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The Werewolf in between Indians and Whites: Imaginative Frontiers and Mobile Identities in Eighteenth Century Amazonia

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This article examines the imaginative dimensions of ethnic frontiers. A brief example will serve to introduce this broad theme. According to Claude Lévi-Strauss (1948), European observers of Amerindian social life in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were immediately impressed with a male affinal relationship they encountered amongst Tupi speaking nations. The chroniclers latched on to it because of its likeness to Iberian coparenthood. Both Tupi and European kinship institutions sought to establish a new, special and artificial, connection between groups. Lévi-Strauss argued that the formal parallel was ‘a striking example of a convergence in which the native and the Latin-Mediterranean institutions show numerous apparent similarities overlying important structural differences.’¹ In other words, the meeting is only achieved because of a misunderstanding on both sides. The Europeans misrecognised the Tupi relationship because they perceived it through their own cultural prism. It seems likely Amerindians were involved in a similar enterprise, since they asked visiting Europeans to become their coparents, as a way of incorporating outsiders in the manner they were accustomed (see Harris 2010 for an Amazonian version of this encounter).

Whatever the cultural differences between the parties, the attempt to find similarities can be seen as a conceptual bridging between parties. This search reveals the basic importance of kinship to the conduct of affairs on the ground in the colony. As ethnic groups mixed, so did their ideas. The intimate connections of body and mind grew up in spite of the encouragement of, or restrictions by, the state and the church. This process may have looked like a convergence or fusion, but in fact it was based in different perceptions of the overall situation. The possibility that hybrid colonial manifestations may have concealed different interpretations of the same phenomena has rarely been explored by scholars of Latin America.

Still, there may have been enough of an overlap to achieve a degree of common recognition. In an effort to break away from a dualistic view of colonialism, studies such as those of Richard White and Mary Louise Pratt have highlighted the significance of a ‘middle ground’ (1991) and ‘contact zone’ (1992) as a space of shared interactions between Indians and whites. Another illustration from a recent article by Carol Podruchny (2004) who analyses French Canadian nineteenth century narratives of the European werewolf and the *windigo*, an Algonquian cannibal monster. Podruchny finds ‘a complex cultural movement, a mingling of cosmologies, and oral technologies’ between French Canadian voyageurs and their aboriginal wives and kin. Stories about and fears of the windigo and the werewolf merged because of their similar features. Thus the ‘French-Canadian belief in werewolves provided a framework to understand *windigos* in French-Canadian terms’. We could say then there was a working misunderstanding (my phrase, not hers) between the various people, which enabled communication at the frontiers of a new imaginative world.

By coincidence, this article also concerns a werewolf. It explores the kind of imaginative home a werewolf found in the colonial Brazilian Amazon. Ostensibly this werewolf was scaring Indians and whites. The reference to the entity is located in a document dated at the end of March 1793 in the State Archives of Pará, Brazil. A judicial process had been conducted to clear a man’s reputation of three accusations, one of which was his ability

to transform into a werewolf, as well as other similar figures. On first glance, the werewolf was obviously a being from European folklore, introduced by Portuguese colonists. But it is that very obviousness that I want to interrogate here. For it is not clear why a werewolf would have any effect on Amerindians or why Brazilian-born administrators and settlers would expect it to. Furthermore, the werewolf connects to a series of related characteristics, such as shamanism, that open onto a broad and shifting imaginative landscape.

My argument here is that the cultural complexes of bodily transformation amongst Europeans and Amerindians in colonial Brazilian Amazonia converged and gave common meaning to beings such as the werewolf. The similarities made for a mixed social language (Bakhtin 1981) in which people otherwise separated by colonial hierarchies could find mutual reference points. Since it is impossible to know whether people really understood another, the phrase working misunderstanding indicates the productive or creative aspect to the convergence.² Perhaps there was more of a messy compromise; a haphazard hybrid form. Kinship and ethnic mingling also involved the construction of ways of thinking in popular culture. In this field, ideas and images come together in a way that cannot be predicted in terms of existing social, political, economic or racial hierarchies. As a result, the study of this 'imaginative frontier' helps deepen and develop our understanding of the dynamics of social interactions in a colonial environment.

Brazilian Amazonia in the late colonial period and mobile identities

Surprisingly, the Brazilian Amazon has been almost absent from anthropological and historical discussions of hybridity, though the opening to Gruzinski's *The Mestiço Mind* (2000) is an exception. For example, a recent survey of Brazilian popular culture in a British Latin American journal does not mention the Amazon at all (Assunção 2005). In Portuguese language scholarship the Amazon is also under-represented in relation to its size to the rest of Brazil (e.g. Nizza da Silva 2001). On the other hand, some scholars have appreciated the significance the Amazon had within geopolitical designs of the Portuguese empire (Alden 1973; Sweet 1974; Davidson 1974; Cardoso 1984, Maxwell 1995).

A new generation of scholars is now seeking to overturn this relative marginalisation with historical studies of the Amazon based in primary documents. (e.g. Amoroso 1992, Ricci 2003, Priore and Santos Gomes 2003, Sommer 2000, Chambouleyron 2010, Roller 2014). This effort has been directed to understanding the Amazon in a continental context, and also how the region differed and diverged from it. This has also involved the recognition that there exists a significant archive on the Amazon spread out in the Americas and Europe. As Neil Whitehead argues, the traditional neglect of history in Amazonia amongst social scientists has been due to the impression that the written record allowed no escape from the conqueror's point of view (2003). Certainly, if one reads John Hemming's *Red Gold* (1978) and *Amazon Frontier* (1987), who uses only published literature, the argument is sustained by the domination of European colonial powers and the destructive changes in native societies. The revisionist work has presented an altogether more open and outward looking view of the region in the colonial period. No longer can scholars justify dividing people into categories that cannot be found in reality. Nor can evidence of Amerindian influence in colonial affairs and policy be ignored. Historian Barbara Sommer has written about a 'unique regional culture' (Sommer 2003: 416) that emerged in the mid eighteenth century with reference to various aspects of popular culture, especially love magic and witchcraft. Here Europeans adopted Indian shamanic practices and Indians appropriated symbolically charged items such as altar stones and communion wafers. Behind these borrowings and innovations lies a complex and shifting social and ethnic backdrop.

