

On women and jaguars

Why perspectivism got it so wrong

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Across Amazonia, myths hold that in early times it was the jaguars, parrots, tapirs and other animals who first invented bows and arrows, cooking fire, ceremonial buildings, religious ceremonies and other complex cultural accomplishments. Then humans stole these things from the animals, elevating themselves above all other creatures – but at the cost of losing their former ability to engage in easy conversation with the animal world. This mythic view of our origins is the reverse of the Darwinian narrative which our own culture holds up as science.

In this talk, Chris Knight will introduce a recent trend in social anthropology – known as ‘perspectivism’ – and discuss whether such radically different ways of perceiving our origins and place in nature can be made to converge.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvdltsExvpY>

Introduction

Camilla: Reporting in progress. Good evening, everybody. Thank you very much for coming tonight, coming to the room. We’ve got a real cognoscenti audience here tonight with maybe better viewer, but better. Thank you very much for coming on Zoom as well. We are getting another RAG talk by our celebrated founder, Chris Knight. And it’s just amazing how many talks Chris. Chris actually did a talk for Plymouth University yesterday morning and he’s doing another one for Rag Tonight. And this tonight on Women and Jaguars is asking how perspectivism got it so wrong. And a couple of weeks ago he was of course talking about how when Graham Graber needed a lesson taught to them by Amazonian myths, Marmonecki and the hunter and his wives from Amazonian myths. So this is again on Amazonian culture, particularly Colombian Brazilian Amazon, Colombian Peruvian Amazon as well. And Yeah, what do we need to say? Any further points of introduction? I think I want to hand over to Chris straight away.

Lecture

Chris: Thank you. Okay, so I think what I’ll try and do is give you a very quick, sort of two-minute version or one-minute version, and then a slightly longer version. And then I hope you’ll be kind to me as I ruffle through my notes and give you a sort of proper version, reading out a few bits and bobs. So why did the perspectivists get it all so wrong? And the short answer is, well, it’s not, I won’t say it’s because they’re men.

That would be unfair because men can be quite clever. And if you're doing science, it doesn't make a damn bit of difference whether you're male or female or what your orientation is or skin colour or whatever. I would say that because there's so many constraints when you're doing science, it has to be collectivist, it's peer reviewed, but when you make a new original claim, all your colleagues will be trying to pull you down and level you down. Science is intrinsically kind of levelling, collectivist, kind of anarchist, because nobody can just be a guru and wave their arms around and convince people. When you are making up a story, then it's completely different. If you're a kind of artist deciding on a new myth, the unfortunate fact is that if it's men making up these stories, they're likely to get things rather catastrophically wrong. So you're probably all aware of these various versions of human origins, man the hunter, man the toolmaker, man this, man the other. When in fact the scientists, who nowadays are very good at working out social things, because we have a thing called selfish gene theory or sociobiology, there are constraints acting on that. And all animals have social lives and there's a thing called fitness, you've got to get your genes into the future to be relevant to evolution. And it really, you know, some wonderful stuff has come out of that branch of, if you like, social science, the social science of nature as well as culture. Right, a slightly longer version, perspectivism. It's a very well-meaning and in many ways positive attempt by anthropologists, particularly in South America, Amazonia, to avoid being colonialist. And I'll be reading out some passages from some of the pioneers of this new approach. But essentially, the idea is that Western science, introduced to the people of South America by the colonialists since Columbus, is a form of myth-making ideology and there's no particular reason why we should think of it as more true than the indigenous wisdom and in particular the myths of the people of the Amazon region. Now, that's obviously very welcome to be critical of colonialism and critical of its, you know, its assumptions. And the perspectivism, I mean, it's obviously a very, you can think of perspectivism in an incredibly wide way and just say the idea that different perspectives exist. But perspectivism, as we understand it in anthropology, this new, very vibrant, very, it's almost like saying, is there anything really exciting happening in anthropology these days? And many people would say, well, yes, it's this ontological turn, this new way of thinking about reality, whether it's subjective or whether it all depends on your perspective. But in particular, there's a sort of more narrow version of this idea of perspectivism relating to how to take account of the worldviews of the people of the Amazon, and in particular through their myths. Now, some of you might have been here a couple of weeks ago when I was dealing with one particular Amazonian myth, the hunter, Monmeneke and his wives. And that was a story about a hunter, Monmeneke, who had a low wife, a high wife, a low wife, a high wife, a low wife, a high wife. These wives were animals frog, a worm, one kind of bird or another, low and high, low and high, low and high, until finally the low and the high split and we had a high part of the final wife and the low part of the final wife. As if you're moving between worlds, moving between one world and another, one world and another, and then finally the two worlds separate. And that's kind of a version of

a very, very, very widespread story, which is that there was a time when everything was flexible and fluid, including death. So when you died, you moved to the world of the dead, and then you come back into the world of the living. There was a rope or a connection between this world and the other world. You go to and fro, to and fro, until finally something terrible happened as a result of losing contact with the moon. And then we have the present tragic situation, which is when you're dead, you stay dead and you can't get back again. And so the two realms, death and this world and the other world, have become fixed. Critical in all the worlds, magical myths and fairy tales, and very, very clearly present in Amazonian mythology, is the idea that animals talk. And I've just got a picture here which I showed last time when we were dealing with that hunter Marmoneki and his wivesmith. This is an astonishing mile-long piece of rock art, only recently discovered by outsiders, archaeologists, because of all the warfare going on in that part of Colombia. And the archaeologists, rock art specialists who attempted to make sense of it and decode it, this time did a very sensible thing. They asked indigenous people to help them in decoding the meanings of these images. And the critical thing that the archaeologists were told is that none of the animals here are just stuck in the position of being an animal. They're all fluid, And the animals are humans who become animal. Where you get a very few pictures of creatures that look very much like human beings, it's because they were animals and they become human and they're probably going to go back into being animal again. So The perspective approach is to take the ideas that you find represented in myths, but also, of course, in rock art, seriously. Instead of thinking this is some kind of strange, kind of, from a scientific point of view, invalid view of the world, take it seriously. Now, this is still part of this short introductory part of the talk. The trouble is that I'm one of those who I think along with somebody I used to know quite well, Louisa Bellonde. She came to my university a long time ago and she'd just done her PhD and we had a lot of talk about these sorts of things. And she was already aware of perspectivism. And she said the trouble with the perspectivists, and by that she meant Vivirás de Castro, Philip Descola and others, they said they have every perspective except a gendered perspective. And I have to say, I'm convinced that that is the problem. So one of the views put forward by these colleagues, it runs as follows. The animals across the Amazon, jaguars, peccaries, capybara, they all think of themselves within their own species. as humans. So this is an indigenous perspective. The jaguars, when relating to each other, relate to each other as if they were humans. But other creatures, so other species, but also humans, are like the others and animals, but within your species, you are humans. And then the idea is that according to the perspective, it is an interpretation of the indigenous outlook. We in the West think of nature and culture as something which we can look at historically. Originally there was nature, there were animals, we were animals, we didn't have tools, we didn't have religion, we didn't have all the things which define us as humans, including language. And we have this view that we gradually evolved, started inventing tools, started inventing ceremonies and rituals, invented language, and so you have nature evolving into culture. That's, if you like, the Darwinian view.

That's the way round we should put it. But the perspectivist view is that this might be completely upside down because the indigenous view is exactly the opposite. So the jaguars, for example, are pretty upset about everything because they believe, the jaguars believe, that they invented tools. The jaguars once had bows and arrows, they once had cooking fire, they once had ceremonies, they once had longhouses, they had language, they had all these things that humans do. And from the jaguars' point of view, they were right to be very annoyed because the only reason humans have fire and bows and arrows and culture is because we stole these things from the Jaguars. And we're invited to think of this as valid in its own way, and as far as I can see, the argument is that this reversal of the temporal sequence of evolution is just as valid as the standard Western view, that first of all you had nature and then you evolved and humans invented tools and they'll all put it the other way around. And I do find that a little bit difficult. Now, okay, so now I'm going to have a slightly longer version of it all and kind of why I feel quite emotional and sometimes quite annoyed about all this really. So we're talking about the Amazon region and I just happened to come across something the other day. Apparently, the Amazon, now that it's been deforested, all the logging has led to terrible reversal of what the Amazon was doing. The Amazon, of course, is the great lungs, if you like, of planet Earth. And the scientists have been warning us for a while that there comes a point when it starts doing the opposite. Once the Amazon reaches a certain point of drying up, what happens is that it starts to produce more carbon dioxide than oxygen, and it actually becomes a source of quite a few problems, especially if the forests start to burn, sending huge amounts of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere. And recently, some of the people who resemble in different ways Elon Musk and Donald Trump, have been getting very, very excited about the enormous amount of minerals and oil as well, apparently, and coal and stuff, which is in the Amazon, and they want to drill, drill, drill. Now, I mean, that just makes me think of science, and in particular climate science. And of course, climate science, I regard as an extraordinarily necessary kind of knowledge for us to be paying attention to without scientists around the world. And actually, they're not flamboyant. You don't know who these scientists are. They don't wave their banners around. They don't say, oh, this is me. I've got this idea. They're all quietly getting on with this job, you know, measuring, you know, ice cores and, you know, all sorts of things which you need to do as a scientist. And they're completely convinced. that we are either on the verge of or maybe beyond the tipping point of cataclysmic climate change. And clearly one of the fundamental features of climate science is that we have one planet. It's not like there's an alternative one we can escape to. There's no plan B. Planet B going to Mars isn't going to help us. You know, you must seem to think it might help him maybe, you know, going to Mars or somewhere. There's one planet. And we are one human race under one, largely one, these days, capitalist system in danger of destroying the only living planet there is. There's no planet B. And I just think it's so important to be aware of science. And I just disagree with the idea that if you're in the Amazon and you're an indigenous person, and you hear about climate science, you could think,

