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DESCOLA'S MODEL OF RELIGION AND NATURE EXAMINED “Ontologies” in the Matobo Hills of Zimbabwe

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Abstract: Philippe Descola suggested a scheme to enumerate dispositions to nature in such a way as to take into account non-Western practices that tend to be overshadowed by the dominance of naturalism. He also deployed this scheme to account for other religious types in the world, which in the same manner tend to be obscured by Western Christianity. This article examines Descola's ontological scheme in the light of the case of the Mwali cult in the Matobo Hills World Heritage Site in Zimbabwe. Data gathered through a protracted period of participant observation and interviews in Matobo Hills shows that instead of the fourfold scheme Descola proposes, his reference to incarnation and figuration is a more promising avenue in an attempt to account for religious forms and the various ways humans relate to their environments.

Keywords: *Religion, Nature, Culture, Ontology, Hybridity*

Introduction: “Nature” and “Culture” Conservation?

Whether the question he is addressing is on nature conservation, the dialogue of disciplines, or the study of religions, Descola has recourse to the same thrust, namely, alternatives to the modernist dichotomy of nature and culture or to Western Christianity (Descola 2008, 2013a, 2013b, 2013c). In considering nature conservation, he contends we must take into account the “ecology of others” or other natures; with regard to disciplinary dialogue we must transcend the Western “tribe's” division of disciplines according to nature and culture; and as for our study of religions we must go beyond ideas of religion influenced by Western Christianity, and incorporate other religions. If Descola

could be said to have a religioid anthropological commitment, his is first and foremost a commitment to the conservation of non-Western “natures” or cultures of “nature,” pursued by way of demanding seats for them in the commonwealth of cultures (i.e., the notion of relative universalism in Descola’s terms; cf. Benthall (2006) on religioid features of anthropology). In order to include the marginalised modes of relation to the nonhuman environment, Descola has endeavoured to demonstrate that there are other dispositions to the nonhuman environment than the dominant Western model, which comprises a dichotomy between nature and culture. Similarly, he has attempted to show that there are other types of religion which are not of the same form as Western Christianity. The different religious types are meant to be compatible with the different modes of relation to the nonhuman environment.

Descola developed a fourfold scheme that he proposes accounts for all possible relations of humans to their nonhuman environments. The corresponding scheme to account for types of religion is threefold, since, according to him, one of the four ways of relating to the nonhuman environment has no corresponding religious element. In this chapter, Descola’s schemes to account for the different modes of relating to the nonhuman environment and for the different types of religion will be considered in the light of the case of the Mwali cult in the Matobo Hills in Zimbabwe. The heuristic value of Descola’s fourfold scheme will be questioned and an alternative route of abstraction that develops his discussion on incarnation and figuration will be proposed.

Anthropology, Religion and Nature

Anthropology and religious studies have proffered models of religion or culture and nature since their inception as disciplines although such models were not always considered as falling under the religion/culture and nature rubric. Anthropology’s theories of and critiques on ideas of nature and culture include environmental determinism (Kroeber 1939; Steward 1955), the ecosystemic approach (Rappaport 1968), ethnoecology and other forms of relativism (Tyler 1969), use-dependent perception (Dwyer 1996; Howell 1996), use-belief dialectic and the nature-culture debate (Ingold 1994; Descola 2013a).

Anthropologists today tend to look at the preservation of cultural diversity as having a bearing on the preservation of biodiversity (Milton 1997). Today there is also a widespread acceptance of ontological pluralism (Ingold 2016).

Most recently, the work of Philippe Descola, as well as that of others¹ who have attempted to transcend the nature-culture dichotomy, has received considerable reception among anthropologists. Although Descola discusses religion as well, his work has hardly attracted any attention in religious studies, perhaps partly because his explicit discussion of the subject matter of religion is brief. While some works from religious studies emphasised the ecological or potentially ecological character of particular religions (Grim and Tucker 2014, Olupona 2010), others have highlighted a religious and religioid commitment to nature and nature conservation (Taylor 2010). Such approaches to religion, Descola laments, are Eurocentric and oblivious to religion in a large part of the globe. The latter, a Durkheimian approach to religion, which de-centres god/s and focuses on sacrality, is, according to Descola, a modern Eurocentric approach that is embarrassed by “the seemingly irrational aspects of all religious ontologies” (Descola 2013c: 36) while it is implicitly theocentric and Christianity-centered in its reference to the “separate and forbidden” (ibid. 37). Similarly, he contends that theocentric descriptions of religion such as polytheism and monotheism or Dumézil’s *sacra* and *signa* “leave aside a large part of humankind” (ibid. 36). Acknowledging the futility of attempting a universal definition of religion, Descola settles for “some common ground that might account for at least a dimension of all religious phenomena” (ibid. 37); and that common ground he identifies as *figuration* or *incarnation*, that is, the rendering present, visible and tangible, qualities, potencies or beings, through speech acts or images (ibid.). By suggesting figuration or incarnation as central to religion Descola has identified a vital heuristic lead in considering the idea of religion as will be tentatively demonstrated in this chapter.

1 Including Eduardo Viveros de Castro, Bruno Latour and Tim Ingold.

Descola's Relative Universalism

Descola sets out to present a common aspect of religion, namely, “the ontological pluralism of religious beings and the different ways in which they become known to humans” (ibid.). He identifies three classes of religious beings and regards each of them as typical of a particular “ontological schema” but acknowledges that all of them may be present in one conceptual and physical space. By “ontological schemas” Descola refers to a limited number of primary schemata or models of “nonreflective” inferences that humans have about the nonhuman beings around them (2013b: 104). According to Descola, these schemata are exhaustive of all the identifications humans make regarding nonhumans.