How can we characterise this landscape in the late colonial period? Rather than the normal anthropological or ethnohistorical convention of studying one group or people, these newer studies are developing frameworks to contain the diverse kinds of people of Portuguese Amazonia. These folk may have experienced colonial life from different subject positions, but they still were living under the same conditions and communicating with each other. What were their common points of references? Based on the documentary record: festivals, sexual pleasure and abuse, good health and witchcraft. Who were these people? Indians with highly varied experiences of colonial life; Africans sent as slaves from various nations in southern and western Africa; colonists, mostly poor soldiers, artisans and peasants seeking fortunes, or criminals sent to Brazil as punishment

for a crime committed in Portugal (some exiles came with their families). There were also many Brazilians, racial mixtures of various sorts. There were roughly 100,000 inhabitants of Portuguese Amazonia in 1800. About twenty percent were classed as Indians, another twenty as slave, the rest were free Brazilians and Portuguese, of which about four per cent were white. Given the Amazon is a huge area; there was a low density of population. Families and communities were spread out along the banks of the rivers. Few people lived in towns and about a third lived near the capital, Belém (Harris 2010).

Owing to the low population density and the character of economic life, which was based in extractivism, there was considerable movement along the waterways (Roller 2010). This mobility connected the scattered groupings with an ease of which most colonial expansionists would have been jealous. Vast distances were covered for the purposes of trade, seasonal access to resources, festival attendance, visiting kinsfolk, and flight from abusive bosses and justice. Pilots of canoes and their paddlers were amongst the most well paid and valued individuals in each village (Sommer 2000 and Roller 2012). Although adult men were probably the most active in this service, women and children also travelled long and short distances. This mobility gave people the confidence to function in a range of contexts and to pursue their own interests rather than those expected of them. In this way, there were no stable or fixed frontiers between the variously identified ethnic groups in colonial Amazonia.

For want of a better term to denote this emerging way of life in the late colonial period I shall use *nativist*. In contrast to historians who use the label for political purposes, the application here is cultural, and builds on the innovative scholarship on the Brazilian Amazon mentioned above. Amazonian nativism can be seen as a series of loosely associated characteristics: geographical mobility, popular religion (including folklore and shamanism), the use of diverse economic skills, the speaking of *lingua geral*, long-distance family networks, and the appeal to an oral history of resistance to the colonial domination. Amazonian nativism was not a coherent body of ideas or practices; on the contrary, it was the haphazard outcome of the actions of those forced into the colonial world as they contended with Portuguese policy. By its very nature, this kind of nativism had its own history and cultural parameters. The *patria* (homeland) was the environment of rivers and forests of the Amazon, not Brazil in general. If we jump to contemporary Brazilian Amazonia, nativism and the heterogeneous and mobile societies remain a critical feature of social life. In the rest of this article I will explore one aspect of nativism, namely popular religion, and in particular the bridging of ideas about humans changing their bodily forms.

Imaginative frontiers and popular religion

In her study of popular religious activity in Portuguese speaking Brazil, Laura de Mello e Souza (2003) argues that witchcraft and magic were an integral part of the colony. They were widespread and powerful strategies of dealing with the precariousness of life. Moreover, there was ‘a yawning gap’ that separated popular religious belief and practice and official, particularly Inquisitorial, Catholicism (Mello e Souza 2003: 87).³ There was no way the elite could understand the complex and dynamic quality of sorcery and magic as they were practiced by Africans, Europeans and Indians (Mello e Souza, 2003: xvi). Her main focus, though, is on the Brazilianisation of European traditions. What is missing from Mello e Souza’s study is an ethnographic contextualisation of colonial religiosity. This would reveal how those diverse influences were made a living part of daily lives, which she also seeks (2003: 53).

The sources for such a project exist. Mello e Souza cites many cases in her study from the Amazon, all of which come from the Inquisition of Lisbon. The inquisition visited the Amazon between 1763 and 1769 and heard about fifty confessions and denunciations. Before and after this time, other cases were processed locally by specially appointed priests; some unlucky folk were sent directly to Lisbon, where their cases often stagnated as they withered away in jail. Most processes concerned witchcraft and sorcery, including shamanism. I should emphasise the singular importance of these records. Along with a few other sources (such as bishops’ chronicles based on their pastoral visits and missionary reflections), they are the best window into popular religion of colonial Amazonia. Only in exceptional instances does the administrative documentation between interior towns and governors carry references to cultural life, and the example of the werewolf is one.

Let me now provide an overview of shamanism as it is represented in the main sources. This exposition will also feed into the werewolf complex. First, it should be made clear that shamanism is viewed through the lens of a church elite who understood it as a pact with the devil. Thus what people were really doing and thinking has to be inferred from the tiniest of details that break through the hardened surface of inquisitorial interrogation. Yet it is clear that various sorts of shamanism flourished. Why? Whites, Indians, mestiços and slaves were attracted to it. Certainly, we know that whites were as interested in it as everybody else, and that it occurred in both rural and urban settings (e.g. Amaral Lapa 1978; Queiroz 1849; Souza 1848, Baena 2004). We do not need to reconstruct the precise practices and beliefs to contemplate the possible connections between Portuguese traditions of folk healing and witchcraft, African possession ceremonies and sorcery and Amerindian tobacco shamanism. The arena proved fertile ground for individual appropriation and manipulation of new forms of symbolic power. So it would seem that shamanic activity was innovated as people used it to pursue their own ends.

The inquisition papers reveal a world in which love magic, sorcery, divination and curing feature prominently. In particular, white women receive more attention than men. There were Indian men too, who were caught with their witchcraft pouches containing pieces of altar stones (amulets), spells and herbs. There were various types of shaman. Many used tobacco that was blown over afflicted areas of the body, the sucking technique, and speaking in strange voices. They also handed out special diets, recommended purges, and baths in herbal concoctions (see Accioli 1833: 124).

