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**FOOD, GENDER, AND  
SHAMANISM: SOCIETY  
AND COSMOLOGY IN  
AMAZONIA**

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# 'FOOD, GENDER, AND SHAMANISM: SOCIETY AND COSMOLOGY IN AMAZONIA'

How is the Amerindian body constituted in terms of  
food and how does this relate to gender?



By Lewis Daly

*“Everything in the forest has an utupë image: those who walk on the ground, those who climb in the trees, those who have wings, those who live in water. It is those images that the shamans call and make come down to become xapiripë spirits. Those images are the true centre, the true interior of the forest beings. Common people cannot see them, only the shamans. But they are not images of the animals we know today. They are the images of these animal’s fathers, they are our ancestor’s images.”*

(Davi Kopenawa Yanomami 1998)

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## ABSTRACT

*This comparative study explores food and notions of the body in Amazonia. Following Viveiros de Castro (1998), it argues that Amerindian ontology is 'perspectival' in that the body is the seat of the individual's point of view. All animals share a human spirit. What differentiates species, however, is their bodies as sets of affects, dispositions and capacities. The central argument is that these bodily affects are constituted by the practices of food production and consumption. These food practices are gendered in Amazonia, and foods as tangible entities encompass parts of those gendered individuals who interact with them. Thus, gender differences and similarities are made socially comprehensible through the gendering of foods. That human and animal species are differentiated through bodily affects, and food in part constitutes these bodily affects, suggests that gender differentiation in food stuffs and practices implies a fundamental difference between the bodily affects of men and women in Amerindian ontologies. This is termed 'gender perspectivism'.*

## INTRODUCTION

In Amazonia, the symbolic meanings of food appear to infiltrate virtually all aspects of life in the rainforest, from hunting and fishing to gathering and 'swidden' horticulture; from the basic cooking of manioc roots to the ritual preparation of ceremonial psychotropic substances such as *yagé*. In this area of the world, ranging across a vast landmass from the Eastern Andes to the North-West Brazilian coast, groups of people live in close contact with their rainforest environments, and it is these fertile environments that lend their human guests a fascinating array of social practices, from the everyday to the ritual, that make it the perfect region in which to explore the links between food use and cosmological beliefs. A pertinent theme in the ethnographic literature used to compile the data cited in this study is gender symbolism in association with food. Gender will therefore be a principle focus of this study. Another recurring theme is that of shamanism, and the role of the shaman is essential to understanding links between society and other realms of the cosmos, such as those where spirits reside. In essence then, this is a study of how food and ingestion in Amazonia convey the meanings of social practices, and cross-cut the layers of the cosmologies that make up the entire worlds of the people who reside there.

Food is a basic element of life. Human beings are unique in that many of their food practices appear to lie in the field of 'culture', that is, they are loaded with symbolic meanings. In virtually all known societies, food is *produced* in some way, whether it is through hunting, horticulture, pastoralism, or in a factory. Food must also be *processed* if not to be eaten raw. For Levi-Strauss, cooking is an essential part of 'being human', and can therefore be viewed as a kind of non-verbal language. By translating Saussurean semiotic techniques to such non-verbal forms of communication, "we can hope to discover for each specific case how the cooking of a society is a language in which it unconsciously translates its structure" (Levi-Strauss 1997: 35). Barthes extends on this

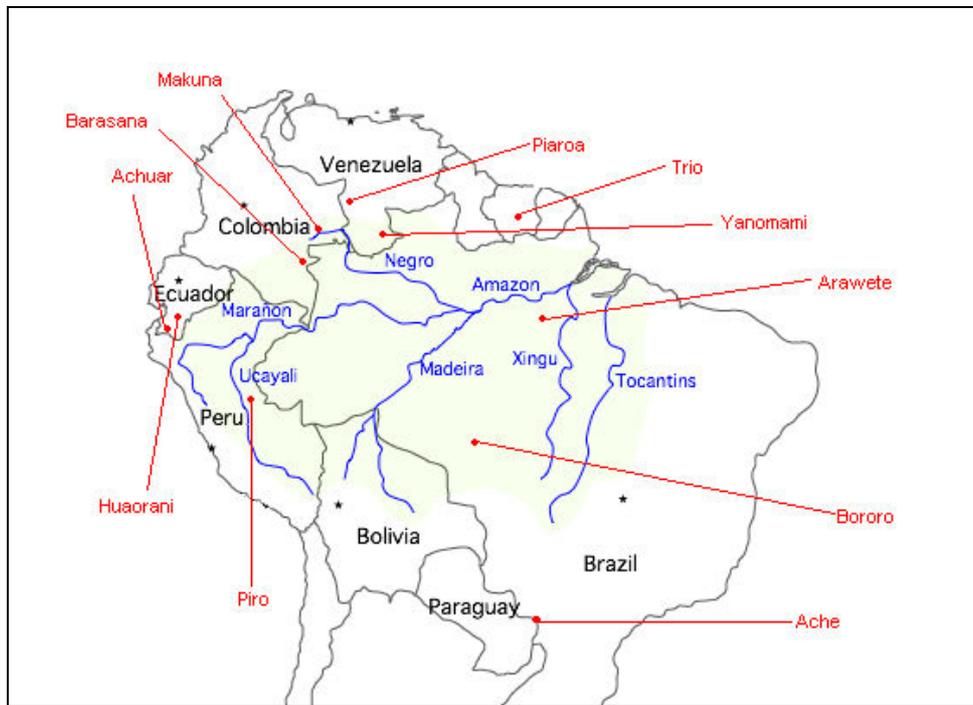
basic structuralism, suggesting that food can tell the anthropologist much more about people than how they communicate; it is suggestive of their whole ontologies:-

Food serves as a sign not only for themes, but also for situations; and this, all told, means the way of life that is emphasized, much more than expressed, by it. To eat is a behaviour that develops beyond its own ends, replacing, summing up, and signaling other behaviours, and it is precisely for these reasons it is a sign. (Barthes 1997: 25).

Thus, food practices are rich in symbolic meaning in human society. Since “[o]ne of the most significant domains of meaning embodied in food centres on the relation between the sexes, their gender definitions, and their sexuality” (Counihan 1999: 9), this study will investigate the relationship between food and gender in Amazonia, with an over-arching aim of analysing notions of the body in indigenous ontologies. In essence, the fundamental premise is that food as a symbolic entity is a way of conceptualising the body and relations between genders in Amazonian society and cosmology: the ambiguous nature of the body requires that gender differences are defined through the social use of food.

It seems ironic but apt to study the long-secluded societies of the Amazon rainforest through the idiom of Western academic discourse in an age where the very existence of those societies is threatened by the destruction wrought by deforestation instigated by the industrial desires of the ‘West’. I hope that in conveying as much as possible about the largely overlooked people who dwell in the Amazon, the discipline of anthropology and its long association with that area can act as an ideological terrarium (albeit an academic rather than political one) for those people.