Some basic tenets undergird the ontological schemata suggested by Descola. These include that humans identify and relate to existing beings; that it is possible to abstract the basic principles that determine all possible humans' identifications and relationships to existing beings; and that all the possible identifications of nonhuman beings by humans comprise regarding the nonhuman beings under consideration as similar or dissimilar to humans in outward form (*physicalities*) or in inner qualities (*interiorities*). *Physicalities* refers to the outward form of the beings, that is, the material, bodily, or physiological aspects of each being, and the possible behaviour they allow. *Interiorities* refers to inner qualities and capacities such as subjectivity, intentionality, reflexivity, emotions, beliefs, as well as the intersubjectivity and “culture” that they make possible among the human collective in question.²

Descola then goes on to identify four such ontological identifications, which he designates as *animism*, *totemism*, *naturalism*, and *analogism*.³ In an *animistic* ontology humans and nonhumans are regarded as having similar interiorities but different physicalities. That is, nonhuman collectives are regarded as having inner qualities, such as intentionality, emotions, beliefs, and intersubjectivity, analogous to those of humans, although their bodily forms are different from

2 In the first chapter a different labelling of the Descola axes is suggested.

3 Note that although Descola makes use of terms that could be regarded as outdated, he gives them a novel theoretical impetus that is cognisant of human cognitive universals.

human bodies. With *naturalism*, which Descola considers the mirror-opposite of animism, it is the physicality which is continuous and interiority discontinuous. *Totemism* ascribes continuity between particular groups of humans and certain nonhumans in both interior and exterior qualities, while *analogism* assigns no continuity in both interiorities and physicalities but establishes links between various existing things seen as analogous in a universe ordered hierarchically. According to Descola, these schemata “take account of the whole gamut of [humans’] relations to existing beings” (2013b: 94). In other words, these are all the possible ways in which humans identify nonhuman beings. Descola emphasises that it is, however, important to note that these primary identifications of existing objects are immediately tempered by attitudes of relationship to what is identified (2013b: 113). Therefore, to each of the basic identification schemata, namely, *animism*, *totemism*, *naturalism*, and *analogism*, is added a possible relationship dimension. He identifies these dimensions as “exchange, predation, gift, production, protection, and transmission” (2013b: 311).

Descola includes the caveat that these ontologies are not to be considered as “tightly isolated ‘worldviews’” (ibid. 38, also Descola 2014). Rather, “Given that the principles that govern such schemas are *ex hypothesi* universal, they cannot be exclusive, and we may suppose that they coexist potentially in all human beings” (2013b: 233). He notes that all these ontological assumptions can be held by one person, but that the person is likely to make inferences according to “the systematization for a group of humans of one of the inferences only – where he or she was socialized” (2013c: 38). As an example he claims that even though most Europeans are naturalists because of the process of enculturation, this “does not prevent some of them, in certain circumstances, from treating their cat as though it has a soul, from believing that the orbit of Jupiter will affect what they do the next day, or even from identifying with one particular place and its human and nonhuman inhabitants so closely that the rest of the world seems to them to be of an entirely different nature from that of the community to which they are attached” (2013b: 233). By this Descola is insinuating that there are animistic, totemistic and analogistic elements in Western society as well. Yet, he argues, these are only isolated “episodic slippages into other schemas,” slippages not sufficient to overtake the dominant place of naturalism in members

of a continually enculturating naturalist European society (ibid.). He asserts as well that “Although we may from time to time indulge in the type of ontological judgments that other modes of identification suggest, it is out of the question for any modern subject fully to become animist or totemist (as ethnographic experience attests) or even to return consistently to the ancient attractions of analogism” (2013b: 304).

In light of this thesis, Descola examines religion by allocating what he calls *incarnates* to three of the ontological schemata. These incarnates are *spirits*, *deities* and *antecedents*. For Descola, since animism is the belief in bodies animated by *spirits*, that is, souls of human or nonhuman persons, spirits are the typical incarnates of the animistic ontology. He observes that in some circumstances spirits are regarded as separated from their proper bodies and as roaming about or occupying other bodies so that the human body, for example, may be said in some situations to embody an animal’s spirit. As for *deities*, he assigns them to analogism. Deities are agencies assigned to one specific area or the other, whether the area in question is a space, a social unit, a regime of practice, a temperament, a technique or a habit. While spirits are nomadic, roaming about without a fixed abode, deities are more generally fixed to certain places, such as caves, lakes and springs, mountains and rocks, and human-made shrines. Worship and sacrifice is made to deities at their places of abode and it is hoped they will grant the worshippers’ wishes. Descola asserts that sacrifice is an *analogist* practice unknown in animism (2013c: 39–43).

The final set of *incarnates* discussed by Descola are what he calls *antecedents* in reference to ancestors and totems, that is, those incarnates that are considered foundational to the communities in which they are regarded as significant (ibid. 43–46). Ancestors, like deities, are approached with prayer and sacrifice, and fall within analogism, whereas totems belong to totemism. For examples demonstrating the incarnates and ontologies, Descola refers to Australian totemism, West African deities and ancestors, Amazonian animism, and assumes that naturalism is a typically modern Western ontology. Although Descola notes that his may not be an exhaustive list of incarnates, that the boundaries may be fluid, and that there may be ontological crossovers, he also claims that “ontological crossovers are uncommon on the whole, because the qualifications of incarnates,

like those of any other kind of population, follow strictly the type of qualities that each ontology requires for any being to come into existence" (ibid. 47). In the examples that he employs as well, Descola insinuates that he is presenting cases that demonstrate the ontologies he suggests and their corresponding incarnates.

