

PART **I**

Worlds and Intersections

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CHAPTER 1

Presence, Attachment, Origin: Ontologies of “Incarnates”

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Most anthropologists dealing with non-Western societies tend to see the notion of “religion” as translating very inadequately the range of phenomena they study. And it is true that none of the traditional definitions of religion is really satisfying. Those that emphasize the contents always miss at least one of them or, on the contrary, pile them on in excess. Marcel Mauss, for instance, who was quite aware that religion is neither an essence nor a substance and that it can only be identified when embedded in social phenomena that are historically contextualized, classified these phenomena as “representations” (myths, beliefs, dogma), “practices” (acts, performances, utterances), “organizations” (churches, colleges of priests, monasteries) and “religious systems” (particular religions or groups of religions) (Mauss 1902). By doing so, he left aside the very qualities that peoples infer in the beings (deities, gods, spirits, immortals, ghosts, genies . . .) with which humans maintain all kinds of relations that religious systems may qualify and foster; even though, most of the time, these beings do not require institutions for them to materialize and become operative in human life. In that matter as well as in a few others, Mauss followed his uncle and mentor Émile Durkheim, whose ambitions were to determine religion as an intelligible object – that is, as a reasonable one – and to render manifest the mechanism of its instauration – sacredness as a transfiguration of society – without ever having to ask the embarrassing questions about the attributes with which these “sacralized” non-humans were endowed, or about the mode of presence through which they became

known. Both questions would have attracted too much attention to the seemingly irrational aspects of all religious ontologies, including the one underlying modern European forms of worship.

The same kind of Eurocentric – or rather circum-Mediterranean – bias affects the attempts to define religion in terms of contrastive oppositions. For instance, the one that was propounded by Dumézil between the *sacra* (that which goes from the humans to the gods) and the *signa* (that which goes from the gods to the humans), a distinction where one cannot fail to detect the heavy apparatus of oblation, sacrifice, and the interpretation of omens which binds in the same conceptual parcel the Greek and Roman gods with those of Mesopotamia and ancient Egypt (Dumézil 1968: 277). For these mechanisms of intertwined connectedness are entirely foreign to other peoples, far more numerous than usually stated, who offer nothing to their deities or who maintain with them a wholly unmediated dialogue, one that dispenses with ritual specialists, priests, diviners, or even shamans. In many parts of Oceania, South America or Northern Asia, no *sacra* go to the multifaceted spirits who lurk in the background, because no proper *signa* are expected from them: they may leave discreet clues as to their presence, they may even fleetingly intimate their desire to establish a relation with so-and-so, but this is a far cry from Heavenly decrees descending on mortals.

The same kind of implicit theocentrism goes with the classical distinction between, on the one hand, gods who are a mere guarantee of the world's order, who act as stewards and perpetrators of an uncreated cosmos and whose good will and zeal must be fueled by humans, and on the other hand, an omnipotent creator god to whom one owes the world itself and everything it contains, an inflexible warden of the order which he instituted and the maintenance of which depends upon the proper maintenance of the alliance that he imposes on (some) humans. The first category embraces the religions of the cosmos, various expressions of Daoism, the religions focusing on dharma, as well as all those functional polytheisms in which deities with a high degree of specialization are entrusted with the task of looking after the adequate working of such and such a sector of the world; the second category is restricted to the monotheisms born on the periphery of the Mediterranean Sea. However, both these categories leave aside a large part of humankind. In particular they exclude all those peoples who do not deem it necessary that the world be ordered – they content themselves with trying to maintain fruitful relations with its inhabitants, whether visible or invisible; they also exclude all those peoples who judge that an order once instantiated becomes sufficiently robust for it not to require a permanent struggle against its disaggregation – in Australia, for example, where the great cosmic classes instituted by the Beings of Dreamtime do not need to be constantly consolidated. In short, it remains quite difficult, and rather unwise, to characterize reflexively a universal essence of religion or of sacredness. Thus, it should not come as a surprise that most European scholars who attempted to do so in the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, scholars who were themselves witnesses of, and often actors in, the process of disenchantment of the world, have used for that purpose what was most familiar to them: the transcendence of the sacred and the finitude of Man, divine wrath and the necessity to placate it, obedience and repentance, the magnificence of liturgy and the worldly influence of priests. Hence the emphasis in the definition of religion laid on what was, in Durkheim's words,

“separate and forbidden,” on cosmological order and hierarchies, on the necessary mediation of ritual, corporate groups and dogma.

