartesian meditation encapsulated in *Kings and councillors* by “the straightforward equivalence, king = god” ([1936] 1970: 74). I mean to capitalize on the more or less explicit temporality entailed in the anthropological master’s exegesis of this equivalence, as when he variously speaks of the king as the vehicle, abode, substitute, repository,

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or representative of the god (Hocart 1933, [1936] 1970, [1950] 1968). The clear implication is that gods precede the kings who effectively replicate them—which is not exactly the common social science tradition of cosmology as the reflex of sociology. Consider time's arrow in statements such as: "So present was this divine and celestial character to the Polynesian mind that they called the chiefs *lani*, heaven, and the same word *marae* is used of a temple and a chief's grave" (Hocart [1927] 1969: 11). Kings are human imitations of gods, rather than gods of kings.

That was the dominant view in Christendom for a long time before the modern celestialization of sovereignty as an ideological expression of the real-political order. From Augustine's notion of the Earthly City as an imperfect form of the Heavenly City to Carl Schmitt's assertion that the significant concepts of the modern state are "secularized theological concepts" (2005: 36), human government was commonly considered to be modeled on the kingdom of God. Based on his own view of the ritual character of kingship, however, Hocart's thesis was more far-reaching culturally and historically: that human societies were engaged in cosmic systems of governmentality even before they instituted anything like a political state of their own. From the preface of *Kings and councillors*:

The machinery of government was blocked out in society long before the appearance of government as we now understand it. In other words, the functions now discharged by king, prime minister, treasury, public works, are not the original ones; they may account for the present form of these institutions, but not for their original appearance. They were originally part, not of a system of government, but of an organization to promote life, fertility, prosperity by transferring life from objects abounding in it to objects dependent on it. ([1952] 1970: 3)

In effect, Hocart speaks here of a cosmic polity, hierarchically encompassing human society, since the life-giving means of people's existence were supplied by "supernatural" beings of extraordinary powers: a polity thus governed by so-called "spirits"—though they had human dispositions, often took human bodily forms, and were present within human experience.

The present essay is a follow-up. The project is to take the Cartesian thesis beyond kingship to its logical and anthropological extreme. Even the so-called "egalitarian" or "acephalous" societies, including hunters such as the Inuit or Australian Aboriginals, are in structure and practice cosmic polities, ordered and governed by divinities, the dead, species-masters, and other such metapersons endowed with life-and-death powers over the human population. There are kingly beings in heaven where there are no chiefs on earth. Hobbes notwithstanding, the state of nature is already something of a political state. It follows that, taken in its social totality and cultural reality, something like the state is the general condition of humankind. It is usually called "religion."

For example: Chewong and Inuit

Let me begin with a problem in ethnographic perspective that typically leads to a cultural mismatch between the ancestral legacy of the anthropologist and



her or his indigenous interlocutors. I know this is a problem, since for a long time I lived with the same contradiction I now see in Signe Howell's excellent study of the Chewong of the Malaysian interior. Although Chewong society is described as classically "egalitarian," it is in practice coercively ruled by a host of cosmic authorities, themselves of human character and metahuman powers. The Chewong are a few hundred people organized largely by kinship and subsisting largely by hunting. But they are hardly on their own. They are set within and dependent upon a greater animistic universe comprised of the persons of animals, plants, and natural features, complemented by a great variety of demonic figures, and presided over by several inclusive deities. Though we conventionally call such creatures "spirits," Chewong respectfully regard them as "people" (*beri*)—indeed, "people like us" or "our people" (Howell 1985: 171). The obvious problem of perspective consists in the venerable anthropological disposition to banish the so-called "supernatural" to the epiphenomenal limbo of the "ideological," the "imaginary," or some such background of discursive insignificance by comparison to the hard realities of social action. Thus dividing what the people join, we are unable to make the conceptual leap—the reversal of the structural *gestalt*—implied in Howell's keen observation that "the human social world is intrinsically part of a wider world in which boundaries between society and cosmos are non-existent" (2012: 139). "There is no meaningful separation," she says, "between what one may term nature and culture or, indeed, between society and cosmos" (*ibid.*: 135).

So while, on one hand, Howell characterizes the Chewong as having "no social or political hierarchy" or "leaders of any kind," on the other, she describes a human community encompassed and dominated by potent metapersons with powers to impose rules and render justice that would be the envy of kings. "Cosmic rules," Howell calls them, I reckon both for their scope and for their origins. The metahuman persons who mandate these rules visit illness or other misfortune, not excluding penalty of death, on Chewong who transgress them. "I can think of no act that is rule neutral," Howell writes; taken together, "they refer not just to selected social domains or activities, but to the performance of regular living itself" (*ibid.*: 140). Yet though they live by the rules, Chewong have no part in their enforcement, which is the exclusive function of "whatever spirit or non-human personage is activated by the disregard of a particular rule" (*ibid.*: 139). Something like a rule of law sustained by a monopoly of force. Among hunters.

When Signe Howell first visited the Chewong in 1977, she found them obsessively concerned with a tragedy that happened not long before. Three people had been killed and two injured for violating a weighty taboo on laughing at animals: a prohibition that applied to all forest creatures, the breach of which would potentially implicate all Chewong people. The victims had ridiculed some millipedes that entered their lean-to; and that night a terrific thunderstorm uprooted a large tree, which fell upon them. Here it deserves notice that while the Chewong profess to abhor cannibalism, like animist hunters generally, they nevertheless subsist on "people like us," their animal prey. Likewise similar to other hunters, they manage the contradiction by the ritual respects they accord wild animals: in this case, by the prohibition on ridiculing forest creatures—which also, by positioning the animals outside familiar human relations, apparently erases the cannibal implications from

overt consciousness (cf. Valeri 2000: 143). Since the forest animals are not really like us, we can beat the cannibal rap.

The severe punishments for disrespecting forest creatures originated with certain immortals of the Above and the Below: the male Thunder God, Tanko, and the female Original Snake, whose abode is the primordial sea under the earth—and who is most responsible for maintaining rules of this type. There were never any humans the likes of Tanko and the Original Snake among Chewong themselves: no such human powers, whatever the conventional wisdom says about divinity as the mirror image of society. Tanko lives in the sky, whence the thunder he unleashes on taboo-violators is aptly said to be the sound of him laughing at the human predicament. His thunderbolts are also known to punish incest, causing severe joint pain and, if the behavior persists, death. On his frequent visits to earth, he indulges in contrasting sexual behavior—relations with distantly rather than closely related women—and with beneficial rather than fatal results: for without his sexual exploits there could be no Chewong people. Tanko descends to have intercourse with all human and animal females, which is what makes them fertile. Menstrual blood represents the birth of children he has sired, children unseen and unknown to their mothers, as they ascend to the heavens to live with their father. The semen of human males, however, is unable to procreate children until Tanko has copulated with the women concerned, which is to say until they have menstruated—from which it follows empirically that the god was indeed the condition of possibility of human reproduction.

The Original Snake is sometimes identified as the sky-wife of Tanko, a culture heroine who gave Chewong fire, tobacco, and night; but in her more usual form of a huge snake dwelling in chthonian waters, she is especially known for her malevolent powers. Knocking down trees and houses, her breath creates the destructive winds that punish people who violate the ordinances on the treatment of animals. She may also be provoked into moving while in the subterranean sea, causing an upwelling of waters that drowns the offenders—upon which she swallows them body and soul.¹ Not that the Original Snake is the only man-eater among the myriad indwelling and free-ranging metahumans whom Chewong encounter, more often for worse than for better. Without replicating the extraordinary catalogue compiled by Howell (1989), suffice it for present purposes to indicate the range: from female familiars who marry the human individuals for whom they serve as spirit guides; through various kinds of ghosts especially dangerous to small children and the creatures upon whose good will fruits bear in season; to the twenty-seven subtypes of harmful beings who were once human, and of whom Chewong say, “They want to eat us” (ibid.: 105). If there is indeed no boundary between the cosmos and the *socius*, then it’s not exactly what some would call a “simple society,” let alone an egalitarian one.

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1. One is reminded of the great Rainbow Serpent of Australian Aboriginals, as also by the Original Snake’s relation to the celestial god Tanko, thus making a pair like the male sky deity and the autochthonous serpent of Australian traditions (see below on Magalim of the Central New Guinea Min peoples and Ungud of the Kimberleys, Western Australia).

I hasten to reply to the obvious objection that the potent deities of the Chewong reflect a long history of relationships with coastal Malay states by noting that basically similar cosmologies are found among basically similar societies situated far from such influences. For an initial example the Central Inuit; thereafter, Highland New Guineans, Australian Aboriginals, native Amazonians, and other “egalitarian” peoples likewise dominated by metaperson others who vastly outnumber them.

Of the Inuit in general it is said that a person “should never push himself ahead of others or show the slightest ambition to control other people” (Oosten 1976: 16), and in particular of the Netsilik of the Central Canadian Arctic that “there were no lineages or clans, no institutionalized chiefs or formal government” (Balicki 1970: xv). On the other hand, of the same Netsilik, Knud Rasmussen (1931: 224) wrote:

The powers that rule the earth and all the animals, and the lives of mankind are the great spirits who live on the sea, on land, out in space, and in the Land of the Sky. These are many, and many kinds of spirits, but there are only three really great and really independent ones, and they are Nulijuk, Narssuk, and Tatqeq. These three are looked upon as directly practicing spirits, and the most powerful of them all is Nulijuk, the mother of animals and mistress both of the sea and the land. At all times she makes mankind feel how she vigilantly and mercilessly takes care that all souls, both animals and humankind, are shown the respect the ancient rules of life demand.