What I observed regarding the Mwali cult in Matobo Hills in Zimbabwe raised qualms regarding Descola's proposal. These misgivings regarding some key aspects of Descola's relative universalism will be raised through an examination of the structure of Descola's proposal and a discussion of the case of the Mwali cult in Matobo Hills. A key aspect of Descola's thesis is the claim that four distinct and exhaustive ontological schemata can be identified. He not only identifies and describes the schemata, but also gives many examples to illustrate them. Any counterexample or argument that demonstrates that the four ontological schemata suggested by Descola are not distinct and/or exhaustive takes away the force from Descola's proposal. The aim of this chapter is not so much to disprove Descola's thesis as to salvage what seems to me to be a most promising avenue that Descola did not develop in his major text (Descola 2013b), but articulated well albeit briefly in a contribution to an edited volume (Descola 2013c).

The difference between the comparative religious history proposed here and the comparative anthropology of Descola is that the latter is framed by the old anthropological attempt to identify human collectives that have recognisably different registers of interpretation from those that are familiar to the inquirer's society, while the former is free of that anthropological disciplinary baggage. Descola makes reference to ethnological material and to the history of ideas to provide evidence of distinct registers of interpretation in various societies and historical times, and he makes this ethnographic and historical material the basis and support of his abstraction. The assumption that these registers are different is inherent in the anthropological disciplinary agenda. A different insight emerges if one starts with a different assumption as will be proposed here. I contend that it is not necessary to start with a commitment to defining different groups. Rather what seems to lead to a less controversial scheme is to venture into a comparative approach that is more committed to find commonalities rather than distinctions in human exploratory and interpretive processes. The ontologies Descola identifies seem

to be reifications that are a result of a disciplinary agenda, an agenda now rather outmoded even within the discipline of anthropology. Descola's conception seems so framed by this agenda of pointing out differences that even when he bravely embarks on a project to highlight universalism he finds four completely distinct ontological grids that however coexist potentially in every human being.

A debatably weak link in Descola's thesis is most clearly exposed when he attempts a refutation of an anticipated criticism (see Descola 2013b: 233), but it is spread out through the text (cf. *ibid.* 104–111). Considering a warning by Lévi-Strauss, his former mentor, and the possible refutation that his proposal may be an enterprise of “madness,” that is, too ambitious in its endeavour to account for the world's complexity within a four-grid scheme, Descola gives a response which is arguably the weakest link in his thesis (Descola 2013b: 233; cf. *ibid.* 98 and Lévi-Strauss 1966: 130). The specific challenge to which Descola attempts to respond is somewhat as follows: That there are many cases of the co-occurrence of elements of what are supposed to be four completely distinct and incompatible ontological grids renders the proposed thesis flawed. Descola's response proceeds in the following manner: When situations arise in which ontological grids co-occur and appear not to be distinct, *we should suppose* that it is because the *four distinct ontological grids* are innate in human cognition and that therefore all of them have the potentiality to manifest in one context. Such cases of unclear distinction are, however, unlikely to occur since the process of enculturation normally ensures the dominance of one schema over the others (2013b: 109, 233, 2013c: 38). Another reason for a lack of clearly distinct ontological grids in a particular situation may be syncretism, that is, a cultural commingling of elements of different ontological grids (*ibid.* 105, 109f).

What has just been presented is tantamount to a fallacy of *petitio principii*. To say that the lack of clearly distinct ontological grids is because the ontological grids are commingled is to smuggle back into the starting premises the idea of distinct ontological grids that is to be demonstrated. In other words, it is to argue that the apparent lack of distinctiveness is because distinctiveness has been hidden. It seems the reader is expected to hold some anthropological religioid belief that there was a time in the past in which ontological grids existed unadulterated, and that the four distinct ontological grids still exist

although in an adulterated form, and, in a condition of potentiality, in every human being's innate cognitive structures.

In the related scenario in which one ontological grid is dominant while elements of other ontological grids still manifest themselves, Descola appeals again to the *supposed* presence of the four distinct ontological grids coexisting in every human psyche. The other ontological grids which are not dominant may manifest from time to time or in relation to some limited aspects of that society's daily living. These manifestations of the latent ontological grids are momentary and/or feeble. This again is a fallacy of *petitio principii* but this time tinged with some kind of equivocation. To talk of a dominant ontological grid is to assume that distinct ontological grids exist. To say that *supposedly* distinct ontological grids that coexist in all human cognition are manifesting themselves in human collectives is to affirm at one level what was supposed at another. A conjecture at one level of the human psycho-social spectrum cannot lead to the affirmation of another conjecture at a different level. What remains at best are conjectures at two levels of human cognitive and social being that may be linked necessarily as a matter of conjecture.

The Mwali cult in the Matobo Hills

It might, however, be contended justifiably that it is enough for an anthropological enterprise to make reasonable conjectures. In this case the conjectures made by Descola are supported by indicial ethnographic material and cognitive psychology. It might therefore be necessary to have a closer look at ethnographic material and see whether it does indeed support Descola's proposal. As I do not have intimate knowledge of the societies cited by Descola I shall take the case of the Matobo Hills with which I am well acquainted as a starting point. It might reasonably be argued that the manifestly pluralistic and syncretic nature of the situation in the Matobo Hills renders the case an unsuitable candidate in either demonstrating or refuting Descola's claims. However, what is interesting about the case is that, given the variety of elements of identification of nonhuman objects in the Matobo Hills, it may be possible to find elements that fall without the scope or seriously question the integrity of Descola's model in one way or the other. Once such elements are identified the question then

arises whether there can be a better alternative to Descola's framework. This is the set of tasks that will be pursued below.