However, the quest for some common ground that might account for at least a dimension of all religious phenomena may not be entirely hopeless. For there is a universal function which brings Christianity back into the common lot of immanent states and ordinary paganisms, a function that Christianity shares with art but which artists have forsaken progressively in the course of the last century when they deemed it necessary, following Marcel Duchamp’s “ready-made,” to question the self-evidence of iconicity. This function is figuration, that is, the public instauration of an invisible quality through a speech act or an image. Under all the guises chosen to consider it, religion embodies, religion incarnates, religion renders present in visible and tangible manifestations the various alterations of being, the manifold expressions of non-self, and the potencies which contain all their acts. The diverse populations of beings that religion institutes in the various parts of the world, and in the heavens that border them, have this peculiarity that, by contrast with organisms, mountains or philosophical concepts, they are all lying in wait for an incarnation, however insubstantial that may be. This is indeed a defining feature of the central figure of Christianity, but a feature it shares with the different kinds of paganism. What differentiates the various entities instituted by religion are their ontological qualities, the kind of metaphysical coherence that they exhibit, and thus the manner in which they can be rendered perceptually present to those for whom they are a matter of concern. The present chapter is thus an attempt to throw a light on religion by tackling one of its aspects: the ontological pluralism of religious beings and the different ways in which they become known to humans. It can be seen as a contribution to a natural history, not of religion per se – as in the anthropological approach inspired by evolutionary psychology – but of the various populations of “incarnates” that peoples deal with when engaged in the kind of intercourse traditionally labeled as “religious.” In sum, rather than the straightforward “anthropology of religion” – usually focused solely on humans – what this essay wishes to explore is a comparative anthropology of a kind of nonhumans characterized by their intermittent mode of being, and of the very diverse ways according to which these go about actualizing their presence.

ONTOLOGICAL PLURALISM

A rapid examination of the classical literature on religion suggests that there exist at least three major classes of entities that can become embodied and operative in certain circumstances; let’s call them “spirits,” “deities,” and “antecedents.” Each of these classes of “incarnates” appears to be typical of a specific ontology, although some of them may coexist in a single conceptual or physical space, a point I shall return to later. An ontology is taken here as an unfolding of the phenomenological consequences of different kinds of inferences about the identities of things around us, inferences which operate by lumping together, or dissociating, elements of the lived world that appear to have similar or dissimilar qualities. One of the universal features of the human mind upon which such dispositions can be predicated is the awareness of a duality between, on the one hand, physical substances and material processes (here called “physicality”) and, on the other hand, inner dispositions and mental

states (here called “interiority”). By using this grid, humans are able to emphasize or minimize continuity and difference between humans and nonhumans. Thus, on the physicality axis, it may be inferred that all physical bodies are essentially ruled by identical “natural” principles, while the opposing inference stresses species differences and postulates that what marks out different kinds of entities is, precisely, the bodies they inhabit. Similarly, on the interiority axis, the emphasis may be on continuity (all beings have the same kind of inner dispositions) or on discontinuities (humans form a kind apart because of their souls or minds). When stabilized, systematized and transmitted, each of these basic inferences results in a specific ontology, that is, a guiding principle for perceiving how and with what the world is furnished; I have labeled these ontologies “animism,” “totemism,” “naturalism,” and “analogism” (Descola 2005).

In an animist ontology, nonhumans are endowed with the same interiority as humans, but every class of beings is differentiated by the body they inhabit. It is most common among native populations of Amazonia, northern North America, Siberia, and some parts of Southeast Asia and Melanesia who maintain that animals, plants, and even inanimate objects have a human-like intentionality, lodged within a mobile bodily clothing which nevertheless determines, because of its anatomical features, the type of world they have access to and how they see it. Naturalism is the mirror opposite of animism and characterizes the modern world and Western thought. It insists on the differences between humans and nonhumans on the interiority axis: humans alone are supposed to have a meaningful selfhood, whether individual (mind, language, capacity for symbolism) or collective (*Volksgeist*, cultures). By contrast, humans and nonhumans are linked by their shared physicality: they belong to a continuum where the same laws of Nature apply. As for totemism, it is taken here not in the sense, rendered common by Lévi-Strauss (1962b), of a universal classificatory device using natural discontinuities to signify social segmentation, but rather as an ontology that stresses the continuity between humans and nonhumans both on the physicality axis (common substances) and on the interiority one (common essences). It is best exemplified by Australian Aboriginal cultures where specific plant and animal species are believed to share with particular sets of humans an identical complex of essential qualities, but one that is absolutely different from other similar groupings. Finally, in an “analogist” ontology, discontinuities are assumed on both axes, with the recognition that there exist microdifferences between the components of the world at an infra-individual level. But a world thus made of singularities requires in turn, to become intelligible and manageable, that various kinds of correspondences be set up between these heterogeneous elements (hence “analogism”). Analogism was the dominant ontology in Europe until the Renaissance, and it is still extremely common elsewhere: in the Far East and India, in western Africa or among native cultures of Mexico and the Andes.

