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# **Soulful Voices: Birds, Language and Prophecy in Amazonia**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The uncanny ability of birds to produce sounds resembling speech has provoked fascination and admiration throughout human history. In addition to their mastery of flight and graceful beauty, birds can seem intelligent or even oracular to the human ear, giving rise to widespread associations with the supernatural, including concepts of transcendence, clairvoyance, and the soul. If the musicality of bird songs has inspired musicians and composers, more than a few poets have wondered if birds converse with the gods and speak their language. In the early modern period, the speech of birds such as parrots often figured in reflections and debates on the nature of language, meaning, and humanity's place in the order of nature (DiPiero 2009). If bird sounds can at times appear motivated and thoughtful, they can also be taken to exemplify blind mechanical repetition. Such was the view of Descartes, who considered that "magpies and parrots can utter words just as we can, and yet they cannot speak as we do – that is, they cannot attest that they think what they say." (cited in DiPiero 2009: 342). Descartes invoked talking birds in order to distinguish the corporeality or materiality of language, that aspect that depends purely on anatomy, from the thought or reason animating it, or those abstract dimensions to which only humans have access.

Subsequent generations of scholars continued to invoke birds in defending or refuting the Cartesian model, advancing competing claims over the nature of language and whether

humans were fundamentally like or unlike other animals in nature. The French mathematician Bernard Lamy, for example, concurred that mere “corporeal impression,” devoid of mental activity, incites birds to imitate the voices of men, concluding that bird speech, as little more than a stimulus-response mechanism, is not only the ultimate foil for human language but “tangible proof of the distinction between the soul and the body” (cited in DiPiero 2009: 344-5). In his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, John Locke invoked an anecdote about a parrot, purportedly capable of responding rationally to questions, in order to refute Descartes’ argument that using language appropriately served as a key distinction between man and animals. Locke insisted that it was instead the ability to “quit particulars,” to form abstractions, that was the capacity most distinctly human (Moore 2009).

In recent years, notions of any “rigid distinction” between humans and animals have largely fallen into disrepute, in the wake of ever more impressive experimental evidence for animals’ cognitive capacities. Scientifically-oriented studies of language now commonly look to birds to help explain fundamental questions about human language learning and evolution, often noting that human language has more in common with birdsong than with the communication systems of other primates (e.g. Beecher and Burt 2004; Aitchison 2000: 213; Goldstein, et al. 2003; Marler 1970; Doupe and Kuhl 1999). Authors of such studies point out that birds can form abstract concepts, use intelligence flexibly for problem solving, play with joy and mate erotically.

Despite extensive criticism of Cartesian dualism, its legacies continue to permeate prominent theories of language. [1] Chomsky (1966) invoked an entire tradition of “Cartesian linguistics” as a precursor for theories of generative or transformational grammar, and argued that the responses of animals are necessarily “stimulus-bound,” whereas only human responses can be “stimulus-free,” that is, truly creative and innovative. The assumption that language comprises two distinct aspects, sound and meaning, underwrites the Saussurean

view of the sign as composed of signifier and signified: the word and the thing it refers to are utterly distinct, and related only through arbitrary convention. This in turn implies a radical distinction between an objective world, devoid of any intrinsic significance, and humans who, as bearers of culture, are in a unique position to give meaning to it. A further legacy is the prioritization of intention in theories of meaning. We tend to assume that understanding the “meaning” of an utterance is a matter of correctly identifying the intentions, or “state of mind,” of the speaker. According to most Western philosophers, for a noise or a mark to count as language, there must be some connection with an intending actor. Similarly, involuntary cries of pain or surprise tend to be excluded from the domain of language, likened to clouds as signs of rain. Such examples should suffice to demonstrate that ideas about speech or language imply further assumptions about those who wield it – in this case, a sovereign subject capable of abstract reasoning and concerned to communicate his or her inner thoughts and intentions.

Working from a very different set of ontological premises – though no less fascinated by the speech of birds - native Amazonians have arrived at quite different understandings. Their refusal or subversion of the classic Western distinctions between a subjective “culture” and an objective “nature,” and between humans and other animals, is by now well established. According to Descola (1994), reflections on modes of communication are decisive in delineating boundaries between human beings and other species: “It is according to their capacity or incapacity to establish an exchange of messages that all denizens of nature, including man, are divided into watertight categories.” Descola is railing against Karsten’s (1935) earlier characterization of Jivaro “animistic philosophy,” according to which all nature’s beings are indiscriminately endowed with an identical “soul.” Such a universalization of essences, he argues, would be an oversimplification of “the very different

ways in which the Achuar conceive the spiritual existence of animals, plants, heavenly bodies, and meteors” (Descola 1994: 98).

