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2013

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# Ethnomusicology Forum

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**THE HUMAN AND NON-HUMAN IN LOWLAND  
SOUTH AMERICAN INDIGENOUS MUSIC**



 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
ISSN 1741-1912

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# Ethnomusicology Forum

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SPECIAL ISSUE: The Human and Non-human in Lowland South American Indigenous Music  
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# Introduction: Considering Music, Humans, and Non-humans

Bernd Brabec de Mori and Anthony Seeger

*Research on music was almost neglected during the history of the anthropology of Lowland South American indigenous societies. This may be due to their difficult accessibility and lack of infrastructure in former research, as well as due to the different focus of researchers. However, the area is now thriving, because many anthropologists and ethnomusicologists have recognised the central role music performance plays in ritual, specifically when ritual action involves non-human agency. The role of animals, plants or spirits in Lowland South American cosmologies has been studied intensely during the last decades, and laid way for the theories of perspectivism and new animism. The authors show how music is used in cosmologies where communication between humans and non-humans is paramount. Further on, they suggest that the sonic domain can help in explaining many indigenous narratives about transformations and non-human agency.*

*Keywords: Music Performance; Lowland South America; Anthropology; Non-human Agency; Indigenous Societies*

Imagine a Shipibo ritual set within a thin-walled house in a rainforest village on a pitch dark night. A patient, breathing lowly and probably sleeping, is lying before an indigenous singer and high-level ritual specialist (*meráya*). The patient's numerous family members sit around the scene; children huddled in the corners, whispering or likewise dozing. The patient is ill; because he or she was bewitched by a human sorcerer, or maybe by an animal or spirit; this detail does not matter for what follows:

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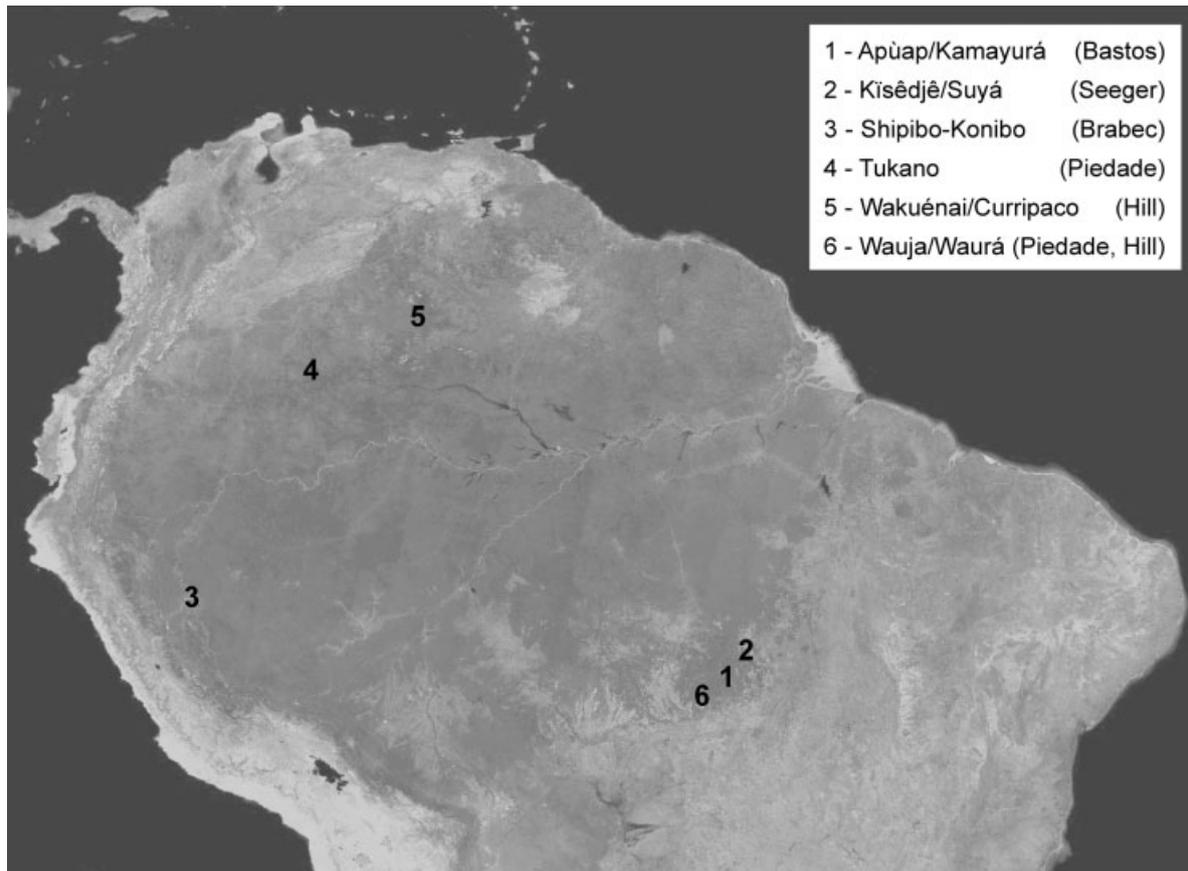
the singer raises his voice alternately to a high falsetto and repetitive, low staccato phrases. The song is intended to confront and overthrow the original causer of the illness. Some phrases from the beginning indicate that ‘It is said that I am singing / while the *bobinsana-meráya* is singing / he is singing “I am the *yashingo*”’. ‘It is said’—from a third person’s point of view, we can say that the Shipibo *meráya* is singing; confirmed by the field researcher and evidenced by his tape-recorder. But the singer points out that actually a plant-person is singing; and to complete confusion, the plant-person is singing that it was another plant-person.<sup>1</sup> But can a plant be a person? And how could such a person sing? Can Lowland South American Indians perceive plants as singing persons? Does the same apply to animals, to spirits, to the dead? Indigenous references to singing or music-making non-humans not only abound in Lowland South America but can be found in many places on Earth. Should we treat these as metaphors; or literally, what could they mean? And what can such references tell us about the indigenous cosmos, lived worlds and music?