These various manners of detecting and emphasizing folds in our surroundings should not be taken as a typology of tightly isolated “worldviews,” but rather as an outcome of different kinds of assumptions about what the world is made of. According to circumstances, each human is capable of making any of the four inferences, but will most likely pass a judgment of identity according to the ontological context – that is, the systematization for a group of humans of one of the inferences only – where he or she was socialized. The most usual milieu for that is a collective,

understood as the outcome of a specific way of assembling humans and nonhumans in a network of relations. That notion of collective, which was initially coined by Bruno Latour (1993), is meant here as an aggregating device, the purpose of which is to gather within an operational assemblage certain types of beings that each ontology distinguishes, and to exclude others. For instance, plants and animals are excluded from naturalist collectives – “societies” or “ethnic groups” exclusively composed of humans – while they form their own collectives, one for each species, in animist ontologies. It should come as no surprise, then, that incarnates find themselves distributed into different kinds of collectives according to the ontological features that go with their particular mode of presence. Let’s examine that for each class in turn.

SPIRITS

Spirits are the typical incarnates in what I have called animist ontologies, that is, where a continuity of souls and a discontinuity of bodies is assumed. There, humans and nonhumans are conceived as possessing the same type of interiority: most animals and some plants are treated as persons, each endowed with a soul which allows them to communicate with humans. And it is because of this common inner disposition that nonhumans behave as full social beings: they abide by kinship rules and ethical codes, engage in ritual activity, organize feasts, and procure their subsistence, just like humans. However, the reference shared by most beings in the world is humanity as a general condition, not man as a species. In other words, humans and all the kinds of nonhumans with which humans interact each have a different physicality in that their identical inner dispositions express themselves in different types of bodies, often conceived as clothing that can be donned or discarded, the better to underline their autonomy from the interiorities which inhabit them. Now, as Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996, 2009) rightly pointed out in the case of Amazonia, these specific forms of clothing induce contrasting perspectives on the world, in that the physiological and perceptual constraints proper to a certain type of body impose on each class of being a specific position and point of view in the general ecology of relations. As is often openly stated in myths and ritual chants, nonhuman persons have the same kind of “culture” as humans because they have in common the same subjective dispositions, but the worlds to which all these beings are attuned are different because each of these worlds is but an extension of the particular bodily equipment of a particular species. The resulting combination is then, properly, a pluriverse.

Each animist “body” – a bear, a birch tree, a sledge, sometimes a shadow¹ – is thus animated by a “spirit.” But it may be the spirit of another body since spirits wander between corporeal costumes, not to mention the fact that a spirit can be temporarily divorced from its proper body – notably during dreams – or even on a more permanent basis, a sad fate that often befalls the dead. In the latter case, especially shortly after death, the spirit renders itself manifest by uncanny or unexpected sounds, by leaving traces of its presence, by furtively touching the living, or it remains partially visible under the guise of a tiny miniature of its usual body.² Spirits thus exist phenomenally as “presences,” sometimes fleeting, sometimes stabilized for a while, neither perfectly visible nor completely imperceptible, the existence of which is established by the surface effects that they generate: the crack of a dead twig, a warm

breath of air, the gaze of an animal. Their instauration into a figure, albeit usually a rather incomplete one, thus happens constantly in people's daily surroundings provided they are attentive to the indexical clues that these semimaterial agencies leave in their wake.