this is what was brought to us by Columbus. This is white man's colonialist science brought to us over here. And we've got our own very different kind of science, which puts things in a very different way. I'll explain what different way in the moment, or perhaps I'll say it just quickly now and perhaps read out a bit later on. According to the perspectivists, again, Vivieres de Castro and others, the view right across the Amazon is that we don't have one planet. The view is that all animal creatures have a soul. Jaguars have a soul, humans have a soul, peccaries have a soul, lizards have a soul, they all have a soul. And all the souls are very similar. You have one kind of soul. But they have different markings on their bodies. And the different markings on their bodies give them different perspectives. And so you have what's called multinaturalism. you have, because each perspective isn't just a perspective on a shared reality, each perspective corresponds to its own reality. And so you have multiple different worlds, but one soul. Instead of one world with different animal creatures on it, you have one, all the creatures have one kind of soul, which if you're a member of that species is human, because you're humans, and you have multiple worlds. And I'm thinking, How on earth can we save the planet we're on? How can we do things to make sure that we don't destroy it while we're thinking that there's multiple different planets? And nothing is kind of objectively real because nothing is any more than the particular perspective. So just to finish this opening summary of what I want to try to say, perhaps by reading out a few things, is this, that the They've got it so completely wrong, because what's not understood is gender. Lou Isabella Wende points all this out. And what happens is, and this is going back to our own idea within the radical anthropology group, going back a long, long way. When we became human, the critical thing which was accomplished was to establish something like, I've sometimes used the idea of the rule of law. There are some things which are sacred, some boundaries are not to be crossed. And we agree, as with so many others in the past who've pointed out, that there's a thing called the incest taboo, a rule against, a prohibition against incestuous sex, which is universal, It's unusual for a taboo to be universal. Usually universal things are aspects of human nature or other some aspect of nature. Usually if it's a particular cultural taboo, it will vary from place to place. But the ancestor taboo, in a sort of sense, doesn't vary. The forms it takes vary, but there's always that fundamental taboo. And everyone, I think, who's done a bit of anthropology will know that Claude Levi-Strauss, the founder of structuralist anthropology and the person who most more than anyone else introduced the scientific study of mythology. You have to start with Levi-Strauss if you're interested in decoding this kind of thing or working out what the myths mean. Levi-Strauss's initial point of departure was that it was men who established the incest taboo. And I suppose what I'm saying is that that kind of idea that males are the dominant sex, that males establish these basic rules, that male initiation rituals, male perspectives on the world somehow are kind of universal, that to my mind is a difficulty, is a problem, not just a problem for Claude Levi-Strauss, but also a problem for his successors who are these perspectivists. So we think it's completely absurd to, if you've got two sexes, the male and the female, and

we know what happens with chimpanzees, and we know that the costs of incest, if there are costs, and of course there are some costs, they're not immediate, but they're real, they fall on the female. The female can only have a few babies. And if there's some genetic problem with one of the babies, there's, you know, that's her baby, so she's going to suffer the cost. The male can always have sex with somebody else. He's got his number of his sperm is limitless, the number of of pregnancies a female can have is limited. So we would expect, wouldn't we, if the costs fall on the female, we'd expect it to be the female in the course of human evolution who resisted incest more than the male and began to establish that taboo. And then, of course, we have just the fact that if you look at our closest genetic relatives, And by the way, I'm now doing what I think of as science, not storytelling, but just people who've, colleagues, including here at UCL, who've spent their lives living with chimpanzees, for example, or gorillas, they will tell you that the reason why the females move away on becoming sexually mature is because they don't want to be hassled by their older brother or father. They want to get out the way. They're not keen on incest. They don't want to be hassled in that way, so they have to move out. And it's called male filopatry. The males stay put. The females have to move out. And there's a cost to the females moving out, because when the female moves out to have a baby, when she has that baby, she's all on her own. She's a single mum. She hasn't got a mother's support. So I'm just going to briefly summarize the position we have on this critical point about nature and culture in terms of human origins in rank in the radical anthropology group here at UCL and elsewhere, quite a few universities these days, different parts of this country and to some extent Europe. So our view is that a critical revolutionary step was taken in the course of human evolution, maybe 2 million years ago. We're not going to be too sure about dates, but what happened was that the female in our case, evolving human females, found a way of staying at home, sticking with mum, sticking with mum, sticking with sisters, being able to share the burdens of childcare. And the critical point is this, they couldn't do this if that meant having sex with their brothers who were also staying with mum. What it meant was that females had to stay with mum and make the males, their brothers, move out. It's like saying to the brothers, yes, you can have sex, but you don't have to look for sex elsewhere. And that meant resisting sex at home. Groups of females had to signal no to sex with their close relatives and make them move out if they wanted sex. So it's kind of simple. It's exactly the Levi-Strauss theory, but it's just a reversal of the Levi-Strauss theory. And then we say, well, how do women say no? What's the most primal obvious body language, unmistakable way for a bunch of females to signal no to males whose sexual intentions are unwanted. How would a bunch of females before language, before morality, all these things, just think really, really body language? What would be the most unmistakable way to signal no? And me, Camilla, Ian here, we think we worked this all out quite a while ago in the 1990s. And it was actually somebody called a colleague of ours, Max Pearson, who made a critical move. He reminded me and others of a thing called a specific mate recognition system. Every species of animal has a kind of system for working out who would be

a suitable sexual partner. And that's called a mate recognition system. You recognise this other individual as potentially your mate. So this is a kind of model. Imagine you're a moth, perhaps a male moth, and you need to find a mate. And you don't use your eyes, you use pheromones, chemical signals. That moth will be looking for another creature of his own species. You don't want a different species of moth. You can't get a pregnancy that way. So the moth will want his own species. He will want the opposite sex to get his genes into the future. And he will want that creature of the same species and the opposite sex to be in a fertile period. Does everyone sort of recognise that makes biological sense? Right, now as soon as you've got that in mind, you can immediately tell, and I think I'm going to ask you to tell me this. Given that, given that you've got to find same species, opposite sex, fertile period, in other words, right sex, right species, right time, what's the body language? Deepest way for a moth, but actually that would apply to any creature, wouldn't it? Any chimpanzee or evolving human, what would be the obvious way to signal, no?

Audience member #2: Wrong species, wrong sex, wrong time.

Chris: Wrong species, wrong sex, wrong time, okay? Right, what did that mean? That means that the female, and we're saying this happened in the case of the evolving human female, I'm going to get to jaguars in a minute, right? The human female had to signal to the male in a group with other females. You want sex with me? No way. I'm the wrong sex, the wrong species, and it's the wrong time. So I'm a jaguar. It doesn't have to be a jaguar, it could be a peccary, it could be a zebra. But anyway, as long as it's the wrong species, it's fine. And anyway, in addition, just to add to your problems, I'm a male jaguar, and a male whatever other animal. And also, I'm not ovulating, I'm menstruating. So you've got an image of a creature that's maybe a jaguar, and it's got masculine attributes, and it's bleeding. Right. Okay. Now, it is rather important for the perspectivists to recognize that across Amazonia you have precisely this paradoxical construction as the most widespread manifestation of what we might want to call divinity. I mean, divinity isn't necessarily the right word. It countries like images of God. But anyway, spiritual authority, some kind of supernatural potency or power. And here we have Peter Gow. an Amazonian myth and its history. Peter Gow died a few years ago, kind of follower of Claude Levi-Strauss. If you wanted to read, I mean, this book is the most astonishing, profound, exciting, brilliant study of a myth ever penned, ever written, in my view. And I think anyone that's read it will agree with me. It's an astonishing piece of work. Peter Gow was with the Pierrot people and he was told a myth. I won't go into the story, it'll take you long of course, but the comical thing is that it took a while before he realised that he, Peter Gow, was the central figure in this myth. The people he was with were weaving a myth about where the hell this strange creature, this character, Peter Gow himself, who seemed to have no relatives, where on earth he had come from, and they worked out he must have come through some other world, popped up through a hole in the ground, and here he was. The story goes on and on and on. But what it gets to, at one point, absolutely critical and marvellous, is a discussion of the major ritual of the Opiro people. And while