**Map. 1: The Amazon River Basin, S. America.** The main tribes discussed in the text are marked in red; the major rivers of the basin are marked in blue.  
(Amended from [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Amazon\\_river\\_basin.png](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Amazon_river_basin.png))



**Map. 2: Satellite image of the Amazon rainforest, S. America** (from NASA). The yellow line demarcates the rainforest according to the WWF.  
(Source [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Amazon\\_rainforest.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Amazon_rainforest.jpg))



**CHAPTER ONE:**  
**THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES**

This thesis draws on a variety of theoretical perspectives, since it is the idiosyncratic nature of ethnography that each account is written in a specific historical academic and personal context. The anthropologist must take the theoretical perspective and the ethnographic ‘data’ to be inseparable in their context. Authorial objectivism cannot be assumed. Thus, this study is both ethnographically and theoretically comparative at one and the same time. The aim of this chapter is to delineate the main theoretical perspectives adhered to. In terms of the broader argument, this section is necessary, first, to lay the theoretical foundations upon which much of this study is based, and second, to demonstrate to the reader the most fundamental ontological premises by which Amerindians view the worlds in which they live. As I hope will be portrayed in this section, Amerindian ontologies are corporeally-based and so questions of food and gender, which are irremovable from notions of the body, are of utmost importance to understanding them. The analyses of food practices and gender are fundamental to understanding how the Amazonian perspective is corporeally situated. In order to lay the foundations for such a study, the following section is a brief synopsis of the history of food anthropology.

**I: THE ANTHROPOLOGY OF FOOD**

Food, as perhaps the most fundamental biological necessity after air, is of huge significance to anthropological study. The meanings of food for human beings, however, transcend the purely utilitarian requirements of nutrition. Mintz has argued that “[n]ourishment, a basic biological need, becomes something else because we humans

transform it symbolically into a system of meaning for much more than itself. That seemingly needless over-complication is a distinctively human undertaking, which every culture embraces, but each somewhat differently” (Mintz 1996: 6). To study food, then, is to study ‘cultures’ and their idiosyncrasies.

Contemporary anthropologists have centred discussion of food on gender and sexuality (Counihan 1999; Kahn 1986; Weismantel 1989). It has been noted by many that consumption and copulation are similar processes: both are basic human needs and both are heavily desired. Both eating and sex can produce euphoric feelings. In essence, the contemporary anthropology of food is occupied with the body and phenomenology. The distinctiveness of this thesis, however, is that it uses such an approach to explore Viveiros de Castro’s (1998) recent theory of Amerindian ‘multinaturalism’.

## **II: ‘MULTINATURALISM’**

In Amazonia, almost all produce comes from the rainforest in one way or another. Therefore, it is essential to study the relationships between Amerindian people and the surrounding world in which they are immersed. In his seminal work *‘Cosmological Deixis and Amerindian Perspectivism’* (1998), Eduardo Viveiros de Castro proposes a pan-Amazonian theory that he coins ‘multinaturalism’. Amerindians imagine that all beings in the world derive from a common condition of humanity, which is exemplified in many Amerindian myths (see Levi-Strauss 1970). The essence of Viveiros de Castro’s argument is that humans see animals equally as humans, but in another realm of reality. Every species has a human *perspective* through which they see themselves as human. To quote his famous example:-

Animals see their food as human food (jaguars see blood as manioc beer, vultures see the maggots in rotting flesh as grilled fish); they see their bodily attributes (fur, feathers,

claws, beaks) as body decorations or cultural instruments; they see their social system as organized in the same way as human institutions are (with chiefs, shamans, ceremonies, exogamous moieties, and whatnot). (Viveiros de Castro 2004 (a): 466)

What differentiates species is not their ‘spirit’ or ‘soul’, which is essentially human, but rather their *bodies*. Jaguars have different bodies from human people. Their points of view are situated in different corporeal vessels. Thus, the ontological claim here is that animals see things as humans do, but because their bodies are different, they see different things. What differentiates species, then, is less *how* they perceive the world and more the world they perceive:-

Animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a ‘clothing’) which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ of the animal. (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 470).

‘Amerindian perspectivism’ is the epithet he gives to the notion that every being sees the world as a human from their perspective. This corresponds with Kaj Árhem’s observation of the Makuna tribe of Colombia that “[a]nimals are people in another dimension of reality... The world looks radically different depending on one’s point of view” (Árhem 1988: 60, 62).

Ontologically, Amerindian perspectivism can be regarded as an inverse of Western ‘multiculturalism’. ‘Multiculturalism’ assumes a Cartesian split between mind and body; between ‘culture’ and ‘nature’. Scientific ontologies view the body as universal: humans, jaguars and vultures are all made up of the same kinds of tissues, cells and DNA. What defines the individual (human) is its ‘culture’ or ‘spirit’. Different societies

share the same nature, what makes them distinct are their cultures. Viveiros de Castro's claim, which this study pertains to but builds upon, is that Amerindians do not see the world as 'multiculturalist', but rather as 'multinaturalist': all species, humans, jaguars and vultures, share the same 'culture', that is, a human way of perceiving the world. What makes species distinct is their 'nature', that is, their corporeal bodies (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 472). Anne-Christine Taylor has observed of the Jivaroan Achuar of lowland Ecuador that "[w]hat differentiates species is essentially shape or, more accurately, appearance" (Taylor 1996: 205). So if what is unitary is the being's 'culture', what is 'multi' is the being's 'nature'.

In speaking of the Amerindian 'body', one must clarify what is meant by this term. It must not be assumed that the body is viewed in the same framework as our own Western cultural conception that is rooted in a Cartesian split between the tangible, scientific body and a non-tangible mind or consciousness. For Viveiros de Castro, the Amerindian person is equally conceived of as dual in nature but in a fundamentally different way. The 'body' is not a purely physical entity, but rather a 'bundle of affects and capacities'. The 'soul', the human perspective, is a removed, unchanging and 'true' essence (1998: 481). Thus in talking of 'multinaturalism', it is the body as *a set of affective capacities and dispositions* that is 'multi'.

In delineating the ideas that underlie Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's theory of 'multinaturalism', I have set out the central idea on which my argument regarding food, gender, and cosmology in Amazonia is based. One issue that Viveiros de Castro has touched upon little if at all in his pan-Amazonian theorising is that of *gender*. Gender and the body are at the forefront of contemporary studies of food, and so must be incorporated into such a theory. Gender is inexplicably combined with themes of food production and consumption, and with ideas of society and cosmology, and so must be of utmost importance. Amerindian conceptions of the body are inseparably entwined

with notions of gender and the aim of this study is thus to elaborate on the theory of 'multinaturalism' to propose an Amerindian *gender perspectivism*.

The focus of the following chapter will be shamanism and cosmology in Amazonia, with reference to Amerindian perspectivism and 'multinaturalism', with the aim of conveying how beliefs about food are entwined with beliefs about cosmology.

## **CHAPTER TWO:**

### **SHAMANISM, FOOD, AND COSMOLOGY**

*The shaman is a mediator between the worlds of humans and spirits, and – in broadest social and cosmological terms – between the ‘inside’ and the ‘outside’.* (Árhem 2000: 8)

When studying ethnographies of Amazonia, the reader frequently encounters the terms ‘shaman’ and ‘shamanism’. Etymologically, the word ‘shaman’ stems from the Tungusic *šaman*, describing the dominant magico-religious advocate in indigenous Siberian cultures (Eliade 2004: 4). The word in its original sense describes a culturally and historically specific phenomenon but in modern discourse it has been transformed into a general, almost universalistic, heuristic device. The cautious anthropologist must therefore be aware of the essentialist trappings of such a concept. However, in this chapter the word ‘shaman’ will not be employed as a universal term, but rather to describe those esoteric members of Amazonian societies who associate most explicitly with the sacred or spiritual aspects of life. Viveiros de Castro’s definition of shamanism is more than satisfactory, and it is to this we shall pertain:-

[T]he capacity evinced by some individuals to cross ontological boundaries deliberately and adopt the perspective of nonhuman subjectivities in order to administer the relations between humans and nonhumans. (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 468)

The shaman in Amazonia can therefore be regarded as a ‘cosmological mediator’ because he is able to switch perspectives and socialise with non-humans. His affinity with animals, plants and their spirits suggests a relationship to food. Such is the case that the roles of the shaman often entail removing dangerous spiritual essences from game kills to

make them safe for consumption, and compèring ritual feasts (C Hugh-Jones 1979: 118). The shaman is intimately related with the workings of the cosmology and thus the aim of this chapter is to assess the Amazonian shaman and his relationships with food in order to demonstrate Amazonian constructions of cosmology.