Ironically, such a universalization of spiritual essences has arguably become even more prominent in the wake of the theory of perspectivism (e.g. Viveiros de Castro 1998; Vilaça 2002, 2005; Stolze Lima 1999). It is noteworthy that much of this literature has tended to rely on ethnographic examples involving larger mammals, such as peccaries or jaguars, even while generalizing its claims to all living kinds as ostensible subjects, each species differing from the next in the same kind of way (*viz.* by virtue of its “body”). As such, this literature runs the risk of further reproducing the longstanding tendency in Western philosophy to compare and differentiate “the human” and “the animal” (or “the non-human”), as though these were monolithic categories that could meaningfully be treated in the abstract singular form (cf. Derrida and Wills 2002).

While a number of monographs have mentioned the significance of birds in the everyday lives of native Amazonians, very few studies have explicitly investigated human-bird interactions. Yet birds offer a particularly interesting case study, precisely because their status as subjects in Amazonian thought appears complex and uncertain. Widespread associations between birds and souls, for example, would suggest that they are not identified as persons in quite the same way as game animals, or endowed with the same kind of “spiritual essence.” The ascription of meanings to certain bird sounds pushes at the limits of inter-species communication. Kohn (2008) has shown how Napo Runa communicate with their dogs using a modified “pidgin” form of human language, in which extensive use is made of indexical and iconic modes of reference. Bird speech would similarly seem to offer a privileged way of situating human language and non-human forms of communication within a single framework, allowing each to illuminate the other. To clarify, I am not positing a simplistic contrast between a Western view of bird speech as mindless and mechanical, in

contrast to an Amazonian view of birds as speaking subjects on a par with humans, but in command of an unintelligible language. Instead, what I want to emphasize is that, in both cases, it is the very ambiguities raised by talking birds that has stimulated the development and refinement of more fundamental ideas about meaning, language, and what it means to be human.

The Urarina are a group of several thousand hunter-horticulturalists who inhabit the banks of the Chambira river and its tributaries in Peruvian Amazonia. The Urarina language is a linguistic isolate, and Urarina were traditionally in closest contact with speakers of various Zaparoan and Jivaroan languages, as well as the Tupían Cocama. Most contact with outsiders today, however, is with itinerant mestizo traders under the system of *habilitación*, in which trade goods are advanced on credit in return for agreed quantities of palm hearts and other forest products. In this low-lying, tropical rainforest environment, birds are a ubiquitous and cherished feature of everyday lives. Urarina commonly maintain that some birds are capable of communicating or revealing information, particularly as concerns future events. Needless to say, they are far from unusual in ascribing an oracular or divinatory function to birds; the ancient Greek art of augury, or reading the trajectories of birds in flight, is a well-known example. The issue of prophetic speech is particularly useful here because it focuses attention on the problem of the authoritative voice, offering grounds for comparing bird sounds to human speech, which in certain circumstances is also considered to be capable of prophecy. The prophetic condition “implies that the unspeakable becomes spoken”, as Ardener (1989:135) put it, and I will argue that birds exemplify an indexical or analogic mode of communication in which language and the world are inextricably connected. Together with their direct connection to divine authority and what I term their vocal transparency, this gives their speech a powerful claim to truth, one that shamans and other ritual specialists go to great lengths to imitate.

## **BIRDS AND AMAZONIAN ANTHROPOLOGY**

Lévi-Strauss (1966) argued that when birds are named by humans, ordinary human names are used, unlike dogs, whose names are drawn from a different stock: a parallel series akin to stage names. Because domesticated dogs are part of human society, raised for the companionship they provide, their names must reflect the fact that they are different from humans. Birds, on the other hand, are physically dissimilar to humans and entirely external to human society, facts which underwrite the striking series of analogies:

They are feathered, winged, oviparous and they are also physically separated from human society by the element in which it is their privilege to move. As a result of this, they form a community which is independent of our own but, precisely because of this independence, appears to us like another society, homologous to that in which we live: birds love freedom; they build themselves homes in which they live a family life and nurture their young; they often engage in social relations with other members of their species; and they communicate with them by acoustic means recalling articulated language. (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 204).

Irrespective of the validity of Lévi-Strauss's argument, [2] the symbolic richness of birds has been amply demonstrated in Amazonian anthropology. In a seminal contribution, Crocker (1985) took up Lévy-Bruhl's earlier observation that the Bororo compare themselves to macaws, and examined the "structural equivalence" of the two groups in a number of different contexts. Crocker also notes a number of associations between birds and spirits (including concepts of the soul, or *aroe*), concluding that macaws "are neither pure spirit nor

totally human, while sharing both some esteemed and some gross qualities of each” (Crocker 1985: 37). This makes them particularly well-suited as images to capture and express “the inchoate sense in which Bororo find themselves to be the fusion of antithetical cosmological principles” (Crocker 1985: 38).

