1   **Perspectivism**

In one of the founding texts of post-processual archaeology, Reading the Past (Hodder 1986), Ian Hodder asked what a series of figures nowadays familiar to archaeologists were (Figure 1.1). According to the point of view of the observer, each object can be one thing or another: a box with a side near or far from the observer, a deer or a bird, a bear behind a trunk or a knotted trunk. One might say they are 'perspectivist objects'. Hodder told us that before we could do anything with them, we had to decide what they were. We had to categorize. These categories, he argued, are formed through a process of perception involving the real world, our theories regarding them and our own social and cultural context (Hodder and Hutson 2003). That is, there must be a point of view and at least one subject that interacts with those figures. However, Hodder (1986) argued that the decision about what they are is neither subjective nor a matter of alternative interpretations: they are in fact different things for different people according to their relative position in the world. That is, what they are comes down to different subjects and their respective points of view of the world. This is what perspectivism is all about.

There is of course much more to perspectivism than this practical, simplified introduction. Perspectivism is both a theory of the world and a way of being in the world. As a theory, it is a set of philosophical assumptions about reality; as a way of being, it implies effective practices in that world. Perspectivism, expressed as theory and practice, is based on the anthropology of Amerindians, mostly native groups from the lowlands of South America, but also others worldwide. Perspectivism was developed chiefly by Brazilian anthropologists, among whom the figure of Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996a, 1996b, 1998a, 1998b, 2004a, 2010a, 2012a, 2014) stands out as its main
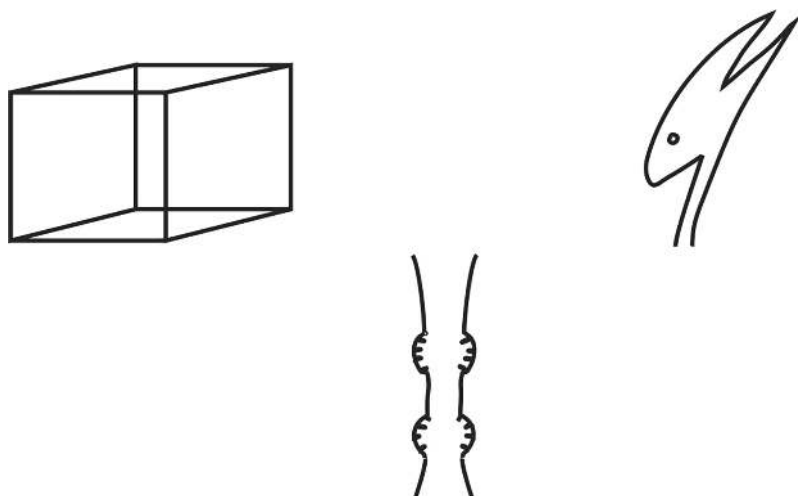
FIGURE 1.1 Perspectivist objects (based on Hodder 1986)

proponent and theorist, followed by Tania Stolze Lima (1995, 1996, 1999a, 1999b, 2000). To explain the characteristics and scope of perspectivism, I begin with its meaning in Amerindian ethnography, which will help to reveal gradually its main characteristics as an anthropological theory and the issues and challenges it poses, particularly for archaeology. Subsequently, I describe the various manifestations of perspectivism beyond the lowlands of South America, laying the foundation for a discussion of the specifics of the concept of materiality and the nature of objects in perspectivism in the following chapters.

THE GENESIS OF PERSPECTIVISM

The sense that some native groups in South America had a particular way of comprehending animals, spirits and some material objects as animate that differed from traditional animism can be found in many Amazonian ethnographies from the twentieth century (see Reichel-Dolmatoff 1996). Likewise, a variety of ethnographies of native North American groups, such as the Cree, the North Pacific coast cultures (for example, see Hallowell 1960, 1975, on Ojibwa ontology) and the Zuni, pointed towards this particular cosmology. The first concrete insight

into perspectivism and the concepts and precepts associated with it relate to an earlier concern of Brazilian anthropologists with the idea of the person (Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro 1979; see also Lévi-Strauss, 1963, 1964, 1967). To a great extent, the theory was also anticipated in the fieldwork and dissertation of Viveiros de Castro (1992) among the Araweté, 'From the enemy's point of view: Humanity and divinity in an Amazonian society', in which he wrote about the concept of the person and cannibalism. In the mid-1990s, a number of nearly simultaneous publications on Amazonian groups not only sparked interest in Amazonian peoples in contemporary global anthropology but also highlighted the principles of perspectivism and other ontologies (Århem 1990; Descola 1992, 1996; Gray 1996; Lima 1995, 1996; Rivière 1994, 1995; Viveiros de Castro 1992, 1996a). Philippe Descola's (1992, 1994, 1996) recouping of traditional anthropological concepts such as animism and totemism was particularly impactful in an international context, where the relationship and limits between nature/culture and human/non-human were being discussed and a new debate on animism was gaining momentum (Ingold 1995, 1998; Bird-David 1999).