Most relevant to the current topic was their capacity for bodily transformation. How was this reported? One Jesuit missionary, who knew the whole region very well, tells us that shamans could command animals to do their evil business (Daniel 2003). From the Indian point of view this control may have been possible because the shaman had become the animal and was calling on his spirit helpers. In a 1764 denunciation of Sabina, an Indian woman shaman, who specialised in curing using her lips, tongue and mouth, a man said she 'could do almost anything', that her powers were limitless. The main implication was that she could transform herself into a spirit and move around. Her strength apparently came from the mark of cross she had on the top of her mouth (Amaral Lapa 1978).

Another case the inquisition heard was against two men, a *mameluco* and an Indian, from the Tapajós River, brought by a priest. Both were well known to be sorcerers, diviners, and principal oracles among the Indians of the region. They often taught false doctrines that were 'totally opposed to all divine and human laws.' One persuaded women to abort by proving to them it was 'not a sin to kill within their wombs the children whom they have conceived'. He once brought all the Indian men and women together in a 'group and spoke to them in strange tongues ... telling them these voices are the souls of the children who were killed in the wombs of their mothers.' And this is so very true, having been revealed to him by the Holy Virgin Mother' (Amaral Lapa 1978, translation by Heather Flynn Roller). These Tapajós shamans were working from their interpretation of Catholicism. More research is needed to pursue the possible resemblances between abortion in Europe and Amerindian societies, and between Mary and another figure from local mythology. The mention of doctrines opposed to all laws can only be a reference to shape-shifting. The priest may have had little sympathy for either the Iberian or the Indian versions.

These brief stories speak to the historical resilience of shamanism, even if its features have changed over time. Unlike in Europe, where witches and *benandanti* were made into evil stereotypes by the inquisition and in consequence persecuted (Ginzburg 1984), their equivalents in the colonial Amazon maintained their ambiguous identity. More to the point, shamanic type activity proved a conspicuous terrain for cultural innovation and social connection.

Folktales and skulduggery: the werewolf in the Amazon

The last and main example of a convergence between resembling motifs concerns the complex of shapeshifting and in particular the werewolf figure known in Portuguese as *lobisomem*. What was a werewolf doing in eighteenth century Amazonia? A man had been defamed by various accusations, amongst them being a werewolf, and wished to clear his name (through a legal process known as *auto de justificação*). Before detailing the case, let

us meet the plaintiff, who is said change into a werewolf, and the priest, who is said to be the origin of the claim.

José Cavalcante de Albuquerque was born in Bahia, northeast Brazil, in 1760. He graduated from the University of Coimbra in 1785 with a degree in Law and Mathematics.⁴ His family was probably linked to the colonial bureaucracy and not very wealthy. For some reason he decided to make a life in the Amazon on his return from Portugal. When he got there he introduced himself to the governor of Pará who came to see him as a young hopeful. Cavalcante was first made an administrator of an Indian village on the Xingu River (Souzel) and then when another administrator was sacked for corruption he was appointed to Vila Franca, a village in the Lower Amazon in 1790 and the largest Indian village in the Amazon at the time. While at Vila Franca he had a cacao plantation along the edge of the Amazon River that was worked by slaves and Indians. In 1801 Cavalcante was a justice of the peace in a neighbouring town (Óbidos) and a part time captain of the *milicianos ligeiros*, a new and temporary army (for which read: workforce) brought in to replace an older system of Indian labour recruitment, known as the directorate. He had a wife, Rita Vitoria Albuquerque, from the Lower Amazon (in the 1792 census he was listed as unmarried) but we know little about her identity except that she was dark haired and skinned. The couple baptised four of their children in the Parish of Óbidos. Then, at the height of his career, in December 1821, Cavalcante was elected a deputy of the Rio Negro region to the Portuguese royal courts and travelled to Lisbon in August 1822; seventy-seven in all were elected from Brazil. However, when the courts were abolished following Brazilian independence, he was stranded in Lisbon without means. His solution was to seek funds instead for a project to civilize Indians in the Upper Amazon. Supported by the bishop of Pará and other northern Brazil deputies, the objective was to encourage ‘uncontacted’ Indians to settle in villages. The plan received no backing. He was only able to return to the Amazon and his family in the late 1820s, when he briefly met the British traveller Henry Lister Maw in 1829.⁵ By the outbreak of the Cabanagem in 1835 he was probably dead.⁶

Another key figure in this story is the priest. Domingos de Lira Barros’s precise identity is not known. He was working in the Upper Amazon in the 1760s, which meant he was fluent in at least one Indian language. During this time he sent about ten Indian couples to the inquisition.⁷ Their crimes were bigamy. Based on this small piece of information, we could say that the priest was quite zealous in his dealings with people and took an active interest in their personal conduct and knowledge about the world. In any case, it is to be expected that the priest, more than anybody else, would be aware of the various beliefs and practices of the people in his charge. It is worth pointing out that these two people exemplify a trait of colonial life mentioned before – mobility along the rivers. They both pursued careers in the Amazon and moved along the watery paths for their own purposes and their official engagements. The men took special interest in Indians.

At an early stage in his career in the 1790s, Cavalcante ran into a series of personal conflicts with other local officials in Vila Franca. The werewolf slur must therefore be seen as part of a larger set of circumstances involving various actors in the Lower Amazon region at the end of the eighteenth century: village or service Indians,⁸ a secular priest, Brazilian born administrators and farmers, Portuguese traders and settlers and slaves.⁹ In other words, the werewolf allegation was a witchcraft type accusation and was expressive of a social dynamic for communal inclusion/exclusion.

There were three allegations against José Cavalcante. On each he wanted to prove his innocence; in this sense the case was similar to a self-confession in front of the inquisition, for bringing things into the open allows for a clean break with the past, even if found guilty.¹⁰ Cavalcante initiated and paid for two legal processes in neighbouring towns (Santarém and Óbidos). The first item concerned the accusation he drank too much. This was serious enough because he would lose his job if it were true. The second was the claim he was a bad administrator. He was said to neglect the Indians in his official care and spend most of his time on his cacao plantation, and employed, without permission from the governor, Indians there (as well as African slaves). This charge was made by two important fellow officials in the town, the clerk and the canoe pilot. In his covering letter to the governor, Cavalcante makes clear his antipathy for these two individuals: he wanted to stuff them into a barrel and nail down the lid.