I'm just briefly describing this, just bear in mind what I said earlier about wrong sex, wrong species, wrong time, because well done. That's brilliant. Oh, that's brilliant. Well done, Camara. Look at that girl here. She is a jaguar. She has painted up with the designs of a jaguar. The jaguar's black fur is kind of mottled and, you know, it kind of has these sort of, not rainbow colours really, but a sort of strangely mottled and brilliant, vibrant set of patterns which get conventionalized and we'll put on the front of that girl. But anyway, this girl, she's just emerged from the ritual called Kigimaulo. And that's a girl's first menstruation ritual. And I just feel so irritated by the fact that the perspective is, despite the fact that right across Amazonia, I mean, maybe not quite everywhere, maybe quite a few places. The major ritual is the male initiation, but across vast regions of Amazonia and certainly in the past. As with the Piero, the Kigimalu, the girls' first menstruation ritual, is the fundamental ritual. It's a huge event. It brings together people from up and down the river, all come together for this extraordinary ceremony, this extraordinary celebration of a young girl's coming of age. Now, what's critical is this. As these different people arrive from different corners for this massive celebration, starting at new moon and finishing the full moon, the different people meet each other. But when they meet each other from all over the place, some of them have never seen each other before, although they might be related reasonably distantly, they see each other not as humans. As they meet, It's an anaconda. you're a peccary. you're a jaguar. They're all these different animals meeting and conversing with each other. Because nobody gets more profoundly transformed and more impressively painted up and decorated than the heroine herself, the girl. As the girl comes out of her menstrual seclusion, beautifully decorated, perhaps I should emphasize, There's a, there's a, I mean, this isn't the most brilliant picture because it's a little bit fudged, but it's on women and jaguars. Well done, Kimber, forgetting it. But it's what the beautiful thing is that all over her body are what's called design. And the design has to be incredibly artistic and careful. And only senior women who are very, very talented are permitted to make these zigzaggy and other geometric designs on the girl's body. And they have two concepts. They have blotchiness. and design. And what they're doing, they're turning her menstrual blood, which could be blotchy, could be a mess, into its exact opposite. They're using pigment to turn what could be blotches, very much like the blotches on the moon, and the blotches on the moon got there through another whole story about how those blotches got there. But you don't want blotches, you want design. And now the final point, just on this particular topic, When a young man first sees his future bride, he sees her in her jaguar form. And she means it. She is a jaguar. There's a song the women sing. We are female jaguars. Be afraid. We are jaguars. Be afraid. You can see what this does. It means that a man has to have respect for his bride. She is a jaguar. And it's really important to stress this. She's not saying I'm painted up to symbolise a jaguar. It's not like I'm looking rather like a jaguar. It's not anything like that. No, no, no. It has to be... You have to hear what she's saying and what all those around her are saying. She is a jaguar. It's for real. This is religion. It's not symbolic stuff. It's not metaphorical stuff. She is a jaguar. OK.

I mean, as a Catholic, brought up a Catholic, I very much understand the difference between saying something's symbolically something and something that's like really is. I was definitely taught as a Catholic that, you know, when you go to church and you have the mass and you eat a little white wafer, it's not just a little bit like the flesh of Jesus. This is the flesh of Jesus. And the wine in the cup, it's not representing symbolically Jesus's blood. You are drinking Jesus's blood. I'm only making that point to stress the difference between a simile and a fully intended metaphor. Actually, all metaphor is kind of saying this is for real, but even the word metaphor kind of loses it. The point is she's a jaguar. Now, can you see If what happened is, I mean, if we're right about our whole theory about how we became human, what would have happened would be women in the past, in order to signal their defiance and to signal no sex, while menstruating, they would have needed to turn into an animal that was bleeding. And I hope you can see now what's going to happen. The men who are the hunters, I've now got to be rather careful when they go hunting, because supposing they come across in this part of the world a jaguar. How do you know this jaguar, given that the concept of a jaguar has come to you from this ritual, how can you be quite sure how to treat what we would call the zoological real jaguar? And you'll find from the readings that the indigenous people across Amazonia, they have the same problem. And there's a wonderful passage, which I might be able to read out if we have time later on, from the, I think it's from the Tucano Indians. I may have got that a little bit wrong. It's about the tapir and I'll find it in a moment. This is actually from Rachel Dolmatov, the anthropologist who did a huge amount of work in Colombia and other parts of South America, particularly Colombia, on the indigenous myths and beliefs. When you're out hunting tapir, perhaps I should say that in this culture A girl has her initiation, her first menstruation ceremony, traditionally in a kind of hut, but it's a really large one. It's made of five or six tapir hides. It's like a collective monster version of the tapir animal. Oh, that's a much better picture. Thank you, Camilla. Much more beautiful. Okay, thank you. From Peter Gow. Well done, Camilla. Great. This is the jaguar. So, okay, just remember, a young man, he sets eyes on his future wife. and he sees her. And everyone is telling him, don't mess with her. And don't just think she's looking, pretending to be a jaguar. This is the real jaguar. She's more truly a jaguar than the odd jaguar you might meet out in the forest, okay? But the point I'm making now is that when the people are out in the wild and they come across a jaguar or a tapir or a peccary, there's always this uncertainty. What do I do about this animal? Because these people are hunters. They've got to kill these animals. And if you think of the animal you're killing, say it's a tapir, and if you think of the tapir as possibly a human under the skin and you still kill it, you are in real trouble. because all the relatives of the tapir will be seeking vengeance and they will get their vengeance on you. are doomed. The only way to manage it is to kill the tapir while sincerely believing it's an ordinary tapir and not a tapir that's sort of underneath it all is a woman. Maybe your mother, your sister, your partner. So there's that distinction to be made between the the zoological creature, and the human. The

human with a different skin. And now I want to come back to perspectivism. Because for some bizarre reason, I just cannot follow it. The perspectivists seem to be unaware of all this. And it's hard to believe they're really unaware. You know what happens with people. It's like certain things just don't compute. They're not in your theory. and you sort of, they're there in front of you in plain sight, but you kind of don't notice it because it doesn't fit your assumptions. So the perspective is, and I don't want to say all perspective is, and I have to say, there's a lot of me which feels very sympathetic towards what they're trying to do to decolonize anthropology, but Louisa Bellonde is one of those who's kind of in the same rough area of anthropology, but absolutely aware of the extraordinary gender blindness of the perspectivists. They just don't see all this. And so therefore, when they come across the idea that the jaguars are annoyed and angry because they invented culture and they were robbed of it by humans, I hope you can see what I can see here. which is that supposing it's true, as I'm absolutely convinced it is true, that over time these very, very powerful female initiation rituals giving enormous power to women with matrilineal residents, maybe elements from matrilineal descent, huge gender solidarity between women. It doesn't mean matriarchy, it doesn't mean the rule of women in any one-sided way, but it means very powerful, you know, female solidarity and therefore ritual and symbolic and religious potency. Supposing over time women began to lose some of that under the influence of increasing male dominance and male rule. It has to be said that across most of Amazonia, unlike, say, many African egalitarian hunter-gatherer societies, like the Hadza, many of the Bushmen groups, the forest people of the Congo, where you have very powerful gender egalitarianism, very powerful women's rituals, balancing off with male rituals, but overwhelmingly, you know, the women have this extraordinary sense of potency and power. Across the Amazon, yeah, mostly they are pretty patriarchal cultures. So If what we're thinking and saying is correct, there has been a transition away from this powerful emphasis on women's initiation, girls' initiation and female gender solidarity. Increasingly, maybe in some places only in recent times, maybe in the last two or 300 years, women have lost power. Right, think about it. That means the jaguars have been losing their power. And can you see, that would actually make a lot of really a scientific sense, not kind of nonsense at all, but actually quite a realistic, logical sense for these jaguars to think, right, we're getting a bit annoyed. We're the ones who establish culture. We're the ones who introduce, you know, the fundamental moral rules. Let me just say, Levis-Soft thinks cooking. In other words, establishing the distinction between the raw and the cooked. If it's raw, it's bloody, you don't eat it. He thinks that rule, the distinction between raw meat and cooked meat, only animals eat their meat raw, humans eat their meat cooked, Levy shows that rule was invented by men. So cooking, you know, was invented by men. He also thinks menstrual synchrony, the possibility of women synchronizing their periods, had to be inculcated in women by male rule. So Levi-Stos argues in sympathy with some of the myths that if women were left on their own, their menstrual periods would mess up everything. They'd mess up the changing of the seasons. They'd throw the whole universe into