Descola's theoretical framework seems, at least at the outset, to be confirmed by human relations to the nonhuman environment in the Matobo Hills that I witnessed during a nine month field research spread out between 2013 and 2016.⁴ Broadly speaking, the Matobo National Park in the Matobo Hills is a space where naturalism's delineation of nature in contradistinction with culture is executed, while contiguous with the national park, in the adjacent villages Domboshaba, Silungudzi, Dewe and Njelele, is the operation of analogism with its hierarchical ordering of analogous entities and its located deity who is approached with sacrifices, as well as animism with its freely roaming spirits. Even traces of what has been labelled totemism are evident in the Matobo Hills. However, as will be demonstrated, some identifications of nonhuman nature in the Matobo Hills question Descola's framework of four distinct ontological schemata.

After about 25 km from the outskirts of Bulawayo along the southerly road to Kezi, the level savannah scenery comes to an abrupt end and a sea of packed granite rock boulders and hills begins, stretching for another approximately 35 km; this latter stretch goes across one of the narrowest widths of the hilly landscape. This rugged country stretches beyond Matobo district into Mzingwane and Gwanda districts. The Bulawayo-Kezi road goes through the Matobo National Park for about 10 of the 35 km and comes to Silungudzi and Domboshaba villages immediately to the south of the national park but still in the Matobo Hills. Also in the Matobo Hills are the Dewe and Njelele villages lying to the west of Silungudzi village. It is in Dewe village that the Njelele Hill shrine priest lives but the shrine is situated in the adjacent Njelele village across the stream Mathanda.

I arrived at the home of my host-to-be in Dewe village just after sunset early in August 2013, but he was not at home. Musa, his wife, advised me that Micah, her husband, had the final say in the matter. I then went to *embuyisweni* (the ritual of welcoming back home a dead person's spirit) at the Ndebeles⁵ where Micah was, and he was quick to grant my request. Micah was the most suitable host on two grounds. As

4 Fieldwork was supported by the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies and the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies.

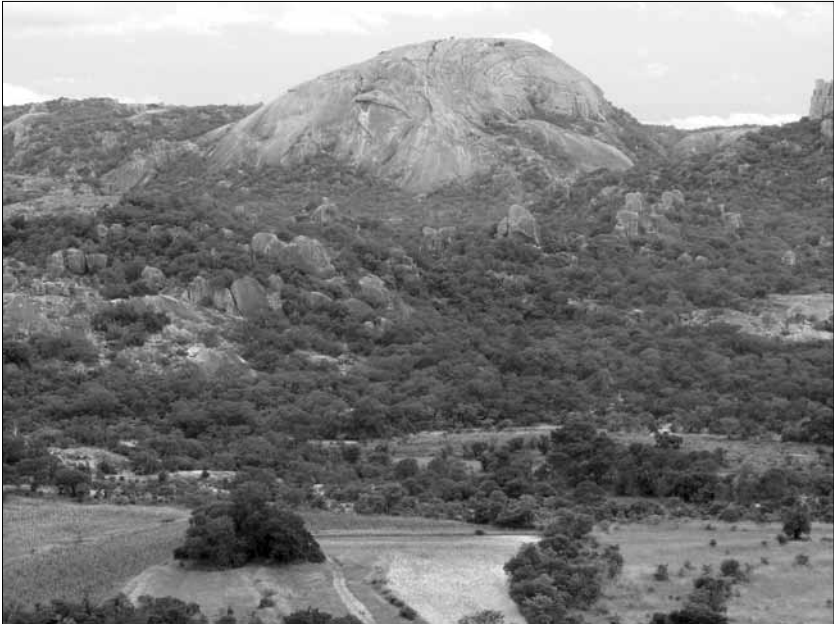
5 In this case "Ndebele" is a family name, not a language or ethnic designation.

a *sobhuku*⁶ he is a central figure through whom much that happens in the village passes. In addition, by accompanying him during the chief's monthly court days I had the opportunity to attend court meetings at which all 59 *sobhukus* under Chief Masuku gather to deal with issues brought to that court.⁷ Furthermore, Micah is nephew to the current Njelele shrine-priest. As the *sobhuku* of Dewe village, the village in which the current Njelele shrine-priest also resides, and as nephew of the shrine-priest, he is an integral member of the shrine leadership. My stay with him therefore allowed me much access to shrine activity and to various other meetings.

About 4 km south-west of Micah's home and just beyond the stream Mathanda is the imposing Njelele hill, a massive and bald granite rock. This hill is in fact one of a pair of hardly detached granite rock outcrops, one higher, steeper, dome-shaped and prominent, the other long, gradual, low and flatter. In an eastern lower neck between the lower part of Njelele hill and another smaller rock outcrop, is a level ground which can be approached from two opposite directions. This natural amphitheatre of about 900 m³ is surrounded by trees and rocks hiding it from the outside world. In its western boundary is a cave with two chambers. On the amphitheatre ground is a small smooth rock dome that is said to be a small iconic image of the Njelele hill. The amphitheatre, the small rock dome on the ground, and the cave, together make up the Njelele hill shrine.

6 *Sobhuku* is a leadership position that has its roots in pre-colonial African administration but was coopted for colonial administration. The pre-colonial title was *samusha* (in Shona) or *mninimzana* (in Ndebele), that is, "village head." Colonial administration transformed this into *sabhuku* or *sobhuku* to mean "keeper of the book," that is, the custodian of the village tax register. The term *sobhuku* is still used today.

7 The chief was by and large the highest governing authority in pre-colonial Zimbabwe. The exception was when a paramount chiefdom emerged, as when Mzilikazi and his subjects arrived on the Zimbabwean plateau, subduing the local chiefdoms. The headman was responsible for taking care of the chief's cattle. During the colonial period, the traditional leadership system became assimilated into the colonial state administration. In the new system the headman works as a deputy to the chief. The post-colonial state adopted the colonial arrangement.



Maize fields in Dewe village with Njelele hill in the background. The shrine lies just to the left of the hill (1 March 2014).