The third, and last, allegation was his appearance at night in the form of a werewolf and other similar figures. In this way, so the accusation went, he abused the ignorance and superstitious nature of the Indians in his care and some of the whites.¹¹ As far as I

can tell, Cavalcante managed to clear his name. All the witnesses testified to his good character and the poisonous nature of relations between him and the priest and the town officials.

In order to focus on the imaginative frontier we need to hear what the witnesses said about Cavalcante being a werewolf. The first man to speak from Óbidos was Pedro Marinho. 'And he [the witness] spoke further concerning the abominable abuse of the werewolf [written *lobizome*]. The Reverend Priest, who was posted at Vila Franca ... introduced the abuse to the simplicity of those people in order to discredit its Director, whose ends only he knows. He [the witness] was told about these matters on various occasions by some Indians.' In other words, the priest had invented the idea that José Cavalcante was a werewolf and in so doing was not just exploiting the vulnerable simplicity of Indians but also bringing Cavalcante into disrepute. After all how could anyone take orders from a werewolf? Marinho said his source was the village Indians, who seemed to understand the situation rather well.

Vicente Marinho was the second witness and the son of the first. He confirmed that the priest was the origin of the slander: 'He spoke further concerning the abuse which the Priest ... introduced to the weak and simple spirits of the Indians of Vila Franca, that the Director was a werewolf who transformed into different figures and that he knew from a girl that he used to rise up in balls of fire and other similar deliria.' So José Cavalcante did not just, according to his detractors, change into a werewolf but also other kinds of beings; we also have the intriguing detail about fire.

The other testimonies from Óbidos repeat what had been said. From Santarém only one declaration introduced a new element. The last witness was Manoel Pinto, who 'signed with a cross because he did not know how to write.' 'Asked for his statement concerning the petition of the plaintiff, he said he went to Vila Franca when the priest was the reverend Domingos de Lira Barros and sought his testimony. The said Priest did not stop talking badly of the said Director and plaintiff, saying that he was evil and that he was a werewolf and that at night, when he changed his figure, a lot of fire used to beat in his eyes. Some people also told him [the witness] that the priest used to get drunk a lot.'¹² Of all the people called to give evidence then, Manoel Pinto was the only one to have talked to the priest, who it seemed had left (perhaps had been removed already) by the time the investigation had taken place.

I want to draw attention to two separate aspects of the evidence given above. First, that there was a conflict between the priest and the administrator which found expression in the elicitation of a diabolical figure from European popular lore. That tension was linked to the position of village Indians. Cavalcante wanted to prove that it was the priest who deliberately exploited their simplicity in order to scare them and to persuade them to take sides in a personal disagreement between the two men. Typically, this implies a patronising argument with regards to the participation and intelligence of Indians. In fact we know very little of what they think; the whole document was for higher-level administrative consumption. Secondly, there was the ability of José Cavalcante to transform himself into a werewolf and other forms at night. Attached to these figures is the detail about the balls of fire and the eyes which beat with fire. On one side we have the charged personal relations and the manipulation of at least one group of people. On the other, there is what we can loosely call various beliefs and ideas concerning bodily transformation, which probably come from both European and Amerindian sources. I say 'probably' because we know nothing of the other forms Cavalcante is alleged to have changed into. The main word used is *lobizome*. The canoe manager, according to Cavalcante in his covering letter, called him a head of fire (*cabeça de fogo*). Presumably we are dealing with a complex of associated phenomena. Given the repression of Amerindian elements introduced with the Pombaline reforms of the mid to late eighteenth century it seems likely that aspiring administrators wanting to impress the Governor would have been reluctant to mention them in a letter. Perhaps the same scorn would have been accorded to a reference to a Portuguese superstition.

Of the many documents and letters dispatched from the Lower Amazon in the colonial and early imperial period, this is the only occurrence I have found to mention an aspect of European folklore.¹³ The vast majority discussed economic production and organisation, mundane administration, the movement of people, soldiers and military hardware; clearly these were the matters of prime interest for communication between local and state levels. As I said above, the main part of the investigation addresses some of these issues. The marginal attention given to the werewolf accusation in this official document is significant precisely because it is out of the ordinary, and, as far as I can tell,

no local precedent had been established. In other words, the formulaic nature, which characterised many witness statements, is less strong than in the more central affairs in the bureaucratic chain. For this reason, the werewolf testimonies are revealing of some significant processes at work: they are expressive of the mental enterprises taking place in colonial life.

The werewolf, the *cumacanga* and other transformational beings

The associated phenomenon mentioned in the inquiry are a werewolf and other similar figures, a head going up in 'a ball of fire,' 'eyes of fire,' 'a head of fire,' decapitation and metamorphosis. These features were only mentioned without extrapolation, as if they were self-evident to those present at the inquiry and to those who might read the transcription. How might we go about understanding what these references meant to the actors? Can we assume that the Indians would be scared by some folk story from Europe?

One starting point is to ask residents of the region today if they know what is being referred to. In my conversations with people from Villa Franca in December 2011, I discovered that the werewolf had nothing to do with a wolf or a fierce monstrous animal. Instead it is a person whose head transforms into a ball of fire; as it goes up it grows bigger and as it comes down it becomes smaller. The *lobisomem* is often the seventh-born son. In order to protect the child from this fate he needs to have an elder brother as his godfather. In a linked story, people tell of the *cumacanga*, though they do not always use the term itself. A woman who has sexual relations with a priest is punished for the transgression by her transformation into a ball of fire, which whizzes around on a Friday night. People also talk about flames or wheels of fire (*fogo fátuo* or *boitatá*) which fly up and down but do not associate them with any particular myth or folklore. In other parts of the Amazon the *lobisomem* is a man or a woman who transforms into a large domestic pig and becomes enchanted. It appears on paths at night and attacks people and other animals.¹⁴ The story is also told in the Lower Amazon but the term *lobisomem* is not associated with it.