chaos. And for that reason, in his language, women had to be subjected to men had to dominate women and teach them to menstruate and give birth in good time, in a proper, ordinary way. So cooking, menstrual rules, I mean everything, every part of culture according to Levi Strauss was invented by men because everybody knows men are the dominant sex. Well we're saying really that if it's a question of establishing an alternative to mighty's right, an alternative to the idea that if you've got brute strength and superiority that's going to be overcome to produce what we call language and symbolic culture, then clearly it's actually the women who'd have been expected to be in the forefront of that revolution. And that would mean that there's a lot of sense in imagining that the jaguars are annoyed. Am I making myself understood? I'm suggesting that the jaguars are women who are in jaguar costume but who are really, genuinely jaguars and peccaries and capybara. And those animals, the reason why they feel that they invented culture and it was robbed from them is because, of course, if you're a woman who's a jaguar, you would feel, right, who is robbing me? I feel as if I am being robbed. Okay, I'm a jaguar, but I'm also a woman. And we women, we invented all these things. And increasingly, these achievements are being denied us, and men are claiming a monopoly over ritual power and symbolic power, and they've got a reason to be upset. Do you see what I'm saying? I'm just saying the way the perspective is portrayed that, as if the wild animals invented tools, bows and arrows, fires, ceremonial huts, and you just think if they believe that, they're crazy, but if you believe this story, it's not crazy at all. It makes a huge lot of sense, because the jaguars and peccaries were the human version of these animals, not the zoological version, and a really important distinction needs to be made between those two. If I've got a bit of time left, I want to read out a few things. And I'm going to start with Vivares de Castro, 2004. perspectival anthropology and the method of controlled equivocation. So what I'm doing here is now I'm just reading out from, if you like, the horse's mouth. This is Vivieros de Castro himself. I use perspectivism as a label for a set of ideas and practices found throughout indigenous America. So he's saying, north and south. In other words, the whole area that Claude Levi-Strauss studied when he did his four-volume massive work on 800 First American Myths. This cosmology imagines a universe peopled by different types of subjective agencies, human as well as non-human, each endowed with the same generic type of soul. So he says that this indigenous cosmology says that all creatures We might call some of them human, some of them non-human, but no, This indigenous cosmology said they all have the same type of soul. The possession of a similar soul implies the possession of similar concepts, which determine that all subjects see things in the same way. In particular, individuals of the same species see each other as humans see themselves. So each, if you've got jaguars, looking at other jaguars, they see humans. But if you see capybara, looking at other capybara, they too see humans, because all these creatures have the same type of soul. What changes when passing from one species to another is the objective correlate, the referent of these concepts. So as you pass from one species to another, the soul is the same, but if supposing a jaguar talks about something like

manioc beer, What the jaguar is referring to might be something which we would refer to with a completely different concept or term. So what jaguars see as manioc beer, humans see as blood. Where we see a muddy salt lick on a riverbank, tapirs see their big ceremonial house and so on. So he's referring to these myths where you're with a bunch of jaguars. They're very much like humans, they live in a long house, they have all the things that humans have, and they offer you a lovely drink of Manioc beer. And then you as a human, you're horrified because you're drinking human blood. Such difference of perspective, not a plurality of views of a single world, but a single view of different worlds. Can you see what he's saying here? He's saying that according to this Amazonian cosmology, You don't have different views of the world. You have the same view of different worlds. This plurality of views, this single view of different worlds, cannot derive from the soul, since the soul is the common original ground of being. It can't come from the soul because everyone's got the same soul. I hope I'm reading this out in a way which is fairly evident that I don't agree with the word of it. I'm not trying to convince you of this. I want you to see what he's like writing in a very calm, scholarly, measured way, something which if it was, if the indigenous people really did think this, you'd have to think they need their head seen to, because it's complete opposite. And it's, I find it, it's such a shame. They're trying to be nice to the indigenous people. but they're actually ending up being patronizing because they're telling you stuff which if they did think this, you'd have to think they were complete idiots. So this plurality of different views cannot derive from the soul, since they all have the same soul. Rather, such difference is located in the bodily differences between species, for the body is a site and instrument of ontological differentiation and referential disjunction. So the reason things are different is because the bodies are different. But of course I can see that in here. I can see it's clearly if she didn't have jaguar spots on her, she had tapir markings or some other creature, of course that would create a different species. So anyway, so hence where we see the unity of nature and the plurality of cultures, the Amerindian conception would suppose a spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity Or in other words, one culture, multiple natures. In this sense, perspectivism is multinaturalism. So the perspectives are actually saying the world is made-up of countless different worlds. There's not even a single planet. And I'm just thinking, at this moment in time, with what's going on with the planet, and where we need this most magnificent thing called science, The idea that we've got different planets, different worlds, and that we've got all creatures have got one soul. I mean, if that were its perspective, I mean, I think it would be almost a useful thing to do to get them in a classroom and teach them some sense. Luckily, it's the other way around. It's actually we who can learn from the indigenous people, because their actual views make a huge amount of sense. I'm going to, what do I shall I do now? Yes, let's just say, this is a little, let me, okay. One of the starting points, I'm still reading from Viveiras de Castro, because I see I've got 10 minutes left. One of the starting points for my first analysis of perspectivism, published in 1996, was an anecdote told by Levi-Strauss in *Race and History*. Levi-Strauss illustrates with an

anecdote based on Oviedo's history and which took place in Puerto Rico. So this is a quote from Levi-Strauss. In the Greater Antilles, some years after the discovery of America, whilst the Spanish were dispatching inquisitional commissions to investigate whether the natives had a soul or not, those very natives were busy drowning the white people they had captured in order to find out, after lengthy observation, whether or not the corpses were subject to putrefaction. So what Levi-Strauss is describing here is a perceived opposition where the white people saw the indigenous people as brutes, as animals, but there was a sort of argument, maybe they have a soul, maybe some of these indigenous people don't need to be exterminated because perhaps they, you know, if we, you know, a little bit of help, they might become Christians and go to heaven. But the opposition here is to the natives themselves, who automatically think of the white people as gods. But if white people were gods, we would be immortals and we wouldn't have bodies which putrefied. And so the argument here is that the indigenous people were killing Spanish Christians and then watching their bodies to see if they would rot. And they were expecting them not to rot, because if they really are gods, they shouldn't. I think mostly they worked out that they did, in fact, putrefy and that cast out on the view. So anyway, so Reverus de Casto says, this anecdote from the Antilles casts some light on one of the core elements of the perspectivist message, the idea of difference being inscribed in bodies. It was only very recently that it dawned on me that the anecdote was not simply about perspectivism, it was itself perspectivist, instantiating the same framework or structure manifest in the innumerable Amerindian myths thematizing interspecific perspectivism, which means different perspectives between different species. Here I have in mind the type of myth where, for example, the human protagonist becomes lost deep in the forest and arrives at a strange village. There the inhabitants, I mentioned this before, but it's perhaps a bit more explicit now, there the inhabitants invite him to drink a refreshing gourd of manioc beer, which he accepts enthusiastically, and to his horrified surprise, his hosts place in front of him a gourd brimming with human blood. If we think about it carefully, the Antilles anecdote is similar to countless others we can come across in the ethnographic literature, or in our own recollection from fieldwork. In actual fact, I think this anecdote encapsulates the anthropological situation or event par excellence, expressing the quintessence of what our discipline is all about. So he's making, in some ways, a valid point, because the whole point of anthropology is to understand each other and not to make your own cultural assumptions so dominant that you perceive someone else's assumptions as kind of nonsensical or horrific. So, but then he says, and this is interesting, blood is to humans, as many as to jaguars, in exactly the same way as a sister to me, as a wife to my brother-in-law. So, I mean, I won't go into it all, but every time he makes a point like that, I mean, the point is that it is absolutely true that when, say, a woman wants to As in the story of the hunter, Mom and Nick and his wives. She's fed up with her partner, her husband. She wants to say no. She wants to move away, go off. What she does is she turns into an animal. Wrong sex, wrong species, wrong time. And so, and equally you find in the stories,

somebody who's far away is likely to be an animal. But everybody has to have sex with somebody who's far away, like with an animal. Because if you're having sex with somebody who's near, they will probably be your brother or sister, and you don't want to do that. So you need to have sex with an animal. But of course, when you come together and you're no longer far away, the animal turns into a human. Well, those of you who are here for the hunt of Mulmaneké and his wives will recognise that. Each time Mulmaneké has a partner, first she's a worm, then she, and then she, you know, they have sex with the worm, and she turns into a human, then she's a... toad and all these things. So far away is animal, coming close. So it's just the simple idea that we people together, when we're close to each other, we're humans, but the others outside are animals. But can you see how nicely that fits with the idea that if you want to put yourself somewhere else, if you want to escape, if you want to set yourself apart, the logical thing to do is to become an animal, And if you don't want to be taken for granted, if you want to be respected, then the maximum way of ensuring that you have respect is, of course, with your sisters, with your clan, with your blood, to actually turn into a very powerful animal like the jaguar. So what I'm trying to say is that the Amazonian perspectivism makes a lot of sense, but the way the perspective is treated and interpreted is, it makes no sense at all. And the only way I can think of, to just explain how they got it so wrong, is because they are seen to be completely gender blind. And if you are gender blind, you will come up with very strange theories which don't make a lot of sense. And it really needs to stop. And I mean, there's various other things I could say. But I hope I've got my point across about perspectivism. And one more little thing, one more sort of thing. There's a completely different way of dealing with this issue of Western science versus indigenous knowledge. And it's called two-eyed seeing. And that's a much better approach. So two-eyed seeing is completely different. It builds on the fact that many indigenous people in America, Amazonia and elsewhere, Aboriginal Australian people, they're indigenous people, they're hanging on to their wisdom and they're going to college, and they're doing PhDs. And while going to college and doing PhDs, they're learning science in the Western sense of science, and they're holding on to their indigenous wisdom, and they're seeing what it is in their indigenous wisdom which corresponds to the science, to what I'm seeing as a very different view, a way of dealing with colonialism, in my own view. Now, when you're when you're looking at indigenous wisdom and whether it corresponds with Western science, obviously there's huge masses of Western science which is complete patriarchal ideology, complete nonsense. I've just given you an example. Claude Lévi's idea of the origin of incest. It's just nonsense. But at its best, and I think looking at climate science as that's an example of science at its best, it's genuinely collaborative, it's genuinely non-ideological, Quietly, people are all over the world testing out these theories, working out what's going wrong. We wouldn't even know, would we, that every time you get in the car with an exhaust pipe, you're helping destroy the planet. We wouldn't know that every time you go on an aeroplane, the CO2 footprint is damaging the only living planet. Without real, genuine climate science, we wouldn't