Crocker further suggested that macaws were favored pets among Bororo in part because they were veritable banks of raw material for ritual purposes. The use of feathers as ornamentation has been widely documented (e.g. Reina and Kensinger 1991), and underwrites associations between birds (especially parrots and raptors) and shamanism (e.g. Belaunde 1994; Uzendoski et al. 2005), as well as other kinds of ritual performance, such as the lengthy Candoshi welcoming ceremonies in which the host dons a crown of feathers that move when he speaks and helps to establish an intense presence (Surallès 2003:786). [3] Erikson (2000) has pointed out that birds represent the paradigmatic pet in a number of societies, including those of the Upper Xingu, but considers pet-keeping generally as expressing principles of reciprocity between humans and non-humans: hence the Piaroa, for example, claim that parrots sing diseases away in compensation for the food they have been given (Monod, cited in Erikson 2000:12).

Birds are potent images for various other dimensions of social life. The Huaorani compare guests at festivals and drinking parties to different species of birds feasting on fruit from a single tree (Rival 2002). Among the Achuar, toucans “are perceived as the model of the happy couple,” featuring in love potions as well as the *anent* songs sung to strengthen the bond between husband and wife, while the hummingbird symbolizes impenitent infidelity (Descola 1994: 96). The Airo-Pai deploy birds as symbols of gender difference and complementarity: both genders, like certain birds, are beautiful, highly social, and have similar duties towards their young, but the form this takes differs: men weave hammocks, much as oropendolas weave nests, while women are ever vigilant over their young, like

parrots, who moreover nest in holes in trees analogized to the female genitalia. Hence, say the Airo-Pai, the dead view men as oropendolas and women as green parrots (Belaunde 1994). In a possibly perspectival reversal of this claim, the souls of the deceased are in many places said to take the form of a bird as they leave the body at death, and connections between birds and souls are widely reported (e.g. McCallum 1996: 359; Crocker 1985).

The widespread invocation of birds in much ritual language, such as the Jivaroan magical songs known as *anent*, has been traced to their ability to evoke relatively stable associations with certain types of mood or feeling. This is thought to forge a link between the interior states of the performer and the world at large, which in turn imbues the songs with a sense of causal efficacy (e.g. Taylor 1983; Brown 1984). Brown also emphasized the materiality or ‘thinginess’ of these songs by comparing them to nonverbal magic, citing the example of a hunting charm fabricated from the remains of a black vulture, a bird taken to “symbolize uncanny attraction and the secret possession of powerful agents.” He drew a further analogy between magical songs and visionary experiences, on the grounds that both “place the actor in direct contact with primordial sources of knowledge, thus forging links to the past while structuring the future.” (Brown 1984: 553).

According to Uzendoski, Napo Runa associate birds with women (who “fly away” from their natal kin groups to become other people’s wives) and with feminine power, as revealed or channelled through women’s songs. In one of the few studies to consider bird sounds and their relationship to human speech and song, Uzendoski et al. (2005: 659) follow Whitten in proposing that “birds are associated with mastery of vertical space and travel and carry women’s songs (and their sexualized power to influence others) to faraway places.” The authors suggest that, through their songs, “a poetic and ontological ‘equivalence’ is established between humans and birds,” allowing the woman singer to embody the birds’ perspectives or subject positions. At the same time, they seem to imply that the songs

themselves are transformations of birds: “like birds, the songs travel far and wide to reach the souls of their targets” (Uzendoski et al. (2005: 659). There is an intriguing ambiguity here, mostly unexplored by the authors, but which may help illuminate local understandings of voice, the soul, and the speaking subject.

## THE USES OF BIRDS

Urarina origin myths for birds, like those for other animals, follow the pan-Amazonian pattern in describing a transformation from an original, proto-human form to their present bird form, often caused or expressed through the distinctive call or song of their species. For example, the story of Woodpecker tells of a woman who hoarded fine handmade pots, but repeatedly thwarted her ritual co-mother’s requests to borrow one by tapping on the sides of carefully selected, cracked specimens to demonstrate their worthlessness. This is of course the sound still heard today, her having transformed into a woodpecker as an implied consequence of her stinginess. Many features or qualities of birds are now considered to be highly desirable, and an abundance of techniques exists for their appropriation, through what might be described as sympathetic or contagious magic. Unsurprisingly, vocal abilities are among the most sought-after of all. The owner of a dog unable to bark loudly or effectively, for example, might rub the tongue or hyoid apparatus of a toucan repeatedly against the tongue of his dog, in the hope that some of the bird’s famous vocal abilities will be transferred. Small children are also sometimes fed the roasted flesh of toucans or other birds similarly considered to be “good talkers,” such as the brown jay. Some mothers attach toucan bills and other such items to their child’s hammock rattle, in the hope that these or similar skills will be transmitted sonically (Walker 2009).