Three publications made prominent contributions to the understanding of Amazonian ontologies. With hindsight they are perspectivist in content, while at the time they were seen as describing an animist ontology. The most important was an article written by Kaj Århem (1990), a Swedish ethnographer who worked with the Makuna people in Colombia; the other two were written by Peter Rivière (1994, 1995), a British anthropologist working with Amazonian groups in Suriname. Based on his 1989 fieldwork among the Makuna of Colombia, Kaj Århem (1990) proposed novel ideas about the way the Makuna think about the relationships between nature and culture and animals and humans. His interests were centred on ecological relationships; he wanted to understand the use of forest resources and how this manifested in the Makuna cosmology. Århem (1990, 2001) argued that ecological knowledge that translated into beliefs resulted in more harmonious and balanced environmental relations and management.

4 PERSPECTIVISM

The Makuna worldview held that humans and other living things were related in spirit and substance by a common human-like soul. Any living being (including plants) could be referred to as a 'person', all having a material and an immaterial form, or intangible spiritual essence (Århem 1990: 112). The cosmos was a large community organized under the same principles as human society, with all beings living a human life in their own worlds (Århem 1990: 125). Not only did they live in their own human-like world, but they were in fact human beings, their true form hidden beneath animal bodies and skins. All this implied a mode of interaction with nature completely different from a mode in which human beings define themselves as radically different and superior to other beings. It was a comprehensive system of ideas, values and practices that made up a true philosophy of nature, or 'ecosophy', given its ecological emphasis.[1]

Århem made a further insightful observation, though he did not develop it: that living things, as humans, had their own point of view or perspective. As humans, he noted, they saw the world as we do, but from the perspective of their own species. Thus, what was water to humans was beer to a deer; what were fish to vultures were worms to people, and so on. For the Makuna, animals are organized into communities and do in their worlds the same things as humans do in theirs. They have their own territories, homes, rituals, customs and objects. In a word, they have 'culture'. Crucially, it is not just that animals live as humans; they are in fact people. There is a shared identity between humans and other beings based on a shared spiritual essence (soul) and a common mythical origin. Fish, prey and humans are different bodily manifestations of that shared spirituality. This common essence becomes evident when one of these species transforms into another. Fish can become prey animals, prey can transform into fish, and both become people when they enter their homes: 'they strip off their skins and put them back on when they leave, while

---

[1]   'Such integral system of ideas, values and practices carry us to what Naess has called ecosophy: a philosophy of nature invested with normative value; ecological knowledge turned into belief' (Århem 1990: 109, citing Naess 1981).

people remove their shirts' (Århem 1990: 121). That is, different kinds of living beings institute different worlds appropriate to their particular needs and characteristics. Despite the disparities in the external forms, a shared spirituality circulates among them: bodily appearances conceal a common internal unity. Yet an interrelated whole exists, a diverse society united by a cosmological order.

The various forms of life are analogues of each other but differ in the social groups each form. Moreover, just as the relations between social groups are reciprocal and mutually dependent, the same applies to the relations between humans and animals. Hunting, for example, is a type of exchange between beings. At a very general level, Makuna order the living world into three broad classes of entities based on relative position in the food chain: 'eater', a central 'ego' and 'edible' (food). The ego can be both an eater and edible. Humans can hunt deer in the same way that humans in turn can be hunted by a jaguar.

As noted, Århem (1990) described a typical feature of the Makuna worldview that he called a 'perspective quality'. For him, a perspective position is one that sees the world from a specific point of view dependent on the 'viewer'. The capacity to see the world is shared but always manifests from a particular point of view according to the class of being. Something that appears as one thing to humans is different for other species, though each perspective is equally true and valid per se. For vultures, maggot-infested rotting carcasses are really rivers full of fish; as noted, for humans, what deer drink is water, while for deer it is beer. Shamans are particularly qualified to see these different worlds or, more correctly, to see worlds from the point of view of other species. Humans, as a species, are decentred; their point of view is only one among others. There is no single true or correct representation of the world – there are many.