even know that. So to me, we need to stick to that, and we need to build it. We need to enable real science to start connecting up the dots. and connect up the science of nature with the science of culture. We need to put into the same basic framework, the whole of science, and put the whole picture together, and in that way give science a voice which can be heard in politics. I don't at all mean, you know, letting politics dominate the science. I mean exactly the opposite. Science should have its own voice, its own political voice, especially climate science, but it needn't stop with climate science. two-eyed seeing is a way of doing that. It isn't the case that all indigenous wisdom coincides with science. Sometimes indigenous wisdom is a little nonsense. It just is. It's superstitious nonsense. But where indigenous wisdom and modern science echo each other, which they very often do, then the combination of those two things can give very deep, necessary insights. And increasingly, when it comes to the climate, It's that which is happening. And that's a very different thing to I'd seeing. I support that. Perspectivism, I think, is pretty cataclysmically misguided. Okay, thank you.

Audience questions

Camilla: Thanks very much. Questions in the room?

Audience member #3: Just a quick one. Where does he write this? Claude Levitstrauss, where he argues this argument.

Chris: In volume three of Methodology, page 222, I believe.

Audience member #3: And does he then further explain it as does he have some sort of academic reasoning?

Chris: Oh, yes. Oh, yes. It's because he's dealing with us...

OK, the question is, where does Claude Levitstrauss say that women need to synchronize their periods properly and therefore need to be subjected by men to the rules, Levitstrauss.

So, he says it in the third volume of Bitologique, when he deals, that's called The Origin of Table Manners. He's dealing with the wives of the sun and the moon. And in that story, what happens is that the human wife suddenly has a baby. The baby just pops up from nowhere. And so her father-in-law, says it is wrong to suddenly present us with a baby. You should go through periods. You should then have a nine-month period of pregnancy, and then you have the baby. And your periods should be, you know, you specify there should be 29.5 days or whatever, I think 28 days it says, but anyway. But I mean, the point is that the story is saying that if women are left to themselves, they'd have babies all over the place and menstruate all over the place, and nobody will know what's going on, and it'll throw the entire cosmos into chaos. And so men are going to dominate women.

And the trouble is that Lemisso sort of goes along with that. I mean, he kind of, he seems to like those stories and the stories aren't too different from his own theory about how everything began, because according to his theory, the human female was

only ever an instrument in the exchange relationships between dominant men. You had a patron local band here. I cut a local band here. Actually, Erica Laglise put it quite nicely, I think a week or two ago. She said it's in trafficking females that morality evolves. So the idea is that men, and I'm just thinking about it, men, you know, invent morality by telling women what to do in terms of sex. I mean, giving, if dominant men give instructions to females about their sexual behaviour, that's going to give you morality. And I think we just need to think about that for a bit.

There's actually another whole theory coming out of all that. I shouldn't go into all these things, but I mean, there's somebody called Chappe, Bernard Chappe, who's a primatologist, who's argued, you know, very seriously and with lots of support. Actually, I even said I heard it at one point seemed to have given him support. I was absolutely. Christian Hawks. Christian Hawks.

Camilla: The grandmother hypothesis implies that mothers and daughters hope to be...

Chris: So, anyway, this says that language was invented so that dominant males could instruct females in their sexual behaviour. And you're just, you're just wondering where are these guys coming from?

Audience member #4: There's something I'm curious, why did the... the word for period and rules is the same in French? Is that, has it always been that or was that sort of developed by Levi Strauss?

Chris: Well, periods are rules, aren't they, when you think about it?

Camilla: I just wondered when he said it.

Chris: Well, is there anyone French here that can tell a little bit more about why in French particular they're called . But I mean, in RAG, we think of periods as that. I mean, periods are rules. You know, you go into seclusion with your period, that you're in a different world. And of course, when you go into seclusion, You're kind of, and there's another quote I could quote, I can keep on quoting from Viveiros de Castro. He says that when you're in seclusion, you're with the dead. And when you're in an, when you're an animal, you are among the dead. And the reason why, when you are, it's simply because animals are not human and you've only got two worlds, you're either the living or the dead. And if you're not in one ear and the other, so all animals are in the land of the dead. And I mean, that's all very strange. But of course, when you think about it, if in the beginning women went into seclusion by becoming animals, then they would be dead to their role as wives and they would be animals. And so animals of the dead are completed.

Audience member #3: There seems to be some confusion amongst us about the meaning that the perspectivists give to the angry animals. What does that mean?

Chris: Well, I mean, it means they don't like being abused. They don't like being hunted. They're kind of angry. But the particular form, the reason why they're angry is said to be because they invented bows and arrows and fire, and now they have to eat raw, they don't have bows and arrows, they've got to use their teeth to kill the animals and all that stuff. And they're angry about it. And all I'm saying is that I

think women taking the form of jaguars or peccaries or other animals, have very logical reasons to feel quite angry with the male-dominated world they're now subordinated to. But that's not how they put it. They put it that the animals really have a sort of have something against humans because they invented culture. Is.

Audience member #2: It significant that the animals that they turn into are always, I think they are always animals that they hunt? They don't turn into ants, for example.

Camilla: I think it's very significant.

Chris: They're large gaminals.

Audience member #2: And then my, I want, why do they hunt jaguars? Is it for the skins? Do they eat them or?

Chris: I think it's, I don't think they hunt them for those.

Camilla: Can Raga tell us why they hunt jaguars?

Chris: You're a jaguar. Tell us why people hunt you.

Camilla: There's actually a beautiful, I wish I could put that film up on the...

Chris: My own view is that they were very much valued for their skins, of course, beautiful, beautiful skins.

Camilla: It's magical power, shamanic power, lovely.

Chris: You can put the skin on you and you're shamanic.

Audience member #5: Can I have a brief chance to say something?

Camilla: Yeah, why not?

Audience member #5: We've got... I'm not quite sure what she or he is, but maybe a jaguar. But anyway, this creature wanted to come, having experienced very difficult times before arriving in this country. Can you see him?

Camilla: Well, I can see it. We haven't got it up here on the screen. I'm not sure we can link. Let's describe it nicely. Can you describe it nicely for us? Is it a jaguar or a leopard?

Audience member #5: I was hoping that we could affirm we see it.

Chris: So you should be able to tell.

Camilla: The people on Zoom can see it.

Audience member #5: Well, I can tell that it hasn't changed its spots for a long time.

Camilla: I haven't. I can't show it to UCL people here.

Audience member #5: It's very old and I somehow have inherited it. And maybe people...

Camilla: Daga, who is fairly, who's a, well, not such a... Such a spring chicken these days has inherited this beautiful skin, although.

Chris: Raga is an elder.

Camilla: Raga is quite an elder. But yeah, I can't put it on the screen, I don't think.

Audience member #5: I'm wanting to ask people if they can find someone to look after this.

Chris: Oh, leopard skin needs a new home, I think is what Raga's saying.

Camilla: Where would you like to give leopard skin a home? Well, we have a volunteer. Wilma is volunteering here. Okay, if we can put you in touch.

Chris: We've found a new home for you all around.

Camilla: I can tell, Dottie, I've got your e-mail. I can give you Wilma's e-mail maybe sometime and you can try and link them together and get the leopard, not jaguar exactly, but yeah, a new home.

Chris: I'm only going to try for a moment to be serious.

Camilla: I have a couple more questions on Zoom, but anybody else in the room? Christine. Christine go and then we'll have Christine. We've got to Christine. Christine.

Audience member #4: They would hunt it for his skin, the Jaguar. But is that because to help people turn into it? So really that would be the reason they would hunt it. Or is there another reason they would hunt it? Because it, I mean, because it looked, I thought they were being the jaguar to be the scariest animal they know, to scare the men off.

Camilla: Yep.

Audience member #4: And then, so.

Chris: It's a bit like asking whether African indigenous people would hunt lions. I mean, not really hunt them. They would rather scavenge meat from them. But, you know, if need be, you've got to have enough courage to stand up to a lion, I suppose, if you've made the mistake of annoying the animal.

Audience member #4: Who would wear the skins once they hunted? Sorry? Who wears the skins once they've hunted them?

Chris: Shamans would wear a jaguar skin, definitely.

Camilla: That could be culturally variable, anyway.

Chris: I mean, yes, it would be culturally variable. And what I'd notice is that the girl never wears the skin. She's always, her own skin is very important. She has to metamorphose into a jaguar. It has to be her own skin that's the jaguar skin.