In a recent volume of the *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Timothy Rice (2010) called for a theory of ethnomusicology, or more precisely for an increased focus on theorising findings from ethnographically grounded music studies. Ethnomusicological theories should therefore transcend the local, particular musical culture and establish frameworks for further, global analysis. The present special issue of *Ethnomusicology Forum* takes up the challenge. It builds upon a symposium convened by Brabec de Mori at the 41st World Conference of the International Council for Traditional Music in 2011 in Newfoundland. Despite a strong regional focus on musical ethnographies of a variety of Lowland South American indigenous societies (see Figure 1), the authors are developing a particular ontology of sound and music performance. Building upon current cultural and social anthropological theories, we elaborate on indigenous auditory perception and its interrelation with what the Indians—and consequently we—know about the world. Further on, we describe how music performance can contribute to defining humanness and how music as communication may transcend the permeable boundaries of humanness. These issues extend well beyond the Amazon and Orinoco rainforests and contribute to a renewed understanding of sound and music as building blocks for constructing and reconstructing the world we live in.

Following John Blacking’s (1973: 3) definition of music as ‘Humanly Organized Sound’ and his argument that leads us to a ‘Soundly Organized Humanity’ (1973: 89), we could stay with the generally accepted opinion that music is something essentially human. However, Marcello Sorce Keller has proposed an increased study of ‘zoomusicology’, including his tantalising remark that he ‘would like to suggest

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<sup>1</sup>The *bobinsana* (bot. *Calliandra angustifolia*, *Mimosaceae*) is a bush predominantly growing on the rocky shores of small rivers and creeks. The *yashingo* (unidentified) is another bush that seems likely to grow on the same sites as the first one. The song mentioned was performed and recorded in 2006, archived at the Vienna Phonogrammarchiv. See Brabec de Mori (2011: 901–2) for a complete translation, and Brabec de Mori (2012) for a contextual analysis.



**Figure 1** Map of northern South America, indicating the main locations of the indigenous groups mentioned in this issue. Taken from <http://www.zonu.com/images/0X0/2009-11-04-10814/Mapa-de-America-del-Sur-satelital.jpg> (accessed 29 September 2012). Indications by the authors.

that musical scholarship excluding non-human animals cannot ultimately describe “how musical is man” (2012: 168).

But rather than focusing on whales’ or birds’ songs, ‘the non-human in music’ in the current context draws upon an improved understanding of Lowland South American indigenous societies. Today it is widely accepted in anthropology that these indigenous people have developed techniques not unlike Keller’s proposal: they listen to animals (and other non-human beings), study their behaviour and potentials, translate this knowledge and bring this agency into the realm of their own musical community life. It is crucial here to notice the difference between listening to the obviously audible and listening to the apparently inaudible. The first idea coincides with what Keller proposed and what, for instance, the Papuan Kaluli do (see Feld 1982): the birds Kaluli people listen to and later imitate in their songs sound similar to those registered by the field researcher. The second idea, on the other hand, refers to indigenous people listening to the entities or persons (commonly referred to as ‘spirits’) embodied by plants, birds or other animals; that is, listening to the apparently inaudible and unrecordable (see Menezes Bastos, this issue). Lowland

South American Indians tend to prefer the latter method. Although they can, for example, hear the call of the bird of prey *matataon*, when they sing the *matataon*'s song they do not imitate the acoustic shape of the call but refer to the bird's person-entity as the song's source. Consequently, by singing, they become the bird (see Brabec de Mori, this issue).<sup>2</sup>

### **A Revision of our Basic Assumptions about Lowland South American Indians and their Music, Myth and Dance**

During the last 20 years, specialists in the indigenous societies of what is referred to as 'Lowland South America' (to distinguish the region from the Andean—or highlands—region of South America) have been demonstrating how little we actually knew about the history, narrative and music of the inhabitants of the vast region extending from the foothills of the Andes to the mouth of the Amazon and from the Caribbean to the southern tip of South America. During the 1970s we believed the ecological capacity of most of the Amazon to be too low to support large populations. We often did our research in very isolated locations without any electronic contact with the rest of the country and world. We recorded speech and song on heavy reel-to-reel tape-recorders that quickly consumed expensive batteries and scarce tape. We often recorded and analysed single pieces of music and single stories because that seemed sufficient. Dance was extremely expensive to record and rarely documented because video-recorders for fieldwork were only a dream, moving picture film was costly and the cameras at the consumer level were still silent. Nearly 500 years of European contact with Amazonian and Orinoco Indians had resulted in very few publications on their music and dance, although many brief descriptions of them filled the pages of explorers' narratives and some longer reflections gave us glimpses of a sonorous relationship with the world.