Ruling their respective domains—Nulijuk or Sedna, the sea and the land; Tatqeq, the Moon Man, the heavens; and Narssuk or Sila, the meteorological forces of the air—these three “great spirits” were widely known under various names from East Greenland to the Siberian Arctic—which affords some confidence in their antiquity and indigeneity. While always complementary in territorial scope, they varied in salience in different regions: the Moon Man generally dominant in the Bering Strait and Sila in Greenland; whereas Sedna, as Franz Boas wrote, was “the supreme deity of the Central Eskimos,” holding “supreme sway over the destinies of mankind” (1901: 119).²

The Central Inuit and Sedna in particular will be the focus here: “The stern goddess of fate among the Eskimos,” as Rasmussen (1930: 123) characterized her. In command of the animal sources of food, light, warmth, and clothing that made an Inuit existence possible, Sedna played “by far the most important part in everyday life” (*ibid.*: 62). She was effectively superior to Sila and the Moon, who often functioned as her agents, “to see that her will is obeyed” (*ibid.*: 63). Accordingly, in his ethnography of the Iglulik, Rasmussen describes a divine pantheon of anthropomorphic power ruling a human society that was itself innocent of institutional authority. So whenever any transgression of Sedna’s rules or taboos associated with hunting occurs,

2. On the distribution and respective powers of these great spirits among Inuit and Siberian peoples, see the general summaries in Weyer (1932), Oosten (1976), Hodgkins (1977), and Merkur (1991). On the dominance of Sedna among the Central Inuit, see in particular Weyer (1932: 355–56).

the spirit of the sea intervenes. The moon spirit helps her to see the rules of life are daily observed, and comes hurrying down to earth to punish any instance of neglect. And both sea spirit and moon spirit employ Sila to execute all punishments in any way connected with the weather. (Rasmussen 1930: 63; cf. 78)

Scholars perennially agonize over whether to consider the likes of Sedna as “gods.” Too often some promising candidate is rejected for failing to closely match our own ideas of the Deity: an act of religious intolerance, as Daniel Merkur observed (1991: 37–48), with the effect of promulgating the Judeo-Christian dogma that there is only one True God. But, “Why not call them gods?”; for it happens that Hocart thus posed the question in regard to a close analogue of Sedna among Winnebago people, a certain “immaterial being in control of animal species” ([1936] 1970: 149; cf. Radin 1914). More than just species-masters, however, Sedna, Sila, and the Moon had the divine attributes of immortality and universality. All three were erstwhile humans who achieved their high stations by breaking with their earthly kinship relations, in the event setting themselves apart from and over the population in general. Various versions of Sedna’s origin depict her as an orphan, as mutilated in sacrifice by her father, and/or as responsible for his death; the Moon Man’s divine career featured matricide and incest with his sister; Sila left the earth when his parents, who were giants, were killed by humans. Much of this is what Luc de Heusch (1962) identified as “the exploit” in traditions of stranger-kinship: the crimes of the dynastic founder against the people’s kinship order, by which he at once surpasses it and acquires the solitude necessary to rule the society as a whole, free from any partisan affiliation. And while on the matter of kingship, there is this: as the ruling powers of earth, sea, air, and sky, all of the Inuit deities, in breaking from kinship, thereby become territorial overlords. Transcending kinship, they achieve a kind of territorial sovereignty. The passage “from kinship to territory” was an accomplished fact long before it was reorganized as the classic formula of state formation. This is not only to say that the origins of kingship and the state are discursively or spiritually prefigured in Inuit communities, but since, like Chewong, “the human social world is intrinsically part of a wider world in which boundaries between society and cosmos are non-existent,” this encompassing cosmic polity is actually inscribed in practice.

Like the Chewong, the Inuit could pass for the model of a (so-called) “simple society” were they not actually and practically integrated in a (so-called) “complex society” of cosmic proportions. In the territories of the gods dwelt a numerous population of metahuman subjects, both of the animistic kind of persons indwelling in places, objects, and animals; and disembodied free souls, as of ghosts or demons. “The invisible rulers of every object are the most remarkable beings next to Sedna,” Boas wrote: “Everything has its *inua* (owner)” ([1888] 1961: 591).³ All

3. The distinction between “indwelling” and “free souls” (such as ghosts) is adopted from Merkur (1991). Reports of the ubiquity of the former among Inuit have been recurrent at least since the eighteenth century. Thus, from East Greenland in 1771: “The Greenlanders believe that all things are souled, and also that the smallest implement possesses its soul. Thus an arrow, a boot, a shoe sole or a key, a drill, has each for itself a soul” (Glann, in Weyer 1932: 300).



across the Arctic from Greenland to Siberia, people know and contend with these *inuua* (pl. *inuuat*), a term that means “person of” the noun that precedes it. Or “its man,” as Waldemar Bogoras translates the Chukchee cognate, and which clearly implies that “a human life-spirit is supposed to live within the object” (1904–9: 27–29). (Could Plato have imagined the perspectival response of Chukchee to the allegory of the shadows on the wall of the cave? “Even the shadows on the wall,” they say, “constitute definite tribes and have their own country where they live in huts and subsist by hunting” [ibid: 281].) Note the repeated report of dominion over the thing by its person—“everything has its owner.” Just so, as indwelling masters of their own domains, the gods themselves were superior *inuuat*, endowed with something akin to proprietary rights over their territories and the various persons thereof. J. G. Oosten explains: “An *inuua* was an anthropomorphic spirit that was usually connected to an object, place, or animal as its spiritual owner or double. The *inuuat* of the sea, the moon, and the air could be considered spiritual owners of their respective territories” (1976: 27). Correlatively, greater spirits such as Sedna, mother of sea animals, had parental relations to the creatures of their realm, thus adding the implied godly powers of creation and protection to those of possession and dominion. Taken in connection with complementary powers of destruction, here is a preliminary conclusion that will be worth further exploration: socially and categorically, divinity is a high-order form of animism.

That’s how it works in Boas’ description of Sedna’s reaction to the violation of her taboos on hunting sea animals. By a well-known tradition, the sea animals originated from Sedna’s severed fingers; hence, a certain mutuality of being connected her to her animal children. For its part, the hunted seal in Boas’ account is endowed with greater powers than ordinary humans. It can sense that the hunter has had contact with a corpse by the vapor of blood or death he emits, breaking a taboo on hunting while in such condition. The revulsion of the animal is thereupon communicated to Sedna, who in the normal course would withdraw the seals to her house under the sea, or perhaps dispatch Sila on punishing blizzards, thus making hunting impossible and exposing the entire human community to starvation. Note that in many anthropological treatments of animism, inasmuch as they are reduced to individualistic or phenomenological reflections on the relations between humans and animals, these interactions are characterized as reciprocal, egalitarian, or horizontal; whereas often in social practice they are at least three-part relations, involving also the master-person of the species concerned, in which case they are hierarchical—with the offending person in the client position. Or rather, the entire Inuit community is thereby put in a subordinate position, since sanction also falls on the fellows of the transgressor; and as the effect is likewise generalized to all the seals, the event thus engages a large and diverse social totality presided over by the ruling goddess.⁴

In the same vein, the many and intricate taboos shaping Inuit social and material life entail submission to the metaperson-others who sanction them, whether

4. In a comparative discussion of species-masters in lowland South America, Carlos Fausto (2012: 29) notes that the topic has been relatively neglected by ethnographers, “due to a widespread view of the South American lowlands as a realm of equality and symmetry.”

these prohibitions are systematically honored or for whatever reason violated. Of course, submission to the powers is evident in punishments for transgressions. But the same is doubly implied when the proscriptive rule is followed, for, more than an act of respect, to honor a taboo has essential elements of sacrifice, involving the renunciation of some normal practice or social good in favor of the higher power who authorizes it (cf. Leach 1976; Valeri 2000). In this regard, the existence of the Inuit, in ways rather like the Chewong, was organized by an elaborate set of “rules of life,” as Rasmussen deemed them, regulating all kinds of behavior of all kinds of persons. For even as the main taboos concerned the hunt, the disposition of game, and practices associated with menstruation, childbirth, and treatment of the dead, the enjoined behaviors could range from how one made the first cut of snow in building an igloo, to whether a pregnant woman could go outside with her mittens on—never (Rasmussen 1930: 170). Rasmussen’s major work on the “intellectual culture” of the Iglulik includes a catalogue of thirty-one closely written pages of such injunctions (ibid.: 169–204). As, for example:

- The marrow bones of an animal killed by a first-born son are never to be eaten with a knife, but must be crushed with stones (ibid.: 179).
- A man suffering want through ill success in hunting must, when coming to another village and sitting down to eat, never eat with a woman he has not seen before (ibid.: 182).
- Persons hunting seal from a snow hut on ice may not work with soapstone (ibid.: 184).
- Young girls present in a house when a seal is being cut up must take off their *kamiks* and remain barefooted as long as the work is in progress (ibid.: 185).
- If a woman is unfaithful to her husband while he is out hunting walrus, especially on drift ice, the man will dislocate his hip and have severe pains in the sinuses (ibid.: 186).
- If a woman sees a whale she must point to it with her middle finger (ibid.: 187).
- Widows are never allowed to pluck birds (ibid.: 196).
- A woman whose child has died must never drink water from melted ice, only from melted snow (ibid.: 198).

Commented Boas in this connection: “It is certainly difficult to find out the innumerable regulations connected with the religious ideas and customs of the Eskimo. The difficulty is even greater in regard to customs which refer to birth, sickness and death” ([1888] 1961: 201–2).

The greater number of these “rules of life” were considerations accorded to Sedna. When they were respected, the sea goddess became the source of human welfare, providing animals to the hunter. But when they were violated, Sedna or the powers under her aegis inflicted all manners of misfortune upon the Inuit, ranging from sicknesses and accidents to starvation and death. Punishments rained upon the just and the unjust alike: they might afflict not only the offender but also his or her associates, perhaps the entire community, though these others could be innocent or even unaware of the offense. As it is sometimes said that Sedna is also the mother of humankind, that is why she is especially dangerous to women and children, hence the numerous taboos relating to menstruation, childbirth, and the newborn. But the more general and pertinent motivation would be that she is the



mother of animals, hence the principle involved in her animosity to women is an eye-for-an-eye in response to the murder of her own children (cf. Gardner 1987; Hamayon 1996). Again, everything follows from the animist predicament that people survive by killing others like themselves. As explained to Rasmussen:

All the creatures we have to kill and eat, all those we have to strike down and destroy to make clothes for ourselves, have souls like we have, souls which do not perish with the body, and which therefore must be propitiated lest they should revenge themselves on us for taking away their souls. (1930: 56)

Among Netsilik, Iglulik, Baffin Islanders, and other Central Inuit, the disembodied souls of the dead, both of persons and of animals, were an omnipresent menace to the health and welfare of the living. “All the countless spirits of evil are all around, striving to bring sickness and death, bad weather, and failure in hunting” (Boas [1888] 1961: 602; cf. Rasmussen 1931: 239; Balikci 1970: 200–1). In principle, it was the persons and animals whose deaths were not properly respected ritually who thereupon haunted the living. But in this regard, Rasmussen confirms what one may well have surmised from the extent and intricacy of the “rules of life,” namely that the gods often act in ways mysterious to the people:

There are never any definite rules for anything, for it may also happen that a deceased person may in some mysterious manner attack surviving relatives or friends he loves, even when they have done nothing wrong. . . . Human beings are thus helpless in the face of all the dangers and uncanny things that happen in connection with death and the dead. (1930: 108)

There is hardly a single human being who has kept the rules of life according to the laws laid down by the wisdom of the ancients. (1930: 58)

In a way, the reign of the metaperson powers-that-be was classically hegemonic, which helps explain the seeming conflict between the common travelers’ reports of the Inuits’ good humor and their sense that “human beings were powerless in the grasp of a mighty fate” (ibid.: 32)—“we don’t believe, we fear” (ibid.: 55). The ambivalence, I suggest, represents different aspects of the same situation of the people in relation to the metaperson powers-that-be. What remains unambiguous and invariant is that for all their own “loosely structured” condition, they are systematically ordered as the dependent subjects of a cosmic system of social domination. Hobbes spoke of the state of nature as all that time in which “men lived without a common power to keep them all in awe.” Yet in Rasmussen’s accounts of the Inuit, a people who might otherwise be said to approximate that natural state, “mankind is held in awe”—given the fear of hunger and sickness inflicted by the powers governing them (1931: 124).⁵ If this accounts for the people’s anxieties, it also helps explain

5. Like the Chukchee shaman who told Bogoras:

We are surrounded by enemies. Spirits always walk about with gaping mouths. We are always cringing, and distributing gifts on all sides, asking protection of one, giving ransom to another, and unable to obtain anything whatever gratuitously. (1904–9: 298)

the reports of their stoic, composed, often congenial disposition. This happier subjectivity is not simply seasonal, not simply due to the fact that times are good in terms of hunting and food supply, for that in itself would be because the people have been observant of Sedna's rules, and accordingly she makes the animals available. There is a certain comfort and assurance that comes from the people's compliance with the higher authorities that govern their fortunes—or if you will, their compliance with the “dominant ideology” (cf. Robbins 2004: 212). In the upshot, it's almost as if these polar inhabitants were bipolar—except that, beside the fear and composure that came from their respect of the god, on occasion they also knew how to oppose and defy her.