Audience member #4: So when the shaman wears, perhaps when the shaman wears it, they know he's tending.

Chris: No, I wouldn't say that. I mean, one of the things they say, which is kind of good is, well, actually, it's more Peter Gow says that than the perspective is, but they say that The collectivist Kigamalu ceremony, the great ceremony, when everyone participates in her jaguar power, when that's isolated and individualized, you know, it's the same thing as the shamanism, but the shamanism tends to be consolated in a man instead of a woman, and in an individual rather than in a group. So that is a very nice observation, which is sort of basically true, although no doubt something of a simplification. But shamans don't do shamanic stuff. There's a whole bunch of shamans. It tends to be 1 shaman. Whereas she can only do that, what she's doing now, because she's so much backed up by all the other women. Neil, I've got Neil.

Camilla: Okay, sorry. I was going to do Christine here on Zoom and we'll come back to the room. Christine.

Audience member #6: Yes, can you hear me?

Camilla: Yeah.

Audience member #6: Hi. Thank you. I have read Eduardo Vivieres de Castro, and I have to say I was deeply, deeply confused myself, so you've... clarified a great deal for me, but I just want to ask a question. I too was raised a Catholic, and so I understand that when you eat the body and blood of Christ, it isn't a metaphor. It's you are genuinely eating it. What I'm what I'm slightly unclear about is if, and I believe that these girls are turning into jaguars, how do you, Chris Knight, integrate that with your conception of science? Either the girl is a jaguar or she isn't a jaguar in a scientific sense, or she's a jaguar in some other sense, like the Catholic one.

Chris: Well, it's an absolutely brilliant question of which to get to the heart of who I am. Of course, absolutely put me on this one. Let me say, I'm of the view that there are two versions of everything and which is what's indeed to this view actually, is when you come across a jaguar or a peccary or tapir, you can never be quite sure whether it's a true tapir, which would mean a human is turned into a tapir or just a tapir. And if it's just a tapir, you don't need to bother too much, you can kill it and eat it and it won't wreak vengeance on you. But if it's a true tapir, which means, really true, that kind of thing. It's an article of faith to believe it's a tapir. That clearly means you think it's a human who's turned into a tapir. You'd better really be careful, not laugh at it, not disrespect it, probably not kill it, because all those things mean you're going to be subject to vengeance from the relatives of that powerful being. So as a scientist, I suppose the answer to this is this. As crystallized as a scientist, I do believe that anthropology can be a science. I believe we can work out, as long as we start from the sort of necessary foundations, and by that I just mean the common foundations of scientists who study other forms of life. By the way, all climate scientists, I mean, will be in some way aware of selfish gene theory, because a gene is a molecule that replicates self. not other. A gene which replicates the competition at its own expense is very rapidly an X genome. It's just fundamental, you're just not even literate if you don't understand those basics. It doesn't mean there are not other levels of selection and all the rest of it. But just having said that, I'm just saying that as long as you treat humans using the same principles that you'd use to study other creatures and then try to do this really difficult task, how was it that we became so different? How is it that humans became creatures that talk I mean, apparently there's a lecture in here before we came here saying why animals talk. It was a bio thing. And let me just say animals don't talk. They can certainly communicate in extraordinarily complex ways. But human language is just radically different. It's digital, not analogue. it operates in virtual reality, not in reality. I mean, so many things. So I don't believe that animals talk. But I mean, all I'm saying is, my own view is that most scientists wouldn't use the word talking about, you know, apes screeching, screaming, you know, all the things which apes and monkeys do. They're certainly communicating, but a tool like talking is different. So all I'm saying is, you ask me a question, how does Krista, the scientist, cope with these things? We need to use the same methods as scientists use in other

areas of life, but somehow apply them to that most challenging problem. How was it, how, when, why do we become so, different? You know, humans are clearly very odd animals with language and religion and classificated kinship and all the things which we have. So it's a challenge, but I think we solved it. The trouble is we've come up with answers which the patriarchs don't really want to know.

Audience member #6: Could I just make a comment? Very clean. Doesn't that mean that then there's a distinction between the science of anthropology and how we became human from a scientific perspective and what those people themselves say because they're saying they stole it from animals?

Chris: Yes, it does.

Camilla: They're using different metaphors from what scientists, I mean, humans use metaphors all the time to express ideas. And scientists are doing using certain metaphors, Westerners are using certain metaphors. And the indigenous groups like Pero or Tugana or whichever will use their metaphors. But it's still, it's still, the two-eyed seeing means we can bring the metaphors into kind of the same space, down to some similar story.

Chris: And another way is, another, I mean, it's a very important question, a very necessary question, a very interesting question, and an endless question in a way. But to me, the point about science is that it's collectivist. It's like what you do is you see something and you ask your friends, do you see what I see? And as long as they're not your boss and they're not your subordinate, as long as you're more or less equals, and can share perspectives, you think, right, if you see what I see, then what I'm seeing isn't just my own, personal fantasy or perspective. And the wider that we, do you see what I see? The more that we stretches out and the more it cuts across boundaries of race and ethnicity and all the rest of the things. Now climate science does that. It goes right across, cutting across all boundaries. You could be a scientist, it doesn't matter what your skin colour, what your, you know, you're a scientist. Now, what I do believe that when we first became human and set up this wrong sex, wrong species signal to say no, in my language, those women were going on strike. In my language, they were forming a picket line. A picket line, by the definition, doesn't want boundaries. Otherwise, the scabs will go round you. So as long as you're going on strike, saying no to unwanted sex, all at the same time, using the moon as your clock, you've got this same idea that your coalition has no boundaries. And therefore, when you say, do you see what I see, that's potentially limitless. And that limitlessness of the number of people around you that can correct your personal, relatively egocentric perspective, the more people that can sort of correct you, the more universal your coalition, if you like, the more likely it is to be science. And that's why I think of the rainbow snake or the dragon as ultimately science. It's because it's the collective body of women, but not just women. Don't forget those women who go on strike against unwanted sexual approaches will naturally include their own sons and brothers, their own offspring in solidarity. So you have a potentially, you have what you can call it a coalition of everyone. It's very difficult to think of how you can have a coalition of

everyone, because mostly a coalition needs a boundary. But as long as you're having your strike and then relaxing it and then having it again, like with the moon as we think would have happened, the threat which gelled your coalition is what happens when you abandon your strike, and that's sufficient to get you back onto strike again, but of course you need to surrender it in order to be able to start to grow up again. So you get this periodicity, which is of course, as anyone knows who's been around in Rag for a while, is this universal image of the rainbow snake or the anaconda or the rain serpent or the dragon. You know, this thing which moves between heaven and earth, life and death, water and fire, all the opposites you can think of, human and animal. All that rock, all that rock, all that rock. That rock art we had up this had all these animals. But it also had these anacondas. The rock out specialists, they call them anaconda, the zigzags. Yeah, okay, they're anacondas, but it's much more than an anaconda. What we're looking at is lunar periodicity, waxing, waning, waxing, waning, waxing, waning, waxing, waning. There's all those zigzags you saw. So you're on strike, you're off strike, you're on strike, you know you want sex, you know you don't want sex, you want sex, all that periodicity. You're with your Kenya with your husband, and you move between being with your. Your kin, your blood, that's great. You've got a huge lot of power and solidarity, but then you get fed up with being with your kin. You want some nice quiet sex with somebody. And so you drop all that, and then after a while that gets a bit boring, so you go back to being a collective again. So that's what we think of as the original logic, when you're sort of moving between life and death, this world and the other, and all those things. And only relatively recently in history did we get stuck. when we lost touch with the moon. And remember that the myths are very accurate on that. They tell us very clearly, we got stuck when we lost contact with the moon. We forgot how to die and come back alive again. When we're dead, we get stuck in death. And it was the moon which gave us that kind of immortality through death, that periodicity.

Camilla: Neil, did you, do you want to put something?

Audience member #2: You can say no about hunting, why are they hunting cats?

Camilla: Go on there, Neil, go on. Hunting cats.

Audience member #2: Yeah, in near East Mythos and in Gilgamesh and in Egypt, it was only very high status people went after cats. You weren't hunting for meat, it was because you were high status, the king went in. the top animal, he killed the top animal, often with his whole crew coming with him with chariots, but he had to be there to finish him off. It was top.

Camilla: It's very hierarchical.

Chris: It's the only, what vestiges we have today of primitive communism are monopolized by one particular family. It's called the royal family, you know.

Camilla: I could add something. They've got recent evidence on Neanderthal hunting of lions fought with all the flaws coming from that line pelts being something preserved as a line pelt recently for Neanderthals. So they were doing it. So yeah, who

knows? It could be Neanderthal shamanist characters too. hang on there. Well, we've got Dottie again. Ivan, were you going to ask a question? Because you had your hand up.

Audience member #1: Oh yeah, I was going to say it's more like a kind of comment question. Alongside this with the perspectivist stuff in Amazonia, Chris, you know, being gender blind, but it's also kind of ritual blind, isn't it? All of that work, they don't really look at rituals much at all, do they?