Ironically, the deforestation of parts of the rainforests revealed the presence of large numbers of interconnected archaeological village sites that had gone undetected on the forest floor before the removal of the trees (Heckenberger 2005; Roosevelt 1991). Applying new methods, archaeologists have shown that the pre-Colombian population of the region was larger than previously imagined, the resultant population loss was greater and there is much still to learn from both the archaeological record and the contemporary indigenous communities. Likewise, anthropologists, linguists and ethnomusicologists working with contemporary indigenous research associates have overturned our thinking about oral narrative and music. They have revealed large narrative and musical structures that incorporate many of the units previously considered to be separate 'myths' and musical pieces (on narratives, see the work of

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<sup>2</sup>Please note that there are recordings available in order to complement our written analyses with a listening experience. The books by Menezes Bastos (2013) and Seeger (2004) contain CDs with audio examples. Hill has his recordings archived and available at AILLA, Texas, and Brabec de Mori at the Phonogrammarchiv, Vienna.

Basso 1985; Hill 1993, 2009; Werlang 2001, 2008; on music, see Menezes Bastos 2007; and on ‘verbal art’, see Fausto, Franchetto and Montagnani 2011). The ethnohistory of the region has also been revealed to be far deeper and richer than we realised (important sources include Basso 1995; Franchetto and Heckenberger 2000; Hornborg and Hill 2011; Wright 1998).

If our perspective on the indigenous peoples of the pre-Columbian era was determined partly by the limitations of our understanding of contemporary indigenous societies and by the invisibility of the earlier large-scale settlements under forest canopy and fluvial soils, our perspective on indigenous music was probably shaped in part by the limitations of our recording devices and our stereotypes about Amerindian music. Rafael José de Menezes Bastos, along with his students Acácio Tadeu de Camargo Piedade and Maria Ignez Cruz Mello, have shown that the music of some of the groups in the Upper Xingu does not consist of short, unrelated, individual pieces but rather of extended sequences of pieces that resemble suites or dramatic operas that last for hours, days and perhaps weeks (Menezes Bastos 2007; Piedade 2004). Menezes Bastos’ (2013) transcription and analysis of the music of an entire 11-day ceremony of the Kamayurá is the first of its kind. Elsewhere he has written:

a notable characteristic of the music of Lowland South America [...] can be summarised under the heading of ‘sequentiality’ and typifies the musical organisation of the rituals on the inter-piece (song or instrumental) plane, or the articulation among the respective vocal, instrumental, vocal–instrumental components. (Menezes Bastos 2006: 8)

He continues that ‘Everything appears to indicate that isolated pieces of music do not make much sense in the region’ (Menezes Bastos 2006: 8), and yet most of the previous analyses of South American Indian music have been of isolated pieces, rather than their inter-piece framework. Careful musical transcriptions and analyses of extended performances reveal that what is often heard by non-Indians as repetitious is, in fact, not repetition at all. Rather, it is variation either unperceived or dismissed as accidental by non-indigenous listeners.<sup>3</sup> The apparently small variations in Upper Xingu flute music and song are perceived by the performers to be a series of different but related musical ideas.<sup>4</sup>

In 1974 a book on South American Indians was published with the title *Native South Americans: Ethnology of the Least Known Continent* (Lyon 1974). The book included many ground-breaking articles for the time. Nearly 40 years later we know

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<sup>3</sup>This recalls Thomas Turino’s observation that he could not always figure out how some of the Andean panpipe pieces differed from others (1993: 89).

<sup>4</sup>Seeger (2004) once suggested that we might consider the almost daily Kisêdjê rainy season and dry season songs to be in fact single songs that lasted six months each, but never followed through on the suggestion. Menezes Bastos (2013) and Piedade (2004) have demonstrated in detail how this happens with suites of flute music pieces and long ceremonies.

the region a lot better—and we think about it very differently than proposed in many of those contributions. We certainly know a lot more about its music than we did then and we have developed new ways to examine and describe musical performance (for a fine discussion of the study of indigenous music in Brazil, see Menezes Bastos 2007). The changes during the past few years suggest there is a lot more to be learned with the help of indigenous investigators and the use of new technologies for recording, preserving and disseminating performances.