As is the case with any other class of being awaiting instauration, spirits can also be instituted through the iconic representation of the avatar into which their original subjectivity was embedded. Figuring a spirit in an animist ontology consists mainly in rendering visible the subjective interiority of the different sorts of beings, and in showing that this common interiority is lodged in a variety of very different bodies which must be unequivocally identified by specific clues. The masks of the Yupik of Alaska provide a fine illustration (Fienup-Riordan 1996; Nelson 1983; Ray 1967). They were used during the winter rituals where they were instrumental in rendering present in the meeting house, *quasgiq*, the souls of animal persons which were honored and entertained so that they should continue of their own free will to surrender their bodies to hunters for humans to feed upon them. Among the great variety of masks, each illustrating a particular event, a myth or the story of a particular relation with an animal spirit, two main categories stand out: shaman masks figuring their auxiliary spirits, and the masks of animal spirits who were received in the *quasgiq* to be honored. In all cases, the interiority of the animal, his *yua*, is figured either by the inclusion of a human face in an animal head carved with great accuracy or, less commonly, by the adjunction of human limbs to an animal body, sometimes by a combination of both. As for the shaman masks they figure the auxiliary spirit, *tunraq*, under the guise of an animal body displaying – or hiding thanks to a mechanical device – a monstrous humanoid face. The masks were anything but static; in fact the meeting house was a sort of theater where the Yupiit staged the world of animal spirits via an array of props, including masks, that were manufactured just for one occasion, and were worn by dancers who told stories, sang songs and imitated with great realism the sound messages of animals; and it was this combination that contributed to attracting the *yua* of animals into the house. Even if the masks were often carved with a striking realism, it was rather the whole scenic design within which they were inserted that ensured their iconicity, and hence the instantiation of their agency. In this sense, the marks of interiority figured on the masks were almost needless: whatever the talent for mimicry of the mask bearer, he could not but reveal his humanity by his body, formerly partially stripped of clothes, so it was obvious for all the viewers that bringing the presence of animals was mediated by a human intentionality adopting the point of view of the animal, that is, incorporating mimetically the intentionality of the animal, without, for all that, being possessed by it.

DEITIES

Let us turn to deities. These are specialized agencies specifically assigned to social units, to subdivisions of space (quarters, cardinal points, seas or mountains . . .) and of time (day and night, seasons, life cycles . . .), to regimes of practice (crafts, statuses, caste specialties . . .) and to kinds of techniques, temperament, and life habits. Deities are common in what I have called analogist ontologies, those that are predicated on the idea that all existing things (entities, states, propensities, qualities . . .) are divided

into a multiplicity of principles, forms, materials, and dispositions separated by tiny intervals, often ordered along a graded scale, such as in the Great Chain of Being which served as the main cosmological model during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. This initial state of fragmentation calls for a structuring of the multifaceted contrasts in a compact mesh of analogies connecting the qualities of each singularity present in the world – and every entity and component thereof is a singularity. Such systems are notable for the remarkable ingenuity invested in detecting all kinds of similitudes and resonances between apparently disparate objects, especially when these connections become instrumental in divining the future, pairing appropriate qualities and treating illness or misfortune. An obsession with analogy becomes a dominant feature, as in traditional China where, according to Marcel Granet in 1934, “society, man, the world, are objects of a global knowledge constituted by the sole use of analogy” (Granet 1968: 297, my translation). But the systematic use of analogy – a form of reasoning otherwise common to all humans – must be understood here as a symptom rather than a defining feature. It points to the evidence of a world made of countless differences, a world that can become comprehensible only by detecting in it resemblances and correspondences, however tenuous, between the states and components of the pieces that form the fabrics of life – including humans, themselves subdivided in multiple fragments partially located outside their physical envelope. Obviously, this kind of ontology requires a lot of work for making its heterogeneous parts stick together; and this is where deities play a crucial role, for each one of these specialized agencies is usually vested with the function of acting as a go-between with such and such a portion or a population of the cosmos.

By contrast with the spirits that wander in the animist archipelago, deities are generally firmly attached to places, where they are the object of genuine cults. They dwell in caves, in lakes, in springs, in mountains, in rocks, as well as in the various sorts of shrines that humans build for their accommodation. There they receive offerings and sacrifices; there prayers are addressed to them at particular times and it is expected of them that they will fulfill in exchange the wishes of their worshippers in the domain of expertise recognized as theirs. Although they are in no way transcendent to human existence, deities are thus less immanent than spirits: besides being located in a specific site – sometimes even embodied in an object (a stone, a piece of wood, a statue) – they are affiliated to a segment of the collective from which are eventually issued the ritual experts entrusted with their celebration, and specialized fields of intervention are assigned to them. Monotheism made a clever move when it merged all these particularisms in a polyvalent God, detached from specific places and from segmentary solidarities, a principle of totalization which has rendered more efficient and more economical the integration of disparities. Analogist collectives are thus alone in having veritable pantheons, not because they are polytheist (a not very helpful characterization, for it is usually understood as a mere pluralization of monotheism), but because, as has often been pointed out, one finds the same diversity and profusion in the little community of deities as there is elsewhere in the world at large. On the surface of the earth as well as wherever the deities live we have indeed the same world, with an identical social division of labor and an identical compartmentalization of the sectors of activity, with identical rivalries and antagonisms between its segments. This is why the various human units of an analogist collective strive, by setting up cults, to get their own particular deities to accomplish whatever they are

destined to do, and endeavor to mobilize their particular temperament and field of expertise in certain collective undertakings for which their cooperation is indispensable. This is also why analogist pantheons are so flexible: most empires were clever enough to welcome the deities of the peoples they conquered, for the cooperation of these newcomers was useful to integrate within a cosmic totality the disparate elements of which these vast collectives were composed. But conversely, it is also perfectly normal that analogist collectives subjected to Christianization – in Mexico or the Andes, for example – should readily add to the scores of nonhumans that already existed in each segment the whole gamut of Catholic saints, along with the powers that each of them is recognized to possess.