## **I: THE AMAZONIAN SHAMAN**

In order to clarify to the reader how such an ambiguous phenomenon as shamanism is manifested in Amazonia, some theoretical and ethnographic descriptions will be comparatively analysed. Stephen Hugh-Jones (1994) delineates two ideal types of Amazonian shamanism. This dual shamanism comprises at one pole a 'horizontal' form, by which the shaman can travel horizontally across the earthly plane, and cross ontological boundaries between species. This is typical of egalitarian rainforest societies where shamans hold relatively low social status. He distinguishes an opposing 'vertical' form, typical of the more complex and stratified societies where the shaman is a powerful individual who holds a sacred and esoteric knowledge through which he travels vertically between cosmological planes (S Hugh-Jones 1994). In reality, the form shamanism takes in any given society is a complex amalgamation of these ideal types, depending on ancestry, hunting ability, wealth, knowledge and many other factors associated with social prestige. In Amazonia, communities may tend to be more egalitarian in terms of power distribution than class-stratified (see Chapter Three), and so often shamanism may appear closer to the 'horizontal' pole. Among the egalitarian Desana, for instance, 'horizontal' shamanism is common: "On a horizontal plane, within the biosphere, the [shaman] can transfer himself geographically... to a hill, or can convert himself into a jaguar or into an anaconda" (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975: 132-133). To condense, an Amazonian shaman may move in the cosmology across a horizontal axis on the earthy plane or on a vertical axis to converse with ancestors and demiurges. On the horizontal

plane, he can corporeally morph into a jaguar or anaconda to change his 'point of view', or to travel through vertical planes he may shed his body completely and let his soul journey into the realm of spirit beings.

The Makuna believe that "the world and all living beings in it have both a material, apparent form and an immaterial, spiritual essence, perceived by shamans but invisible to ordinary people" (Árhem 1988: 61). This corporeal-spiritual duality stems from an original mythical condition of transparency. In Amazonia, mythic discourse depicts a 'virtual pre-cosmological condition' that has been described as a transformational 'chaosmos' (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 6). This can be seen, for example, in Levi-Strauss's example of a Bororo myth in his *The Raw and the Cooked*, where humans converse with and transform into animals, freely commit incest, lack genital organs, die and come back to life (1970: 35-37). In myth, such a transparent 'chaosmos' is often the basis and beginning of all being, from which present life originates:-

The originary transparency or infinite *complicatio* where everything seeps into everything else, bifurcates or explicates itself, from this point on, into a relative invisibility (human souls and animal spirits) and a relative opacity (the human body and the somatic animal 'clothing') which determine the makeup of all present day beings. (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 6-7).

For Viveiros de Castro, as for Árhem, the resulting Amerindian ontology is dual in that every corporeal being has a spirit/soul component and an opaque physical component. The shaman is the only (human) being who can willingly separate his spiritual essence from his material body. By doing this he can switch perspectives and take on the form of other beings in the cosmos.

It appears to be an almost universal trend that shamans use states of induced consciousness in order to separate their soul from their body. As Rouget (1985) has portrayed, the main tool of the shaman is *trance*, an altered state of consciousness associated with sensory over-stimulation. In trance states, the soul leaves the body. He opposes trance to states of *possession* (in terms of two diametrically opposed poles on an uninterrupted continuum), which are less associated with shamanism since they are attained through sensory deprivation (Rouget 1985: 8-10). If trance is a vital tool of the shaman in his cosmological travels, the question must be raised as to how he attains this state. Many ethnographers have noted the association between shamanistic ritual and drugs (S Hugh-Jones 1995; Riviere 1969; Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975). Drugs, or ‘non-foods’, sustain the soul (S Hugh-Jones 1995: 58). The shaman uses ‘non-foods’ to socialize in spiritual realms of the cosmos. Drugs such as coca, alcohol, *yagé*, and tobacco snuff are consumed abundantly at many rituals, which often occur at night. In Makuna rituals, “copious amounts of coca, powdered snuff, and *chicha*, a beer made from manioc or other root crops, are consumed. These are men’s ritual foods, replacing ordinary food during ritual events” (Árhem 1988: 19). For the Pirá-Paraná Indians of Colombia, “male products are thus associated with insubstantial phenomena and the female products with substantial ones: this fits their respective associations with change of soul and change of body” (C Hugh-Jones 1975: 232). Since it is males who are symbolically associated with the supernatural, and in a practical sense it is often only males who partake in the consumption of ‘non-foods’, it follows that the vast majority of shamans are male. In the next subsection, the relationship between the shaman and food will be explored.

## **II: SHAMANISM AND FOOD**

The nature of Amerindian perspectivism is that all beings originate from a mythical condition of humanity. Important species, such as those game animals that make up the

meat element of the diet, are considered to retain that human perspective. They are considered as being ‘co-substantial’ with human beings (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 481). To eat an animal that has a human perspective from its own point of view would be tantamount to an act of cannibalism. Game kills must therefore be ‘de-subjectivised’ before being consumed, and this is a responsibility of the shaman (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 481). The shaman is the only individual capable of such an act because he is the only person who can manipulate the corporeal-spiritual duality of beings. He must remove the human soul from the animal in order to leave the tangible, somatic ‘clothing’ de-subjectivised and thus safe to eat.

Just as only the most important animals are attributed a human perspective in ‘multinaturalism’, only those most important foods must be shamanised. For the Barasana, for example, there is a hierarchy of rituals regarding the shamanism of food, where important and rare foods such as large hunted game require the most elaborate rituals, whereas readily available flora are placed in a much lower category as they are considered to contain less illness-causing agents and thus pose less danger to the consumer (C Hugh-Jones 1979: 120). Plants and insignificant animal species are no longer attributed a human perspective, their spirits being significantly distanced and depleted from the original mythical condition of humanity. Such species require less or no shamanistic activity to make them safe for consumption. For the Achuar of Ecuador, garden plants are animated with a soul, but this soul is only a ‘trace’ of their previous humanity: “Many of them are endowed with a soul, *wakan*, the last remaining trace of their earlier humanity from the days before the mythical heroes divided life into the various orders that now embody it” (Descola 1997: 95). Garden plants can be eaten, therefore, without any fear of cannibalism.

Food stuffs can also be *possessed* by malevolent spirits as a result of witchcraft or sorcery by an enemy such as a shaman with bad intentions (Seeger 1981: 200). It may

also be a punishment imposed by the supreme spiritual forces on an individual for not abiding by certain taboos. Plants and animals alike may be possessed by malevolent spirits or forces, which must be removed to make the food item safe for consumption, and the shaman does this by methods such as chanting esoteric songs or blowing on the food. His breath and phlegm are often seen as neutralizing of malevolent forces, as is tobacco smoke exhaled from his lungs. The Barasana shaman “[b]lows spells into a small sample of ready-prepared foods and sends away the illness-causing agents associated with all the foods in the category his sample represents” (C Hugh-Jones 1975: 120). For the Makuna, another Tukano-speaking tribe, “[t]he fruits of the forest must be blessed - made safe by shamanic means - before they can be eaten, as must the edible animals that feed on the forest fruit and fish that swim in harmful waters” (Árhem 1988: 56).