The priest's home as well as some two sacred pools in nearby streams are also part of the shrine system. Pilgrims coming to the shrine usually first consult with the shrine-priest at his home, which lies about two kilometers walking distance south-east of Micah's home, and behind Zhuzha hill. After the consultations and any necessary preparations the pilgrims are taken to the shrine at Njelele where they offer a sacrifice, eat roasted meat and drink opaque home-brewed beer, sing and dance, and present their petitions, according to the purposes of their visits. The shrine has its own rules about the forest closest to it, and about how to approach the shrine. These rules are enforced by the local traditional leadership, that is, the shrine-priest, the chief, the headman and the *sobhukus*. One may not cut wood in the area from the stream Mathanda to the shrine. It is also not permissible to build a home, cultivate a field or hunt in that area.

The Mwali cult is first and foremost an agricultural cult with a ritual calendar very much tied to the annual agricultural cycle. Rainfall

in Zimbabwe is seasonal and concentrated in the six months from October to March. Planting in rural Zimbabwe's low-input agropastoral subsistence farming is largely done from October to December. Once crops have germinated they are cared for by weeding and guarding them from cattle, donkeys and goats, since fences are often not tight enough to prevent the most eager and aggressive animals from breaking through. Crops also need to be guarded from birds and baboons. Through both observation and interviews I gathered that at Njelele the ritual activities related to the annual agricultural cycle start in August and end in July of the following year. From August to the end of September various congregations, that is, chiefdoms or *sobhukus* send their delegations with beer or ingredients to brew beer in order to make supplications for the rains as well as to have fertility spiritually boosted in seeds to be planted during the planting season coming soon. At the end of September the shrine is closed, to be opened again at the beginning of March.

When the shrine opens in March it is time for the first-fruits ritual. It is a widespread practice in Southern Africa that the first produce of the fields should be eaten in a ritual manner in order to prevent diseases (McGregor and Ranger 2000). The congregations are expected to bring fresh bottle-gourd fruits, maize cobs, sweet reeds, and any other fresh produce, part of which will then be chewed but not swallowed. Just like many other practices associated with the Mwali cult, though, this ritual eating of the first fruits has reportedly gone down in prevalence. Once the shrine has been opened in March it remains open until July when a major annual gathering takes place for the purpose of giving thanks for the harvest. Between March and July individuals and communities are welcome at the shrine to make supplications for a variety of concerns.

The shrine-keeper, who listens to the prayers of each and everyone who comes to the shrine, gave me examples of issues for which pilgrims make supplications and thanksgiving. These include healing, success in business, securing jobs and promotions, harmony in their families, child-bearing, surviving accidents, mental health, protection and the increase of livestock, luck, and general well-being. Traditional healers ask for success in healing people, while leaders of African Independent Churches ask for power to perform miracles and conduct exorcism.

During my stay in Dewe I met quite a few pilgrims who had some of these concerns.

According to the shrine keeper, before 1980, Njelele was not as frequently visited as it is currently. This was because Njelele was largely limited to asking for the rains, and acted as a referral shrine for the Dula shrine; but in 1980, Joshua Nkomo, the leader of a nationalist party who hailed from that area, organised a large political rally-cum-ritual gathering at which 25 cattle were slaughtered as thanksgiving for the end of the liberation struggle. At the same gathering, Nkomo declared that all who were seeking spiritual intervention in their lives could bring their concerns to the Njelele shrine. This opened a floodgate of pilgrims with all kinds of supplications at the Njelele shrine. This was attested to by several Matobo informants. A ZIPRA ex-combatant intimated to me that it was Joshua Nkomo who brought confusion to Njelele by endorsing a materialistic man as the shrine-keeper.

Some Troublesome Cases

Case 1: The case of animals and spirits

Whether pertaining to votive offerings at the shrine, or *umbuyiso* ritual, wholly black bulls or oxen are often chosen for sacrifice. I witnessed the arrival of a sacrificial ox at the Njelele shrine-priest's home. The oxen was a rain-seeking offering from a sub-shrine⁸ of the Bango chiefdom in the Maphani area. News arrived at the shrine-priest's home that a tyre of the car carrying the ox had been punctured about a kilometre from the shrine priest's home. When the problem eventually was fixed and the ox finally arrived at the shrine-priest's home, a *whosana*⁹ from the community sending the ox got possessed and others persuaded the spirit to realise that "the ancestor" had finally arrived well and that there was no more need to worry. They also addressed the ox as if speaking to a human being, asking it to accept to come out of the

8 Principal shrines like Njelele have sub-shrines operating under their oversight. The sub-shrine (*u-mutolo*) serves a few villages or a chiefdom while the principal shrine (*i-daka*) serves areas covering many sub-shrines.

9 A *whosana* is an officer of the Mwali rain cult. She is usually a woman who has been selected to work as a leader and messenger of a sub-shrine. One of her major tasks is to sing and dance at ritual gatherings.

car trailer. However, despite such respect shown to the ox, the same was meat shared among the congregants the following day.

What we have here is the case of an ox which is an embodiment of a spirit. If we categorise this in terms of the ontological schemata suggested by Descola this is a case of animistic identification. The ox has human interiority, namely, the human spirit, but the body of an ox. The ox is considered by the Mwali cult adherents as sharing with them human interiority but as being different in bodily form. However, this is not consistent with Descola's scheme which regards ancestors as belonging to the analogist grid. The reason ancestors are so categorised by Descola is that they comprise a time series connectionist view of the world.