More precisely, if great shamans could on occasion force the god to desist from harming the people, it was by means of countervailing metapersons in their service: familiar spirits they possessed or who possessed them. Thus empowered, the shaman could fight or even kill Sedna, to make her liberate the game (upon her revival) in a time of famine (Weyer 1932: 359; Merkur 1991: 112). More often, the dangerous journeys shamans undertake to Sedna's undersea home culminate in some manhandling of her with a view to soothing her anger by combing the sins of humans out of her tangled hair. Alternatively, Sedna was hunted like a seal from a hole in the ice in winter: she was hauled up from below by a noose and while in the shaman's power told to release the animals; or she was conjured to rise by song and then harpooned to the same effect.

The last, the attack on the god, was the dramatic moment of an important autumnal festival of the Netsilik, designed to put an end to this tempestuous season and ensure good weather for the coming winter. Again it was not just the stormy weather with its accompaniment of shifting and cracking ice that was the issue, but the “countless evil spirits” that were so manifesting themselves, including the dead knocking wildly at the huts “and woe to the unhappy person they can lay hold of” (Boas [1888] 1961: 603). Ruling all and the worst of them was Sedna, or so one may judge from the fact that when she was ritually hunted and harpooned, the evil metahuman host were all driven away. Sedna dives below and in a desperate struggle manages to free herself, leaving her badly wounded, greatly angry, and in a mood to seize and carry off her human tormenters. That could result in another attack on her, however, for if a rescuing shaman is unable to otherwise induce her to release the victim, he may have to thrash her into doing so (Rasmussen 1930: 100). Although the shamans' powers to thus oppose the god are not exactly their own, may one not surmise there is here a germ of a human political society: that is, ruling humans qua metapersons themselves?

A word on terminology. Hereafter, I use “*inua*” as a general technical term for all animistic forms of indwelling persons, whether of creatures or things—and whether the reference is singular or plural. I use “metaperson” preferably and “metahuman” alternately for all those beings usually called “spirits”: including gods, ghosts, ancestors, demons, *inua*, and so on. Aside from direct quotations, “spirit” will appear only as a last resort of style or legibility, and usually then in quotation marks—for reasons to which I now turn, by way of the life story of Takunaqu, an Iglulik woman:

One day I remember a party of children out at play, and wanted to run out at once and play with them. But my father, who understood hidden



things, perceived that I was playing with the souls of my dead brothers and sisters. He was afraid this might be dangerous, and therefore called upon his helping spirits and asked them about it. Through his helping spirits, my father learned . . . there was . . . something in my soul of that which had brought about the death of my brothers and sisters. For this reason, the dead were often about me, and I did not distinguish between the spirits of the dead and real live people. (Rasmussen 1930: 24)

Why call them spirits?

Sometime before Hocart was asking, “Why not call them gods?” Andrew Lang in effect asked of gods, “Why call them spirits?” Just because we have been taught our god is a spirit, he argued, that is no reason to believe “the earliest men” thought of their gods that way ([1898] 1968: 202). Of course, I cannot speak here of “the earliest men”—all those suggestive allusions to the state of nature notwithstanding—but only of some modern peoples off the beaten track of state systems and their religions. For the Inuit, the Chewong, and similar others, Lang would have a point: our native distinction between spirits and human beings, together with the corollary oppositions between natural and supernatural and spiritual and material, for these peoples do not apply. Neither, then, do they radically differentiate an “other world” from this one. Interacting with other souls in “a spiritual world consisting of a number of personal forces,” as J. G. Oosten observed, “the Inuit themselves are spiritual beings” (1976: 29). Fair enough, although given the personal character of those forces, it is more logical to call spirits “people” than to call people “spirits.” But in either case, and notwithstanding our own received distinctions, at ethnographic issue here is the straightforward equivalence, spirits = people.

The recent theoretical interest in the animist concepts of indigenous peoples of lowland South America, northern North America, Siberia, and Southeast Asia has provided broad documentation of this monist ontology of a personalized universe. Kaj Århem offers a succinct summary:

As opposed to naturalism, which assumes a foundational dichotomy between objective nature and subjective culture, animism posits an intersubjective and personalized universe in which the Cartesian split between person and thing is dissolved and rendered spurious. In the animist cosmos, animals and plants, beings and things may all appear as intentional subjects and persons, capable of will, intention, and agency. The primacy of physical causation is replaced by intentional causation and social agency. (2016: 3)

It only needs be added that given the constraints of this “animist cosmos” on the human population, the effect is a certain “cosmo-politics” in Eduardo Viveiros de Castro’s sense of the term (2015). Indeed, the politics at issue here involves much more than animist *inua*, for it equally characterizes people’s relations to gods, disembodied souls of the dead, lineage ancestors, species-masters, demons, and other such intentional subjects: a large array of metapersons setting the terms and conditions of human existence. Taken in its unity, hierarchy, and totality, this is a *cosmic*

polity. As Déborah Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017: 68–9) very recently put the matter (just as this article was going to press):

What we would call “natural world,” or “world” for short, is for Amazonian peoples a multiplicity of intricately connected multiplicities. Animals and other spirits are conceived as so many kinds of “people” or “societies,” that is, as *political entities*. . . . Amerindians think that there are many more societies (and therefore, also humans) between heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophy and anthropology. What we call “environment” is for them a society of societies, an international arena, a *cosmopoliteia*. There is, therefore, no absolute difference in status between society and environment, as if the first were the “subject” and the second the “object.” Every object is another subject and is more than one.

In what follows I offer some selected ethnographic reports of the coexistence of humans with such metapersonal powers in the same “intersubjective and personalized universe”—just by way of illustration. But let me say here, and try to demonstrate in the rest of the essay, the implications are world-historical: for if these metaperson-others have the same nature as, and are in the same experiential reality with, humans, while exerting life-and-death powers over them, then they are the dominant figures in what we habitually call “politics” and “economics” in all the societies so constituted. In the event, we will require a different anthropological science than the familiar one that separates the human world into ontologically distinct ideas, social relations, and things, and then seeks to discount the former as a dependent function of one of the latter two—as if our differentiated notions of things and social relations were not symbolically constituted in the first place.

Not to separate, then, what peoples of the New Guinea Highlands join: surrounded and outnumbered above, below, and on earth by ghosts, clan ancestors, demons, earthquake people, sky people, and the many *inua* of the wild, the Mbowamb spend their lives “completely under the spell and in the company of spirits. . . . The spirits rule the life of men. . . . There is simply no profane field of life where they don’t find themselves surrounded by a supernatural force” (Vicedom and Tischner (1943–48, 2: 680–81). Yet if the “other world” is thus omnipresent around Mt. Hagen, it is not then an “other world.” These people, we are told, “do not distinguish between the purely material and purely spiritual aspects of life” (*ibid.*: 592). Nor would they have occasion to do so if, as is reported of Mae Enga, they conducted lives in constant intersubjective relations with the so-called “spirits.” “Much of [Enga] behavior remains inexplicable to anyone ignorant of the pervasive belief in ghosts,” reports Mervyn Meggitt. “Not a day passes but someone refers publicly to the actions of ghosts” (1965: 109–10). Or as a missionary-ethnographer recounts:

For the Central Enga the natural world is alive and endowed with invisible power. To be seen otherwise would leave unexplained numerous events. The falling tree, the lingering illness, the killing frost, the haunting dream—all confirm the belief in a relationship between the physical world and the powers of earth, sky, and underworld. (Brennan 1977: 11–12; cf. Feachem 1973)

Such metapersonal powers are palpably present in what is actually happening to people, their fortunes good and bad. Hence Fredrik Barth’s own experience among

Baktaman in the Western Highlands: “The striking feature is . . . how *empirical* the spirits are, how they appear as very concrete observable objects in the world rather than ways of talking about the world” (1975: 129, emphasis in original). Supporting Barth’s observation from his own work among nearby Mianmin people, Don Gardner adds that “spirits of one kind or another are a basic feature of daily life. Events construed as involving ‘supernatural’ beings are commonly reported and discussed” (1987: 161).⁶

Mutatis mutandis, in the Amazonian forest, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro comes to a similar appreciation of the gods and dead as immanently present for Araweté. Listening to the nocturnal songs of shamans summoning these metaperson-others to the village, the ethnographer

came to perceive the presence of the gods, as the reality or source of examples, in every minute routine action. Most important, it was through these that I could discover the participation of the dead in the world of the living. (1992: 13–14)

The presence of *maï* [‘gods’] in daily life is astonishing: for each and every purpose, they are cited as models of action, paradigms of body ornamentation, standards for interpreting events, and sources of news . . . (1992: 74–75)⁷

The general condition of the cohabitation of humans and their metapersonal-alter in one “real world” is their psychic unity: their mutual and reciprocal status as anthropopsychic subjects. The venerable anthropological premise of “the psychic unity of mankind” has to be more generously understood. For as Viveiros de Castro says, “There is no way to distinguish between humans and what we call spirits” (ibid.: 64). In effect, the so-called “spirits” are so many heterogeneous species of the genus *Homo*: “Human beings proper (*bide*) are a species within a multiplicity of other species of human beings who form their own societies” (ibid.: 55).⁸ As is well known, the statement would hold for many peoples throughout lowland South America. Of the Achuar, Philippe Descola writes that they do not know the “supernatural as a level of reality separate from nature,” inasmuch as the human condition is common to “all nature’s beings. . . . Humans, and most plants, animals, and meteors are persons (*aents*) with a soul (*wakan*) and individual life” (1996: 93).