Some birds, like the sunbittern (*Eurypyga helias*), are associated with sexual attractiveness. Men desperate to win a woman’s affection can seek out this bird and extract its

thigh bone, through which they gaze at her from a distance until her sexual desire is finally aroused. Spells or chants exist to achieve similar results, and make frequent references to the sunbittern in an attempt to appropriate its sensuality and attractiveness. Meanwhile, hawks and other birds of prey are focused on for their hunting abilities. Some say that an infusion of boiled hawk's talon should be smeared on the hands and wrists of a young man whose own hunting abilities are less than satisfactory. One man recommended scraping the talons themselves along the back of the hands until blood is drawn, "so that no spider monkey will escape." Hunting spells invoke hawks in order that a hunter's darts will "fly dead straight, like a bullet." Other forms of ritual discourse draw on birds to help protect human infants from certain kinds of illness. For example, the *ijia baau*, intoned to cure afflictions caused by the mystical attack of a lupuna tree, invokes a series of birds known to make nests in the tree and raise healthy offspring there. Songs sung during manioc beer drinking parties refer to birds in order to express or symbolize particular emotions, especially joy and sorrow. One drinking song celebrates how the solitary sandpiper (*Tringa solitaria*) teeters its tail when feeding and walking, encouraging fellow drinkers to dance and waggle their behinds in a similarly amusing way:

So pretty, oh yeah

You're so pretty, Solitary Sandpiper

There's abundant manioc beer for us

This power of manioc beer is good for us

So very pretty

Shaking your behind, Solitary Sandpiper

There's abundant manioc beer for us

Another drinking song recalls the pitiful dove, said to have been exiled from heaven in disgrace, who now sings its sorrowful song when the sky is dark and gloomy, or when someone has passed away. As one man put it, “when someone dies and people are crying, or when the afternoon is sad, the dove sings. Or, when you walk in the forest, all alone, and sad, you can hear it making a sound.” When I asked what they might say, he simply replied, “they speak in their language, their song.” The fact that people sing of doves at drinking parties – or play “dove songs” on their flutes - was explained to me in terms of this music’s ability to evoke feelings of pity and nostalgia that bring people together, inspiring them to enjoy life while they can.

Interestingly, the songs of doves are associated with feelings of sorrow, grief or abandonment in many other parts of the world. The Kaluli of Papua New Guinea say the call of the beautiful fruitdove reminds them of a child, hungry and crying for its mother. According to Steven Feld (1990), this is largely because of their musicological characteristics: high, human falsetto-like, and melodically descending sounds that resemble melodic weeping. These sorrowful sounds are moreover intimately associated with feelings of pity, as Kaluli singers are well aware when they strive to imitate them in achieving their ends.

Generally speaking, the ways in which the sounds of birds such as the dove come to stand for a particular sentiment or ethos is not simply arbitrary or conventional, but rather natural and instinctive, like an involuntary cry of pain, where the signs are impacted by the objects they represent. Birds are generally associated with iconic, indexical or metonymical modes of communication, according to which a part (such as a bird’s beak) can stand for a whole (singing ability), and where relations of likeness and contiguity take precedence over arbitrary symbols or metaphors, giving them a particularly “contagious” aspect.

This is reflected in the names given to particular species of bird, many of which are onomatopoeic, or “echoic words,” drawn from the distinctive sound with which the bird is associated. Birds such as the *joajojoa*, *catatao*, or *corocorori* are all named in this way. This broadly corresponds with Berlin and O’Neill’s (1981) finding that 34% of a total of 206 Huambisa bird names were onomatopoeic in origin, drawn directly from their human vocalizations. Moreover, and perhaps more strikingly, 58 out of a total of 88 Urarina bird names I collected, or two-thirds, end in the syllable [ri], affricated in rapid speech to [dZi] and pronounced with a rising intonation. I detected no analogous pattern in names for other living kinds. This may also reflect a kind of onomatopoeia: simply put, bird names go “tweet-tweet.” It may further reflect a universal sound symbolism. As Berlin (1994) has pointed out, whereas [i] is widely associated with concepts of quick and rapid motion, vowels and consonants characterized by high acoustic frequency are disproportionately present in words denoting or connoting concepts of “smallness.” Berlin demonstrated that Huambisa names for smaller sized birds ( $\leq 10$ ” in length) are particularly likely to exhibit [i]. In short, the naming of birds, like many of the practical and symbolic uses to which they are put, evoke natural or non-arbitrary associations between sound and meaning. I will return to this further below, but first wish to consider further everyday relations with real birds.