What we see then in the Matobo Hills as well as in other parts of Zimbabwe is the embodiment of the spirits of ancestors in some chosen oxen or bulls. This is the case with other animals too. Ncube, the shrine-keeper, intimated to me that there are lions that are present but are rarely seen because they are spiritual lions commonly known as *matshena*. These, he claimed, are lions of ancestral spirits of great ancestors whose links to any known present-day families have been lost. Although these lions are rarely seen their presence is often evident from their footprints. The same idea was shared by the president of the International Traditional Healers Association (ITHA), David Muhabhinyane Ngwenya, regarding a lion which had been roaming close to the southern suburbs of Bulawayo for several weeks, but which, according to him, neither left any spoor nor caused any harm to livestock (Nkala and Tshuma 2014).¹⁰ Ngwenya claimed that it was a spiritual lion. Another informant, *Gogo Phela*, complained that the spiritual lions which used to appear from time to time at the Njelele shrine were no longer appearing due to what she regards as sacrilegious aberrations at the shrine.

These cases question the setting apart of what Descola regards as animism and analogism. The idea of animals which embody spirits of ancestors cannot be regarded as a case of momentary slippage from one grid into the other since the supposed distinct identifications are inseparably together in that idea. While the four ontological grids may be proposed at the level of human cognition it may be misleading to

10 <https://www.southerneye.co.zw/2014/05/15/stray-lion-spirit-traditional-healer/>

extrapolate their application to the level of registers of interpretation held in particular societies. It might of course be argued that this is a case of syncretism of ontological schemata. However, the problem is that even if we focus just on what could be regarded as the animistic element, it is so different in various cases that it is heuristically futile to lump all those cases under a common ontological grid. For instance, the ox mentioned above, which is regarded as embodying an ancestor, is a very different case from the domestic pet treated as though it has a soul. The spirit embodied in the ox's body is not the ox's own spirit. Rather, it is the spirit of a human ancestor, which, when the ox is being slaughtered, is set free to roam about ready to enter another body. By contrast, the soul of a cat referred to by Descola in reference to Europeans' treatment of pets is the pet's own soul. Contrary to these still, the roaming lion referred to above, is not thought of as a real lion embodying a spirit. Rather, the lion is itself a spirit. It only appears as having a body but the body is spiritual. It is the kind of body that can appear or disappear. To lump this together with the Southern American animism that Descola refers to under one ontological schema does not have any heuristic value.¹¹

Case 2: The case of supposedly totemic identifications

Similar issues could be raised regarding what Descola regarded as totemism. One animal with spiritual associations in the Matobo Hills is the baboon, which is said to embody the spirits of the area and to have been in the area long before humans arrived. In her chastisement of what she saw as defiling deviations at the Njelele shrine, *Gogo Phela* claimed that there was a baboon which used to linger around at the shrine but had since stopped doing so. According to her, this was a spiritual baboon. Its lingering at the shrine was a sign of approval of the proceedings there, and its disappearance signified disapproval. Baboons can be a nuisance in the Matobo Hills since their diet is close

11 "The animist mode of identification distributes humans and nonhumans into as many 'social' species as there are different forms and behavior patterns, so that the species endowed with an interiority analogous to that of humans are reputed to live within collectives whose structures and properties are identical to those of human collectives. They are fully complete societies with chiefs, shamans, rituals, houses, techniques, and artifacts, societies that come together, coalesce, quarrel, provide for their own subsistence, marry in accordance with the rules, and lead a communal life that, as described by humans, would appear to be covered by all the habitual rubrics of an ethnological monograph" (Descola 2013:248).

to that of humans and they steal from fields and homes. They crave the ground-bean (*vigna subterranea*), fresh maize cobs, and chicken as well as the meat of goat kids. According to rules handed down from previous generations it was not permitted to kill a baboon by poisoning it, nor by shooting it; nor could one kill many baboons at one time. The Mwali cult in the Matobo Hills also honours the baboon by employing the totemic name, *Ncube*,¹² used as the totemic name of the cult. Ncube, the shrine-priest, informed me that the *Ncube* Mbikwa family, generally believed to have founded the Njelele shrine, was in fact originally a *Ndlovu* (that is “elephant”) family, whose members changed their totemic designation in order to identify themselves with the shrine.

By its longevity in the Matobo Hills, the monkey is attributed sacredness, regarded as the embodiment of territorial spirits of the hills, and associated in a totemic way with the shrine. At the outset this confirms the idea of a totemic ontological grid. The baboon's bodily behaviour is thought of as identical to that of humans in many respects. Its mental capacity is also said to be approaching that of humans. Musa, Micah's wife, told me that the alpha baboon is not afraid of a woman. She claimed that if she wants to scare it off she first has to dress like a male person. She believed that only then can she successfully chase it away. She concluded laughing, “That animal is just like a real human being.”¹³

Therefore, this case presents a problem to the idea of four distinct ontologies as the baboon is not only attributed totemic associations with the shrine, but also regarded as embodying territorial spirits of the hills. In its own right the baboon is regarded as sharing similarities with humans both in interiorities and physicalities. Yet it is not with all people that the baboon has totemic associations. It is only with the shrine and the *Ncube* families, whether they are serving at the shrine or not. Apart from its own interiorities and physicalities which it shares with humans, the baboon is further thought of as embodying human ancestral spirits of ancient and unknown families who resided in the hills in times earlier than anyone remembers. This means that

12 The totemic name, *Ncube*, generally relates to the monkey family. In isiNdebele language it is *Ncube*; in Shona it is *Shoko*.

13 “*Lowana ngumuntu muntu!*” Musa Hadebe during a discussion at Micah Moyo's home at Dewe village on 3rd March 2014

the baboon is considered at one and the same time in a multiplicity of ways that are not felt as distinct and incompatible. This again is not a matter of momentary slippages. The only possibility would be to talk of syncretism. However, it is difficult to see why the supposed totemic identification may not in fact be the reason for the attribution of the embodiment of ancient territorial spirits. If that is the case then the idea of distinct or syncretic ontological schemata may not be applicable as the supposed totemic element is irretrievably intertwined with what is meant to be the analogist and animist one.