In speaking of the “own societies” of the metaperson-others as known to Araweté, Viveiros de Castro alludes to the “perspectivism” that his writings have done much to make normal anthropological science. Well documented from Siberia as

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6. Peter Lawrence and Meggitt speak of a general Melanesian “view of the cosmos (both its empirical and non-empirical parts) as a unitary physical realm with few, if any, transcendental attributes” (1965: 8).
 7. Yet the Araweté are no more mystical in such regards than is the ethnographer. The affective tone of their life, Viveiros de Castro notes, does not involve what we consider religiosity: demonstrations of reverence, devaluation of human existence, and so forth. They are familiar with their gods.
 8. Or else, like the various animals known to Naskapi of the Canadian Northeast, these other persons “constitute races and tribes among which the human is included” (Speck 1977: 30).

well as Amazonia, the phenomenon offers a privileged instance of the coparticipation of humans with gods, ghosts, animal-persons, and others in the same complex society. In consequence of differences in their perceptual apparatus, both people and animals live unseen to each other in their own communities as fully human beings, bodily and culturally; even as each appears to the other as animal prey or predators. In this connection, the common ethnographic observation that because the non-human persons are as such generally invisible, they must inhabit a different, “spiritual” reality, is a cultural *non sequitur* for Araweté and other perspectivists. In Lockean terms the differences are only secondary qualities: due to perception—because of the different bodily means thereof—rather than to the thing thus perceived. In practice, moreover, the *socius* includes a variety of metapersonal communities: not only those of the animal *inua*, but also the villages of the gods, the dead, and perhaps others, all of them likewise cultural replicas of human communities. Accordingly, the human groups are engaged in a sociological complexity that defies the normal anthropological characterizations of their simplicity. A lot of social intercourse goes on between humans and the metahuman persons with whom they share the earth, as well as with those who people the heavens and the underworld. Apart from shamans, even ordinary humans may travel to lands of the metaperson-others, as conversely the latter may appear among people in human form. Human and nonhuman persons are often known to intermarry or negotiate the exchange of wealth—when they are not reciprocally eating one another.

Social relations of people and metaperson-others

A woman sits in a corner of the house, whispering to a dead relative; a man addresses a clump of trees. . . . When an illness or misfortune occurs, a father or neighbor will break knotted strips of cordyline leaf, talking to the spirits to find out which one is causing trouble and why. (Keesing 1982: 33)

This passage is one of many that exemplify how Roger Keesing makes good on the introductory promise of his fine monograph on the Kwaio people of Malaita (Solomon Islands): namely, “to describe Kwaio religion in a way that captures the phenomenological reality of a world where one’s group includes the living and the dead, where conversations with spirits and signs of their presence and acts are part of everyday life” (ibid.: 2–3; cf. 33, 112–13). Likewise, the human world of the Lalakai of New Britain is “also a world of spirits. Human beings are in frequent contact with non-human others, and there is always the possibility of encountering them at any time” (Valentine 1965: 194). Yet beyond such conversations or passing encounters with metaperson-others, from many parts come reports of humans entering into customary social relations with them.

Inuit know of many people who visited villages of animal-persons, even married and lived long among them, some only later and by accident discovering their hosts were animal *inua* rather than Inuit humans (Oosten 1976: 27). A personal favorite is the Caribou Man of the northern Algonkians. In one of many similar versions, Caribou Man was a human stranger who was seduced by a caribou doe, went on to live with and have sons by her, and became the ruler of the herd (Speck 1977).

French-Canadian trappers were not off the mark in dubbing Caribou Man “*le roi des caribou*,” as the story rehearses the archetypal stranger-king traditions of dynastic origin, down to the mediating role played by the native woman and her foundational marriage to the youthful outsider. Besides the hierogamic experiences of Chewong women and the marriage of the gods with dead Araweté women, there are many permutations of such interspecies unions: some patrilocal and some matrilineal, some enduring and some ended by divorce due to homesickness. A Kaluli man of the New Guinea Southern Highlands may marry a woman of the invisible world, relates Edward Schiefflin (2005: 97); when the man has a child by her, he can leave his body in his sleep and visit her world. Reciprocally, people from that world may enter his body and through his mouth converse with the people present. Then there was the Mianmin man of the Western Highlands who, beside his human wife, formed a polygynous arrangement with a dead woman from a different descent group. The dead wife lived in a nearby mountain, but she gardened on her husband’s land and bore him a son (Gardner 1987: 164).

Don Gardner also tells of the time that the Ulap clan of the Mianmin saved themselves from their Ivik enemies by virtue of a marital alliance with their own dead. The Ivik clan people were bent on revenge for the death of many of their kinsmen at Ulap hands. Sometime before, the big-man of the Ulap and his counterpart among their dead, who lived inside the mountain on which the Ulap were settled, exchanged sisters in marriage. When the big-man of the dead heard the Ivik were threatening his living brother-in-law, he proposed that the two Ulap groups exchange the pigs they had been raising for each other and hold a joint feast. In the course of the festivities, the ancestral people became visible to the Ulap villagers, who were in turn rendered invisible to the Ivik. So when the Ivik enemies came, they could not find the Ulap, although three times they attacked the places where they distinctly heard them singing. Throughout the Western Mianmin area, this account, Garner assures us, has the status of a historical narrative.

We need not conclude that relations between humans and their metaperson counterparts are everywhere and normally so sympathetic. On the contrary, they are often hostile and to the people’s disadvantage, especially as the predicament noted earlier of the Inuit is broadly applicable: the animals and plants on which humans subsist are essentially human themselves. Although some anthropologists have been known to debate whether cannibalism even existed, it is hardly a rare condition—even among peoples who profess not to practice it themselves. As already noticed, in many societies known to anthropology, especially those where hunting is a mainstay, the people and their prey are involved in a system of mutual cannibalism. For even as the people kill and consume “people like us,” these metaperson-alterers retaliate more or less in kind, as eating away human flesh by disease or starvation.

All over the Siberian forest, for instance,

Humans eat the meat of game animals in the same way that animal spirits feed on human flesh and blood. This is the reason why sickness (experienced as a loss of vitality) and death in the [human] community as a whole are understood as a just payment for its successful hunting both in the past and the future. (Hamayon 1996: 79)

Married to the sister or daughter of the “game-giving spirit,” an elk or reindeer, his brother-in-law the Siberian shaman thus enters an affinal exchange system of flesh—the meat of animals compensated by the withering of people—on behalf of the human community. Thus here again: “Being similar to the human soul in essence and on a par with hunters in alliance and exchange partners, spirits are not transcendent” (ibid.: 80). It is, to reprise Århem’s expression above, “an intersubjective and personalized universe.”

Metaperson powers-that-be

The metahuman beings with whom people interact socially are often hierarchically structured, as where gods such as Sedna and species-masters such as Caribou Man encompass and protect the individual *inuua* in their purview. These hierarchies are organized on two principles which in the end come down to the same thing: the proprietary notion of the higher being as the “owner”—and usually also the parent—of his or her lesser persons; and the platonic or classificatory notion of “the One over Many,” whereby the “owner” is the personified form of the class of which the lesser persons are particular instances. One can find both concepts in Viveiros de Castro’s discussion of the Araweté term for metahuman masters, *nā*:

The term connotes ideas such as leadership, control, responsibility, and ownership of some resource or domain. The *nā* is always a human or anthropomorphic being. But other ideas are involved as well. The *nā* of something is someone who has this substance in abundance. Above all, the *nā* is defined by something of which it is the master. In this last connotation, he is at the same time “the representative of” and the “represented by” that something. (1992: 345)⁹

Although, in a spasm of relativism, Pascal famously said that a shift of a few degrees of latitude will bring about a total change in juridical principles, you can go from the Amazon forests or the New Guinea Highlands to the Arctic Circle and Tierra del Fuego and find the same ethnographic descriptions of greater metapersons as the “owners”-cum-“mothers” or “fathers” of the individual metapersonal beings in their domain. Urapmin say “that people get into trouble because ‘everything has a father,’ using father (*alap*) in the sense of owner. . . . In dealing with nature then, the Urapmin are constantly faced with the fact that the spirits hold competing claims to many of the resources people use” (Robbins 1995: 214–15). (Parenthetically, this is not the first indication we have that the “spirits” own the means of production, an issue to which we will return.) Among Hageners, the Stratherns relate, all wild objects and creatures are “owned” by “spirits,” and can be referred to as their

9. These species- and place-masters are known the length and breadth of the Western Hemisphere. For good examples see Wagley ([1947] 1983) on Tapirapé, Wagley and Galvao ([1949] 1969) on Tenetahara, Huxley (1956) on Urubu, and Hollowell (1960) on Ojibwa. As noted, the great Inuit god-*inuua* are also represented as “owners” of their domains.

“pigs,” just as people hold domestic pigs (1968: 190). “Masters of nature,” to whom trees and many other things “belong,” these *kor wakl* spirits are “sworn enemies of mankind” because people tend to consume foods under their protection without proper sacrifices. “The people are terribly afraid of them” (Vicedom and Tischner 1943–48, 2: 608, 659).

In the Siberian Arctic, large natural domains such as forests, rivers, and lakes had their “special owners,” as Waldemar Bogoras calls them. The forest-master familiar to Russo-Yukaghir had “absolute power” over the animals there; he could give them away as presents, lose them at cards, or round them up and cause them to depart the country (Bogoras 1904–9 285). Not unusual either is the compounded hierarchy of metahuman owners, composed of several levels of *inua*-figures: as among Tupi-Guarani peoples such as Tenetehara and Tapirapé, where species-masters are included in the domains of forest-masters, who in turn belong to the godly “owners” of the social territory. Similarly for Achuar, the individual animal *inua* are both subsumed by “game mothers”—who “are seen as exercising the same kind of control over game that mothers exercise over their children and domestic animals”—and also magnified forms of the species—who, as *primus inter pares*, watch over the fate of the others. The latter especially are the social interlocutors of the Achuar hunter, but he must also come to respectful terms with the former (Descola 1996: 257–60). The chain of command in these hierarchical orders of metaperson “owners” is not necessarily respected in pursuing game or administering punishments to offending hunters, but it is quite a bureaucracy.

As I say (and so have others), this sense of belonging to a more inclusive power can be read as membership in the class of which the “owner” is the personified representative—that is, a logical and theological modality of the One over Many. The ordering principle is philosophical realism with an anthropomorphic twist, where a named metaperson-owner is the type of which the several lesser beings are tokens. In a broad survey of the concept in the South American lowlands, Carlos Fausto (2012) uses such pertinent descriptions of the species-master as “a plural singularity” and “a singular image of a collectivity.” Anthropologists will recognize classic studies to the effect: Godfrey Lienhardt (1961) on the totems or species-beings who subsumed the forms of the same kind; and Edward Evans-Pritchard (1956) on the Nuer “God” (Kwoth), manifested in a diminishing series of avatars. (Parenthetically, as species-masters are more widely distributed in the world than totems proper, the latter may be understood as a development of the former under the special influence of descent groups or other segmentary formations.) In his own well-known wandering minstrel tour of animism—rather like the present article, composed of ethnographic shreds and patches—E. B. Tylor conceived a similar passage from “species-deities” to “higher deities” by way of Auguste Comte on the “abstraction” thus entailed and Charles de Brosses on the species archetype as a Platonic Idea (1903: 241–46).¹⁰

10. This classificatory logic is evident in Hermann Strauss’ reports on the subsumption of the various Sky People of the Mbowamb into “He, himself, the Above.” As the beings who “planted” the clan communities, together with their foods and customs, the Sky People are “owners” of the earthly people, but generally they remain at a distance and

That divinity originates as a kind of animism of higher taxonomic order is not a bad (Platonic) idea. Consider this notice of Sedna: “In popular religious thought, the Sea Mother is an indweller. She indwells in the sea and all of its animals. She is immanent in the calm of the sea, in the capes and shoals where the waters are treacherous, and in the sea animals and fish” (Merkur 1991: 136). Analogously, for the Aboriginal peoples of Northwest Australia, the cult of their great Rainbow Serpent, Ungud, could be epitomized as *inua* all the way down. A bisexual snake identified with the Milky Way, the autochthonous Ungud made the world. Les Hiatt summarized the process:

Natural species came into existence when Ungud dreamed itself into new various shapes. In the same way Ungud created clones of itself as *wonjina* [local versions of Dreamtime ancestors], and dispatched them in various places, particularly waterholes. The *wonjina* in turn generated the human spirits that enter women and become babies. . . . Ungud is thus an archetype of life itself. (1996: 113)

In his informative account of the local Ungarinyin people, Helmut Petri specifies that the numerous *wonjina* were transformed into “individual Ungud serpents,” such that “Ungud appeared in the Aborigines’ view at one time as an individual entity, at another time as a multiplicity of individual beings” ([1954] 2011: 108). This included the spirit children whom the *wonjina* deposited in the waterholes: they were given by Ungud. Hence the One over Many, down to individual human beings, for each person thus had an “Ungud part” (see also Lommel [1952] 1997).