Christianity and the deities of analogist collectives also share a strange institution which is unknown among animist collectives, sacrifice. Rather than rendering this practice a defining feature of an embracing definition of religion, one could see it as a means of action developed within the context of analogist ontologies in order to establish an operational continuity between intrinsically different singularities. For this purpose, it makes use of a serial mechanism of connections and disconnections that functions either as an attractor – to establish a connection with something else – or as a separator – to break a connection that already exists at a different level and that one seeks to dissolve. For the characteristic feature of a sacrifice is that it establishes a link between two terms initially unconnected, the purpose of the operation being, to cite Lévi-Strauss's definition,

to establish a relation, not of resemblance but of contiguity, by means of a series of successive identifications. These can be made in either direction, depending on whether the sacrifice is expiatory or represents a rite of communion: thus, either of the persons offering the sacrifice with the sacrificer, of the sacrificer with the victim, of the sacralized victim with the deity; or in the reverse order. (1962a: 297–298).

Making use of sacrifice to forge a relationship of contiguity between initially separate entities may seem necessary in an analogical ontology in which all existing beings are singularities between which links need to be established. In that sense, a link between two distant and heterogeneous entities such as a sacrificer and a deity can only be constructed by a mechanism of gradual and transitive identifications between the intermediate elements.

A common feature of the mode of presence of deities is their occasional embodiment in material objects, whether iconic or not. This trait appears all the more crucial as it is often expected of these agencies that they show indications of the destiny which will befall individuals and collectives, and it thus becomes often necessary for them to render these indications manifest through physical actions. Besides, adoration and prayer are made much easier when they are addressed to objects that one can precisely identify and with which one can identify oneself. The mode of presence of deities is thus quite different from that of spirits, an important point that requires a clarification.

I surmise that spirits become present in images through an inference of intentionality that corresponds to a mentalist strategy – their material form acquires an agency because it is endowed with the same kind of intentionality as the agent that it renders present and which renders it active; while deities become embodied through a behavioral inference that corresponds to an externalist strategy – a deity's image acquires

an agency because it purportedly has a kind of human-like mode of existence corresponding to the social role it is expected to play. The internalist theory is grounded in the premise that humans attribute the cause of the behavior they observe among fellow humans to a mental disposition: it is because I presume that the person with whom I interact possesses a mind like mine, hence representations, beliefs, feelings, that I am able to interpret his or her behavior; while the externalist theory stems from the Wittgensteinian principle that a mind is inferred in others on the ground of the intuition that their behavior, notably their linguistic behavior, follows a rule that can be reconstructed. Instead of having to choose between a mentalist strategy and an externalist strategy, as Alfred Gell felt obliged to do when he discussed the mental process that can activate an agency in an image, it appears more reasonable to surmise that spirits materialize according to the former and deities according to the latter (Gell 1998: 126ff.).³ In other words, an image can be seen as having an agency, either because in certain circumstances it appears to express the same type of intentionality as the subjects who made it, inspired it or used it, or because, by stipulating for the image a social role conceived by analogy with that of a human, it appears to be able to act independently. In the first case it materializes as a spirit, in the second as a deity.

Let's go back to the Yup'ik masks to see how they embody spirits. During the ceremonies where they were used, as I pointed out, it was obvious to everyone that the presence of an animal interiority was mediated by a human agency. The dancers were not alienated by the spirit of the animal that they represented, rather in the sense of an attorney representing a principal; they kept the full control of their subjectivity and only served as a filter for the animal point of view thanks to the objectifying agency of the mask. Furthermore, as is very often the case with masks in an animist regime, these were endowed with agency during the performance only. A mentalist inference was thus activated occasionally, in an exceptional context where the mask operated as one among several other presence-triggering devices of which it embodied the figuration. There is nothing surprising in the fact that animist images are most often provided with agency through a mentalist inference, since the imputation of an interiority conceived by analogy with that of humans is precisely a typical feature of animism. If such a disposition is quite plausible when directed toward nonhumans leading autonomous lives – animals and plants – to whom representations, desires and even beliefs can be ascribed in certain circumstances, by contrast, the agency ascribed to artifacts must perforce be the index of a surrogate intentionality, precisely that of a spirit, here understood both as a subjective reality capable of mental representations and as a kind of nonhuman incarnating this subjective reality in a variety of hypostases, including man-made images.