Though Rivière has not been as influential as Århem, he elucidated concepts that enabled perspectivism to be seen as a shared phenomenon among many lowland groups in South America. Around the same time as Århem's article was published, Rivière published an article in Portuguese (Rivière 1994) and one in English

(Rivière 1995) in which he made a similar argument about the body and interiority, though not about points of view. Rivière identified a defining feature of Amerindian ontology: that the native people of the Amazon live in a highly transformative world where appearances can be deceptive. Using the acronym 'WYSINWYG' (What You See Is Not Necessarily What You Get), he focused attention on the difference between external appearance and internal reality. External forms can be put on and taken off, like clothing, and conceal an underlying reality. Although he based his conclusions on Amazonian myths, he nevertheless argued that transformations occurred not only in mythical space-time but also in the everyday world (Rivière 1994: 256). Rivière emphasized transformation and instability in living beings, changeable external appearances (that can be reversed) and the presence of an internal 'soul' or spirit. Thus, a human form can conceal an animal interiority and vice versa. Importantly, Rivière intuited a shared communality among living beings as well as a capacity for transformation based on the bodily surface or outer covering. Although he is silent on perspective and worldviews, he makes a brief comment that will prove important for perspectivist theory: that behaviour is a better guide than appearances in everyday life, as 'it is never safe to believe the evidence of your own eyes. It is better to wait and see what transpires' (Rivière 1994: 261). As we will see, what living beings do – their affects and behaviours – is what differentiates them as species, not their soul or external bodily form.

Animism and Perspectivism

Amerindian studies and their relation to anthropological theorizing were brought to the fore by the work of Philippe Descola (1992, 1996) among the Achuar from the Ecuadorian Amazon and his reformulation of the concept of animism. His general approach aimed to establish general schemes of praxis arising from the operation of underlying principles of reality constructed by different cultures. Descola (1996) considered the objectifications of nature and otherness as key problems. In addition, Nurit Bird-David's (1999) reformulation of Tylor's (1871)

traditional concept of animism as a relational epistemology had a significant impact and opened up new horizons of inquiry on the subject. Descola (1996) argued that the principles underlying the construction of social reality should not be sought in the relationship between human beings and their natural environment, but rather in operational schemes originating in cognitive devices shared by all humans. It is through their operation that the social objectification of nature is implemented, resulting in native taxonomies, for example. In such schemes, 'nature' is always constructed with reference to the human domain, which is how animism is generally explained. The difference is that Descola noted that these schemes are consequently informed by ideas and practices relating to 'self' and 'otherness'. For the author, there is a homology between the ways in which 'nature' and 'others' are conceived, thus highlighting continuities and discontinuities between the social and natural domains (Descola 1992: 110–111).

At the time, Descola (1992) proposed totemism and animism as two distinct processes by which humans impose continuity between the domains of nature and the social. Following Lévi-Strauss (1963), he argued that totemism makes use of empirically observable discontinuities between natural species to conceptually organize an order that delimits social units. Totemism expresses a relationship between a social group and a natural category; discontinuities in nature are signs used as metaphors for differences in the social order (Descola 1992: 124). In contrast, the traditional anthropological notion of animism is that it endows natural beings and things with human dispositions, with will and intention or agency. Moreover, natural beings possess their own spiritual principles, making it possible to establish personal relationships with them, including relationships of protection, hostility and exchange. Animate entities have the status of persons with social attributes, including social hierarchies, kinship relations and behavioural norms. Unlike totemism, in which relationships between natural species provide a conceptual ordering for society, animism holds that social categories order the relationships between humans and natural species. For Descola (1992: 114), animist

systems are a symmetrical inversion of totemic classifications: whereas totemism expresses a relation between a natural category and social aggregates, animism posits relations between individual entities treated as single persons, whether a natural category, plant or individual animal. Descola's work has had a significant impact on anthropology, consolidated by the subsequent publication of the more detailed and complete versions of his model some years later, in which he includes analogism and naturalism as two additional modes of relationship and identification between nature and society (Descola 1996, 2006, 2009). Descola's conceptualization of animism allows for equivalence between humans and animals as persons, as well as the recognition that there are no fixed boundaries between nature and society. It was not hard, consequently, to interpret Århem's perspective quality and Rivière's human–animal transformations in terms of Descola's animism. Though several authors (Alberti and Marshall 2009; Descola 2006; Halbmayer 2012; Harvey 2006; Holbraad and Pedersen 2017; Pedersen 2001; Willerslev 2007), and even Århem (2016) himself more recently, consider perspectivism in a broad sense to be a variant of animism (a 'companion concept', as Århem puts it), it nonetheless has some unique characteristics that distance it from animism as a distinct ontological phenomenon (Lima 1996, 1999b, 2000; Viveiros de Castro, 2002a, 2011a).