### **New Animism and Perspectivism in Lowland South America**

The contributions in this special issue address the role of music specifically in relation to its origin or destination: much ritual music in Lowland South America is said to be received from, or directed to animals, plants, spirits or the dead—that is, non-human beings in general. In biological sciences (and common sense in industrialised countries), humans are defined as beings pertaining to the species *homo sapiens*. In indigenous societies, however, this definition may not apply and the understanding of who or what can be regarded human (and consequently non-human) may differ significantly. This implies, among different societies, a varying understanding of what are culture, society, nature and the environment. Although by no means new to anthropology, during the 1990s a renewed interest in these issues surfaced (see especially the volume on *Nature and Society* edited by Descola and Pálsson 1996). In an attempt to overcome the duality of nature and culture, French anthropologist Philippe Descola (1992) explains that in many native communities a vast range of animals, plants and spirits are regarded as persons not unlike humans in the sense of *homo sapiens*. Descola's proposal is often termed 'new animism', because it contrasts with the classical view on animism, where animals, plants or geographic entities were thought to be inhabited by a spirit (e.g. nymphs were thought to inhabit streams). In a more recent book, Descola (2011 [2005]) introduces four ontological models for any communities on Earth, based on the respective relations between a human agent and other beings relative to him or her: (new) animism, analogism, totemism and naturalism. While Descola illustrates naturalism with modern European/western, totemism with Aboriginal Australian and analogism with African and traditional European ontological concepts, he explains how animism is conceptualised by presenting examples from Lowland South American indigenous peoples: animism implies that across different species, exterior qualities (bodies) are discontinuous but their interiority (mind, soul) is similar or continuous. More than the other models, animism enables communication, socialising and transformation across the borders of these categories of beings or species. Descola's ontological models allow for a theoretical framework to be constructed in which non-human agency is evident and the problematic notion that indigenous people would believe that peccaries were persons to be rejected: within an animic ontology, they are persons.

Most of the contributions to this issue address the usefulness of a concept called 'Amerindian perspectivism' that likewise emerged during the 1990s. Similar to 'new

animism', this concept re-interprets the existing term perspectivism<sup>5</sup> specifically for Amerindian contexts. For those unfamiliar with the concept, it was first described by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (1996) along with one of his students, Tânia Stoltze Lima (1996), and has been developed by a number of Viveiros de Castro's other students. Viveiros de Castro subsequently published on the phenomenon in English, German, French and Portuguese (for English, see especially 1998, 2004, 2012); Lima later published a wonderful ethnographic study of the Yudjá (Lima 2005). Contrary to Descola's models, perspectivism does not intend to abolish the nature–culture divide, but radically reverses the relation between culture and nature relative to a naturalistic understanding. Viveiros de Castro claims that this set of ideas and practices are found throughout indigenous America and refers to them ('for simplicity's sake') as though it was a cosmology:

This cosmology imagines a universe peopled by different types of subjective agencies, human as well as nonhuman, each endowed with the same generic type of soul, that is, the same set of cognitive and volitional capacities. The possession of a similar soul implies possession of similar concepts, which determine that all subjects see things in the same way. In particular, individuals of the same species see each other (and each other only) as humans see themselves, that is as being endowed with the human figures and habits, seeing their bodily and behavioral aspects in the form of human culture. What changes when passing from one species of subject to another is the 'objective correlative,' the referent of these concepts: what Jaguars see as 'manioc beer' (the proper drink of people, Jaguar-type or otherwise), humans see as 'blood.' Where we [humans] see a muddy salt-lick on a riverbank, tapirs see their big ceremonial house, and so on. Such difference of perspective—not a plurality of views of a single world, but a single view of different worlds—cannot derive from the soul, since the latter is the common original ground of being. Rather, such difference is located in the bodily differences between species, for the body and its affectations [...] is the site and instrument of ontological differentiation and referential disjunction. (Viveiros de Castro 2004: 6)

To bring this home to the reader, consider the difference between new animism and perspectivism and the general Euro-American idea of the differences between human beings and animals. There is a widespread attitude in Europe and North America that human beings are exceptional in their use of language, use of tools and their ability to reflect on themselves. Animals are considered to be unable to do those except in (at most) a rudimentary fashion. With the exception of certain pet-owners and members of religious faiths that originated outside Europe and the Middle East, most people who believe humans have souls do not extend that status to animals or inanimate objects. While thinking on some of these points is shifting today in the face of animal

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<sup>5</sup>In the following, 'Amerindian perspectivism' will be called 'perspectivism'. It is to be noted that perspectivism is a well-known idea in German philosophy: introduced by Leibnitz, it was more prominently formulated by Nietzsche as a 'perspectivistic subjectivism' that generates a plurality of *Wirklichkeiten* (see Kaulbach 1990). Amerindian perspectivism is very similar to Nietzsche's, who, however, limits available perspectives to human beings (as conceived by him).

behaviour research (tool use and communication are recognised as being more widespread than earlier declared), a firm distinction is still made between humans and other animals. Contrast that with the idea that all animals have souls and that every species sees itself as human, speaks a language, uses tools and engages in ceremonies in which music and dance are usually a part. Members of a species look like humans to one another, but other species do not look like humans.<sup>6</sup> In Lowland South American human societies, at least, certain specialists (often referred to as shamans) can move between the perspectives of different species at will, and other humans who are not specialists may also have experiences in which they see the human form of animal species. Viveiros de Castro suggests this is a widespread understanding of the world in Lowland South American Indian societies and beyond.