Overing-Kaplan (1975) has described how the eating of meats is considered a ritual act among the Venezuelan Piaroa, whereas eating cultivated plants is not. Meat foods must be ‘shamanised’ to remove the dangers of the external forest. She suggests that, “[t]hrough [the shaman’s] chants he transforms the meat to vegetable, thereby freeing it of both the dangers of disease contamination and the possibility of impregnation of pregnant women by the ‘Father’ of the animal” (Overing-Kaplan 1975: 39). Viveiros de Castro would no doubt argue that in transforming the meat to vegetable, the shaman is de-subjectivising it. The danger is not of ‘contamination’, but rather of performing an act of *cannibalism*.

### **III: THE SHAMAN AS MEDIATOR**

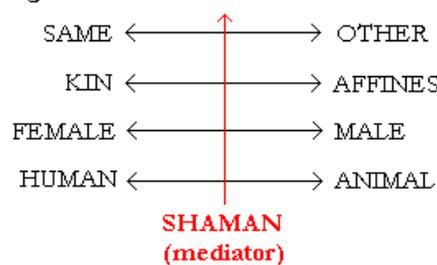
Across Amazonia, meat is often associated with the forest, as cultivated plants are with the village. This seems only natural since meat is solely a product of hunting in the rainforest where tapirs, collared peccaries and other prey reside, whereas vegetables are grown and harvested in domesticated gardens (Kensinger 1995: 11-12). Males are hunters

and females are cultivators, and thus there is a strong association between men and the rainforest and women and the garden. Symbolically, males are ‘external’ beings, affines as it were. Females are ‘internal’ in nature, associated with the domestic domain and consanguinal kin. For instance, Descola writes that, “[t]he Achuar associate women with the realm of consanguinity, while they place the obligations and hazards of affinity in the men’s camp” (Descola 2001: 96). A series of binary oppositions can be formulated regarding Amazonian gender, food and spatial symbolism:-

**Male : Female :: Meat : Plants :: Forest : Garden :: External : Internal**

The shaman is a ‘mediator’ between all these oppositions (see **Fig.1** below). Among the Makuna, for instance, the shaman mediates between the sexes in marriage ceremonies. In transforming a bride from an affinal clan member into a member of the consanguinal unit, the shaman must make her ‘of the same substance’. As Árhem states, “marriageable women brought ‘from afar’ – just like game brought in from the forest – have to be blessed and ‘purified’ by shamanic means before being incorporated into the longhouse community of agnatically related men” (Árhem 2000: 8). For the Piaroa of Venezuela, the shaman is a mediator between meat and plants in that he ‘makes meats vegetable’ (Overing-Kaplan 1975: 39). He can travel at will between the horizontal domains of forest and village, for instance transforming into a jaguar, and is therefore a sort of inter-species diplomat between the external and internal.

**Fig.1.**



These oppositions demonstrate that the ‘shaman as mediator’ is protective of his group. For the Piro of Eastern Peru, for instance, “[t]he knowledge of shamans comes from the forest, and is concerned with defending people from the lethal potential of forest and river demons” (Gow 1991: 235). The shaman protects humans from cannibalism and malevolent spirits; he performs cosmic diplomacy; he reinforces group boundaries by making affines consanguines, thus strengthening social solidarity in the face of the enemy ‘other’. In essence then, the shaman mediates between society and ‘the outside’ (Árhem 2000: 8).

#### **IV: SHAMANISM AND PREDATION**

The cosmos is often imagined as a giant food chain, in which shamans are the ultimate predators. Across much of South America, shamans are associated with predators. It is often told in myth and by shamans themselves that they can transform into jaguars, eagles or anacondas. Reichel-Dolmatoff emphasises the transformational abilities of the *payé* (a Desana shaman): “The power of transformation of a *payé* is one of the most important aspects of the office that he fulfills in the group” (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975: 132). In certain Amazonian dialects, ‘shaman’ and ‘jaguar’ are even signified by the same word.

Árhem (1988), amongst others, has suggested that cosmic classification for the Makuna is based on ideas of food chain and predator-prey relationships. The symbolic importance of three predators, jaguars, anaconda and raptors, correlates with each species’ dominance in the food chain on three cosmic domains: Jaguar is to forest as anaconda is to water as raptor is to sky:-

Each are hunters of different cosmic domains: jaguars in the forest, anacondas in the river, and raptors in the sky. As with their human counterparts – shamans – the cosmic

hunters change shape as they move between the various layers and domains of the universe (Árhem 1988: 56).

Furthermore, these predators with which the shaman is affiliated can be seen as ‘cosmic mediators’, like the shaman himself, since, “[e]ach of these animals is seen also as a mediator between cosmic domains: eagles come to land and fish in rivers, jaguars swim and climb trees, and anacondas come out of the water onto land” (S Hugh-Jones 1979: 124).

In sum, in North-West Amazonia, the shaman is associated with the greatest predators in their respective food chains, and these predators are envisaged as being cosmological mediators just as the shaman is. It can be suggested that the fact that Amerindians conceptualize and reify their cosmologies in terms of food chains emphasises the fundamental importance of food in their lives. If the cosmos can be imagined as a giant food chain, the relationship between the mundane, microscopic food practices that (re)produce social relationships and the overarching, macroscopic ontologies such as those based on affinal-consanguinal and predator-prey relationships must be meaningful. The aim of the next chapter, therefore, is to assess how food, as a tangible entity, is produced, consumed and thought about in Amazonian society.

## **CHAPTER THREE:**

### **FOOD AND SOCIETY**

*One could say that an entire "world" is present in and signified by food.*

(Barthes 1997: 23)

The aims of this chapter are first, to assess the social and political form of Amazonian societies in order to provide a base upon which to study the place of food within them, and second, to assess how food is produced, cooked and consumed in such societies. The ultimate aim of this chapter is to convey that power lies not between stratified classes but in the relationships between consanguines and affines and between females and males. It will be argued that these relationships are constructed through food practices and embodied in food.

#### **I: POWER AND POLITICS IN AMAZONIAN SOCIETY**

It has been remarked by many ethnographers of the Amazon, from Levi-Strauss (1963) to Descola (1994), that the societies that dwell there are of an egalitarian nature. By this, one may assume that there are little or no structures of social hierarchy and no hegemonic authorities. As Rival states, "Amazonian societies are remarkably egalitarian; their political institutions and ideologies are not generally conducive to domination, coercion, or oppression" (Rival 1999: 61). It must be asked then, how do such 'egalitarian' groups remain socially stable, if they exist at all? If a collectivity is to exist in any constant form, it must surely contain imbalances of power. Pierre Clastres has argued that 'Stateless' societies such as those that concern us *are* in fact political, since the very nature of society itself is political:-

[A]ll societies, whether archaic or not, are political, even if the political is expressed in many voices, even if their meaning is not immediately decipherable, and even if one has to solve the riddle of a “powerless” power. (Clastres 1989: 22)

Amazonian societies are typified by atomisation and opposition to other tribal groups. One way in which this atomisation is maintained and reified is in food practices. In Amazonia, “Indian tribes distinguish themselves from each other in part through their different habits, manners, or conceptions of eating” (Counihan 1999: 6). Food is a tool by which one can oppose the ‘Other’ and thus serves to reinforce small social groups, such as exogamous clans. In such clans, Amazonian chiefs are those persons who stand out as the most powerful members of society due to their prestige, but for Clastres this power is no more than illusion. The chief is usually the supreme hunter, and it is upon this that his prestige is based. By making large and frequent game kills, he can demonstrate his generosity by making prestations of food to the group. Such prestations, as Marcel Mauss (1990) has famously claimed, can serve to maintain peace in a society close to war. In terms of Western notions of power incorporating proprietorship and material wealth, the power of the chief appears paradoxical. He does not command or order society, his ‘power’ is not coercive and is in fact detrimental to himself and his family in terms of loss of material goods through prestations. Levi-Strauss has described the ambivalence surrounding chiefs in a poetic account of the Nambikwara:-

[T]here does not seem to be any great competition for power, and the chiefs I knew were more inclined to complain about their heavy duties and many responsibilities than to regard them as a source of pride... [T]he chief is seen as the cause of the group’s

desire to exist as a group. And not as the result of the need for a central authority felt by some ready-established group. (Levi-Strauss 1963: 406-407).