Chris: No, of course. OK, so Levi Strauss. and Chomsky, but all these people, it's a mind over matter paradigm. It's called the cognitive revolution. So just after the Second World War, it became hugely fashionable to deny that bodies matter. I mean, in a sense, it was anti-communist. It was like the communists have this idea, obviously a Marxist idea, that the ideas in our heads result from the way our bodies move around. So we have bodies, we need to eat, we need to find food, we need to cooperate in different ways or compete in different ways. As a result of those relationships, we develop certain ideas. Well, in opposition to communism, or rather in opposition to Marxism, but sort of kind of in opposition to the Stalinist regimes of the Soviet Union and all that, the CIA was very keen on, and obviously lots of other people were very keen on, promoting the opposite. So the communist bloc was was opposed partly with missiles and nuclear bombers and all that, but partly with a new way of looking at the world, which put mind over matter. And so mind first, matter second, Levi-Strauss. And what that meant was, for Levi-Strauss in particular, he had to get rid of ritual, because of course, if you think about it, we have in mythology, we have all the spirits, all the spiritual beings, But they are connected with the world through ritual. It's in ritual that the gods come down to earth, isn't it? It's like if we didn't have, like with me as a Catholic, if we didn't keep having ceremonies, you know, christenings, baptisms, funerals, mass, all that stuff, where would Jesus be? I mean, you know, where would God be? He had to bring him down to earth and make him real among ourselves through rituals. Well, Levi-Strauss decided, right, I don't want all that. I just want myth to be idly communing with themselves, so let's get rid of ritual. And he did it by this ridiculous book called Totemism, where he said that totemism is just a, like hysteria, just a nonsensical concept and didn't really exist. And then you're right, Ivan, it's astonishing how little ritual there is among the perspectivists. And it's another version of mentalism or idealism. It's all in the mind.

Camilla: Sorry, Ivan, go on.

Audience member #1: I was just going to say, somebody in the audience there, I think, asked something about shamanism that you commented on. And I just wanted to mention here that the Maya shaman story I've told you before, he's in the center surrounded by a chorus of women. They all go up together. So that's kind of a quite a different example where the women are central to this shamanic initiation. What's interesting, I was thinking today about it, is that the place they get to, it's these kind of, it's like a river with different flows in it, you know, different. So the kind of imagery maps on really nicely with a female coalition. They can't go, the shaman can't go

without them. Do you see what I mean? So I thought that's kind of a nice counter example there.

Camilla: We had a couple more in the room. Would you like to say we'll repeat?

Audience member #2: So it feels like I'm probably completely wrong, but the perspectivists are projecting their own idea of what people believe, and that you've been describing a theory of why people believe things. But is there a space also for a better understanding of what people believed in these indigenous communities? Is perspectivism representing that at all, is anything else?

Chris: I think you're asking whether there's a better way of genuinely and honestly and accurately representing indigenous beliefs than, yeah. Well, one of my favorite anthropologists is Luisa Elvira Belonde. I mentioned her earlier on. And she's written a lot of stuff, nearly almost none of it in English, unfortunately. But of course, nowadays you can get it translated nice and quickly. And she makes the point that the real problem with the perspectivists is that they have every perspective except gender. They are really gender blind. And so I'll just say, she has this idea, it's a lovely idea, and I think it's absolutely right. It's called an Amazonian hematology. she says, right across Amazonia, what is common, and it's almost ignored by the perspectivists, is the idea of blood as medicine, blood as potency, blood as both fertility and danger, and menstrual blood in particular being the most dangerous substance. And I just think she gives, and because that topic of menstruation is, the thing about menstrual blood is that It really is a taboo for Western scientists, that's the problem. Unless you're doing medicine and you medicalise menstruation, you're almost not allowed to talk about it. So Louisa herself, she went to study her people in the field and she came back with a whole lot of notes. She told me all this. And she went to her supervisors in the LSE and they said, Louisa, can you cut out all the stuff on menstruation? And she said, why? She said, because you're just describing your personal experience and there's no, a PhD has to be theoretical. A PhD has to engage with theory. There's no theory about menstruation. Now, Louise actually said, well, actually, I've just read a book by Chris Knight, it's called Blood Relations. And they said, oh, well, that's just Chris Knight, you know. I mean, I suppose the point I'm making is that I think there are other ways, but the main bias, the main problem with representing these other beliefs is this gender blindness. And I mean, if you're interested in Amazonian cosmology and all the rest of it, a huge corrective is the work of Louisa. I mean, but among others, I mean, Joanna Overing was her teacher, one of her teachers, and there's a whole bunch of other women who've done wonderful work.

Camilla: And Joanna Overing is famous for her catch 22, what is it, on gender. And she was also operating with a group where there was a lot of parallels with power between menstruation and the shamans in terms of.

Chris: So Joanna Overing, look her up. Louisa Bella one day, look her up. Yeah, wonderful, wonderful stuff.

Audience member #1: Can I rather quickly ask this thing about the about?

Audience member #5: I can say what it's about. Yeah. Are you with me on Alan Arira and the work that she did? many years ago in the Amazon and Latin America. And I wonder what happened to his work. He was very advanced, I thought, at the time.

Camilla: Is that the...

Chris: I'm very, very keen on his work. There's wonderful stuff about older brother and younger brother and all that marvellous stuff. I imagine he's retired now, is it? Is he also? I don't really know if he's still with us. Yes, he was.

Audience member #5: Say hello to him.

Chris: Well, I can't really say hello to him because I. We haven't met him. We haven't met him and I'm not even sure if he's with us.

Audience member #5: I've met him and maybe he won't remember me, but I'm a member of this group and I think we should be recognising him.

Chris: We certainly should. Yeah. So the Kogi had this very long ritual where they put their They put the boy who's going to be, I don't know what you call a shaman, but he has to not see the light of day for I think 10 or 15 years. And all that period he's learning and learning and learning. And they're very, very worried about, and this is before climate science had really been able to sort of speak about what we're doing to the climate. But it's very interesting, Raga, because these people, the Kogi, They knew themselves from the fact that the tops of the hills no longer had snow and that the streams were drying up. They knew that the white man was damaging the entire planet and they were warning what they call little brother. Yeah.

Audience member #5: Us lot.

Chris: Us lot, yes. Yeah, and it was very, very moving stuff.

Audience member #5: Thank you. Thank you for the talk. Bye. Well, that's a bit rude. Oh, me? Yes. Oh.

Chris: I'm surprised when I agree with her, I think.

Camilla: Go away.

Chris: Go away. Sorry. Yes, hi. Yes, you speak.

Camilla: I have a question here.

Audience member #7: Yeah, thank you so much for the wonderful talk. I have a very naive question. So I'm wondering, do you have a solution to solve the ritual blindness of perspectivism? And a particular context for...

Chris: The solution lies with women. The people you need to talk to are Camilla here and a few other people and Christine. The solution is a global women's strike, but obviously you can say that very quickly and it won't work. You need to start locally with a menstrual synony.

Camilla: Is that the actual question you were asking, the solution to the entire problem of the world?

Audience member #7: I'm first you're asking about the ritual blindness, the ritual blindness perspective.

Chris: Well, the thing to do is to start some rituals, and without rituals, we've got no magic, no solidarity, and I believe in magic very much, but I mean, it's up to women, like, I mean, anyway, go on, come on.

Camilla: I think the question was more about... Yeah, can you say again?

Audience member #7: So for example, for this picture, this wonderful photograph, you showed us that when a man saw this woman, she was not seeing the girl as her. She is, she was seeing, he was seeing a juggernaut. But precisely that was in a ritual context. But for us, we are not in that ritual context. So we can always only talk about a ritual and talk about ritual contact, talk about ritual perception, but we will never...

Chris: Let me just say a little bit. My daughter, Olivia, organised a wonderful first menstruation ceremony for my granddaughter, Vera. One of the people who came to this class, Lex Franke, a few years ago, has made a clock, like a special moon clock, to be given as a rather expensive present to celebrate your daughter's first menstruation. So one of the ways to start back with ritual would be to, instead of letting... I was a teacher in a secondary school before I became a professor at a university. And I just remember quite often some poor 13 or 14 year old girl suddenly thought she was dying. She was having a period. No one had warned her about it. What A ridiculous thing to do. I mean, what an absolutely absurd thing. And then sometimes, of course, girls would be taking exams during their period. and nobody would make any allowance. So instead of having this awful idea, which is just everywhere, that, this is a horrible problem, that menstruation is a kind of curse, celebrate it, and make, it's so, I mean, I say easy, not easy, you've got to have a, you know, but you're going, it's a stream, but it can be done. You can make sure that every young girl coming of age is celebrated for having had her first period and makes it a joyful occasion. So that might be one little way of starting to change the world.

Audience member #7: So may I interpret the answers, because I'm also thinking about the distinction you made between it is and it symbolizes. So in a ritual context, it is, but when we talk about it, symbolizes the job. So, but you are giving a wonderful personal story indicating actually the solution lies in scientific practice and never ending.