### **Going Beyond: Multiverse and Agency**

As Viveiros de Castro has noted, the idea was swiftly applied to other cases and became the centre of heated debates among specialists in Lowland South America—among them Brabec de Mori, Hill and Menezes Bastos in this issue. Perspectivism has been criticised for ignoring the importance of objects, which can also have souls according to some groups (see the excellent collection of articles in Santos-Granero 2009); for ignoring significant differences among the cosmological ideas of different South American Indian communities (Menezes Bastos, this issue); for focusing too much on the visual (Brabec de Mori 2012; Lewy 2012)—perspective is a visual idiom (e.g. the verb ‘see’ appears eight times in the quote from Viveiros de Castro 2004); for focusing too much the perspectives of prey and predator (Hill, this issue); and for ignoring the salience of the sacred. Terence Turner (2009) in a brilliant paper shows that both ‘new’ animism and perspectivism can neither overcome the duality of culture and nature or body and mind, nor establish an alternative to what he calls ‘the crisis of late structuralism’. That said, it may be rewarding to understand specifically Viveiros de Castro’s claim, which is more radical than Descola’s animism, as a political agenda. Viveiros de Castro declares a certain political intention when he suggests that the worldview resulting from perspectivism (a concept he calls ‘multinaturalism’) is a ‘bomb’ with considerable social impact when applied to western society (see Latour 2009). By suggesting an alternative interpretation of alterity in the world, he challenges the ethnocentric naturalistic understanding of a multicultural world. He does so by giving a voice to Amazonian Native peoples, who are among the most marginalised citizens on Earth. With that, ‘subaltern’ people otherwise unheard (cf. Spivak 2008) are empowered to partake in the global discourse of the nature and functioning of the world.

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<sup>6</sup>Descola (2011: 214–18) states that the main difference between his definition of animism and Viveiros de Castro’s perspectivism lies in the form humans are perceived by non-humans: whereas perspectivism indicates that for non-humans, humans appear in a form different from a human body, Descola insists that also non-humans perceive humans in their human bodily appearance.

Regarding definitions of humanness, however, both new animism and perspectivism agree that these are not similar to the notion of *homo sapiens*, but propose a concentric, deictic hierarchy of humanness that can be observed in ethnonyms (cf. Frank 1994; Viveiros de Castro 1998: 472): a person's own social unit is considered to pertain to the 'Real People', whereas neighbouring indigenous groups as well as non-Indians are included in 'People' but excluded from the 'Real' ones. Going further, many animals, plants, spirits, objects and geographic entities (rivers, lakes, mountains) may as well be included in 'People' and excluded from the 'Real' ones. Relative to naturalistic understanding, the frontier between human and non-human becomes undefined, shifting and permeable. It may be important to note here that the ascription of humanness to other than *homo sapiens* by Lowland South American Indians is the result of actual experiences of otherness (i.e. transformation) during accidental transcendence of the porous boundaries of humanness in illness and by being captured (see e.g., Gow 2001; Illius 1992; Lima 1996; Vilaça 2005), as well as during ritual performance that is most often experienced by ritual specialists. Therefore, understanding these specialists' epistemology by closely analysing their ritual praxis can shed much light on the relevance and limitations of perspectivism and animism (see Brabec de Mori 2012). Considering that a great part of ritual and narration is performed through music, this epistemology can only be really understood when indigenous music performance can first be comprehended. Ritual music is the still missing link to understanding Lowland indigenous cosmologies.

Approaches by both Descola and Viveiros de Castro suggest that the traditional layer-cake cosmic structure often communicated in the literature—that is, a vertical division in three, four or sometimes more parallel worlds (one or more underworlds, the world we live in, one or more heavens or worlds in the sky)—is an overt simplification of how most indigenous people understand the cosmos. In literature, this cosmos is sometimes described with metaphors from system theory, specifically fractal self-similarity in different scales (Kelly 2005, among others). Halbmayer goes beyond such metaphors, because 'Thereby we will have to keep in mind that such abstract theoretical considerations always reflect our own models. They are necessarily radical reductions of lived social and cultural complexity' (2012: 117). This author continues that lowland indigenous 'cosmologies do not create encompassing totalities or an integrated universe, but [...] a multiverse of co-existing and multiply connected worlds relying on a specific form of non-totalizing partial encompassment' (Halbmayer 2012: 120). The overlapping parts of Halbmayer's multiverse may include persons, houses, tools, musical instruments, animals, plants, villages (of humans or non-humans) and so on. These parts are related to each other and, through the distribution of agency in various aspects of the multiverse, these relations as well as the entities themselves are never stable but have to be constantly negotiated, maintained or transformed (cf. Vilaça 2005). Halbmayer continues that:

From within such an ontology, it is completely clear that communication and interaction with other-than-human persons may be achieved and how this is done. The main question inside the ontology is how reasonable exchange and

communication across the borders of unstable and temporary entities and worlds may be managed without being permanently transformed into the other. Politics of fragile inter-species and multi-world border management become central in a world in which the avoidance and limitation of such contact and exchange is at least as important as its strategic establishment. (Halbmayer 2012: 119)