This shows remarkable similarities to Clastres' conclusion that the Amazonian chief is a figurehead who *stands for* the power of the group, rather than *imposes* power upon it:-

[Ameri]ndian cultures are cultures anxious to reject a power that fascinates them: the affluence of the chief is the group's daydream. And it is clearly for the purpose of expressing both the culture's concern for itself and the dream it has of transcending itself, that power, paradoxical by its nature, is venerated in its impotence: this is the Indian chief, a metaphor for the tribe, the 'imago' of its myth. (Clastres 1989: 47).

Power in Amazonian social groups is therefore 'expressed in many voices', not in the voice of a State or bourgeoisie. Imbalances of power lie not between stratified sectors of society. It will be argued that power is expressed in the social domains of food production and consumption through symbolism and the production of social relations.

## **II: SUBSISTENCE**

The smallest 'unit of production' common throughout Amazonia, from the Barasana to the Bororo, is that of the domestic household. The roles of husband and wife are often complementary. For the Trio of Surinam, "the combination of an adult of each sex is theoretically capable of existing alone because between them they know every technique of the traditional culture which the Trio use for exploiting the resources of their environment" (Riviere 1969: 55), and this productive unit is often autonomous from the rest of the group except in times of ritual. Descola states of the Jivaroan Achuar of Ecuador that "[i]f Achuar ecology can be termed domestic, it is because each household thinks of itself as a unique, autonomous centre and the permanent staging point for all

relations with the surroundings” (Descola 1994: 323). The Amerindian domestic unit often includes a garden of sorts, usually a clearing in the rainforest of the ‘swidden’ variety, which is situated a moderate distance from the house. Among the Piaroa of the Orinoco basin, the man clears the dense rainforest, with the aid of offspring and consanguinal kin, before the woman cultivates it. Whilst females cultivate, males hunt to provide the meat elements of the complementary diet (Overing-Kaplan 1975: 35).

Amazonian food production relies heavily upon the season cycle. Viveiros de Castro has noted that for the Araweté, for instance, maize is the preferred staple crop but cannot be successfully cultivated all year, so manioc is used as a replacement during the rainy season when subterranean crops will grow but maize will rot (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 40). Thus subsistence-horticulture is unpredictable and transitory. For the Araweté, at least once a year among their myriad of other tasks, males must clear swidden patches for their wives to cultivate. Females cultivate for a great deal of the time, spending time in and walking to and from the garden, whilst men often go off on hunts deep into the rainforest for days. It can be suggested, then, that to live in the rainforest *is* to produce and consume food. In general, whilst the day is dedicated to food production, night is the time for sociality.

Christine Hugh-Jones has observed of the Pirá-Paraná Indians that “[t]he division of labour in food production is reflected in communal eating patterns” (C Hugh-Jones 1979: 172). The most valuable foods, such as rare and ritually dangerous ones like tapir meat and other large game, constitute ‘good meals’, whilst the more reliable and constantly available foods such as bitter manioc constitute ‘substitute meals’ (1979: 173). That meats are highly valued may well be of nutritional significance, since they are the most nourishing foods, however, cultivation is also extremely highly valued since it is the staple element of the diet. The Trio of Surinam have a proverb to this effect: “We can live without meat; without bread we die” (Riviere 1969: 42). Together, the reliability of

garden produce and the high nutritional value of the sporadic meat from hunting form the basis of subsistence for many such Amerindian societies. Before produce can perform its nutritional role, however, it must be cooked.

### **III: COOKING**

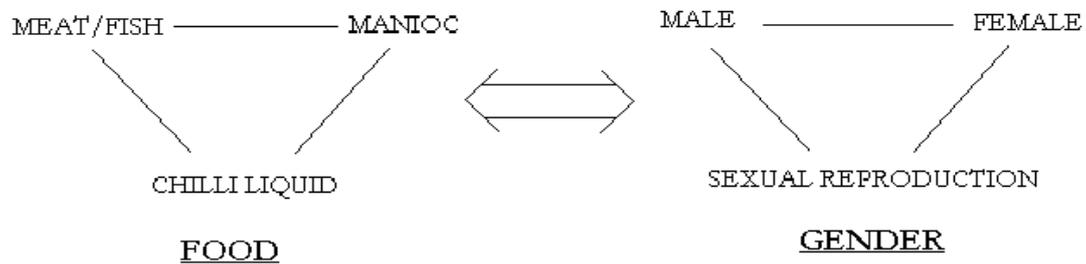
Levi-Strauss has claimed that boiling is a form of '*endo-cuisine*' in that it is associated with the 'internal' domestic sphere, whilst roasting is a style of cooking associated with 'external' guests, ritual feasts, and is therefore an '*exo-cuisine*' (Levi-Strauss 1997: 29). Stephen Hugh-Jones (1995) has described boiling to be the common form of non-ritual cooking for the Barasana of North-West Amazonia. He has argued that a standard meal must consist of three symbolic elements: meat/fish (boiled), manioc bread, and chilli peppers in liquid. Similarly, Riviere has observed of the Trio that in everyday meals, "the meat is usually cooked by the women, and this consists of boiling with peppers" (Riviere 1969: 48). The liquid is essential in that it performs a 'catalytic role' by combining and fusing the male and female elements of the meal (meat and manioc respectively). For Hugh-Jones, then, the 'everyday' domestic meal reflects the complementary produce and the domestic relationship between man and wife:-

'Meals' are made up of two substantial elements, one produced by men, the other by women, combined together in the presence of a third, more aromatic, substance which has more dynamic or 'catalytic' resonances of fire and sexual intercourse. (S Hugh-Jones 1995: 62).

Mirroring the complementary production of food, meals can be viewed as bringing together the female elements (crops) and the male elements (meats), in the presence of a third catalytic element (liquefied chilli pepper stock) that unites the

gendered elements, symbolically acting as sexual intercourse. That meals symbolically emulate gender pertains to Counihan's argument that the sensual phenomenology of eating is associated with that of sexual intercourse, since both bodily processes are pleasurable and desired (1999: 9). This symbolic relationship between food and gender is demonstrated in **Fig.1**:-

**Fig.1**



The meal represents production and reproduction: the complementarity of male and female elements in the meal metonymically represents the complementarity of male and female roles in food production, and in copulation and sexual reproduction. That the meal heavily associates with two such important processes as subsistence and sexual reproduction is not by chance. It exemplifies the fundamental importance of food in the lives of Amerindians, and the importance of their complementary relationships with one another. If we are to adhere to Levi-Strauss's (1997: 35) claim that cooking is a language that unconsciously translates a society's structure, we can interpret the symbolic elements of the meal as 'translating' the structure of the relationships in the domestic household. The consumption of foods in larger social groups must be assessed in order to convey something about the wider social implications of food in Amazonia.