It only needs to be added, from Nancy Munn’s revelatory study of analogous phenomena among Walbiri, that in participating intersubjectively in an object world created by and out of the Dreamtime ancestors, human beings experiencing “intimations of themselves” are always already experiencing “intimations of others”: those Dreamtime heroes “who are superordinate to them and precede them in time” (1986: 75). Accordingly, violation of any part of the country is “a violation of the essence of moral law” (ibid.: 68). While clearly different from other societies considered here, these no less “egalitarian” Australian Aborigines are thus no less hierarchical. “It’s not our idea,” Pintupi people told Fred Myers in regard to the customs and morality established in perpetuity by the Dreamtime ancestors. “It’s a big Law. We have to sit down beside that Law like all the dead people who went before us” (Myers 1986: 58).

are involved only in times of collective disaster or need. Exceptionally, however, Strauss cites a number of Mbowamb interlocutors assigning responsibility to “The Above” for both individual and community misfortunes.

If many men are killed in battle, they say “He himself, the Oglá [Above], gave away their heads.” . . . When a great number of children die, the Mbowamb say, “He himself, the Above, is taking all our children up above.” If a couple remain childless, everyone says “Their *kona* [land] lies fallow, the Above himself, as the root-stock man (i.e., owner) is giving them nothing.” ([1962] 1990: 38–39)

The cosmic polity

By way of integration of themes presented heretofore, there follows a sketch of the cosmic polities of the Mountain Ok-speaking Min peoples of New Guinea.¹¹

There was no visible or proximate political state in the center of New Guinea, the region of the Fly and Sepik River headwaters traditionally inhabited by the Mountain Ok or Min peoples. All the same, the Telefolmin, Urapmin, Feramin, Tifalmin, Mianmin, and others could be fairly described as governed by metahuman powers whose authority over otherwise politically fragmented peoples was exercised through obligatory rules effectively backed by punitive force. The Hocartesian question might well be, “Why not call it a state?” Or else, if this cosmic polity were unlike a state in that the controlling powers largely outnumbered the civil society of humans, their regime could be all the more dominating. Experientially, the people live in a condition of subjugation to a host of metaperson powers-that-be, whose numerous rules of order are enforced by the highest authorities, often through the offices of the lesser personages in their aegis.

Among the Central Min peoples, where this regime achieved its most integrated form, it was dominated by the cosmocratic duo of Afek, mother of humans and taro, and the serpentine Magalim, who preceded her as the autochthonous father of the numerous creatures of the wild (Jorgensen 1980, 1990a, 1998). Parents of all, Afek and Magalim were themselves children of none. The beginnings of their respective reigns were marked by violent breaches of kinship relations, giving them the independence that was the condition of their universality. Afek was notorious for committing incest with her brother, whom she later killed (and revived). Magalim was born of himself by intervening in the sexual intercourse of a human couple. Emerging as a serpent, he was subsequently rejected by his would-be mother, swallowed his foster-father, and killed his father’s brothers. Magalim has been likened to the Rainbow Serpent figures of Aboriginal Australian traditions: among other resemblances, by his habitation of subterranean waters, from which he rises when irritated to cause destructive floods (Brumbaugh 1987). Afek adds to the analogy by her own resemblance to Australian Dreamtime ancestors, creating features of the landscape and endowing the customs of the human groups she gave rise to in the course of her travels. Thereafter Afek’s presence would be mediated primarily by the human ancestors whose cult of fertility she established, whereas Magalim as indwelling “boss” of the land acted through the multifarious *inua* of its creatures and features. Although in effect they thus organized complementary domains—Afek the human sphere and Magalim its untamed environs—through their

11. I am especially indebted to Dan Jorgensen for his unstinting, generous, and informative replies to my many questions about the ethnography of the Telefolmin and of Min peoples in general. His knowledge and interpretations of this material, as of anthropology more broadly, are extraordinary—though, of course, I take responsibility if I have misconstrued the information he provided. I have also relied heavily on several of his writings, especially Jorgensen (1980, 1990a, 1990b, 1990c, 1996, 1998, 2002). Also most useful have been Barth (1975, 1987), Wheatcroft (1976), Brumbaugh (1987, 1990), and Robbins (1995, 1999, 2004).

respective human and metahuman subjects each extended into the jurisdiction of the other—often there to do harm.¹²

Much of Min cultural order, including the taboos that sanction it, is the codification of the legendary doings of Afek in the mode of mandatory custom. “Since that time,” Tifalmin people say, “men and women have known how to do things” (Wheatcroft 1976: 157–58). The precedents thus set by episodes in the epic of Afek’s advent include the different social and sexual roles of men and women and the rituals and practices of menstruation, initiation, childbirth, and death. Indeed, death itself was initiated by Afek along with the westward journey of the deceased on the underground road to the land of the dead—whence in return come life-giving shell valuables, hence Afek is also the originator of wealth, exchange, and long-distance trade. Afek bore the taro plant that iconically distinguishes the Min people, making a complementary schismogenesis of it by destroying the swamps in the Telefolmin region, thereby marking the contrast to lowland sago peoples. Along her journey, she established the men’s cult houses where the remains of the ancestors of each Min group and the associated initiation rituals would guarantee the growth of their youth and their taro. Afek’s ritual progress culminated in the construction of her own great cult house, Telefolip, in the Telefolmin village of that name.

Afek’s house became the ritual center of the Mountain Ok region, thus giving the Telefolmin people a certain precedence over the other Min groups. Rituals performed in connection with the Telefolip house radiated Afek’s benefits in human and agricultural fertility widely among the other Min communities. If the house itself deteriorated, the growth of taro in the entire region would decline in tandem. The several Min groups of a few hundred people each were thus integrated in a common system of divine welfare centered on the Telefolip shrine. The overall effect was a core–periphery configuration of peoples in a tribal zone with the Telefolmin custodians of Afek’s legacy at the center. As described by Dan Jorgensen (1996: 193): “The common linkage to Afek locates Mountain Ok cults in a regional tradition. Myths concerning Afek not only account for the features of a particular ritual system or aspects of local cosmology, but also place groups relative to one another in terms of descent from Afek (or a sibling)” (cf. Robbins 2004: 16–17). “A surprisingly ambitious ideology,” comments Robert Brumbaugh, “because it does not link up with any economic or political control from the center” (1990: 73). Here is another instance where the superstructure exceeds the infrastructure. What does link up with the superiority of Telefolmin, as Brumbaugh also says, is Afek’s continued presence:

In Telefolmin religion, Afek remains present and accessible. Taro fertility is a visible sign of her power, just as her bones are the visible signs of

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12. As a civilizer who carved a human cultural existence out of the wild, displacing its “nature spirits,” Afek’s story is similar to stranger-king traditions. A further similarity is her union or unions with local men (or a dog). Although the Min peoples are generally known as “Children of Afek,” there are alternate local traditions of the autochthonous origins of certain groups from animal ancestors. The same sort of opposition between indigenous “owners” and the incoming rulers is in play in the domination of the area by the Telefolmin people, who arrived at their present location and achieved their superior position by early military feats.



her presence. . . . Thus the Falamin, when addressing the local ancestors in ritual, consider that they are heard by Afek as well. When stronger reassurances are needed, the local ancestor is bypassed, new personnel take charge of the ritual and Afek is invoked directly. Groups without access to bones of Afek—it seems that not all groups have them—are covered by Afek’s promise to hear and respond when she is called upon for taro. (1990: 67)

But “Magalim always ruins Afek’s work,” Telefolmin say, breaking her “law” by deceiving men into killing their friends, seducing women, driving people mad, causing landslides and floods, and wrecking gardens (Jorgensen 1980: 360). Capricious and malicious, Magalim is oftentimes (but not always) the enemy of people: a menace especially among the Central Min, where he is the father, owner, and thereby the common form in the persons of the animals, plants, rocks, rivers, cliffs, and so on, that inhabit and constitute the environment—where human persons hunt, garden, and otherwise traverse with disturbing effects. “All things of the bush are Magalim’s children, *Magalim man*,” Jorgensen was told. “If you finish these things, Magalim is their father and he will repay you with sickness, or he will send bad dreams and you will die” (ibid.: 352).

The wild has its own hierarchy: at least three levels of Magalim-persons, encompassed by the archetypal All-Father serpent. Jorgensen notes that certain species-masters of distinct name “look after” marsupials and wild pigs, even as Magalim himself looks after snakes. But all are in turn encompassed in Magalim, as “All these names are just names. The true thing is Magalim” (ibid.). Likewise for Urapmin, Joel Robbins refers to intermediate species-masters controlling their particular animal-persons; these “owners” being in turn subsumed in the greater Magalim-Being. Certain “marsupial women” are guardians of the many marsupial kinds that people hunt and eat. Taking a fancy to a hunter, a marsupial woman may have sex with and marry him. Thereafter she comes to him in dreams to inform him about the whereabouts of game. But marsupial women have been known to become jealous of their husband’s human wife, especially if the latter is too generous in sharing marsupials with her own relatives. Then the hunter has accidents in the bush or falls sick, or even dies if he does not leave his human spouse (Robbins 2004: 210).

In any case, where Magalim reigns, the principle holds that all particular *inua*, whether of living creatures or natural features, are also forms of him. The individual Magalim-persons who cause Feramin people trouble may be treated as acting on their own or as agents of Magalim All-Father. The people may say, “Tell your father to stop making thunderstorms—and not to send any earthquakes either” (Brumbaugh 1987: 26). Magalim, however, is not always causing trouble for Feramin. Without changing his notorious disposition, he may turn it on strangers, whom he is reputed to dislike, and thus become protector of the local people. Indeed, he defends Feramin tribal territory as a whole. The Feramin were divided into four autonomous communities (“parishes”); but Magalim’s remains were in the care of a single elder, and when ritually invoked before battle, they made all Feramin warriors fierce and their arrows deadly. “Without subdivision by parishes,” Brumbaugh writes, “the territory of Feramin as a whole is considered under the influence of Magalim, who watches over its borders and the well-being of the traditional occupants” (ibid.: 30).