The literature on Brazilian folklore and myth, dating from the end of the nineteenth century, has much to say about these stories.¹⁵ In his synthesis of this material the Brazilian folklorist, Luis de Camara Cascudo, found the distribution of myths linking wolves and humans to be universal; the Luso-Brazilian version was distinguished by the sense that turning into a wolf was punishment for a sin such as incest or concubinage.¹⁶ He referred to the Amazonian variant of the wolf myth, the *cumacanga*, but did not mention the *lobisomem* one itself.¹⁷ The *cumacanga*, as a chastisement for immoral behaviour, is a head of a woman that took leave of her body and became a ball of fire going up and down. This development of the werewolf story only exists in the Amazon and the neighbouring state of Maranhão (where it is known as *curacanga*).¹⁸ It seems probable that the testimony concerning the eyes of fire and the ball of fire was referring to the *cumacanga/lobisomem* complex, if not by name then by appearance and bearing. Perhaps the *cumacanga* was a female version of the *lobisomem* story. *Cumacanga* is lingua geral and is made up of two words. The first is *acanga*, meaning head, and the second is not obvious but could be a form of *cunhã*, or Indian woman. Therefore the composite word means the 'head of a woman'.¹⁹

One of the few published references roughly contemporary with the document comes from the Bavarian scientists Karl Martius and Johann Spix (181). These men were liberal humanists and competent linguists and ethnographers who travelled in Brazil in the late 1810s. Their portraits of the Amazon give some of the best ethnographic insights on the region in the early nineteenth century. In their discussion of the Indian fear of demonic type beings, they draw equivalence between an Indian malevolent spirit and the werewolf of Portuguese origin (Spix and Martius 1981: 146). The Indian spirit is described as a diminutive man, or a dog with long ears that makes a terrible noise at midnight. But they fail to inform what precisely the Portuguese story is. They continue by saying that the similarity is related to the balls or tongues of fire (*boitatá*, or literally snakes of fire) stories which the Portuguese imagine as the mule or horse without a head (*mula sem cabeça*) with fire spurting out of its neck.²⁰

In Portuguese folklore, the werewolf complex has different aspects to the ones mentioned above. Indeed, the werewolf is not necessarily connected to the zoological form of a wolf. Instead a person is transformed into any sort of animal, normally a dog, goat, pig, horse, donkey or another farmyard beast (Pederoso 1988: 187; Vas da Silva 2003: 45;

Ladurie 1990: 58). At night, the afflicted man or woman takes off his clothes, hangs them on a pine tree, and rolls naked in the dirt. This act of spinning effects the transformation, the man will turn into the last animal to have rolled in that place. He will then run very fast, not necessarily seeking animals or humans to attack, and return to his or her human state when the clothes are back on. Werewolves often have yellow skin, a condition which may be linked to their excessive consumption of alcohol and loss of sleep.²¹

The skin is an important motif in this discussion. The anthropologist Francisco Vas da Silva, based on his fieldwork in northern Portugal, has argued that the werewolf metamorphosis is ‘a conversion of an internal form into an external animal shape... which fits with the widespread notion that werewolves are ‘skin shifters’ [from James Frazer]. This supposes a basic equivalence between metamorphosis as a flight of the animal double from the body and as a change of skin’ (Vas daSilva 2003: 346). The skin change suggests a connection between bodily transformation and shamanism, not just in indigenous America but also in European mentalities – a point I will return to below.

What about the other transformational beings that Cavalcante could supposedly turn into?²² There are no details concerning these beings except the reference to ‘various’ or ‘different figures’ and ‘similar deliria’. The key question is whether the figures are of a different order, indirectly related to the lobisomem complex outlined above (but still about bodily change), or whether there are resemblances between the *lobisomem* of luso-brazilian lore and an Amerindian tradition. It is likely that both were developed as they confronted each other.

The historical and anthropological literature on Amerindian shamanism provides extensive documentation on the ability to change bodily shape, either into animals or spirits, and go on a journey (e.g. Langdon 1992, Viveiros de Castro 2002, and Fausto 2012). Recently anthropologists have shown that amongst indigenous Amazonians all bodies are generally conceived as unstable (Taylor 1996, Viveiros de Castro 1998). Bodily changes can be achieved by exchanging substances, such as food, by decorating the body with tattoos or painting or piercing, wearing different clothes and changing skins. These generalised ideas must have fed into the late eighteenth century expressions of shamanism in the Lower Amazon.

Shamans have endured in contemporary riverine villagers along the Amazon and its main tributaries (Galvão 1952, Maués 1995, Harris 2000). These ritual healers make reference to many kinds of supernatural entities, including *encantados* (invisible and generally malevolent human beings captive to the environment), *bichos visagentos* (demonic animals), *visagens* (ghosts), and folkloric creatures (e.g. like the *curupira*) (Lima 1992; Galvão 1952; Maués 1995).²³ To give an example of transformational being of Amerindian origin, I shall refer to *botos* or the Amazonian pink river dolphins (*Inia geoffrensis*). The *boto* can turn into a man or a woman at will. In most widely told part of the story, a *boto* hears the noise of a saint’s festival from the river and wants to be part of the fun. It leaves the water and changes into a well-dressed man in a white suit and hat and black shoes and searches for the dance hall. He starts dancing and immediately draws women towards him who cannot resist his charms. Eventually he disappears into the forest with the one he prefers and they make love. As she recovers herself, he escapes and returns to the river. The women will pine to meet the man again and eventually people will realise that it was a *boto* that seduced her and that she will need the special powers of the shaman (*pajé*) to cure her.²⁴ The dolphin’s clothes are derived from the bodily changes of river animals: the shoes are a pair of stingrays and the hat a turtle. As soon as the *boto* returns to the water all change back again. In other words, clothes are an important part of dolphin’s flight from river to land, but this time in the opposite direction to the werewolf, putting them on, rather than taking them off, to assume a different shape (see Slater 1994).

It is possible that there is a direct resemblance between the *lobisomem* and an Amerindian spirit. The *jurupari* was described by mid nineteenth century commentators as a monstrous, hairy and ravenous beast who lives in the forest and caused great fear.²⁵ Missionaries equated the devil with the *jurupari*. However this assumes the *lobisomem* was also a demonic figure, which we cannot take for granted. We should remember here Mello e Souza’s observation of the wide gulf between popular religious activity and educated and official knowledge and understanding.