#### **IV: FOOD COMMENSALITY AND RITUAL**

Commensality is an arena in which social relationships are produced and reproduced (Mintz & DuBois 2002). To eat is to say something about one's identity and at the same time translate this to others in diachronic relationships. One domain of social 'exocuisine' is ritual feasting. Feasts are brimming with symbolic values that serve to demonstrate direct links between food practices and the cosmos. For the Makuna, "[s]ubsistence efforts and food intake are not only tuned to the cosmological definition of place and the seasonal rhythm of the environment, but also to the life-cycle events of individuals and the collective rituals of the community" (Árhem 1988: 120). In order to assess ritual commensality, an analytical distinction must first be delineated between two types of foods: normal foods and 'non-foods'. Normal foods, such as meat and cultivated crops, are consumed in order to nourish the *body*. 'Non-foods', including tobacco, coca, manioc beer, and *yagé*, are those ingested or inhaled substances which serve to nourish the *soul* (S Hugh-Jones 1995: 64). 'Non-foods' are associated with the spirit realms of the cosmos, and are thus an important tool for many Amazonian rituals.

Stephen Hugh-Jones (1995: 60) suggests that the conversion from 'everyday' to 'ritual' commensality is usually accompanied by two transitions: one from normal foods to 'non-foods', the other from informality to formality. In essence then (to use an ideal typical description) rituals are formalised, and are times when 'non-foods' are consumed with precedence over normal foods. The relationship between foods (everyday) and 'non-foods' (ritual) must be demonstrated, since this relationship is not arbitrary. Viveiros de Castro (1992) describes of Araweté feasts:-

In the feasts of foods and mild beer, the first to be invited are those who live the closest, with commensality expanding to circles of decreasing density. In the feast of strong beer, by contrast, the singer (the focal figure and main one served) may never come from the

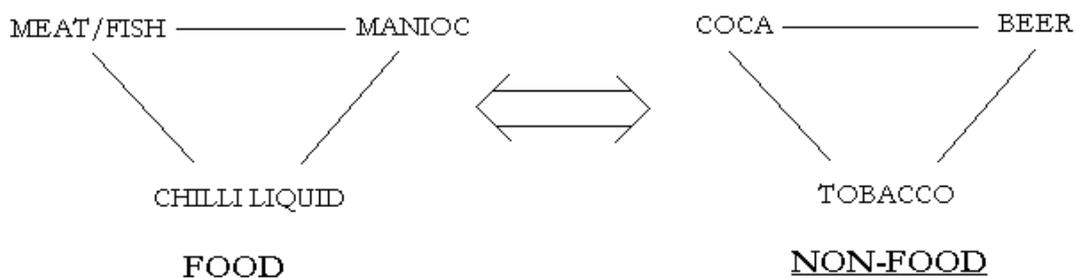
same section as the owner of the drink; the only ones who do not drink are those who always eat together with the sponsors. (Viveiros de Castro 1992: 127).

Strong beer is a ‘non-food’ and its ritual is a form of ‘exo-cuisine’ rather than ‘endo-cuisine’ (to employ Levi-Strauss’s terms). If everyday commensality produces and reproduces social relationships *internally* within the domestic sphere, ritual commensality produces *external* social relationships. To make some generalised binary associations, then: if female is to male as the everyday is to the ritual, and the everyday is to the ritual is as the internal is to the external, one could say everyday commensality (re)produces ‘consanguinal’ relationships, whilst ritual commensal relationships are ‘affinal’ in nature, since, “Affines, by contrast [to consanguines], are socially construed as different and distant; they are prototypical ‘others’, of different ancestral origin and essence” (Árhem 2000: 7):-

**Everyday : Ritual :: Female : Male :: Internal : External :: Consanguines : Affines**

Although by this abstract logic the ‘everyday’ and the ‘ritual’ appear to be two poles in a dichotomous opposition, there is a non-inversive symmetry between the substances ingested *within* the ‘culinary triangles’ suggested, which I have demonstrated by adapting Hugh-Jones’s (1995) diagrammatical model:-

**Fig.2**



(adapted from S Hugh-Jones 1995: 60)

**Meat: Coca :: Manioc : Beer :: Chilli : Tobacco :: Everyday : Ritual :: Food : Non-Food**

Just as an everyday meal is comprised of a male-catalyst-female formula (according to S Hugh-Jones, as described above in subsection III of this chapter), so is ritual ingestion. Coca plant, widely grown and consumed as a stimulant drug in Amazonia, is produced and consumed mostly by males, and is symbolically and ritually a masculine substance. Manioc is grown by women in the garden, and converted to alcoholic beer by way of fermentation, also by women, so is a feminine substance. Both are consumed extensively during many Barasana and other Tukanoan Indian rituals. The catalytic substance here is tobacco, which binds together the masculine and feminine components (S Hugh-Jones 1995: 62). However, whereas the ‘everyday culinary triangle’ pertaining to ‘foods’ is essentially female, the ‘ritual culinary triangle’ pertaining to ‘non-foods’ is male. This may be due to the symbolic nature of the catalytic component: “Both tobacco and chilli have marked sexual connotations. If chilli peppers and pepper-pots are associated with female sexual organs, tobacco has similar associations with male organs” (S Hugh-Jones 1995: 62).

In sum, relationships between men and women are made tangible in food. It is in these relationships that power is transferred between individuals. The association between males, ritual and spirituality is one way in which power inequalities are constituted in Amazonia. Males can demonstrate their power through a religious medium. That food is symbolised explicitly in terms of gender warrants an investigation into indigenous notions of the body, and this shall be the aim of the penultimate chapter.

## **CHAPTER FOUR:**

### **GENDER, FOOD, AND THE BODY**

*[In Amazonia] the person is defined negatively... by the intersection of a certain number of inexplicit assumptions concerning animation (viewed as imputed subjectivity), sociality (viewed as ordered communication and therefore implicit in the indigenous notion of animation), and finally shape, ordered surface, that principle of speciation dividing an otherwise generalized physiological model or matter. (Taylor 1996: 209).*

Many have emphasised the indispensable relationship between food, the body and social relations in Amazonia. Conklin suggests that “[c]orporeal elements and their analogs (especially food, beverages, body paints, and body ornaments) are vocabularies through which individuals not only signify but also actively establish, intensify, transform, attenuate, and sever relations to others” (Conklin 2001: 141). The strong associations between such ‘corporeal elements and their analogs’ must therefore be essential to understanding how Amazonians interpret the bodily differences and similarities between the genders, and how gender relationships are constructed. The central aim of this chapter is to delineate how gender issues are essential to understanding the social implications of food (and ‘non-food’) production, preparation and consumption. The author will first attempt to portray how, literally as well as symbolically, hunting is essentially a masculine activity and gardening is feminine in terms of Amazonian division of labour. It will then be conveyed how certain processes, namely beer fermentation and tobacco consumption, are gendered. The ambiguous nature of Amazonian bodies will subsequently be demonstrated.