While for Descola animism is a set of practices in the world and a classificatory system in anthropological theory, for Viveiros de Castro (2009, 2014) perspectivism is a theory about the world and not a classificatory system, though it does involve practices. Even as a set of practices, however, it differs from Descola's animism, since two entities cannot be human at the same time (Viveiros de Castro 2004a). Relations are not 'animist', since relations are between people and other entities under their non-human form rather than between people and other people. As Viveiros de Castro (2014: 69–70, emphasis in original) argues,

Neither animism, which would affirm a substantial or analogic resemblance between animals and humans, nor totemism – which would affirm a formal or homological resemblance between intrahuman and interanimal differences – perspectivism affirms an intensive difference that places human/nonhuman difference *within each existent*. Each being finds itself separated from itself, and becomes similar to others only through both the double subtractive condition common to them all and a strict complementarity that obtains between any two of them; for if every mode of existent is human for itself, none of them are human to each other such that humanity is reciprocally reflexive (jaguars are humans to other jaguars, peccaries see each other as humans, etc.), even while it can never be mutual (as soon as the jaguar is human, the peccary ceases to be one and vice versa).

The debate over whether perspectivism is just one of several variants of animism remains unresolved.[2] If we define animism in a broad sense – or, as Århem (2016) and Ingold (2006) suggest, in terms of a 'new animism' – encompassing a spectrum of cultural phenomena and characteristics that are associated with the interrelationships between beings and souls or spirits (Harvey 2014), perspectivism could be classified as animism. That is, it would be part of 'a propensity among indigenous peoples worldwide to anthropomorphize nonhuman beings and things – i.e., the notion that not only human beings have soul (consciousness, will, intentions) but also animals, plants and a whole host of other objects and phenomena' (Århem 2016: 4–5). But of course, it is precisely the richness and particularity of perspectivism that is lost by labelling it as and fitting it within such a broad description of animism.

---

[2]   Århem (2016) distinguishes between an egalitarian or horizontal animism and a hierarchical or vertical form, depending on the complexity and hierarchization of the differences in the forms of social organization. Descola's and Viveiros de Castro's work can be described as structuralist animism, while Ingold's and Bird-David's approach is a phenomenological animism.

Perspectivism as Cosmology

Perspectivism as a distinct cosmology appeared simultaneously in articles by Tania Stolze Lima (1996) and Viveiros de Castro (1996a) in the same volume of a Brazilian journal published in 1996. Each author contributed in different ways to its definition. This conjunction, as the authors acknowledge, was the result of a dialogue between the two. Lima (1995, 2005) had completed her dissertation among the Yudjá or Juruna,[3] a Tupi group, under the direction of Viveiros de Castro at the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, while the latter had been working on questions of otherness, personhood and the body among Amazonian groups for many years (Seeger, Da Matta and Viveiros de Castro 1979; Viveiros de Castro 1979, 1992 1996a). In her 1996 article, Lima developed the idea of 'point of view', drawn from the relationship between humans and animals in the cosmology of the Yudjá. An analysis of the relationship with peccaries in hunting helped her to highlight and define the difference between the concept of point of view and animism. In the same article, she elucidated the relationship between the soul, the body and the individual and in the process discarded the concept of cultural relativism as an adequate framework to understand the nature–culture relationship. Based on myths and ethnographic records, Lima (2000) writes, peccaries for the Yudjá are people. And, as such, they have a human spirit and way of life in their own domains but the outward appearance of an animal; that is, they have a perspectival quality that makes them see things from their own world in a human way. However, Lima also found that the Yudjá actually recognize peccaries as animals, not humans; the key point, in fact, being that peccaries consider themselves to be human (Lima 1999b: 113). Humanity is not an intrinsic property of humans, but a characteristic that must be produced, which many entities can do, particularly animals. Animality, Lima (1999b: 115) argues, is a form of other-consciousness, while self-consciousness

---

[3]   Juruna was the name used for the group by Lima in her dissertation and early articles. She subsequently realized that the more correct name was Yudjá (Lima 2005).