What about fire and decapitation? Myths recounted by various South American Indians possess many of the motifs to have been mentioned. In these stories, decapitated heads of women and men have supernatural powers.²⁶ In the Gê version the head turns into a bird and flies away. Another common story, according to Lévi-Strauss, especially

amongst the Gê and the Tupinamba peoples, is the burning headdress. In one version the woodpeckers made a diadem of feathers which gleamed like fire. The sun asked a bird for the headdress so the woodpecker threw it down from the top of the tree. The sun had to catch it before it landed. But the headdress was fiery hot, so the sun threw it up in the air to cool it down. The movement of the fiery feathers matches the head of fire and light in the *lobisomem* and *cumacanga* stories. The Cashinahua in western Amazonia (Panoan speakers) tell of a wandering head which eventually was made into the moon.²⁷

It is impossible to know if these symbolic associations were present for the actors we met earlier. Moreover, the concepts and cultural role of these stories and magical beings have changed since the late eighteenth century. Even though we do not know exactly what these other beings are we can reliably speculate that they come from the panoply of shape changing and enchanted creatures which exist in contemporary times, and some have historical references. The *lobisomem* reference was multifarious and part of a wider complex which was associated with a variety of motifs commonly found in both Amerindian myths and European popular culture. This complex was distinctively nativist and colonial Amazonian for it was the arena in which people shared their cultural signs and symbols.

I suspect the reason why the witnesses refused to give a name to them, or else the clerk did not write them down, is due to the fact that the Portuguese Crown was trying desperately to Europeanize the Amazon. A reminder that a place in the backlands (*sertão*) was cultivating hybrid cultural beliefs, or sustaining the superstitions of the Indians, would have drawn scorn from the metropolis.

We could say that there was a ‘natural affinity’ in the imagination between the changeable beings of colonial Amerindian and European traditions. Even though we are dealing with different types of transformation, these differences could either have been erased in the general comparability or a working misunderstanding, pragmatic frameworks for understanding different traditions which had aspects which resembled each other.

Although he does not employ the term natural affinity, the implication is clear in Carlo Ginzburg’s reinterpretation of Sigmund Freud’s famous clinical study of the wolfman (1989). Ginzburg points out that Freud’s lack of awareness of Russian folklore prevented a fuller understanding of the case and argues that Freud missed a singular opportunity to articulate the connection between phylogenetic and ontogenetic spheres of myths such as the werewolf. For our purposes, what is relevant is Ginzburg’s insistence that ‘*from a historical point of view* [his italics], there is a connection between werewolves and the sabbat which has the *benandanti* as an intermediate link: both can be considered figures in vast half-obliterated stratum of beliefs imbued with shamanistic overtones...’ (Ginzburg 1989: 152). Following this argument, it is understandable why a mestiço form of shamanism acted as the focus for the diverse religious and imaginative world of colonial Amazonia. The shaman was a shape-changer who could communicate with spirits, bless in the catholic tradition, heal sickness, and deal in harm and death. Most of the myths and linked ritual practices of the village Indians were either suppressed or faded away. But shamanism persisted and proved a dynamic, adaptive force. In other words, shamanic activity underlay the intelligibility of the different traditions. This links to a more general phenomenon noted for shamanism in South America, namely its mimetic quality and capacity for generating working understandings (Salomon 1983; Taussig 1987).

Bridging concepts and working misunderstandings

Through a complex of images about humans as transformative beings from Portuguese and Amerindian mythology, a conceptual bridge was assembled between the various actors. The common experiences of facing the repressive conditions of life in a marginal part of the colony, of being disoriented by either dislocation and virtual slavery (on behalf of the Amerindians), and the lack of familiarity with the techniques and skills to survive in the riverine and forested worlds (on behalf of the settlers and administrators) of the Lower Amazon produced a series of locally grounded reconciliations between the various actors. On paper and in the eyes of the colonial authorities, there were enormous gaps between the kinds of people living in one place. Yet this was not an environment in which *anybody* could escape the demands of day-to-day work, except for the lame and sick and the very privileged. The sharing of these demands, if not entirely equally distrib-

uted, provided the possibility, perhaps necessity, for the imaginative limits to take stock of the situation. The work of elaboration may have been taking place collectively but it was not happening uniformly; individuals in different social positions in the colony may have interpreted such developments variously, helping to explain the heterogeneous nature of folk beliefs in evidence today (though there has also been a process of homogenisation as dominant regional versions replace local ones). The point is that the ideas were out in the open, and could be debated or repressed.²⁸ Although something new was emerging, it was not a new 'culture' or new 'imaginary'. Rather there were a series of singular expressions of the negotiated and conflictual relations between the various actors in a place. This expression had both material and ideological aspects to it, and was not necessarily evenly developed.²⁹

In the shape-shifter complex, it is possible then to see a bridging between the varied beliefs and practices – the substratum, to use Ginzburg's archaeological phrase – of Iberian colonists and the traces of the Amerindian groups who were forced into being vassals in the towns. These conceptual bridges were joining continents and individuals with different histories. It was what Serge Gruzinski has referred to a 'métisse dynamique', where there was a merging of horizons.³⁰ This *perception of similarities* requires comparison, which is not so different from the anthropological procedure. Horizons merge as humans live together and learn from one another. Note that this process does not imply agreement or mutuality but a shared frame of reference in the course of learning of each other's interests.

It is significant that the priest was formally acknowledged as the origins of the werewolf story. He would have been well placed to know the religious and imaginative world of the village Indians and how to find a common ground between diverse people. It is tempting to speculate that it could even have been the priest who recklessly suggested the resemblance between different traditions. This speaks to a process of cultural translation, even if in the mind of the priest. Having haphazardly made the connection, perhaps for no other reason than to discredit his local enemy, it caught on and became widely distributed. This indicates the possibility that the natural affinities discussed earlier did not occur naturally – but only with work and in quite precise historical situations and shot through with the power relations which produced their convergence. Alternatively, the priest could have been building on an imaginative phenomenon constructed by others. I am not claiming that these conceptual bridges were successful in bringing people together. They may have provided the hope to create a context for it to happen, but essentially the imaginative frontier, as a mode of being, was not supported by social and political conditions. It promised more than it could deliver. The imaginative frontier connecting the diverse experiences in the Lower Amazon could not be harnessed in the same way as an institutionalised religion like Catholicism. It lacked firm sociological roots and was as unruly as it was creative in its connectivity. The only institutional form for such beliefs and practices would have been the shaman and the knowledge of curing. For this reason the priest and the shaman occupy opposing positions.