Before turning to the materialization of deities through an externalist strategy, let's consider a third kind of potential incarnate, what I have called "antecedents," for some of these share with the deities their specific mode of presence.

ANTECEDENTS

Antecedents are literally what one has to get back to in order to understand, and accept, the conditions of the present order. However, by contrast with the creative deeds and exploits attributed to deities in an unspecified past, antecedents are sources

of qualities and rights for restricted local groups of humans only; they are fragmented determinants. Two main kinds of antecedents may be distinguished: ancestors and totems. Even if, in both cases, they constitute agencies from which social segments draw their ontological identity, they have little in common.⁴ Let's begin with ancestors. These are humans from previous generations, neither really dead nor entirely alive, often materialized in domestic or lineage shrines, whose descendants depend on them for almost everything: their status, their temperament and dispositions, their means of subsistence. In many West African societies, it is not only the possessions at one's disposal or the ceremonial prerogatives one enjoys that are allotted by the ancestors, but also one's share of happiness and misfortune, one's fate as a (semi) mortal. The cult addressed to the ancestors is thus not so much a way of honoring them and thanking them for all that they transmit; rather, it is an attempt to conciliate them and dispel their anger, an attempt that one can never be sure will be crowned with success. The flow between generations is irreversible, for it is impossible to return to one's ancestors what they have given, starting with life. The living thus inherit a debt that is transmitted unflinchingly from one generation to the next, until they pass away themselves and can make their descendants in turn pay for the life and the corporate patrimony that they have received. Paying one's duties to the dead – in particular through the proper accomplishment of rituals – is not only to compensate for one's existence and everything that makes it possible; it is also an insurance for one's own survival after death.

Despite some behavioral differences between deities and ancestors – both, anyway, emerge in analogist ontologies – they share an identical mode of presence. Examining this mode will bring us back to the question of how a social agency is inferred in these kinds of incarnates. We have seen that deities (and now ancestors) materialize in an object through an “externalist” inference, by contrast with spirits who become embodied as a result of a mentalist inference. The case of ancestors' shrines among Mandé and Voltaic societies in western Africa will provide a suitable example of the former process.⁵ There, standing in houses or sanctuaries, wooden sculptures figure adult men and women, upright or seated in hieratic poses, devoid of any narrative dimensions. They are archetypal images of individuals characterized by a stage of life and a recognizable status. Among the Lobi, for instance, in a room called the “chamber of powers,” the head of the household settles the effigy of a clearly identified maternal ancestor with whom he shares some qualities. For instance, the statue of a forefather wearing on his head a calabash spiked with porcupine quills bears witness to the status of powerful healer that this ancestor shares with his descendant. During his lifetime the owner of the chamber of powers fits it with objects linked to his personal history, with ancestors' effigies and figurines carved on the occasion of an incident consequential to him or to a member of his household, so that the room appears as a vast biographical fresco where the effigy of the tutelary ancestor keeps watch over a congregation of clay and wooden statues augmented by a confused mass of objects. Now these statues, designated in all this area by words denoting the shadow and the reflection, are the doubles both of the ancestor *and* of his descendant who pays homage to it. For the configuration which links them to be activated, it must be incorporated in a figuration recognizable by the ancestor because it was carved in a specific style by the carvers working for the maternal clan. And it is only if the ancestors identify themselves in their effigies that they accept to come and

inhabit these iconic repositories. Ancestors' statues are at the same time singularities, each the double of such and such a maternal ancestor embodying the destiny of his descendant, and an archetype of the image to which the living must try to conform. It is for this reason that the statues bear the marks of the ritual transformations undergone by their descendants or that they are bound to go through.

It can readily be seen that these small "wooden persons," as the Bambara call the effigies of their ancestors, are quite different from the spirit masks of the Yupiit. They do not incorporate an episodically activated nonhuman interiority; they permanently embody the network of social relations that link the ancestor to his descendants and his kin, by emphasizing the positions that they occupy in relation to each other, their reciprocal duties, and the rituals which reunite them periodically. However, the statue is not a symbol or an emblem, but indeed a "little person," that is an artifact inhabited by a human who is neither completely dead nor fully alive, and endowed because of this with an agency of his own in spite of his apparent immobility. But this is an agency of which only the effects – whether prophylactic, vindicatory or reparatory – are perceptible by those they affect, a means to give credit to a presence by the result it generates. The best way to ascribe this disposition to the effigy is thus to treat it according to an externalist approach, as an eminent agent of the life of the collective; for not only does it obey the social rules that govern the relation of the ancestors to the living, but it validates them and renders them possible. Never mind, then, the obvious inertia of the carved ancestors, since these indexes, prominent in a medley of other indexes, offer to the gaze, in the darkness of the chamber of powers, the chain of affinities which bestows dynamism and substance to collective life.