## **I: DIVISION OF LABOUR**

It appears to be a pan-Amazonian phenomenon that the division of labour in food production is gender-specific. From the Vaupés region of Colombia (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1975) to the regions of the Gê linguistic groups in central Brazil (Seeger 1981), the demarcation of gender roles is relatively homogenous. In general, males are hunters and females are gardeners. For the Achuar, “[a]s in many other Amazonian societies, Achuar women are mainly ‘transformers’ of raw products within the *domestic* sphere, while men are essentially *predation* in the outside world” (Descola 2001: 96 [emphasis added]). The Piaroa similarly associate femaleness with gardening and cultivation. Overing-Kaplan has observed that “[w]omen are responsible for practically all planting, weeding, and harvesting of crops, as well as the preparation for eating of all garden produce” (1975: 37). The trend, then, seems to be that the female is responsible for cultivating the crops in ‘swidden’ clearings which were initially made by males. Manioc, often the staple crop in the Amazon, is heavily associated with women and their bodies, and specifically, (menstrual) blood. Among the Pirá-Paraná Indians, this association is so strong that the female even gives birth in the maternal space of the garden (C Hugh-Jones 1979: 125). A woman’s role regarding food production, to condense, is centred on the ‘internal’ space of the garden. In sum, the realm of the Amerindian female is the house and garden; cooking and cultivation. Women are therefore associated with *domesticity* and the ‘internal’ realm.

Conversely and complementarily to that of the female, the male’s role is that of the hunter. Among the Piaroa, “men are hunters... Piaroa mythology and Piaroa theology is centred upon the Piaroa man as hunter in great disproportion to the notion of the Piaroa as gardener: gardening is a realm set in opposition to hunting as being of woman” (Overing-Kaplan 1975: 38-39). To be a man and to hunt are one and the same, and joining a hunt is often an essential part of male initiation ceremonies, as with the

Barasana (S Hugh-Jones 1978). The masculine realm, therefore, is the rainforest as opposed to the garden. The male is associated with the 'external', with *predation*. In many Amerindian groups, such as the Huaorani (Rival 1999), the male also provisions the female with the materials with which she works, which come entirely from the forest. The realm of the male is 'nature' as opposed to the female's 'culture' (to use a crude Western academic dichotomy). A series of oppositions again become apparent: between male and female; forest and garden; nature and culture; external and internal. That the man makes the garden for the woman to use is also of significance for Descola:-

The Achuar practice what has been called "pioneering slash-and-burn cultivation," that is they always use for swidden sites parts of the forest that have never been cleared before. Each new garden is therefore the result of an act of predation committed on the forest; it is the man marking the environment. (Descola 1994: 136).

The male is seen again as working in the rainforest, as external, as a *predator*.

Food production is the fundamentally most important aspect of Amazonian life. Without food, people die. That such processes are heavily gender-specific reveals an axiomatic relationship between gender and food. When studying Amazonian socio-cosmologies, therefore, it is of absolute importance to study gender.

## **II: CORPOREALITY AND AMBIGUITY**

Marilyn Strathern (1988) has shown of Melanesia that systems of exchange serve to literally, rather than symbolically, 'externalise' the 'partible person'. The nature of the person as 'partible' in Melanesian ontology requires that the individual must externalise itself through non-corporeal 'things' in order to define itself and its relationships, as in the case of constructing gender relations (Strathern 1988). Since the ambiguous body is

composed of multiple parts, one must externalise certain parts to combat this androgynous state. The suggestion is that in Amazonia, food can be perceived as analogous to objects of gift exchange in highland Papua New Guinea, in that people externalise themselves through it in order to define their gender and their relationships with others. Conklin says of lowland Brazilian societies that the importance of external objects used to adorn or ingest within the body is paramount to understanding what she calls the '*biosocial fabrication of persons*'. By interacting with material things such as food, persons can externalise themselves by means of them (Conklin 2001). For the Pirá-Paraná Indians, for instance, the married couple who host a beer festival are embodied in the beer that they have fermented, which the guests consume, thus producing (or reproducing) social relationships (C Hugh-Jones 1979).

The notion of the body as a corporeal entity is essentially ambiguous in Amazonia, and this is exemplified in many Amerindian myths where the original being was androgynous or asexual (see Levi-Strauss 1970). In his study of Tukanoan material culture and myth, Stephen Hugh-Jones has recently suggested that the androgyny and corporeal ambiguity told in myth 'also applies to normal human beings', since "in most respects the bodies and body parts of men and women are quite similar and the penis and vulva/vagina that we treat as diacritics are here imagined as transformations of one another, androgynous object-organs" (S Hugh-Jones 2006: 9). It can be proposed that since the notion of the body is ambiguous and unstable, the notion of *self* must be too, since *the Amerindian's perspective is situated in the body*. For the Jivaro, this 'self' is ambiguous and thus warrants definition: "If selfhood is a state, it is also by nature a highly unstable one, in so far as one's inner landscape is shaped by the understanding one has of other's perceptions of oneself" (Taylor 1996: 207). The Amazonian self, situated within the body, is therefore inherently social, for "[s]ociety is nowhere if not in the body" (Taylor, A-C 1996). In externalising the (gendered) body through ingestible substances, then, one

must be acting socially. Society thus becomes gendered, and the encompassing cosmology too. This is why the idea of food is of major significance when studying Amerindian ontologies, since corporeality, gender and society and all embodied in it. Food sociality is a tool that (re)defines the unstable notion of the individual self by way of allowing others to interpret it. In essence, then, the consumption of food creates social relationships between individuals, and in doing so, creates stable definitions of the gendered body.

For the Makuna, the communal eating of food magnifies this sharing of 'extended self' to a level at which it forms an absolute social identity. Kaj Árhem recalls that "[i]t was as a commensal community that the *maloca* (longhouse) most clearly expressed its unity and collective identity" (Árhem 1988: 57). Viveiros de Castro suggests regarding the 'universal symbolic importance of food and cooking regimes in Amazonia' that "this universality demonstrates that the set of habits and processes that constitute bodies is precisely the location from which identity and difference emerge" (1998: 479). Árhem says that the masculine 'external', agnatic relationship to food and the feminine 'internal', consanguinal relationship work in tandem, complementing each other, to construct this 'identity and difference':-

The agnatic mode of sociality created an exclusive 'we', an essentialised identity asserting categorical boundaries between self and other, kin and affines. The consanguinal mode, by contrast, established an inclusive 'we', a corporeal, commensal identity dissolving essential distinctions and categorical boundaries. (Árhem 1988: 60).

So, to clarify, the author suggests that in Amazonia, the ambiguous nature of the *individual* body, especially that concerning gender differences, is resolved and clarified through food practices, in that they are inherently social. These food practices, whether

they be consuming the daily meal communally in a longhouse, or simply receiving a meal in the private domestic space from a spouse, form social relationships, on micro and macro social levels, that help define the community, its boundaries and its collective identity. In the conclusion, we will see how food as a definition of gender relations places the gendered body in the cosmos.

## CONCLUSION

*Every type of being has the same form (the generic form of a human being): bodies are the way in which alterity is apprehended as such... The set of habits and processes that constitute bodies is precisely the location from which identity and difference emerge. (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 478; 479)*

In his study on the Gê-speaking Suyá of Brazil, Seeger defines cosmology as “[t]he way in which the members of a society construct their universe and think of themselves and other beings within it” (Seeger 1981: 21). He portrays how the Suyá interpret their cosmos *through the body*, and as I hope to convey in the remaining part of this study, analyses of food practices are fundamental in showing how the Amazonian perspective is corporeally situated. By corporeal in this context, Strathern’s definition is adhered to: “A body that transforms external into internal substance, and vice versa” (Strathern 2001: 231). It should be apparent that food is transformed by bodies from an external to an internal substance, since this is the nature of consumption. Food is subsequently transformed from internal to external through excretion, perspiration and defecation. The claim put forward in the previous chapter is that Amazonian food symbolism can be interpreted as the body ‘externalising’ itself through eating food, an internal bodily process. So, to briefly return to Seeger’s study, he proposes of the Suyá that “[i]dentity is not *corporate* in the juridical sense but *corporeal* in the physical sense” (Seeger 1981: 238). It is through such a notion of identity as corporeal that Amazonian ontologies will be evaluated in this concluding chapter.