### **‘JUST SING FOR US TO HEAR’**

Urarina love to keep all kinds of pets, usually the captured offspring of animals slain during hunting. Captured birds, however, are perhaps the most popular pets of all, as they are considered vastly less troublesome or mischievous than monkeys. A wide variety are kept, although parakeets seem particularly highly favored, and are possibly the only species that people specifically set out to capture, laying traps in the breeding season using scraps of old fishing nets. Yet not all birds make good pets, and some are explicitly designated as

unsuitable or impossible to domesticate: the dove, for example, is thought liable to die quickly in captivity and to inflict mystical harm on nearby children.

My neighbor Samuel, who was particularly fond of birds, had at least five or six always roamed freely in his small house, which allowed him to examine their behavior very carefully. One day, he remarked that his vulturine parrot (*Pyrilia vulturina*) always knew when someone had just killed an animal in the forest and was about to return with it to the village, because it played with its own feathers on such occasions. He had decided this purely on the basis of empirical observation. When I asked if any of the other birds in his house had similar abilities, he replied frankly and honestly that he wasn't sure, but would ask his wife if she had an opinion.

One of the most popular and well-liked birds I ever got to know was Bolon's trumpeter (*Psophia crepitans*). Though I never personally found it particularly pleasant to listen to, this bird's toughness and resilience certainly made an impression, frequently squaring off against roosters and walking directly in front of people with spread wings, forcing them to slow down or stop in order to avoid it. Bolon's mother-in-law, Rosa, was particularly fond of this bird, and one day, while quite drunk, began singing to it fondly, to the amusement of those around her. Her song ran more or less as follows:

Pretty, pretty is your voice, Trumpeter

Sing prettily so we can hear you, Trumpeter

If you don't sing I won't feed you, Trumpeter

Prettily, prettily you sing, that's why we love you, Trumpeter

Let's scratch your little head, are you listening, Trumpeter?

Because you are beautiful, I am speaking to you, Trumpeter

Something was slain before, dance, dance, Trumpeter!

Because something will be killed you are dancing, Trumpeter  
Tall and skinny, let's look at you, Trumpeter,  
So prettily, prettily you are speaking, Trumpeter  
Just sing for us to hear, Trumpeter

As well as imploring the bird to talk or sing, this song refers to a widespread claim that, like Samuel's vulturine parrot, the trumpeter would often feel and express joy by playing or dancing when a large animal was about to be brought back to the village for everyone to feast on. This kind of foresight, in fact, is not limited to domesticated birds in the village.

## VOICES IN THE FOREST

People who set out walking in the forest are sometimes said to be "accompanied" by birds, whose presence – typically revealed through the sounds they make – may be laden with meanings. These usually concern future states and events: some birdcalls are unambiguously good omens; others are bad. For example, the marbled wood quail (*Odontophorus gujanensis*) is known to "advise" or "tell" people that the next day will be fine and sunny. On the other hand, the laughing falcon (*Herpethotes cachinnans*) causes alarm and anxiety when it cries out nearby, because it means that someone will be bitten by a snake and possibly die. Similarly, the black vulture (*Coragyps atratus*) calls out when someone will fall ill from disease, such as smallpox, measles, or whooping cough.

In many cases, there is a relatively clear physical or material connection between the species of bird and the event it foretells. For example, the laughing falcon is known to be a specialist snake-eater (and is also known in English as the snake hawk), while the black vulture is a scavenger who feeds on carrion and detritus, where disease is generally thought to

be prevalent. Yet there is also very often a discernible connection between the bird's distinctive sound and its meaning. Unsurprisingly, the song of the marbled wood quail is pleasing to listen to, a perceptibly "happy" or "joyful" song, characterized by a rapid succession of rising notes. On the other hand, the laughing falcon's call is harsh, grating and unpleasant, each human-like cry rising sharply in pitch, reminding one of evil or maniacal laughter.

Associating such maniacal laughter with personal misfortune is not simply a matter of arbitrary cultural convention. The sound iconism involved in such cases can be quite explicit, as in the case of the screech owl (*Megascops sp.*), who is said to "sing strongly," especially at night or at dawn, when someone – usually mestizos - will soon arrive at the community. The call of this bird is a series of short, staccato bursts (rendered as *prb-prb-prb*), which people liken to the noise of a *peque-peque*, the small motorized canoe transport used most frequently by mestizos.