Let us turn now to the second kind of antecedents, namely totems. In Australia at least, they are the prototypes of encompassing qualities, physical as well as moral, whose actual form may be left undefined. Totems are now commonly qualified in the ethnological literature on Australia as "beings of the Dreamtime," a lexical *aggiornamento* which regretfully tends to restrict their application to a single cultural area, however large, and thus strips them of the potential for constituting a worldwide class of incarnates. Although totems are not as generalized as Frazer suggested in "Totemism and exogamy," these kinds of agency nevertheless were recognized as potent means of identification in other parts of the world, particularly in North America and Oceania. However, thanks in particular to the richness of the ethnography on Australian Aborigines, the totems of this area may be singled out as good models for this category of incarnates. In Australia, then, the main totem of a group of humans, most often an animal or a plant, and all the beings, human and nonhuman, that are affiliated to it are said to share certain general attributes of physical conformation, substance, and behavior by virtue of a common origin localized in space.⁶ It may even be that these attributes that crosscut species boundaries are not derived from what is improperly called the eponym entity, since the word designating the totem in many cases is not the name of a species, that is, a biological taxon, but rather the name of an abstract property which is present in this species as well as in all the beings subsumed under it in a totemic grouping (von Brandenstein 1982).

Totemic groupings are thus systems of differences, but these go beyond a mere system of classificatory labels. For the differences are not primarily between animals and plants that would offer a system of natural discontinuities as a template for designating social discontinuities – for example, the obvious differences between the

Crow (Wardaar) and the White Cockatoo (Maarnetj) would have provided to the Nungar of southwest Australia an analogical model for the social differences between the moiety of the Crow and the moiety of the White Cockatoo. The differences are more ontological than natural, in that they bear upon bundles of attributes common to different beings, including humans, within classes designated by words denoting dispositions – for example, still among the Nungar, humans and nonhumans belonging to the moiety of “the getter” (*maarnetj*) have a set of physical and moral qualities distinct from those belonging to the moiety of “the watcher” (*waardar*), two names that also serve to designate respectively the crow and the white cockatoo (von Brandenstein 1977). And among humans, the qualities – physical conformation, color of skin, character, etc. – do not proceed directly from morphological or behavioral features of the cockatoo or the crow; rather, the two birds are prototypes of encompassing qualities of which they are deemed to offer a synthesis. They are signs for a totem which is a source of life, form and identity, but remains unrepresentable as such. When an emu or a kangaroo is painted on a piece of bark, it is not an attempt at depicting the “ancestor of the clan,” it is an instantiation in an animal of the specific combination of qualities proceeding from a specific totem, an animal which, for the convenience of figuring an indescribable abstraction, stands as a conventional representation of the totem and is named after it.

Although the embodiment of antecedents (ancestors or totems) into images is quite common, it is not a requirement for their incarnation. For even when they remain invisible or reduced to traces – as with the bones of the ancestors confined to receptacles or the effects of the action of totemic beings on the structuring of the Australian environment – they continue to maintain a metonymic relation with those whose existence they determine or instantiate. Whether embodied in statues, preserved as mummies or inhabiting shrines with their diffused presence, ancestors remain powerful agents because the attachment of descent – par excellence a relation of contiguity – is constantly reactivated by their descendants who wish to benefit from what they procure. Their incarnation is thus mainly obtained by the desire that something of them be present in the living. As for totems, they become alive through other relations of contiguity: descent also, but in a more essential way than with ancestors, as each one of them is a hypostasis of the qualities defining the human and nonhuman members of the class proceeding from it; and indexicality, because the whole world is a direct trace of their bodily moves and actions. In spite of their current invisibility, antecedents are thus very concrete since the ontological qualities and the collective privileges that they transmit, infused in bodies, objects and sites, ensure the continuity, generation after generation, between a point of origin and those that it irrigates.