Protector of the entire territory from an abode within it, a subterranean being who can cause earthquakes, Magalim is the indwelling *inua* of the land itself: “boss of the land,” the people now say. Indeed, if all the creatures and prominent natural haunts of the wild are so many aliases of Magalim, as Jorgensen puts it, it is because he is “identified with the earth and its power.” “Everything depends on Magalim,” Jorgensen was often told, including Afek and all her people who “sit on the top of the ground” (1998: 104). Kinship to territory: the self-born Magalim, slayer of his foster-kin, becomes god of the land.

Hence add gardeners to the tragic predicament of the animist hunters. The Urapmin, according to Robbins, are constantly aware they are surrounded by “nature spirits” (*motobil*) who are original “owners” of almost all the resources they use (2004: 209–10). Consequently, “every act of hunting or gardening causes some risk,” even on non-taboo grounds, should it disturb the metaperson-owners—who would thereupon punish the person responsible “for failure to observe their version of the laws” (*ibid.*: 211). Interesting that New Guineans and Australian Aborigines, although without any native juridical institutions as such, have been quick to adapt the European term “law” to their own practices of social order. In other contexts, Robbins speaks of “the law of the ancestors,” apparently referring to the numerous taboos based on traditions of Afek that organize human social relationships. The Urapmin term here translated as “law”—*awem* (adj.), *aweim* (n.)—maps a moral domain of prohibitions based “on kinds of authority that transcend those produced *simply* by the actions and agreements of men” (*ibid.*: 211). Otherwise said, these laws are “sacredly grounded prohibitions aimed at shaping the realm of human freedom” (*ibid.*: 184). Given the range of social relationships and practices established by Afek, it follows that the laws were “complex” and “left everyone laboring under the burdens of at least some taboo all the time” (*ibid.*: 210–11). Although Urapmin boast of having been the most taboo-ridden of all Min people, it could not have been by much. Among others, the Tifalmin knew taboos that were likewise “very powerful . . . sustaining and interpenetrating many other normative and ethical aspects of everyday life” (Wheatcroft 1976: 170). This could be true virtually by definition, inasmuch as by following Afek’s precedents, the entire population would be ordered by taboos marking the social differences between men and women and initiatory or age-grade statuses. Negative rules predicate positive structures—and at the same time uphold them.¹³

In Telefolmin, Urapmin, and probably elsewhere, violations of Afek’s taboos were as a rule punished occultly, without Afek’s explicit intervention. On the other hand, in Tifalmin the metaperson-powers of both the village and the bush were actively engaged in sanctioning the many taboos of “everyday life.” Often punishments emanated from the prominent ancestors whose remains were enshrined in Afek’s cult house. Alternatively, they were inflicted by the “vast congresses” of thinking and sentient animal “ghosts” (*sinik*), *inua* who struck down people with disease or ruined their gardens. The last suggests that even people who adhere to Afek’s food taboos may thereby suffer the vengeance of the species-masters—that is, for killing and eating the latter’s children. As Don Gardner observed for Mianmin, since

13. I am indebted to Dan Jorgensen for this point: which, as he observes, derives from observations of Lévi-Strauss.



every animal has its “mother” or “father,” human mothers and children become vulnerable to an equivalent payback for what was done to the species-parent’s child. And among the Central Min, where the parent is an All-Father like Magalim, the threat is apparently constant as well as general in proportion. Brumbaugh writes of Magalim:

All smells connected with women and children bring danger from Magalim. He may make women pregnant, eat an unborn child and leave one of his own, or come unseen between a couple having intercourse in the bush to give his child instead; it will then be a contest between the power of the man and the power of Magalim that determines the future of the child. (Brumbaugh 1987: 27)

It follows that to the extent people are socially objectified in terms of the wild foods they could or could not eat, they are in double jeopardy of suffering harm: whether magically or indirectly from Afek, mother of humans, for eating wrongly; or from the mother or father of the animal for eating it at all. Here again are “cosmic rules” of human order, enforced throughout the social territory by metaperson authorities to whom it all “belongs.”

Determination by the religious basis

Of the South American lowland people, the Piaroa, Joanna Overing writes:

Today, Masters of land and water own the domains of water and jungle . . . both of whom acquired their control over these habitats at the end of mythical time. These two spirits guard their respective domains, protect them, make fertile their inhabitants, and punish those who endanger their life forces. They also cooperate as guardians of garden food. The relevant point is obviously that the inhabitants of land and water are not owned by man. (1983–84: 341)

Since, as a general rule, the peoples under discussion have only secondary or usufructuary rights to the resources “owned” by metaperson-others, it follows that their relations of production entail submission to these other “people like us.” In conventional terms, it could justifiably be said that the spirits own the means of production—were it not that the “spirits” so-called are real-life metapersons who in effect *are* the primary means-cum-agents of production. Fundamental resources—plants, animals, celestial and terrestrial features, and so on—are constituted as intentional subjects, even as many useful tools are “person-artifacts.”¹⁴ Marked thus by an intersubjective praxis, this is an “economy” without “things” as such. Not only are metahuman persons ensouled in the primary resources, they thereby govern the outcome of the productive process. As intentional beings in their own right, they are the arbiters of the success or failure of human efforts. For theirs are the life-forces—which may be hypostatized as *mana*, *hasina*, *wakan*, *semengat*,

14. “In the Amerindian case . . . the possession of objects must be seen as a particular case of the ownership relation between subjects, and the thing-artefact as a particular case of the person-artefact” (Fausto 2012: 33).

orenda, *nawalak*, or the like—that make people’s gardens grow, their pigs flourish, and game animals become visible and available to them. Some decades ago, Jonathan Friedman and Michael Rowlands put the matter generally for “tribal” peoples: “Economic activity in this system can only be understood as a relation between producers and the supernatural. This is because wealth and prosperity are seen as directly controlled by supernatural spirits” (1978: 207).

Of course we are speaking of the people’s own notions of what there is and how it comes to be: a culturally informed reality they share with metaperson-others to whom they are subjected and indebted for life and livelihood. When faced with the assurance of Kwaio people that their prosperity is “a result of ancestral support,” Roger Keesing refrains from the temptation “to say that the sacred ancestral processes are a mystification of the real physical world,” for, “in a world where the ancestors are participants in and controlling forces of life, this conveys insights only at the cost of subjective realities” (1982: 80). But why, then, “subjective realities”? If the ancestors participate in and control the people’s everyday existence—if they are “empirical,” as Fredrik Barth might say—the demystification would shortchange the “objective” realities.¹⁵ Not to worry, however: in due course, with a few pertinent ethnographic notices in hand, I consider what scholarly good or harm would come from crediting such “determination by the religious basis.”

It is not as if the producing people had no responsibility for the economic outcome—even apart from their own knowledge and skill. The Inuit shaman explains that: “No bears have come in their season because there is no ice; and there is no ice because there is too much wind; and there is too much wind because we mortals have offended the powers” (Weyer 1932: 241). Even so, something then can be done. Around the world, the common recourse for this dependence on the metaperson agents of people’s prosperity is to pay them an appropriate tribute, as in sacrifice. Sacrifice becomes a fundamental relation of production—in the manner of taxation that secures benefits from the powers-that-be. As Marcel Mauss once put it, since spirits “are the real owners of the goods and things of this world,” it is with them that exchange is most necessary ([1925] 2016: 79). A Tifalmin man tells how it works:

When we bring secretly hunted marsupial species into the *anawok* [men’s cult house] during ceremonies, we tell the *amkumiit* [ancestral relics] and the pig bones [of feasts gone by], “you must take care of us and make our pigs grow fat and plentiful, and our taro immense.” As soon as we told them this, shortly afterwards we see the results in our gardens. They do just what we petitioned. (Wheatcroft 1976: 392)

For all this hubris, however, the Tifalmin are not really in control. Edmund Leach notably remarked of such sacrifices that the appearance of gift and reciprocity notwithstanding, the gods don’t need gifts from the people. They could easily kill the animals themselves. What the gods require are “signs of submission” (Leach 1976: 82–93).

15. Later in the same monograph, Keesing attempts to recuperate these “political insights” in favor of the conventional view that the spiritual powers are an ideological reflex of the Kwaio big-man system. But aside from the fact that the Kwaio spirit-world is much more complex morphologically than Kwaio society, there are no Kwaio big-men with the life-and-death powers even of their ancestral predecessors.



What the gods and the ancestors have, and peoples such as the Tifalmin seek, is the life-force that makes gardens, animals, and people grow. The metahuman powers must therefore be propitiated, solicited, compensated, or otherwise respected and appeased—sometimes even tricked—as a necessary condition of human economic practice. Or as Hocart had it, based on his own ethnographic experience: “There is no religion in Fiji, only a system that in Europe has been split into religion and business.” He knew that in Fijian, the same word (*cakacaka*) refers indiscriminately to “work”—as in the gardens—or to “ritual”—as in the gardens.

So why call it “production”? How can we thus credit human agency if the humans are not responsible for the outcome: if it is the ancestors according to their own inclinations who make the taro grow; or if it is *Sila Inua*, the Air, and the bears themselves who make hunting successful? In a golden few pages of his recent work *Beyond nature and culture* (2013), Philippe Descola argues persuasively that our own common average native notion of “production” fails to adequately describe human praxis in a metahuman cosmos. Where even animals and plants are thinking things, the appropriate anthropology should be Hocartesian rather than Cartesian. Rather than a subject–object relation in which a heroic individual imposes form upon inert matter, making it come-to-be according to his or her own plan, at issue here are intersubjective relations between humans and the metaperson-others whose dispositions will be decisive for the material result. Descola can conclude from his Amazonian experience that it is “meaningless” to talk of “agricultural production” in a society where the process is enacted as interspecies kinship:

Achuar women do not “produce” the plants that they cultivate: they have a personal relationship with them, speaking to each one so as to touch its soul and thereby win it over; and they nurture its growth and help it to survive the perils of life, just as a mother helps her children. (2013: 324)

Not to forget the mistress and mother of cultivated plants, Nankui, described by Descola elsewhere (1996: 192ff.): the goddess whose presence in the garden is the source of its abundance—unless she is offended and causes some catastrophic destruction. Hence the necessity for “direct, harmonious, and constant contact with Nankui,” as is successfully practiced by women who qualify as *anentin*, a term applied to persons with the occult knowledge and ritual skills to develop fruitful relations with the goddess.

The way Simon Harrison describes the agricultural process for Manambu of the Middle Sepik (New Guinea), people do not *create* the crops, they *receive* them from their ancestral sources. “What could pass for ‘production,’” he writes, “are the spells by which the totemic ancestors are called from their villages by clan magicians to make yams abundant, fish increase, and crocodiles available for hunting” (1990: 47). For “yams are not created by gardening,” but, like all cultivated and wild foods, “they came into the phenomenal world by being ‘released’ from the mythical villages by means of ritual” (*ibid.*: 63). Note that this is a *political* economy, or, more exactly, a cosmopolitical economy, inasmuch as the human credit for the harvest goes to those who gained access to the ancestors by means of their secret knowledge—rather than the gardener who knew the right soils for yams. Of course, one may accurately say that, here as elsewhere, human technical skills, climatic conditions, and photosynthesis are responsible for the material outcome, for

what actually happened; but also here as elsewhere, the decisive cultural issue, from which such specific political effects follow, is, rather, *what it is that happened*—namely, the clan magicians summoned the yams from the ancestral villages. Such is the human reality, the premises on which the people are acting—which are also the beginnings of anthropological wisdom.