Sometimes the call resembles an Urarina word, and is lexicalized. The black vulture, for example, who brings disease and death, lacks a syrinx, or vocal organ, and its only vocalizations are grunts or low hisses, which Urarina render as *sau-sau-sau*, meaning literally "Kill! Kill! Kill!." Similarly, the black-fronted nunbird (*Monasa nigrifrons*) predicts the water level of the river, singing either *bate-bate-bate* ("Fall! Fall! Fall!") when the river will go down, or *taba-taba-taba* ("Rise! Rise! Rise!") when the water level will rise. Its rapid oscillation between two pitches easily gives rise to the impression of a two-syllable word.

It should be noted at this juncture that Urarina are themselves far from free of doubt or skepticism concerning the veracity of these omens. It was my impression that faith in birds' usefulness in this regard varied from person to person and from bird to bird. People would sometimes seem to go out of their way to plan for the events foretold by birds, but past experiences condition their responses. Martin once confidently assured me that Carapa would

soon return to the village from his logging expedition upriver, and pointed out that Jose and Antonio had already started preparing for his arrival. When I asked how they all knew, he replied that it was because they had earlier heard the call of the screech owl. Knowing Martin to be a relatively well-educated schoolteacher who often styled himself as a “civilized” Urarina and beacon of progress, I asked whether he really believed in these apparent superstitions. “Well,” he replied, “I don’t know about all the beliefs of the folk around here, but *this* bird, the screech owl, for sure I know it’s true that people arrive when it sings, because I’ve seen it many times.” The semblance of a standardized system of beliefs, in short, should not obscure peoples’ constant critical recourse to interpretations of personal experiences.

Explanations for the prophetic abilities of birds often mention that they are the “envoy” or “delegate” (*letono*) of Our Creator (*Cana Coaunera*), or, in the case of bad omens, Moconajaera, or “The Burner,” a figure commonly equated today with the Christian Devil. One example is the squirrel cuckoo (*Piaya cayana*), a good omen said to sing when one is on the verge of finding a game animal in the forest, and whose call comprises short, sharp ascending notes, a whistled *wheep-wheep-wheep* which evokes happiness or joy. One man told me, “Squirrel Cuckoo is Our Creator’s envoy. That’s why, when someone goes walking in the forest and they’re going to find an animal, it sings *ti-ti-ti-ti-ti-ti*. It’s happy when someone’s going to find a deer or a peccary, and it sings with joy.”

In those instances where the omen affects an individual, such as a snakebite, rather than a general or public state of affairs, such as a visitor or good weather, it often seems the case that those nearest the source are at greatest risk. For example, I was told that the laughing falcon “advises when someone will die, or will be bitten by a snake. If it sings close by, you’ll get bitten.” As such, the sound is not simply impartial “advice” to a general public. Moreover, in some cases, the avian voice appears to have a kind of performative or

illocutionary force to help bring about the event it foretells. For this reason, people may go to great lengths to frighten away certain birds and prevent their calls from transmitting, as a way of averting potential misfortune. Several times I was woken up shortly before dawn by the sound of people urgently banging the blunt end of an axe against a log, in order to scare away a laughing falcon calling from across the river.

In short, the ability of birds to prophesize future events stems in part from the fact that they are sent by, and effectively represent or stand in for, higher divinities, namely Our Creator or Moconajaera. The birds are intermediaries between the earth and the sky or heaven (*dede*), as indeed they are in many parts of the world. Yet the birds themselves are not just passive or impartial mouthpieces, as their vocalizations also stem from the strong emotions they are thought to experience and are compelled to express, whether of joy, grief or malice. The dancing and playing of Samuel's parrot and Bolon's trumpeter are similarly expressive gestures that convey genuine emotion. There is a certain ambiguity here, such that birds embody, give voice to and therefore materialize, in the form of audible sounds, messages or insights that are direct and spontaneous but nevertheless also have their origin elsewhere.

Two further examples can illustrate this ambiguity. The bird most closely associated with the souls of the deceased (*anocai*) is the undulated tinamou (*Crypturellus undulatus*). Its call is often heard at dawn or dusk, and comprises an ethereal, three or four note whistle. Yet the bird itself is often targeted for food, and people will not hesitate to kill and eat it, or capture its offspring to raise as pets. I formed the impression that it is only the bird's whistling sound, rather than the bird itself, that is associated with the *anocai*. It is as though the bird speaks for them, but does not actually "contain" or "embody" them in any way.