Such complex relations between humans and non-humans are further illustrated by the concept of distributed agency (see also Latour 2005) developed by William Sax:

To say that agency is distributed in networks is not a radical claim, it is merely a truism. A much more radical claim is that the [spirits] have agency too, that they are part of the agentive network. [...] In any case, nonhuman agents are crucial for the functioning of the system, which would lose its coherence without them. (Sax 2009: 133–4)

The (distributed) agency of nonhumans is also treated by Michael Taussig. In *Mimesis and Alterity* (Taussig 1993), he describes how in many different societies and historical situations, mimesis is used as a tool for defining as well as demolishing alterity. An indigenous ritual chanter, for example, creates a copy of a tree or a peccary by ‘singing it into being’. Taussig suggests ‘that the chanter is singing a copy of the spirit-form, and by virtue of what I call the magic of mimesis, is bringing the spirit into the physical world’ (1993: 105). This brings us to the function of singing, and the ontology of music. For Taussig, the song is ‘a verbal, toneful, simulacrum’—thus, an artefact that works as a copy of the spirit world and simultaneously of the world people live in. The song as an object is also mentioned by Santos-Granero (2009), although rather peripherally while analysing *The Occult Life of Things* in a much broader sense. A song, however, or any sonic manifestation, may be considered a ‘thing’ that has an ‘occult life’ in the Amerindian context, enacting agency and maybe even intentionality in certain conditions or situations. Singers of magical songs among the Peruvian Shipibo, for example, may ‘summon the songs’ for ritual use, and the songs may ‘come’ and pass through the singer’s mouth, or may refuse to do so, thus causing the ritual to fail.

### Essays in This Issue

Rafael José de Menezes Bastos opens the essays with a profound treatment of the constructive and communicative faculty of the sonic. He concentrates on the perception of sonic events that originate from sources that are rather obviously known to produce sounds (e.g. birds) but likewise from sources that are commonly understood as silent (e.g. fish) or even regarded as non-existent by most non-Indians (i.e. spirits of all forms). In a way loosely related to Feld’s (1996) acoustemology, Menezes Bastos describes the Brazilian Apùap’s (also known as Kamayurá and indicated by the numeral 1 in Figure 1) system for classifying such perceptions and its relatedness to their system of music production. He analyses the musical structures of performed music in order to show how these are interrelated with the classificatory

system and its categories of sounds from outside the domain of humanly performed music. Departing from this case study, he suggests the use of three probably pan-Amazonian musical phenomena—translation, sequentiality and variation—for inter-ethnic comparison rather than music's relatedness to vision-based theoretical concepts like perspectivism.

Acácio Tadeu de Camargo Piedade further expands on the faculty of the sonic to communicate and interrelate between spirits, men, women and spirits, again. First, he compares the sacred flute complex between the Tukano (number 4 in [Figure 1](#)) and the Wauja (number 6 in [Figure 1](#)). By extrapolating a dual cycle of musical production, he juxtaposes the supernatural cycle of spirits communicating to human Wauja ritual specialists with the social cycle of musical communication between men and women. Thereby he shows in detail that much of the communication necessary for maintaining the Wauja world in its shape as well as the individual persons' bodies in health can be achieved by sonic means, while at the same time these processes are almost entirely excluded from the visual domain. Piedade shows that sonic mimesis and music-based deception of enemy others are more prevalent in the Wauja's understanding of the world than transforming into the other, or transiting between different perspectives.

Jonathan D. Hill criticises in his contribution a common attitude of most perspectivists, who base perspectivism on predation and aggressively transforming the other. He exemplifies how analysing performances of wind instruments can help to deconstruct the paradox of 'living well' in terms of group-internal relationships within an environment of seemingly predatory and violent exterior relations. He bases his analysis on musical ethnographies of the Wakuénai (number 5 in [Figure 1](#)) and Wauja (number 6 in [Figure 1](#)), concluding that 'musicalising the other' through ritual aerophone performances provides for a renewed understanding of alterity, production and reproduction that is grounded in interspecific communication and sharing of space–time rather than in predation and cannibalism. His essay shows that collective performances maintain a balance of life-giving and life-taking forces and at the same time provide stability for the musicians' and their groups' identities.

Bernd Brabec de Mori takes up the transformative faculty repeatedly mentioned by Shipibo (number 3 in [Figure 1](#)) ritual specialists. By analysing funny animal songs called *osanti* and elaborating on the role of humour and laughter in the construction and maintenance of the world, he shows that mimesis and transformation are closely related. *Osanti* songs can only be performed by ritual specialists, because their uttering is grounded in the singers' knowledge of how to transform into animals while retaining their own humanness. All this is perfectly obvious in song lyrics and performance styles, although at the same time well hidden from, or eloquently deceiving, both humans' and non-humans' visual capacities. He shows how these funny songs establish a hierarchy of beings based on their respective competence of perception and action rather than on an economy of predation or affinity as suggested by perspectivism. Humorous singing of funny animal songs also

contributes to boundary work between humans and animals, a process fairly similar to humour in western societies.