There are probably more kinds of incarnates in the world than those listed in this chapter and some of them may combine features pertaining to different kinds. For instance, the many physical expressions of the souls of the dead may be likened to the mode of presence of spirits, although these manifestations do not really fall into the category of ancestors' behavior; where the spirits of the dead wander freely among the living, there is neither a dependency of a set of humans upon a set of dead nor the idea that the latter play a part in the ontogeny and the sociogenesis of the former. A certain fluidity of ontological boundaries is also encountered in Australian totems: although they are mostly prototypes from the dawn of time, they may

sometimes be described as spirit-like and whimsical agencies still intervening in the daily affairs of humans.⁷ A measure of cohabitation between different sorts of incarnates is also possible in a single collective. In the sort of typical analogist ontologies where deities and ancestors proliferate, spirits are not unknown, but they are more particularized, specialized and attached to places than in animist ontologies.⁸ Even monotheism is known to coexist with spirits. A remarkable answer to the necessity of providing a unique standpoint from which to synthesize a multiplicity of agencies, monotheism nevertheless allows for a discreet survival of what it aimed to replace, such as the *jinn* in Islam or the various *vaettir* spirits in contemporary Lutheran Iceland. But ontological crossovers are uncommon on the whole, because the qualifications of incarnates, like those of any other kind of population, follow strictly the type of qualities that each ontology requires for any being to come into existence.

By contrast with any other entity, however, an incarnate in general is entirely defined by its very movement of becoming (visible, audible, tangible, efficient, representable, lovable, horrific . . .) which confirms its intermittent existence and eventually signals that a “religious” event is going on. Whether in domestic icons of the Virgin or in Yup’ik masks, in Yolngu paintings of totems or in African ancestor shrines, the actualization of a presence in various forms is the basic process that brings to the fore different sets of agencies, with different sets of properties, which require in turn different kinds of treatment from humans. Of course, one could speak there of hierophany, a term with a solid standing in the history of religions. But hierophany implies that something out there is revealed, something sacred preexisting its manifestation and which stands in stark opposition to everything mundane and profane. On the other hand, the figuration of an incarnate – that is, its very existence – is nothing but the ad hoc objectification of an agency which corresponds to the expectations of those that become aware of its presence, expectations that are themselves shaped by the ontology of the things familiar in the context where these agencies appear. No revelation is implied of something transcendental and previously hidden from perception and consciousness – although some religions emphasize this aspect; what we have, rather, is an objectification of a potentiality the very nature of which is to become objectified now and then. Figuration is indeed the adequate term to designate this sleight of hand, midway between the capture of a form (*forma*), which evokes too neatly the idea of an inalterable prototype, and the reproduction of an image (*imago*), which overemphasizes the idea of the copy, diminished and devalued, of that same prototype.⁹ Although he had Christian iconography in mind, with its historical weight of incarnation, Hans-Georg Gadamer did not mean otherwise when he emphasized the exemplary nature of the religious image: “in it we can see without doubt that an image is not a copy of a copied being, but an ontological communion with what is copied” (Gadamer 1986: 125). No wonder, then, that in our disenchanting world, art has become the new form of religious experience.

NOTES

- 1 See the remark by Bogoras that, among the Chukchee, “Even the shadows on the wall constitute definite tribes and have their own country, where they live in huts and subsist by hunting” (1904–1909: 281).

- 2 The miniature may also be the usual form according to which a nonembodied “soul” can be apprehended, for instance among the Chewong of Malaysia (Howell 1989) or the Inuit (Laugrand and Oosten 2008).
- 3 As Maurice Bloch rightly pointed out, Gell deals with this question in a paradoxical manner since he draws on an internalist theory in his treatment of the intentionality of the works of art, while he refers to an externalist theory when it comes to explaining certain effects of their agency, such as idolatry or anthropomorphism (Bloch 1999).
- 4 Aboriginal totems are often qualified as “ancestral” in the anthropological literature on Australia, but it is obvious that they can only be so in a metaphorical way when compared to what “real” ancestors stand for in West Africa or in China.
- 5 See the chapter “Le corps et ses doubles,” in Breton et al. 2006.
- 6 This explains the kind of counterintuitive statement reported by Spencer and Gillen who, when showing a photograph of him to an Aranda man of the kangaroo totem, received this comment from him: “this one is exactly like me; as is a kangaroo,” leading them to comment “every man considers his totem . . . as the same thing as himself” (1899: 202).
- 7 For an example among the Mangarrayi of northern Australia, see Merlan 1980.
- 8 For such a case of coexistence in Inner Asia, see Hamayon 1990.
- 9 As Erich Auerbach noted in his 1938 analysis of the use of the term *figura* by Lucretius (Auerbach 2003: 17–19).

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