Chris: Absolutely. It has to be not just a symbol. It has to be for real. One of the reasons this amazing woman, Lex, who came to the class a few years ago, we've stayed in contact with her, the way she completely bowled me over was exactly that. I had a first meeting with her and she completely seriously just said, Chris, I go to the moon once a month. And I sort of said, well, how do you get there? And she says, it's easy. I said, don't you need a rocket? She says, no, I don't need a rocket. My body takes me there. And she was just being completely flat and serious. And she said, when she's on the moon, she looks at herself and she's caring about herself. She can see herself in a room through the window that she's the moonlight coming down. And I mean, you could, I could have had the attitude, this strange young woman who's turned up to rag is completely off her head. I mean, I didn't because people say that about me,

because like moonshine, bonkers and all the rest. And I just thought, Somebody like that means it. She visits the moon once a month. There's evidently truth there. And when you start having rituals, they make an alternative truth. And perhaps I should just really emphasize that. It's not tonight's subject, really, but I'm writing a book on the origin of language with Jerome Lewis. And everything in language is, we're moving around in virtual reality. You know, we're not saying something, doesn't, you know, saying I hereby fry this egg. that doesn't get the egg fried. you could actually fry it. But when you make moves with language, you're moving in a virtual world, a world of shared beliefs. And those shared beliefs are real, you know? I mean, citizenship, money, marriage, all these things that people fight wars over, in a way they wouldn't exist, like money wouldn't exist if you didn't have a belief in it. But they're also much more positive things than money, which only exists because you believe in them. But if rituals construct those beliefs, they are truer than lumps of wood or stone.

Audience member #3: Can you point us to the worker, Lex, actually? Could you give a reference, like her full name or website? Is that possible?

Camilla: Lex Frankie. The artist with the clock. When you say I need a website, if people search Lex, L-E-X, Frankie, F-R-A-N-C-H-I, I haven't got anywhere to write it.

Chris: She doesn't, she's an artist, she works with her hands, she doesn't do writing really, she's not very good at writing.

Audience member #3: That'd be interesting for everyone to see her work.

Camilla: For sure.

Audience member #4: The clocks are for sale at Moon Clocks.

Camilla: If you look, so search, next Frankie, Moon Clocks.

Audience member #4: Camden Arts Centre.

Camilla: Yeah. And you can also search on Radical Anthropology's Mastered and Feed, search her name or search moon clock, you'll find it. Also to say, we are running dark moon menstrual huts, each dark moon. And anybody who'd really like to join us, talk to me or Christine to go on WhatsApp or e-mail list.

Chris: And we may have our fun as well.

Camilla: Yeah, but the next one, which is probably going to be an outdoors polyphony session in Brockwell Park, actually, is the possibility. I don't know, there may be some discussion whether we let any all genders welcome. I'm not sure. We'll see. I'll talk to Ingrid about it. But that's the next opening. Anybody who's really wanting to come?

Audience member #4: Lex has got an Instagram called Moon Clock.

Camilla: Oh, fantastic. Thank you.

Chris: Instagram called Moon Clock.

Camilla: So if you're on Instagram, find Lex on Moon Clock.

Chris: I'm a I'm a TikTok celebrity as well, by the way.

Camilla: Yeah, TikTok is going down bad roads. You've got to remember that. But maybe you're the one who can.

Chris: If you look up Professor Knight on TikTok, you'll find I've got the link. Got a million followers or something like that.

Camilla: And many followers. Oh, Ian, you're going to say something. Right.

Audience member #3: I was just wondering. With perspectivism, isn't this a bit of a case of sort of rediscovering the wheel a bit?

Chris: Yeah.

Audience member #3: You know, it sort of seems to have kicked off in the '90s in Amazonian anthropology. But so much of it resonates with sort of Southern African rock art research, where This is where like Lewis Williams was realizing that the monarchical girl becomes an eland and that the shaman becomes a feline, a lion. So there at least you did have this engagement with ritual and becoming something other at the same time. It's just that he went up, he decided that he couldn't do much with the monarchical ritual, and he focused it all on the shamanistic. And in a sense, I don't know the Amazonian stuff as well, but I suspect that they probably also focus mostly on the shamanism as well. So it's sort of gender blindness or not even blindness. I mean, David Lewis Williams wasn't blind to gender. He decided that it was just a male focus. It was more productive for his purpose. But so that means so that makes this like sort of what's new in any of this, right?

Chris: Well, it does. It does. happens to be, if you ask an anthropologist what's new, what's current, what's fashionable, what's happening, what's in anthropology, I mean, it's hard to say very much is happening, apart from perspectivism. And, I mean, our bunch, I mean, we are very imaginative, very creative, doing very, very well, but we're so much against the patriarchal stream that, I don't know, it's just hard to break through all that. But, I mean, yeah, I mean, we are doing well. We've got several universities, more or less, in line with our thinking in Bratislava and in Bristol, in Plymouth and various places. We've got the anthropology departments behind us and we're doing well in terms of publishing and Ian's doing, Ian's the number one scholar of the ochre record of human evolution. I mean, that's the only thing you can do as an archaeologist if you're into the symbolism is study the red ochre and Ian's the world expert on that and he's got some fantastic recent publications. So we're kind of doing all right, but it's still it's against the stream. I mean, the dominant paradigms, they just don't like it. They just don't like it because it's all about women, or it's all about the moon, or it's all about things which are regarded as hugely controversial.

Audience member #2: Maybe some unknown female is unconscious in itself. The moon, a symbol of mystery. just unconscious energies, full stop.

Chris: One of the things is we have a lot of marvellous support recently from artists and poets. So artists and poets, I mean, Anish Kapoor, I mean, you know, a huge lot of stuff that he's done, you know, kind of owing to my book, *Blood Race*, all this stuff and Anish Kapoor's red paintings. Cecilia Vicuna with the lovely red threads. acknowledges my book, *Blood Relations*. Recently we've had, obviously Christine, of course, but I've known Christine all, seems like all my life, so I might forget to mention her, like I forget to mention Ian or Camilla. But so poets don't have such hang-ups,

where scientists who've invested their whole lives in a particular theory I'm afraid they have to die. It's too precious to hold on to, even if their theory is patently nonsense. I mean, a good example is Chomsky. His linguistics is absolute rubbish, doesn't make any sense at all. And nowadays people are abandoning it. But I mean, as long as he was alive, I mean, he's still alive, but he's quite seriously ill. But I mean, there's no way some of these people that have invested their lives in a kind of crazy theory are going to abandon it. There's too much at stake. They've invested too much. And I hope I'm not like that, but I mean...

Camilla: Well, that's really...

Chris: The trouble is, Ian, if that applies to me, it applies just as much to you. But anyway.

Camilla: There is one last question from Christine. Can you make it loud so people can hear? And then I'm going to sign off. Hold on.

Audience member #4: All these people in the world that don't even think menstruation is a taboo. It just is a taboo. They don't even know they're thinking that. In a way, they're only like the people that believe that she is a jaguar in a different way, because they're so unconscious of the fact something is even a taboo.

Chris: Yeah, it's true. The unseen and unspoken taboos are the most powerful. And the ones which are most powerful are the ones in Western science because they're never acknowledged. It's like, oh, there's no taboo, Chris. No, But how come is it, how come you never talk about these things? I mean, it's just, it's obviously a very, and the moon is, again, it's a, I mean, the moon is like, you can't even plan anything in the future without using the moon as sort of the sun. But somehow the moon disappears from all textbooks on human origins. It's just not even there. You've only got seasonality.

Camilla: The blindness of our culture to the effects of the moon is quite extraordinary. And you can't be on the African continent or any indigenous culture have a blindness to the moon. It's impossible.

Chris: So this blindness to the moon is just completely unscientific. It's purely, it's superstition in reverse. They're so anxious to avoid superstition that they get into a reverse superstition. Yeah.

Camilla: I think we'd better sign up and say thank you very much, Chris, for what was a great lecture. And thanks for the questions as well and comments as well. And I think there's lots of links being going up on the Zoom there, which is really good. And next week, We are very delighted that we will be switching back to a much more evolutionary behavioural ecology primate mating systems talk with Kit Opie, who's a lecturer at Bristol University Arkenant Department and well published with people like Robin Dunbar. He's produced some nature and PNAS, NAS papers. He's very well published, but he's also one of the major people totally getting our theory and working on our model. But what he's going to be talking about next week is primate mating systems and the evolution of language. So he will be adding some to whatever Chris has been saying about it. So I hope that people on Zoom will get back to me. If I put up my e-mail and you can get in touch for any papers you aren't able to access.

Let me just get the e-mail correct and then Zoom people can. Oh, sorry about this. Sorry about this. Okay, that's my e-mail. If you want access to some of those papers, I may be able to help you. So otherwise than that, I hope we'll see you next week on Zoom. Thank you very much for joining.

Audience member #2: I'm here. Great. And here the pub we go to is just down there, two minutes walk.

Camilla: Yeah, if anyone wants to come and have a drink in the Cabbestop, just go there, down to the end of the Cabbestop.

The Ted K Archive

Chris Knight
On women and jaguars
Why perspectivism got it so wrong
11 March 2025

Radical Anthropology. <www.youtube.com/watch?v=qvdltsExvpY>

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