A second example is an event that transpired one day while I was lounging around in Lorenzo's house, drinking manioc beer. All of a sudden, Bolon stormed in, returning early and empty handed from his mission to collect ungurahua fruits deep in the forest. "Abai!" he

exclaimed angrily. “*Abai* insulted me! So I had to return.” The *abai*, I knew, were forest-dwellers said to be about half a human’s size but very skilful shamans. “What did they sound like?” I asked, intrigued. “Like a macaw,” Bolon told me, as he drank down some manioc beer. “Yes,” said Lorenzo. “That’s right, it sounds like a macaw,” and the conversation moved to other matters.

While I do not claim to fully understand this curious incident, my sense was that a real macaw was again heard to act as a mouthpiece or spokesperson, this time for the *abai*. It might have sounded like a macaw, but Bolon knew perfectly well that it was really a forest-dwelling *abai*. Exactly what, if anything, the bird was thought to have said remains unclear. The only other time I ever heard of Urarina finding the speech of outsiders particularly offensive involved the use of the ethnic label *shimaco*, a word still used by the *ribereños* who inhabit the surrounding areas and considered derogatory, in fact, a racist slur, by the Urarina. It may be significant that while such insults often appear to be issued by a single, individual speaker, they in fact accumulate their performative force – their ability to wound or hurt – through their assimilation or “citation” of a long history of usages and, in many cases, threats or physical violence. As Judith Butler (1997) has pointed out, the speaker who utters an insult or slur is effectively citing that slur, making linguistic community with a history of speakers, or “chiming in” with a chorus of racists. In this sense, hurtful speech does not originate with the subject, even if it requires the subject for its efficacy. It is only because we already know its force from its prior instances that we know it to be so offensive now. In a way, then, my concern to locate the “real” origin of the insult to Bolon, with either the macaw or with the forest-dwelling *abai*, was perhaps beside the point, because the force of this speech lay in its irreducible extension well beyond a single speaking subject. If this kind of displacement of meaning or intentionality was troubling to me, it did not seem at all troubling to Bolon or Lorenzo. This may be because it is also common in the speech practices of ritual specialists.

## TO SING FOR JOY

Urarina shamans, or ritual healing specialists, closely align themselves with various kinds of birds. One of these, known as *jiunaca*, is described as the spirit “mother” or “owner” of tobacco, as well as its “soul” and “companion.” Due to the excessive amount of tobacco smoke he ingests, the experienced shaman has a close bond with the bird, which is said to “belong” to him and to sing nearby when he is about to arrive at a community. Shamans also use bird feathers extensively, in their feather fan (*inaru*), made from black hawk feathers and used to blow air on the disease to “scare it away;” and feather headdress (*comai*), which comprises a reed headband lined with red macaw feathers, and a series of yellow and blue macaw feathers strung from a slender pole protruding from the rear. These are said to appear to transform into birds following the consumption of ayahuasca or brugmansia, and to be “pleasing” to these plants’ spirit “mother.”

Besides curing sick patients, shamans strive to postpone or delay the imminent apocalyptic collapse of the climate or world-era (*cana cojoanona*), in which increasingly poor weather, marked by rain and cold, eventually gives way to total darkness and annihilation of all life. A key aim of the semi-improvised shamanic chanting (*coaairi baauno*) that continues for the entire duration of the hallucinatory experience is to bring about fine, sunny weather, thus temporarily averting catastrophe. In doing this, the enunciator is explicitly aiming to replicate the call of the red-throated caracara (*Ibycter americanus*) which, as a prototypical good omen when heard in the forest, is said to “sing for joy” (*acurunaa*) when the weather will be fine. Again, there is an inherent ambiguity here concerning whether such singing is simply constative, or prophetic, or even an illocutionary act, actually bringing about an event through its very utterance. Urarina were decidedly vague and uncertain on this

topic, and the lack of a straight answer could well be taken to suggest that my premises were faulty.

A significant stylistic feature of the *coaairi baauno* is its voicing predominantly from the perspective of the “owner” or “mother” of ayahuasca or brugmansia, who speaks “through” one who has consumed preparations of these plants. The enunciator is often addressed directly in the second person, while other linguistic features of the chant similarly emphasize that the discourse does not originate with the enunciator himself, such as repetitiveness and extensive use of set phrases and formulaic expressions, considered to have remained virtually unchanged since the times of the ancestors. Mention is often made in the chants to the notion of “singing for joy” (*acuruna*), sometimes accompanied by onomatopoeic phrases such as *crobe-crobe*, which I was told is an imitation of a parrot. Yet although the shaman is on one level attempting to replicate the singing for joy of a red-throated caracara, I believe it would be overly simplistic to propose that he is symbolically “transforming into a bird,” or aligning himself with a bird subject position. His identity in the chant is instead multiple and diffuse.

