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Review of Praying and Preying: Christianity in Indigenous Amazonia by Aparecida Vilaça

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***Praying and Preying: Christianity in Indigenous Amazonia* by Aparecida Vilaça, Oakland: University of California Press, 2016. xiv+316 pp., illustrations, references, index. Translated by David Rodgers.**

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This book focuses on Aparecida Vilaça's three decades of research among the Wari', an indigenous community living in the present-day Brazilian state of Rondônia. It is a well-written and rich text that combines ethnography and the anthropological study of religion in an exemplary way. Vilaça, associate professor in the anthropology graduate program housed in Rio de Janeiro's Museu Nacional (one of the premier research institutions in Brazil), has produced a detailed account of the different phases of interaction between the Wari' and the New Tribes Mission, a US-based evangelical group. She chronicles a process that initiated with contact in 1956 and continued through the Wari' conversion to Christianity by 1969. This was followed by a subsequent wave of deconversion and, since 2002, another round of conversion to Christianity following the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York in 2001. The Wari' were able to see the demolition of the Twin Towers on TV and became convinced that the end of the world was coming. Vilaça's description of missionary-Wari' interaction is in the best tradition of what Evans-Pritchard advocated in the late 1940s as the need for anthropologists to focus on translation and interpretation. The title of the book is a clever pun on the author's use of *perspectivism*, a specific methodological idea formulated some decades ago by her colleague, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1998:470), who defined it as "an indigenous theory according to which the way humans perceive animals and other subjectivities that inhabit the world—gods, spirits, the dead, inhabitants of other cosmic levels, meteorological phenomena, plants, occasionally even objects and artefacts—differs profoundly from the way in which these beings see humans and see themselves."

In the course of nine chapters, an introduction, and conclusion, Vilaça presents a fascinating story of conversion, adaptation, and cultural change, drawing also on her own experiences (and shifts in her own perception of the Wari') during her several stays among them. Even though parts of the book have been previously published in journals and a couple of edited volumes, the book presents a coherent whole and a narrative that captivates, both by its arguments and the author's style—for which the translator, David Rodgers also deserves a lot of credit. The structure of the book is such that, even though each chapter could be read separately, it forms a tightly woven net—a net that captures different worlds that the Wari' inhabit. The book is about Wari' skillfully navigating these different worlds. Or, as put by Vilaça:

Given that they are surrounded by Christians on all sides, it is somewhat surprising then that the Wari' are still keen to preserve their own world and that they do so in order to enable the Christian life that equally interests them, a desire that requires them to engage in complex procedures to make this composition possible. The aim of this book is precisely to analyze these procedures, revealing their limits as well as their surprising forms of success (p. 26).

The first chapter deals with the New Tribes Mission and describes their missionary goals and procedures. In the second, Vilaça describes the strategies used in translation. The concept of translation has different meanings for the Wari' and for the missionaries, and it is closely related to native ideas of corporeality, as well as the relationship between humans and animals. "Although both animals and enemies can occupy the positions of humans, animals were the only ones...with whom the Wari' had social relations properly

speaking, through their shamans” (p. 59). Also, “The Wari’ often say that animals prey on the Wari’ (whom they see as enemies or as prey animals) with the eventual aim of turning them into kin, the outcome of which is death for the victim, who goes to live forever on the side of the animals” (p. 64). This leads to a specific (double) perspective of the shaman, who inhabits two bodies simultaneously—that of the Wari’ and of a particular animal species. This enables the shaman to relate to all the animals, as they are all seen as people (pp. 65–66). Chapter 3 deals with the encounter with missionaries and brings more focus to the Wari’ ideas of enemies (*wijam*) and their social/practical implications. The fourth chapter describes the conversion to Christianity against the historical background of Wari’ life since the 1940s.

From the outset, the conversion to Christianity was a collective enterprise, strongly associated with kinship. As soon as the first people converted, they turned to their both near and distant...to take them along. Similarly, the abandonment of Christianity around a decade later also occurred collectively (pp. 103–104).

There were several Christian concepts to which the Wari’ could easily relate, from the idea of the faithful as a community of siblings to some other practical matters, like the notion of sin. In explaining the subsequent conversions and reconversions, Vilaça elegantly uses the material provided by myths, such as the origin of fire and the origin of funerary cannibalism (pp. 112–115), or “the lizard myth” (pp. 122–124). The relations embedded in Wari’ traditional tales have parallels with the relations they read about in the Bible. Thus while God and Jesus were originally perceived as “enemies,” Wari’ gradually transformed their relation “into one of filiation and siblinghood” (p. 118).

Conversion and the change of perspectives are discussed further in Chapter 5, and here Vilaça returns in more detail to Viveiros de Castro’s idea of perspectivism (pp. 126–127), and its implications for understanding the Wari’. Chapter 6 presents another gem—an analysis of how the Wari’ perceive the devil and God (“in his three persons”). Other Amerindian groups share the perception that these persons must be members of the same kin group (p. 167). Changes in traditional ritual which were catalyzed by exposure to Christianity are explored in Chapter 7, while the next chapter deals with the development of a distinctive kind of morality that differs from the notion of “symbolic systems,” as described by Rivière for the Trio. In order to explain the distinctive morality developed by the Wari’, Aparecida Vilaça draws upon the excellent work of Joel Robbins among the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea. The Urapmin seem unable to constitute themselves as moral in a traditional way, and this places them in a permanent “state of conflict, which they associate with sin” (p. 197). As expressed in a prior formulation of Joanna Overing, “Amazonian peoples’ moral systems are based on interpersonal trust, focused on the domain of the domestic and the quotidian, in clear opposition to the coercion through laws and institutions that characterize Western morality” (p. 216). Chapter 9 explores the notion of person, harking back to Mauss and Dumont, as well as the individual/dividual constituting of the human self. In the Conclusion, the author notes that the defining characteristic of the Wari’ seems to be their “capacity to alternate, and undoubtedly the successive movements of conversion and deconversion in the past provide a clear example of this” (p. 242).

Some additional considerations in relation to Vilaça’s use of perspectivism can be made. Although she mentions Viveiros de Castro together with another great name associated with this methodological approach, Philippe Descola (p. 18–19), the actual relationship between the approaches of these two scholars is perhaps a bit more complex (as noted by Latour [2009] and Kapferer [2014]). Within a broader, historical picture, Halbmayer (2012:10) credits the German philosopher Leibniz as the discoverer of the term *perspectivism* in 1714. As a matter of record, the present account might have found more that was of relevance in the vast scholarship on indigenous people and Christian traditions in the Americas. Of course, the author’s emphasis on evangelicals is necessary, given her focus—although, historically, the presence of the Catholic Church in the Americas has been much stronger and has led to important political consequences, including those related to the themes of conversion and spirituality with which she deals (cf. Bricker 1981). When the author refers to scholars who mention “the historical rivalry between anthropologists and missionaries” (p. 9), one does well to recall that Tylor’s work (as well as Frazer’s) would have been almost impossible without the data provided them by missionaries. And one twentieth century missionary, Maurice Leenhardt, is referred to in the book. These comments are not meant to detract from the work under review, however. Vilaça’s book combines insights from fieldwork with interviews,

ethnohistory, myths, current theoretical and methodological approaches, and comparative research (especially Strathern and Robbins on Melanesia) to present a strong argument for the use of perspectivism. The author has provided us with an admirable guide through the alternations that the Wari' have experienced, and her book will be an indispensable tool for both students of Lowland South America and for anyone interested in the anthropology of religion in years to come.

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