Case 3: The ubiquity of naturalism

My first day in Dewe village was saturated with informative events regarding religious registers and other matters of significance in the village. On this day, Moyo began assisting me with my research agenda as best he understood. It was a day when there was a funeral in the village and when the *umbuyiso*, the ritual gathering where we had found Moyo the day before, was still going on. I had told Moyo that I was interested in getting to know Matobo villagers' "traditional" or "cultural" practices in relation to their natural environment. As a result, he highlighted what he understood as the "traditional" relations to the natural environment that the researcher wished to know.

The first thing Moyo did just after breakfast was to show me a sacred landform just 100m from his home. It was Dewe stream, "a stream flowing throughout the year." In a part of the country that often runs precariously dry before the first rains come, Dewe stream's "ever-flowing" waters are highly significant to Dewe villagers. A swamp, with its core about a kilometer northwest of Moyo's home, supplies the "ever-flowing" stream.¹⁴ It is one of several such swamps in the Matobo Hills area. Owing to the ruggedness of the granite-rock-strewn landscape of the Matobo Hills, the runoff water, which collects on the granite whalebacks and seeps underground, in some cases seeps out at low-lying outlets of which Dewe wetland is one.

14 In October and November 2014, when the first rains fell late in the season, I witnessed the stream running dry, but that was long after other streams and rivers in the area had gone dry.

Moyo told me that he had dedicated the garden projects of the Dewe wetland and stream to *ukhulu elitsheni*, by which he meant the Njelele shrine-priest. Since Moyo considers the “perpetually” flowing Dewe wetland and stream sacred and “related to sacred traditions,” he thought it important to present the garden projects before god and the ancestors at the shrine.¹⁵ By contrast, his uncle, Solifa Ncube, the Njelele shrine-keeper, complained to me about the gardens:

There is a large sacred rain-snake which used to stay in the Dewe stream. Now they have put metal fences around the gardens at *Dekateka* (the dancing ground, i.e., the wetland). Someone has also planted gumtrees close to the wetland. That is why there are no rains. The rain-snake got angry and left.¹⁶

However, it should be noted that the shrine-priest is someone who spends most of his time talking about spiritual matters. Moreover, he was speaking to a researcher who had expressed an interest in such matters. His views do not represent those of all people in Dewe. For many Dewe villagers, the register of Dewe wetland and stream as sacred or as embodying sacred forces is simply something that not often occupies their minds. Three different groups solicited the help of two NGOs to establish vegetable gardens at the Dewe wetland and along the Dewe stream. One of the NGOs, Fambidzanai, sponsored two vegetable garden schemes at and close to the wetland, while Red Cross sponsored another one further downstream with the purpose of enhancing good nutrition for orphans and patients of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The NGOs supplied fences and tools for the gardens. Micah's family, as the *sobhuku*'s family, had the privilege of having a Dewe-irrigated vegetable garden of their own.

While the *sobhuku* claimed to have dedicated the gardens at the shrine and while the shrine-priest complained about the metal fences that are a defilement of the sacred wetland and stream, many Dewe villagers are more concerned about making use of the wetland to grow vegetables for themselves and their children rather than obey the demands of the Mwali cult. Of Dewe village's 200 families, 65 are members of the vegetable garden cooperatives. Some of them see no contradiction between following traditional religion and fencing their gardens with

15 “*Yisifula samasiko*.” Micah Moyo, August 2013, at Dewe village

16 Solifa Ncube, March 2014, at Dewe village.

metal. One such is a traditional healer known as MaMpofu. MaMpofu is, in fact, a leading member of one of the garden schemes. Although she is a traditional healer, expected to be a zealous adherent of the Mwali cult, she allowed the cooperative to establish a garden on her land. Part of her land is on the wetland, and it seems never to have occurred to her that she should not accept a metal fence or a metal solar pump at her land. Another is Micah himself, who in fact has his own garden fenced by a metal fence and, as *sobhuku*, allowed that the gardens be established and be so fenced, and who dedicated the gardens to the Njelele shrine.

Although some Mwali followers, such as Micah and Ncube, may hold beliefs of spiritual powers as enabling rainfall, they know that people and animals as well as vegetation need water in order to survive. They do not attribute spiritual powers to the effect of water, a substance that they take for granted as needed for the sustenance of life. They know well what it is to be thirsty and attribute no spiritual forces to it, except in special circumstances when a possessed person demands something to quench his or her thirst. Water in particular pools, or water set apart for ritual purposes, may be regarded as embodying incarnates of one type or another but when water is used to brew beer or to water the cattle it is not animism or analogism but naturalism that is the dominant disposition. Particular places are regarded as sacred at particular times but most places are mundane most of the time. Wood, soil, grass, animals and water are extracted from many places without any conception of incarnates at those places and in those elements of nature.

A major question concerning what Descola has termed naturalism, and which he has claimed as the dominant ontological schema of Western society, is whether there is any other society in the world for which naturalism is not the dominant approach to the environment. One would suspect that in most societies in the world, water, for example, in its various day to day uses, is taken as simply a material element, useful for washing, cleaning, quenching thirst, cooking, swimming, watering plants and livestock. It is doubtful that ethnographies presenting the animism or totemism of this or that group represent an exhaustive or even a dominant adjustment of that group to the environment. The water in the Dewe stream is used to water the vegetables, to bath, to water domestic animals, to wash clothes and so

on, and there is no one who ever claimed that they use this water in this way because it has some mystical powers. Most day to day activities are done with a naturalistic mindset. The cognitive set of great apes most likely already includes instrumental and intentional relationships with the environment. This distinction carries over to humans.