## I: 'MULTINATURALISM' AND GENDER

Viveiros de Castro's (1998; 2004) theory of multinaturalism proposes that Amerindians impose order and meaning on the world not through animism, but through *perspectivism*, "a process of discrete switching of points of view between different forms of agency populating the cosmos" (2004 (b): 16). As he has also claimed, the original common condition of all species in mythical time was humanity, and animal species that are important to Amerindians (for example, those species that are prey to or predators of humans) are believed to retain this humanity (or at least a depleted form of it). Since animal species are conceived of as having a 'human' spirit the human form becomes ambiguous. Since spiritual humanity is the universal, humanity as a corporeal condition is ambiguous. If all species are spiritually 'human', human beings are not differentiated from other species by means of soul or spirit. For Viveiros de Castro, what differentiates species is their somatic 'clothing', in short, their bodily 'affects, capacities, or dispositions' (1998: 478). My proposal is that in their 'highly transformational world' (1998: 471), Amerindians use food to define the ambiguous body, that is, to discern the 'human' form from "the infinite *complicatio* where everything seeps into everything else" (Viveiros de Castro 2004 (b): 7). By 'externalising' themselves through the medium of food and imposing human corporeality upon food processes, Amerindians can ontologically make sense of their cosmology and place themselves in it. Alfred Gell (1998) has suggested of the Melanesian person:-

[A] person and a person's mind are not confined to particular spatio-temporal coordinates, but consist of a spread of biographical events and memories of events, and a dispersed category of material objects, traces and leavings, which can be attributed to a person and which, in aggregate testify to agency and patienthood during a biographical career" (Gell 1998: 222)

The suggestion here is that Amerindians conceive of the person in a similar way. Food is one medium through which the person is dispersed as a material object. Christine Hugh-Jones has portrayed of the Pirá-Paraná Indians of Colombia that “[w]hen an individual eats something or uses an object, he or she is not simply consuming the finished article, but is also absorbing the powers associated with an entire process and all the social and physical relations involved in it” (C Hugh-Jones 1979: 119). Stephen Hugh-Jones has further elaborated this point on Tukanoan material culture in a recent article:-

[Tukanoan myths] suggest a theory of mind and agency in which thoughts, designs and intentions are given material form in the objects that such intentions produce. A theory in which a diversity of artefacts connotes not only different body parts but also different bodily capacities and dispositions controlled, regulated and inspired by different areas of self-discipline and responsibility. (S Hugh-Jones 2006: 12)

Gell’s description of a Melanesian person resonates in the Hugh-Jones’s. The ‘person as body’ is not purely physical, but made up of social and physical relations that are externalised in food. The person can be ‘spread’ spatially and temporally through external items and the social relations they produce. If the holistic human form is defined and externalised in tangible items such as food, intra-human differentiations such as gender can be defined in the same way. Strathern has exemplified how food embodies people and creates social relationships:-

The fact that products are ‘consumed’ or taken in by others creates the particular relationship between the agent and those affected by his or her acts... Acts individuate

persons; it is thus people's acts that establish the gender of their behaviour, in making apparent the condition of their own and other's bodies/minds. (Strathern 1988: 289; 299)

Gender is thus socially and not physically defined. For the Piro of Peru, for instance, "gender identity is constituted within the social relations of native communities" (Gow 1991: 120). If the social self is externalised in food, the gendered self, a product of those social relations, is consequently externalised in food.

In Amazonia, some foods are female, others are male. Human beings interact with these gendered foods, and this defines their 'ambiguous body' as gendered through social relationships entailed in and produced by food. People's 'affects, capacities, and dispositions' are solidified, as it were, in food. Thus, when food is consumed, social relationships are formed. In same-sex relations, such as male ritual commensality, individuals consume male 'non-foods' and strengthen their same-sex solidarity. In cross-sex relations, such as a married couple eating an evening meal together, individuals orientate towards the other sex, combining them with their own (Strathern 2001: 226). Thus, in symbolically gendering foods and their processes of production and consumption, cross-sex and same-sex relationships are solidified in a tangible form (food), reducing corporeal ambiguity.

## **II: 'GENDER PERSPECTIVISM'**

If bodies as sets of affects and capacities are externalised in food, and food is gendered, then male bodies and female bodies must be aggregates of different sets of affects and capacities. If men and women are corporeally differentiated are they of the same species if species are defined by their bodies? If humans differentiate themselves from other species through corporeal affects, do the genders differentiate themselves

from each other in the same way? Through their associations with food, men are seen as closer to the spirits and the sacred aspects of life. Women are seen as domestic and associated with the profane. Men are associated with the species of the higher trophic levels of the cosmic food-chain, such as jaguars, anacondas and eagles. These species are conceived of as sacred, as seen in their association with the shaman. Women are associated with those species much lower down the food chain, such as cultivated plants. These species are seen as mundane, possessing little or no spirit. The highly speculative claim here is that the differentiation between genders may be conceived of as being a species differentiation. Food thus acts as a tool to distance the genders from each other, just as it distances species from each other. If the cosmos is conceived of as a giant food chain, men and women are conceptually placed in different echelons of it. Men are analogous to powerful species, as women are to powerless ones. Árhem has suggested that this gender asymmetry serves to legitimize the dominance of males in society (2000: 9). In short, if species are differentiated according to their bodily affects, where their point of view is situated, and bodies are individuated through food and its processes, then the stark gender-specific nature of food production, preparation, and consumption in Amazonia may imply a separation between the sexes analogous to that between species. If species are differentiated through their perspectives, so are the genders. This may be termed '*gender perspectivism*'. The writer's conjecture is thus: Amazonian alterity is produced, between species and between genders, by food.

## EPILOGUE

To conclude on such a speculative claim may seem to the reader to be a zenith as intellectually ambiguous as the notion of the body in Amazonia is claimed to be in this study. However, I hope that the ontological questions raised in this concluding section can provide a hypothetical foundation for further ethnographic study into the topic. Viveiros de Castro (2004 [a]) has vigorously maintained that in studying Amazonian ontologies through his own, the Western anthropologist is committing a cardinal sin. Similarly, what I hope has been conveyed in this study of food, the body and gender in Amazonia is that many of the notions that constitute Western academic epistemologies cannot be applied ethnographically as if they were universal. I have tried to abstain from talking of a 'pan-Amazonian culture' or 'the culture of the Achuar' for this reason. Even the interpretive guise of 'cultural relativism' is founded on age-old intellectual premises such as 'society', 'individual', 'nature' and 'culture' that are the bedrocks of thought for Plato, Marx, and Kant, but mean nothing at all to an Amerindian. If Amerindian ontology is based on concepts *similar* to ours, we cannot assume them to be *the same*. Rene Descartes famously proposed a split between mind and body, the body being the seat of nature (science); the mind being the immaterial abode of culture (the spirit). The *immaterial mind* was what defined humans (Rozemond 1998). However, in Amazonia, the *material body* is what defines humanity. Food is one way that Amerindians define it as thus.

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[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Amazon\\_rainforest.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Amazon_rainforest.jpg)

This paper is an edited version of the dissertation I submitted for the Anthropology BSc course at UCL. Following my undergraduate research on Amazonia, I moved to Oxford University to study Amazonian anthropology at the MSc level. I am hoping to embark on a PhD in the near future, and I propose to conduct fieldwork in the Guyanan Amazon.