By focusing on the work of the imagination in eighteenth century colonial Amazonia, I have tried to offer a new perspective on this period. So often portrayed in apocalyptic or Manichean terms, the decimation of the indigenous Amerindian and the imposition of the Portuguese, I have attempted to shift attention to the people who came to be an active part of this colonial world and their struggles to create a place for themselves to inhabit more or less securely. Despite the violence and abuse, resistance and death, the forced shared participation in and imagination of the world they confronted brought the different groups together.

Conclusion

The story told here has sought to uncover a South American history of connection complementary to those that emphasise loss and destruction. Although the main focus has been a single case, it has been shown to be symptomatic of a wider cultural process associated with kinship, religious activity, folklore and myths, festival participation and in particular shamanism. The political and social environment of the late colonial Amazon produced a blurring of racial hierarchies in which people could explore each other's imaginative worlds. This does not mean there was fusion or hybridity. Rather there were a series of affinities which more than likely concealed deep differences.

The burden of argument sustained by the single case is in the nature of the documentation. I have followed Ginzburg's insistence that a close reading of small number of richly suggestive texts is more rewarding than the accumulation of masses of repetitive evidence (1989). My method has been to piece together and aggregate disparate features – normally the move is to disassemble and deconstruct a complex of associated elements. The aim of this article has been mainly methodological and explored how an anthropologist may work with judicial processes in a way that reveals wider social phenomena.

The idea that colonial Indians or mestiços were imposters, and historically and anthropologically insignificant, has been challenged by a number of scholars – but only very recently. Stuart Schwartz and Frank Salomon have argued that the people mentioned in this presentation were 'new kinds of persons,' for old categories failed to classify them, and they defied the social and class boundaries imposed on them (1999). Some moved between Indian and European society with ease, switching names, languages and clothes, as they did so. Their new subjectivities posed a profound challenge to the European dominated colonial order.

Yet what I hope to have elaborated here is that the colonial Indians of this presentation were not in any simple sense newly constituted persons. Neither were the mestiços 'new people', nor are their descendents who live on the riverbanks today. These individuals may have faced new political and economic structures but they were not complete or total. Those who came to find a 'home' in this colonial world drew on past experiences and revised them according to their embodied propensities and culturally defined limits to see the world in a certain way. Their knowledge and understanding was not constructed out of nothing - it was woven from the multiple threads coming from the past. These were only new persons as far as the colonial context was concerned. From the people's own perspective they were trying to use every possible cultural and material resource in order to take control of their lives.

Notes

¹ Note that one of the Tupi terms mentioned in Lévi-Strauss' article is 'atour-assap', and a contemporary Tupi dictionary translates *atuasaba* as *compadre* or *comadre*.

² The French for working misunderstanding is 'malentendu productif'. I am grateful to Nicolas Ellison for telling me this and for his more general comments.

³ However, there were times when hybrid forms were tolerated and perhaps even actively fostered on a local level. Good examples are the *santidades*, which mixed Amerindian and Catholic practices. These cults flourished in Bahia as early as the second half of the sixteenth century (Vainfas 2005).

⁴ Morais, 'Estudantes Brasileiros na Universidade de Coimbra (1772-1872)', *Anais da Biblioteca Nacional do Rio de Janeiro*, 1940.

⁵ The sources for the biography of Cavalcante are Nizza da Silva, 1994, 243-246; Baena 1969, 345; Raiol 1970, 21; Arquivo Historico Ultramarino, Lisbon, (AHU), Pará caixa 159, doc. 12129; AHU Pará caixa 161, doc. 12283; AHU Rio Negro caixa 18 doc. 750; Parish of Óbidos, *Livro de Baptismos, 1807-1820*; Maw 1829: 341.

⁶ He opened his eleven page letter with the statement "not having had the happy accident of a noble birth, I owe to providence an honest education". Thus began his appeal to his Governor, who had praised him before for his good works and intelligence. His letter offers his story of a series of events, which I will come to in a moment, in a cogent and well-argued way. He also criticized the directorate and calls for its end – 'one director, one tyrant', adding that no one benefits from its regulations. His reasoning was that it is impossible to get Indians to work for production in common, they fled from the village, and the local officials such as the canoe manager did not record properly what is produced. And punishment is not the solution. As a result he had constant fights and no one would obey him. The Indians were 'monsters of ingratitude' and he wanted to 'stuff the mouth of his clerk and treasurer with a barrel of black sun'. He ended his letter with a plea for the governor to spend three days as a director and he wondered how the governor would comply with the legislation. He was 'tired of living with them [the Indians],

adapting to their ways, and getting to know their dispositions and customs.’ Despite these difficulties and the gossip against him, his spirit was not weakened and he would carry on. But ‘nothing’, he reassured the governor, ‘you could say is the invention of your director’. APEP codice 501 doc. 6

⁷ Arquivos Nacional do Torre de Tombo (ANTT), Lisbon, INLx processos.

⁸ The term ‘village or service Indians’ (*índios do serviço* or *índios aldeados*) is used frequently in the documents from the colonial Amazon to distinguish them from the *gentio* who either have escaped from the villages, or refused to be resettled, such as the Mura and the Mundurucu.

⁹ African slaves had a significant presence in the Lower Amazon, and came to play a significant political role in the early nineteenth century especially around independence and the Cabanagem. In the towns of the Lower Amazon there were 101 slaves (Pinto Ferreira 1964) in 1790, but this does not include those working on outlying farms. Some slaves escaped from their masters and set up new communities, *mocambos*. For runaway slave communities in the Lower Amazon, using mostly later 19th century material, see 1999 and for studies of African slavery and culture in the Amazon see Salles 1988 and Vergolino e Silva 1990.