An Alternative Route

What seems more illuminating is Descola's proposal of a general function of religion:

This function is figuration, that is, the public instauration of an invisible quality through a speech act or an image. Under all the guises chosen to consider it, religion embodies, religious incarnates, religion renders present in visible and tangible manifestations the various alterations of being, the manifold expressions of non-self, and the potencies which contain all their acts (Descola 2013c: 37).

Although Descola suggests and briefly discusses this incisive definition of religion he does not develop it to its full potential, preferring instead to develop a rigid categorisation of the incarnates into ontological schemata. What could lead to a more fruitful conceptualisation in Descola's definition of religion is the idea that there is more leeway for creative performance and manifestation of qualities, potencies or beings in non-naturalistic relations or adjustments to the environment than in strict adherence to the demands of material reality. Naturalism is the disposition that strictly follows the demands of material reality. It does not seem that any human society could survive for long without regarding the demands of the material world. For this reason, I suppose that all human societies are first and foremost cognitively naturalists, even though that might not be scientific naturalists.

Over and above a basic naturalism that sustains survival, humans have much leeway to imagine, perform and perceive qualities, potencies and/or beings that do not necessarily closely follow the dictates of material reality. In fact, cultural transmission and learning among humans are primarily social in nature. Human infants imitate significant others primarily not because of the material or instrumental value of what these significant others are transmitting but in order to satisfy the

innate need to socially belong (Tomasello 2016). There are therefore many instances in which human adjustment to social and imaginary worlds takes precedence over or determines the adjustment to material reality. This is one reason why, in considering adjustments of human collectives to their material worlds, the idea of cultural adaptation to the natural environment is inappropriate. However, if cultural transmission in a particular human collective becomes robustly and fundamentally at odds with the material world the human collective faces the trouble of much discomfort or the possibility of extinction, or some members of the collective will not conform to what is transmitted in order to avoid pain and death. Although much human behaviour is learnt socially, this does not mean humans disregard the material base. For example, a person may see that plants in the garden are wilting and conclude that they need to be watered. The person most likely learnt the connection between lack of water and wilting from significant others, but the idea is itself a naturalistic attitude to material reality.

The imagination, performance and perception of other-than-material realities comprise processes of interplay between concealment and disclosure. Religion involves participation in the production and reproduction of suggestive, speculative and/or affective concealment and disclosure of spiritual entities and more-than-mundane worlds or states of mind of various degrees of significance to the religious performer or perceiver. Religion, then, is here considered as those human phenomena that have to do with enchantment, which is a matter of performed evocative interplay between concealment and disclosure of alternative realities and potentialities by means of various registers and regimes.¹⁷

Conclusion

Various permutations of concealment and disclosure make up the mystery, knowledge and experience that comprise religious dispositions. There is a plethora of possibilities concerning the what-and-how of concealment and disclosure. It is perhaps wise to take heed of Lévi-Strauss' warning that any attempt to account for all these permutations may be an enterprise of madness. Although some

¹⁷ In my forthcoming work I deal more fully with the role of concealment and disclosure in religion with illustrations from religious and religioid practices in the Matobo Hills area.

basic interesting patterns may be evident at the human cognition level, how they play out at the level of human groups may not be that easy to categorise. However, it is possible to summarise practices and manifestations of concealment and disclosure without making any controversial claims regarding how innate human cognition appears in collective interpretive registers.

As observed in the Matobo Hills area, concealment and disclosure can be summarised as follows. There is concealment and disclosure that is inherent in the given circumstances. Issues might be inevitably concealed in time, that is, in the past, in darkness, in the not yet known, in the future, in absence, by forgetting, and by nightfall. And they could be deliberately concealed in time, that is, through misleading, selective remembering or reminding, causing to forget, secrecy, performance, veiling, or preservation. Disclosure in time involves memory, remembering, experiencing, anticipation, divination, prophecy, dreams, prediction, reminding, making known, explaining, and language, that is, narration and simulation. In space, concealment may occur in the jungle, on hills, in rivers or streams, in distance, in boundaries, by fencing, by taboos, through disguising, and by secrecy. In space, disclosure may occur through opening, entering, unveiling, transgression, and language. Again, as observed in the Matobo Hills, individuals, and not least groups, engage in performances and watching, as well as perceiving and adjusting to various kinds of concealment and disclosure. The deployment of a multiplicity of the registers of concealment and disclosure as observed in the Matobo Hills area makes it difficult to talk of any dominant mode of identification, except perhaps for the naturalistic mode of identification which gives the material base for other forms of identification.

Attempts at defining religion tend to have the limitation of making reference to particular ontic elements that are contained in religions and claim to be exhaustive, with the effect that the ontic elements are most likely to be limited to some religions or religious practices to the neglect of others. Rather than identifying all possible ontic elements of religion, it is more helpful to identify religion's typical procedures. Durkheim (2001[1912]) led the way by identifying the sacred as what is typical of religion. However, procedures behind the creation of religious entities are multiple and any discussion of religion is likely

to highlight some aspects of religion and leave out others. Descola's idea that religion comprises "figuration" or "incarnation" has the strength of not being a definition based on ontic elements. Rather, it is based on procedure. The question it answers is not "What are the typical contents or elements of religion?" but rather, "What is the typical procedure of religion?" One limitation in Descola's discussion is that, although identifying figuration as the underlying aspect in religious phenomena, he goes on to identify and categorise religious incarnates using a questionable set of schemata.. Another limitation is that Descola seems to suggest "the" typical rather than "a" typical procedure of religion. Instead, what has been proposed here is that *one* important procedure of religion is that of concealment and disclosure. In this way, Descola's idea of incarnation can be extrapolated to include concealment and disclosure of much more that has traditionally been thought of as the ontic elements of religion.

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