Further ethnographic notices of the spiritual nature of the material basis are easy to come by. I close with a final one that has the added advantage of addressing the issue, raised in Harrison's work, of human power in a cosmic polity. The site will be Melpa and their neighbors of the Hagen region. Here a variety of metahuman beings—Sky People deities (including their collective personification in “Himself, the Above”); “Great Spirits” of the major cults; the human dead, both recently deceased kin and clan ancestors; and the numerous “nature spirits” or *inua*-owners of the wild—are the agents of human welfare:

In trade and economic affairs . . . in campaigns of war or at great festivals, any success is seen as the result of the help of benevolent spirits. . . . Benevolent spirits are said to “plant our fields for us” and to “make our pigs big and fat.” . . . They are said to “raise the pigs.” (Strauss [1962] 1990: 148)

The functions of these metaperson-kinds are largely redundant; many are competent to promote or endanger the well-being of the people. It will be sufficient to focus on a few critical modes of life and death from the metapersons—with a view also to their constitution of human, big-man power.

Whereas the Sky People originally “sent down” humans and their means of existence, it is the recent dead and clan ancestors who are most intimately and continuously responsible for the health and wealth of their descendants—though for punishing people they usually enlist the ill-intentioned *inua* of the wild. As recipients of frequent sacrifices, the recent dead protect their kin from accidents, illness, and ill fortune. “They will ‘make the fields and vegetable gardens for us . . . raise pigs for us, go ahead of us on journeys and trading trips, grant us large numbers of children . . . stay at our side in every way’” (ibid.: 272). So likewise, on a larger scale, as when a meeting house is built for them, will the clan spirits “make our fields bring forth . . . our pigs multiply, protect our wives, children, and pigs from plagues and illness, keep sorcery and evil spirits at bay” (ibid.: 279). But if the gardens are planted without proper sacrifices, “the owner-spirit digs up the fruits and eats them” (Vicedom and Tischner 1943–48, 2: 677). By contrast to this constant attention, the Great Spirits of the collective cults are ceremonially celebrated only at intervals of years. On these occasions, the large number of pigs sacrificed testifies to the deities’ exceptional ability to multiply things themselves by promoting the people’s growth, fertility, and wealth. In such respects both the dead and the cult deities are particularly useful to big-men and would-be big-men, that is, as the critical sources of their human power:

We rich people [i.e., big-men] live and sacrifice to the Kor Nganap [Female Great Spirit]; this enables us to make many *moka* [pig-exchange festivals]. Through this spirit we become rich, create many children who remain healthy and alive, and stay ourselves healthy. Our gardens bear much fruit. All this the Kor Nganap does, and that is why we sacrifice to it. (Vicedom and Tischner 1943–48, 2: 794)



The Stratherns relate that when a big-man goes on a journey to solicit valuables, he asks his clan-ancestors to come sit on his eyelids and induce his trading partner to part with his valuables. Big-men are also helped by the ghosts of close relatives, who may be enlisted by partaking of the pig backbone cooked especially for them. The same ancestors and ghosts are with the big-man in the ceremonial ground when he makes the prestations that underwrite his fame and status (Strathern and Strathern 1968: 192).

In another text, Andrew Strathern notes that traditional Hagen big-men had “a multitude of sacred and magical appurtenances which played an important part, from the people’s own perspective, in giving them the very access to wealth on which their power depended” (1993: 147). Strathern here addresses a range of leadership forms in a variety of Highland New Guinea societies—including Baruya, Duna, Simbari Anga, Kuskusmin, and Maring, as well as Melpa—to show that the “ritual sources of power” amount to a Melanesian *Realpolitik*: the condition of possibility of human authority, as regards both the practices by which it is achieved and the reason it is believed. All the same, we need not completely abandon historical materialism and put Hegel right-side up again, for in these big-man orders one may still speak of economic determinism—provided that the determinism is not economic.

To conclude

To conclude: we need something like a Copernican Revolution in the sciences of society and culture. I mean a shift in perspective from human society as the center of a universe onto which it projects its own forms—that is to say, from the received Durkheimian, Marxist, and structural-functionalist conventions—to the ethnographic realities of people’s dependence on the encompassing metaperson-others who rule earthly order, welfare, and existence. For Durkheim, God was an expression of the power of society: people felt they were constrained by some power, but they knew not whence it came. But if what has been said here has any cogency, it is better to say that God is an expression of the lack of power of society. Finitude is the universal human predicament: people do not control the essential conditions of their existence. I have made this unoriginal and banal argument too many times, but if I can just say it once more: if people really controlled their own lives, they would not die, or fall sick. Nor do they govern the weather and other external forces on which their welfare depends. The life-force that makes plants and animals grow or women bear children is not their doing. And if they reify it—as *mana*, *semengat*, or the like—and attribute it to external authorities otherwise like themselves, this is not altogether a false consciousness, though it may be an unhappy one. Vitality and mortality do come from elsewhere, from forces beyond human society, even as they evidently take some interest in our existence. They must be, as Chewong say, “people like us.”

But so far as the relation between the cosmic authorities and the human social order goes, in both morphology and potency there is no equivalence between them. As I have tried to show, especially by egalitarian and chiefless societies, neither in structure nor in practice do they match the powers above and around them. Among

these societies there are no human authorities the likes of Sedna, Sila, Ungud, the Original Snake, Afek, Magalim, Nankui, or the New Guinea Sky People.¹⁶ What Viveiros de Castro says in this regard to the Araweté and Tupi Guarani peoples generally can be widely duplicated among the classically “acephalous” societies:

How to account for the coexistence of, on one hand, a “loosely structured” organization (few social categories, absence of global segmentation, weak institutionalization of interpersonal relations, lack of differentiation between public and domestic spheres) with, on the other hand, an extensive taxonomy of the spirit world . . . an active presence of that world in daily life, and a thoroughly vertical “gothic” orientation of thought . . . ? Societies such as the Araweté reveal how utterly trivial any attempts are to establish functional consistencies or forced correspondences between morphology and cosmology or between institution and representation. (1992: 2–3)

Even apart from the numerous malevolent, shape-shifting beings with superhuman powers of afflicting people with all kinds of suffering, Viveiros de Castro describes a society of immortal gods in heaven without equal on earth, who make people’s foods and devour their souls, who are capable of elevating the sky and resurrecting the dead, gods who are “extraordinary, splendid but also dreadful, weird—in a word, awesome” (ibid.: 69).¹⁷

But they do have shamans, precisely of similar powers (ibid.: 64)—as do many other such societies. Even where there are no chiefs, there are often some human authorities: big-men, great-men, guardian magicians, warriors, elders. Yet, given the basis of their authority, these personages are so many exceptions that prove the rule of domination by metaperson powers-that-be; for, like Inuit shamans or Hagen big-men, their own ability to command others is conveyed by their service to or enlistment of just such metaperson-others. Indeed, as Vicedom and Tischner write of Hageners: “Any manifestation of power in people or things is ascribed to supernatural or hidden power,” whether in the form of good harvests, many children, success in trade, or a respected position in the community (1943–48, 1: 43).

In insightful discussions of the Piaroa of the Orinoco region, Joanna Overing (1983–84, 1989) notes that human life-giving powers were not their own, but were magically transmitted to individuals from the gods by tribal leaders. By means of powerful chants, the *ruwang*, the tribal leader, was uniquely able to travel to the lands of the gods, whence he brought the forces for productivity enclosed within “beads of life” and placed them in the people of his community. Overing points out that this is no political economy in the sense that tribal leaders control the labor of

16. Of the Huli equivalent of Hagener Sky People, R. M. Glasse writes: “Dama are gods—extremely powerful beings who control the course of nature and interfere in the affairs of men.” Notably, one Datagaliwabe, “a unique spirit whose sole concern is punishing breaches of kinship rules” (1965: 27)—including lying, stealing, adultery, murder, incest, violations of exogamic rules and of ritual taboos—inflicts sickness, accidents, death or wounding in war (ibid.: 37).

17. For a similar structure of divinity in a non-Tupi setting, see Jon Christopher Crocker (1983: 37 *et passim*) on the *bope* spirits of the Bororo. In both cases, by conveying to the gods their rightful share of certain foods, the people will be blessed with fertility and natural plenty.



others. But as they absorbed more divine powers than others, they were responsible for building the community: “Without the work of the *ruwang*, the community could not be created, and because of his greater creative power, he was also the most productive member of the community” (1989: 172).

In such cultural-ontological regimes, where every variety of human social success is thus attributed to metapersonal powers, there are no purely secular authorities. Roger Keesing relates of an ambitious young Kwaio man that he is well on his way to big-manship, as evidenced by his staggering command of genealogies, his encyclopedic knowledge of traditions of the ancestors and their feuds, his distinction as a singer of epic chants, and his acquisition of magical powers. Accordingly, he is “not only acquiring an intellectual command of his culture, but powerful instruments for pursuing secular ambitions as a feast-giver” (Keesing 1982: 208). Or for an Australian Aboriginal example: Helmut Petri concludes that the reason certain Ungarinyin “medicine men” and elders are leading and influential men of their communities is that they “are regarded as people in whom primeval times are especially alive, in whom the great heroes and culture-bringers are repeated and who maintain an inner link between mythical past and present” ([1954] 2011: 69). Not that those who so possess or are favored by divine powers are necessarily placed beyond the control of their fellows, for popular pressures may be put on them to use such powers beneficently. Here is where the famous “egalitarianism” of these peoples becomes relevant. Tony Swain (1993: 52) notes that the native Australian elders’ shared being with the land entails the obligation to make it abound with life—a duty the people will hold them to. Swain is careful to insist that the leaders’ access to ritual positions amounts to a certain control of “the means of production,” hence that this is not the kind of communalistic, nonhierarchical society “imagined by early Marxists.” But then, ordinary people, without direct access to metapersonal sources of fertility, “can and do order ritual custodians to ‘work’ to make them food: ‘You mak’em father—I want to eat.’” All of which brings us back to the issue of mystification.