¹⁰ An investigation of proof was called by a person wanting to clear his or her name of various allegations. The town’s *juiz ordinário* (a justice of peace, a locally elected member of town council with judicial powers in minor cases) invites various witnesses to speak for or against the *justificante* (plaintiff, also referred to as the *suplicante*) and what he was alleged to have done or said; statements were written down by the *escrivão* (clerk), another locally important position. For this reason, the plaintiff sent the legal proceedings covered by a letter to the state governor, who had the final say in judging the outcome of the case. A bill for expenses accompanied both investigations and were paid by the plaintiff.

¹¹ The following statements come from a document found in the Public Archive of Pará, Belém (hereafter APEP). It is in fact a bundle of documents consisting of a long letter by José Cavalcante de Albuquerque, dated 31st March 1793 and written in Vila Franca, and two investigations of proof (*autos de justificação*), conducted in the neighbouring towns of Santarém and Óbidos in the middle of March 1793. These three towns were (and still are) situated in the Lower Amazon area of what was then called the State of Great-Pará. APEP Codice 501, doc. 06, ‘Auto de Justificação em que he justificante José Cavalcante de Albuquerque’, Óbidos, 18 March 1793, Estanistão Ferreira.

¹² APEP Codice 501, doc. 06, Auto de Justificação em que he justificante José Cavalcante de Albuquerque, Santarém, March 1793, Hipolito Antonio Lobo Marcante.

¹³ Sommer (2000 and 2003) cites documents which mention the use of stones as talismans (*muiraquitã*), shamans (*pajés*), and garden magic. There are other sources for religious activity such as the missionaries accounts (e.g. Bettendorff 1990), the inquisition (1763-1769, see Amaral Lapa 1978) and the diaries of the pastoral visits of bishops (see below).

¹⁴ See Napaleão Figueiredo and Anaíza Vergolino e Silva, *Festas de Santo e Encantados*, Academia Paraense de Letras, Belem, 1972, p. 24. Their research was done in the 1960s and early 1970s amongst people who live a few days travel by boat south of the capital Belém.

¹⁵ See for example Frederico de Sant’Anna Nery, *Folklore Bresilien*, 1889; Basilio de Magalhães, *O Folclore no Brasil*, 1960.

¹⁶ The literature on werewolves is extensive and I only delved in order to draw out the most relevant general material. Most helpful were Camara Cascudo, 2002; Ladurie 1990; Ginzburg 1989 and 1983; Vas da Silva 2003 and Jacques-Lefevre 1999.

¹⁷ Carlos Roque, in his *Grande Encyclopaedia da Amazonia*, defines the Amazonian werewolf as follows: ‘An evil spirit, monster (a man who transforms at night into a wolf). Even though the wolf does not exist in Amazonia, this is one of the stories which most

clearly reveals the large influence of other groups in the ethnic formation of Brazil, Roque, 1966.

¹⁸ See Cascudo, 1999, 2002 and Rocque, 1966.

¹⁹ Another mythical being which involves fire is the *anhanga*, a hobgoblin type spirit who protects game in the forest. It can transform into any kind of animal, including human, and get hunters lost. Its most common manifestation though is as a deer with fiery eyes.

²⁰ The *mula-sem-cabeça*, the mule without a head, is the metamorphosed figure of a woman who is the priest's lover. The transformation, which takes place over Thursday nights to Friday mornings, is a punishment for moral transgression; it does not seem that the priest in general is punished in folklore. The *mula-sem-cabeça* sparks fire from its neck and charges around with much neighing and is very similar to the werewolf and the *cumacanga*. The story was generalized in the Iberian Peninsula and has various manifestations in Spanish speaking America as well. (Camara Cascudo 2002, 191-195.)

²¹ Echoing the *Paraense cumacanga*, in Northern Portugal, the child of a sexual relationship between a godfather and a goddaughter will suffer the fate of being a werewolf. These beliefs are still part of the folk traditions of peasants living along the waterways of the Lower Amazon. Indeed, any form of incest is punishable by the child turning into an animal (Harris 2000). It is also common for godparents to be chosen amongst close relatives very similarly to Silva's study, but as far as I could tell the practice was not linked to fear of the fate of werewolf for the seventh born, but to an attempt to recreate kinship links and maintain dense communal ties (see Harris 1999)

²² In answering this question it is important to remark that these other figures could be either ones other than a zoological werewolf, such as a goat (so that the werewolf term already includes these other animals), or other beings we know little about, which could be Amerindian.

²³ It cannot be assumed that the idea of *encantado*, literally enchanted beings, is indigenous American in origin, since in Portuguese folklore, the same term is used to refer to a person who can transform into an animal or a plant or inanimate object, but in the new state will be immobile, Coelho 1993, 356.

²⁴ The best source and analysis to date of such stories is Slater 1994.

²⁵ See Hartt, *Amazonian Tortoise Myths*, p. 5; Herbert Smith, *Brazil, Amazons and the Coast*, 1879: 568)

²⁶ Wilbert, *The folk literature of the Ge Indians*, p. 269; Lévi-Strauss, *The Naked Man*, p. 579.

²⁷ See Capistrano de Abreu, *Ensaíos e Estudos*, 1976, Rio de Janeiro, Civilização Brasileira, p. 153.

²⁸ I have used the phrase bridging concepts in order to juxtapose my argument with Andean convergences, such as Sallnow's presentation of ones between pre-Colombian trinities and the Catholic trinity, 1982.

²⁹ In any case this lack of coherence speaks to an outstanding feature of Amazon folk religion: it lacks that quality of being a single web, and a systematic, or otherwise, integration of its influences. Certainly, traces of aboriginal Amazonia at the time of conquest have been changed by their encounter with older Iberian practices and beliefs, but these messy outcomes have not been integrated with local Catholicism. As Galvão remarks, shamanism and Catholicism remain practically distinct and are appealed to in different situations, Galvão 1952, 7.

³⁰ Note that I am not talking about syncretism between Catholicism and folklore but between perceptions in mid to late eighteenth century colonial acculturated Portuguese, ascendant Brazilian and corrupted Amerindian. I have avoided using the term syncretism because of its imprecision and inadequate conceptual framing, and its concealment of differential power relations, see Gruzinski 2000.

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