Anthony Seeger's concluding contribution to the present issue takes up the history of the renewed understanding of Amerindian cosmologies and explains the effect that his own knowledge of perspectivism had on the interpretation of his prior fieldwork results. He presents a variety of questions that could be answered in a different and perhaps more consistent way than he answered them in earlier publications, thereby nevertheless stressing some limitations of the concept as formulated by Viveiros de Castro and Lima. Building on these renewed understanding, he adopts another visual and literally perspectivistic idiom, the 'gaze', in order to analyse how Kisêdjê Indians (also known as Suyá; number 2 in [Figure 1](#)) represent themselves towards others, or non-humans—namely whites—in order to focus the latter's gaze on the Kisêdjê body. This narrative about indigenous modernity illustrates the role of ritual music and dance in the Indians' interaction with non-Kisêdjê in the broadest sense.

### Is Music Human?

Considering the repeated instances of transcending boundaries or broadening the notion of humanity in these papers, we have to reconsider Blacking's statement that music was essentially human in nature. The category 'human' is not used everywhere to mean the same thing. This category is variable both spatially and temporally. We do not have to look very far back in European history to see times when men were humans but women were only women, and when the faithful were humans and infidels were not. In Central Europe, it is often terrifying to note how the ideas of a time when 'Aryans' were humans but others were not are still present and recurring. In Lowland South America, times are changing too. Shifting attitudes towards non-Indians, the globalising world and technology influence cosmologies and therefore categorisations of beings, as is hinted at in various papers in this issue. In the Andes and western Amazon regions, it is still not clear whether whites are all humans, or if some—or all—of them pertain to the *pishtako* demons. They are certainly not 'really' humans. We can deduce that humanness as a category is shrouded and permeable, and consequently it becomes fairly unclear who (or what) one refers to when writing about non-humans. We will return to this in a moment; but let us first consider that interestingly, auditory perception and music performance seem to be intrinsically connected to instances where the frontiers of humanness are explored and crossed intentionally, in Lowland South America and elsewhere.

The contributions in this issue show that interspecific translation is enabled by hearing, listening and receiving sonic correlates of meaning (spirits' or animals' voices, songs of rushing water, the legendary Inca's music) that are then translated into human music by specialists, performed on domesticated 'living' instruments or sung with lyrics in a human language; that is, the respective vernacular indigenous language. Cases where a linguistic translation of song lyrics is omitted (for untranslated vocal music, see Brabec de Mori in this issue or Seeger [2004](#); as well

as for music with imagined lyrics, see Olsen 1996) show that translation is not a necessary prerequisite of ritual musical performance. Both translation and intentional omission of translation facilitate the transmission of meaning originating from non-humans to a human audience via sound and music production. Similarly, messages designed for summoning, instructing or chasing away non-humans are translated into the others' language via sonic performances.

By developing the functions and ontologies of the sonic, long-standing issues in South American anthropology and ethnomusicology can be revisited (cf. the excellent collection of articles edited by Hill and Chaumeil 2011). One of the outstanding qualities of the sonic (along with the olfactory) is its capacity to fill a space, regardless of where a listener at a given moment is looking.<sup>7</sup> Sound production and music performance can actually create an encompassing atmosphere within a given space (and there is no easy escape without shutting one's ears). It is fairly obvious that in such a sonically filled space, any present being with a functioning auditory sense will hear something. In Lowland South American ethnographies, many reports confirm that despite visual barriers—like unilateral or bilateral invisibility—sound and music can be heard by present entities who (or which) are different from the musicians in the broadest sense (cf. Piedade in this issue, describing how *apapaatai* spirits attentively listen to Wauja flute and vocal music although they cannot be seen by the musicians; see also Franchetto and Montagnani 2011; Lewy 2012). All papers in this issue affirm that vocal or instrumental music can be considered a medium for (mutual) communication, intelligible for neighbouring Indians as well as for non-Indians, for spirits and sometimes for animals or even plants. These non-humans or 'not really humans' are thought to understand music because it is a super-formalised language and they may react or interfere, for instance by providing their own songs or musical motifs.

Although one commonly hears nothing special when holding one's ear close to a *bobinsana* plant<sup>8</sup> (to recall the example from the very beginning of this introduction), one can certainly hear the 'trace left behind by some moving agent' (Latour 2005: 132); the musical 'trace' left by the plant-person in the ritual specialist's song. For this difference, Alfred Gell made clear that one should not mistake (applied to our example) the *bobinsana* bush with the agent appearing in the song—although they are synonymous:

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<sup>7</sup>Auditory perception is not entirely independent of a listener's directedness. This is well acknowledged in what music psychologists call *Auditory Scene Analysis* (Bregman 1990). Of course, a listener usually concentrates on, and thereby emphasises, a certain set of sound events that are, under most 'normal' circumstances, assembled by memory and other predispositions as well as by the current visual focus (the 'cocktail party effect'). However, by imagining how one may listen to an encompassing soundsphere with eyes closed, it is easy to grasp the point we make here. Although it seems highly rewarding to include auditory scene analysis in rethinking distributed sonic agency in respect to the relations between people, spirits and animals as treated here, this lies beyond the scope of this issue.