Earlier, I warned against too quickly writing off the human dependence on gods, ancestors, ghosts, or even seal-persons as so much mistaken fantasy. Well, nobody nowadays is going to attribute these notions to a “primitive mentality.” And from all that has been said here, it cannot be claimed these beliefs in “spirits” amount to an ideological chimera perpetrated by the ruling class in the interest of maintaining their power—that is, on the Voltairean principle of “There is no God, but don’t tell the servants.” Here we do have gods, but no ruling class. And what we also distinctively find in these societies is the coexistence in the same social reality of humans with metahumans who have life-giving and death-dealing powers over them. The implications, as I say, look to be world-historical. As is true of big-men or shamans, access to the metaperson authorities on behalf of others is the fundamental political value in all human societies so organized. Access on one’s own behalf is usually sorcery, but to bestow the life-powers of the god on others is to be a god among men. Human political power is the usurpation of divine power. This is also to say that claims to divine power, as manifest in ways varying from the successful hunter sharing food or the shaman curing illness, to the African king bringing rain, have been the *raison d’être* of political power throughout the greater part of human history. Including chiefdoms such as Kwakiutl, where,

The chiefs are the assemblers, the concentrators, and the managers of supernatural powers. . . . The human chiefs go out to alien realms and deal with alien beings to accumulate *nawalak* [generic life-giving power], and to concentrate it in the ceremonial house. When they have become centers of *nawalak* the salmon come to them. The power to draw salmon is equated with the power to draw people. The power to attract derives from *nawalak* and demonstrates its possession. (Goldman 1975: 198–99)

It was not military power or economic prowess as such that generated the dominance of the Abelam people over the various other Sepik communities of New Guinea eager to adopt Abelam cultural forms; rather it was the “supernatural power” that their successes signified. “Effectiveness in warfare and skill in growing yams, particularly the phallic long yams,” Anthony Forge (1990: 162) explains, “were in local terms merely the material manifestations of a more fundamental Abelam domination, that of power conceived essentially in magical and ritual terms.” What enabled the Abelam yams to grow larger, their gardens to be more productive, and their occupation of land once held by others was their “superior access to supernatural power.” Accordingly, the political-cum-cultural reach of the Abelam extended beyond their actual grasp. Beyond any real-political or material constraints, the Abelam were admired and feared for their superior access to cosmic power in all its forms, and notably for its “concrete expression” in rituals, buildings, and a great array of objects, decorations, and aesthetic styles. Abelam culture was thus carried abroad by its demonstrable command of greater force than its own (ibid: 163ff.).

Southeast Asian “tribals” and peasants are well known for sacrificial “feasts of merit” in which the display and/or distribution of livestock, foods, and ritual valuables such as porcelain jars and imported textiles is the making of local authorities. But it is not so much the economic benefits to the population at large that constitute this authority—as if the people were rendered dependent on the sponsor of the sacrificial feast for their own means of existence—as it is the privileged dependence of the feast-giver on the metahuman sources of people’s prosperity. As Kaj Århem comments in regard to the “ritual wealth” thus expended:

Such ritual wealth is regarded as objectivized spirit power—an indication that the owner is blessed and protected by personal spirits. Spirit possession manifests itself in good health and a large family. The blessings of the spirits are gained by proper conduct—keeping the precepts of the cosmologically underpinned social and moral order—and, above all, by continuously hosting animal sacrifices, the so-called “feasts of merit.” Wealth, sacrifice, and spiritual blessing are thus linked in an endless, positive feedback circuit. The implied reification of spiritual potency in the form of wealth and worldly power—its acquisition and accumulation as well as its loss—is central to Southeast Asian cosmology and politics. (2016: 20)

Economic prowess is a metaphysical power.¹⁸ Then again, there are other well-known ways, from the magical to the military, of demonstrating such metahuman potency. Even in the matter of kingship, the royal authority may have little or

18. Geertz (1980) was right to speak of a Balinese “theatre state.” So were those who criticized him for underplaying its material dimension.



nothing to do with the accumulation and disposition of riches. In certain African stranger-kingships described elsewhere (Graeber and Sahlins 2017: chap. 5), power essentially rested on the ritual functions of ensuring the population's prosperity: the authority to do so being dependent on descent from exalted foreign sources, complemented usually by traditions of the dynastic founder's exploits as a hunter and warrior in the wild. As Shilluk, Lovedu, and Alur demonstrate, in more than one African realm such stranger-kings "rained" but did not govern. For all the superior foreign origin of an Alur chiefly dynasty, its connection to the ancient great kingdom of Nyoro-Kitara, the Alur ruler, reported Aidan Southall, was revered by his indigenous subjects more for his power to stop war than to make it; "and the sanction to his ritual authority, which is always uppermost in people's minds, is his power to make or withhold rain rather than his power to call in overwhelming force to crush an opponent" ([1956] 2004: 246):

Rain (*koth*) stood for material well-being in general, and a chief's ability to demonstrate his control over it was a crucial test of his efficacy. The chief's control of rain and weather, together with his conduct of sacrifice and worship at the chiefdom shrines, stood for his general and ultimate responsibility in the minds of his subjects for both their material and moral well-being. ([1956] 2004: 239)

You will have noticed that I have come back full circle to Hocart's *Kings and councilors*. Government in general and kingship in particular develop as the organization of ritual. As said earlier, we scholars of a more skeptical or positivist bent are at liberty to demystify the apparent illusions of the Others. We can split up their reality in order to make society autonomous, expose the gods as fantasy, and reduce nature to things. To put it in Chicagoese, we may say we know better than them. But if we do, it becomes much harder to know them better. For myself, I am a Hocartesian.

A final note in this personal vein. Written by one of a certain age, this pretentious article has the air of a swan song. Similarly, for its concern with disappearing or disappeared cultural forms, it is something of the Owl of Minerva taking wing at dusk. Still, it does manage to kill those two birds with one stone.

Coda

Already copyedited, this text was on its way to the printer when by happy chance I discovered that in 1946 Thorkild Jacobsen had formulated the concept of a "cosmic state" in reference to Mesopotamian polities of the third millennium BCE. Jacobsen's discussion of a universal metapersonal regime in a city-state setting indeed anticipates many of the attributes of "The original political society" as presented here—most fundamentally his observation that "the universe as an organized whole was a society, a state" ([1946] 1977: 149). Ruled by divine authorities, human society was merely a subordinate part of this larger society, together with all the other phenomena-cum-subjects inhabiting the cosmos, from beasts and plants to stones and stars: all animate beings (*inua*) likewise endowed with personality and intentionality. Jacobsen depicts this hierarchically organized world in which personkind was the nature of things in a number of parallel passages. For example:

Human society was to the Mesopotamian merely a part of the larger society of the universe. The Mesopotamian universe—because it did not consist of dead matter, because every stone, every tree, every conceivable thing in it was a being with a will and a character of its own—was likewise founded on authority: its members, too, willingly and automatically obeyed orders which made them act as they should act. . . . So the whole universe showed the influence of the essence peculiar to Anu [Sky, king and father of the gods]. ([1946] 1977: 139)

By Jacobsen's descriptions, this universal animism was classificatory—the personalities of elements of the same kind were instances of a master personality of the species; and the scheme was hierarchical at multiple levels—species forms were in turn inhabited by higher, divine forms, such that the world was governed through the indwelling being of cosmocratic gods in every existing thing. While the whole universe manifested the essence of Anu, the goddess Nidabe created and inhabited the useful reeds of the wetlands and by her presence made them flourish. “She was one with every reed in the sense that she penetrated as an animating and characterizing agent, but she did not lose her identity in that of the concrete phenomena and was not limited to any or all the existing reeds” (ibid.: 132). Note that this kind of philosophical realism, with the god as personification of the class of which individuals are participatory members, is a general logic of partibility or dividualism. The god is a partible person manifest in various other beings—like the “myriad bodies” (*kino lau*) of Hawaiian gods—and at the same time exists independently of them. By the same token (pun intended), the several members of a divine class are at once manifestations of the god and (in)dividuals in their own right and kind.

Following this classificatory logic, Jacobsen achieves a description of divine kingship in Mesopotamia of the kind known from classic anthropological accounts in which, for all that the king is a certain god, the god is not the king. Nyikang is Juok, but Juok is not Nyikang; Captain Cook is Lono, but Lono is not Captain Cook. Just so, the Mesopotamian king is Anu, but Anu is not the king. Indeed, given the partibilities involved, the Mesopotamian king in various capacities is also Enlil, Marduk, or any and all the great gods. (Interesting that Hocart [(1936) 1970: 88] recounted the analogous claim of an important Fijian chief who, after enumerating the great gods of the chiefdom, said, “These are all my names.”) This type of intersubjective animism is by far the most common type of divine kingship: the king as human manifestation of the god, as an avatar of the god, rather than the human as the deity in his own person, such as the self-made Roman god, Augustus. Jacobsen also thus testifies to the principle that human authority is the appropriation of divine power. In the cult, the Mesopotamian king enacted the god and thereby controlled and acquired the god's potency. By a kind of usurpation, as it were, a man could “clothe himself with these powers, with the identity of the gods, and through his own actions, when thus identified, cause the powers to act as he would have them act” (Jacobsen [1946] 1977: 199).

For the rest, Jacobsen's text delivers on the usual ontological suspects of a meta-personal cosmos: no subject–object opposition, and, a fortiori, no differentiation of humans from nature—or can we not say: no culture–nature opposition? (Similar observations are made in the same volume by John A. Wilson [(1946) 1977] on ancient Egypt and H. and H. A. Frankfort [(1946) 1977] on ancient civilizations in



general.) Given this universal subjectivity as a matter of common experience, neither did the ancient Mesopotamians know a transcendent, “supernatural” realm. “The Mesopotamian universe did not have ‘different levels of reality’” (Jacobsen [1946] 1977: 149).

The ethnographic examples of “The original political society” were deliberately taken from so-called “egalitarian societies” situated far from any state system to avoid the possibility that the cosmic polities at issue had been diffused or otherwise transplanted from an already existing regime of ruling kings and high gods. However, comparing Jacobsen’s account with peoples such as the Inuit and New Guinea highlanders, something of the reverse seems more likely: that the ancient civilizations inherited cosmological regimes of the kind long established in human societies. If so, the human state was the realization of a political order already pre-figured in the cosmos: the state came from heaven to earth—rather than the gods from earth to heaven.

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La société politique véritable

Même les sociétés prétendues égalitaires et peu structurées connues de l'anthropologie, les sociétés de chasseurs comme les Inuits ou bien les Aborigènes d'Australie par exemple, sont en structure et en pratique des segments subordonnés de règnes cosmiques et inclusifs, contrôlés et gouvernés par des divinités, des ancêtres, des maîtres d'espèce et d'autres méta-personnes douées de pouvoir de vie et de mort sur la population humaine. "Le Mbowamb passe sa vie entière sous l'emprise et en compagnie des esprits." (Vicedom et Tischner). "la société [Arawaté] n'est pas complète sur terre: les vivants font partie d'une structure sociale globale fondée sur l'alliance du ciel et de la terre" (Viveiros de Castro). Nous avons besoin d'une révolution copernicienne de la perspective anthropologique, marquant un départ de notre perspective prenant la société humaine pour centre de tout et projetant sur tout sa propre forme - c'est à dire les conclusions trompeuses des écoles Durkheimiennes ou structuro-fonctionnalistes - et rendant compte des réalités ethnographiques diverses de la dépendance des peuples à des pouvoirs englobant, incarnés, capables de donner la vie et de délivrer la mort, déterminant l'ordre terrestre, l'épanouissement des êtres et l'existence. Quoi qu'en dise Hobbes, l'état politique est la condition d'humanité dans l'état de nature; il y a des êtres royaux dans le ciel même lorsqu'il n'existe pas de chefs sur terre.

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