<sup>8</sup>Current findings in plant behaviour sciences (beyond folkloristic interpretations from the 1970s) suggest that plants actually can emit sounds by themselves. However, these sounds are probably located above audio range within 20–300 kHz as well as within 10–240 Hz but at very low intensity, still inaudible for human ears (cf. Gagliano 2013).

[T]he distinction between animacy and inanimacy that we require here cross-cuts the distinction between the living and non-living [...]. The god who, at one moment is manifested in a non-living thing, such as a stone or a statue [or a bush], may be manifest in a living thing also, such as a possessed [or singing] shaman. The worshippers, whose god appears in these contrasted forms, are perfectly cognizant of the difference between them. (Gell 1998: 122)

Both Gell and Latour suggest that the bush—synonymous with the singing plant-person—is an agent. This agent can be the origin of a musical rendering (see Piedade's *kawoká*, in this issue) or likewise manifest in the musical structure (e.g. as microtonal rising, see Hill 1993; Olsen 1996; Seeger 2004). We suggest that this agent is the instance understood as 'human' (although not 'really human') by indigenous people. In a ritual, the indigenous ritual specialist adopts a multiple positionality, embodying these '(not really) human' agents, and translates their agency to human agency by performing his or her multiple personality musically. The music used in such contexts may employ a variety of sounds and timbres, associated with the embodied non-human entities, or have lyrics with a variety of first-person positions (see also Severi 2008). Non-humans thus 'humanised' may be treated as humans in discourse, but as Gell indicates: the 'worshippers' are perfectly aware that the bush on the riverbank is not 'human' in a strict sense.

Descola and Viveiros de Castro likewise affirm that in both animism and perspectivism indigenous people are well aware of a difference between a 'body' (here, the bush) and a 'soul' (here, the singing plant-person). Across species, 'bodies' are regarded as different or discontinuous, and 'souls' are regarded as similar. 'Bodies', therefore, seem to correlate with 'seeing' and 'souls' with 'hearing' (Lewy 2012).

The existence of spirits or singing plant-persons therefore can be validated by the methods of ethnomusicology. Although in general it is rather assumed that the *bobinsana*-person or the *kawoká*-spirit do not exist in a literal, 'physical' sense, they are evident as musical motifs or music-inspiring agents. They manifest themselves in sound transmission and execute agency via music performance. It therefore proves rewarding to understand the music and its details executed in ritual as agents by themselves, taking on different musical forms and changing in time (cf. Stoichiță and Brabec de Mori 2012).

If musical items in ritual are considered agents, it is easier to understand how music performance can serve as a tool for constructing and transcending perspectives (see Brabec de Mori 2012), for constructing and transforming bodies (see Piedade in this issue) as well as for Halbmayr's 'fragile inter-species and multi-world border management' (Brabec de Mori, Hill, and Seeger, this issue). The large-scale musical pieces performed by Xingu Indians may also be interpreted in this way (Menezes Bastos, this issue). While it proves painfully difficult to verify or falsify the existence of spirits, we can undoubtedly hear that translation, variation and sequentiality occur in many Lowland indigenous music performances. Spirits, animals and plants can manifest themselves in their 'human forms', so ethnography tells us. But instead of

pondering how this could be understood in a visual, or even physical sense, we suggest that these ‘human forms’ are those who transmit melodies to people in dreams, who sing through a transformed healer’s mouth or who cause variations in musical pieces (which have to be contested and controlled through repetition; see Hill, this issue). If these musical performances are understood as stemming from interventions by non-humans in their ‘human form’, and consequently during performance can be understood by the same (or other) non-humans in their ‘human form’, it becomes more evident on which ontological level humans may transform into non-humans, and non-humans likewise can mingle with humans in ritual. By understanding such ‘non-human’ agency in music, we may finally even come closer to understanding ‘How Musical is Man’.

Although we recommend acknowledging and integrating new information and theories from archaeology, ethnohistory, anthropology and linguistics, ethnomusicologists’ most valuable contributions must certainly lie in listening closely and analytically. In our case, we are listening to the indigenous peoples from Lowland South America in order to understand how their music is thought to work and who contributes to such ‘music that works’. Thanks to Timothy Rice, ethnomusicologists today are encouraged to extend the ideas that emerge from rich ethnographic writing to ethnomusicology as a whole. Such a procedure may well cause repercussions of its own in other fields as well. We have shown that analysing the capacities and agencies of music and the sonic can help to bridge the gap between those who are considered ‘Real People’ and ‘other people’, and between non-humans and ‘non-humans in their human forms’ among Lowland South American Indians. This serious engagement with ethnography helps to explain how interspecific interaction may actually be achieved in this context. Thus a hitherto missing link can be inserted into current theories, a link that may strengthen aspects of the existing analytic frameworks, or suggest ways to modify or rethink them.

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