Another explicit goal of shamanic ritual is to learn the outcome of future events, ranging from the birth of a child to an imminent trip to the city. Those who drink hallucinogenic preparations are often asked about their insights the next day, and people seem genuinely interested to know, for example, the amount of time remaining until the end of the world, whether the weather will improve or deteriorate, or whether animals will be replenished in the forest. This kind of divination or future-reading is not “singing for joy,” but still aims to reproduce certain abilities of birds. Both the knowledge of future events and the related ability to bring them about derive from a similar relationship to a higher power – namely God or the plants’ spirit “owner” – for whom birds and shamans effectively act as intermediaries and mouthpieces. If shamans do not exactly attempt to transform themselves

into birds, they do strive for a similarly ambiguous identity, capable of prophetic speech with an elusive performative or illocutionary force, producing a kind of meaning independent of the intentions of a single speech actor. The principle epitomized here is also present, albeit in a more subtle and diffuse form, beyond the restricted domain of specialized ritual speech. As I show below, the language ideologies associated with birds and reproduced by shamans are further inscribed in local models of the person, both human and non-human, grounding a vision of discursive consciousness.

## VOICES OF THE HEART

Large game animals, like tobacco, have a spirit “owner” or “master,” said to be “like the animal’s soul” and who takes the form of a small bird. Known as *cojoaaorain*, this bird “advises” the animal to protect it from harm – warning it, for example, of approaching predators, including humans. Hunters sometimes plead with it and try to persuade it to stop advising the animal, and thereby allow the latter to be killed as food. This “master” bird is also described as the “envoy,” “employee,” or “delegate” of Our Creator, protecting and diligently watching over the animals that He created. One man explained it as follows: “cojoaaorain doesn’t want to just give up the animal to you for fun. He’s like the envoy of Our Creator, doing his will, not letting the animals just wander about. Our Creator told the ancient people, ‘if cojoaaorain doesn’t want to give you the food, ask me directly, and I’ll dissuade him’.” Upon enquiring further after the nature of this “dissuasion,” I was offered the example of a man with amorous designs on a young girl, pleading with her adult caretaker or guardian to relax their control or vigilance over her, thereby opening up the potential for seduction.

Jaguars also have their own avian advisors, known as *urichoraaona*, who is “like cojoaaorain” and “communicates with the ones in his care,” invisible to all - bar the drinker

of psychotropics. Thanks to his presence, jaguars are notoriously difficult to deceive. “The jaguar is never careless, you can’t fool it,” I was told. “That’s called urichoraaona.” When I once asked if the jaguar has a soul, the reply was, “Yes, this is called its urichoraaona.” In a similar vein, when I asked whether humans also have a “master” bird of this kind, watching over them, I was told simply, “No...but the human being does have its heart-soul.” One of two souls all humans are thought to possess, the “heart-soul” (*suujue*) connotes notions of hardness and interiority, and evokes the hard inner “heart wood” (*suujui*) of a tree trunk, as well as the “heart” (*suujua*) as the seat of reason and emotion. During dreams and hallucinations, the heart-soul is said to detach from the body and fly about, and it is because shamans do this so frequently that certain birds can anticipate their arrival.

The heart (*suujua*) is a prerequisite for being a good, compassionate, moral person, and is often described as something that “speaks” or “sounds” in a variety of common expressions, such as “listen to what your heart says,” or “my heart says this,” meaning, “this is my opinion.” To give someone advice is expressed in terms of “giving them heart.” Recalling that small birds also give useful advice to game animals, and sometimes humans, we could speculate that the heart-soul is somewhat analogous to the voice of conscience: a moral and practical counsel and precondition of reflexive self-awareness. If the heart-soul is most accurately represented by the image of a small bird, this may well be because such birds epitomize the notion of the authoritative voice: a voice in relation to which subjects are discursively constituted or interpellated. Immediate and spontaneous, this voice also has its origins elsewhere, in a higher authority beyond the individual.

## CONCLUSION

If the sounds of birds have long offered Westerners food for thought in reflecting on and refining their own theories of language and personhood, this is likely to be even more so

in those places where birds are a ubiquitous presence in daily life. To the Urarina, birds are not incapable of thought and therefore of speech, but nor are they full persons or subjects analogous to humans. Birds express genuine emotion through their speech and actions, but are not self-contained, rational agents whose songs and calls merely give outward expression to some inner resolution; what they “say” is generally taken also to originate, in part, in the physical world and with the divine authorities to whom they stand in indexical relationship. It is this vocal “transparency” that gives them a presence at once immediate and other-worldly. The communicative abilities of birds, like the human uses to which they are put, are moreover predicated on more basic kinds of sign processes than those which characterize ordinary human communication. As Kohn (2008) points out, these are the processes out of which symbolic reference is constructed, and which many argue are intrinsic to the biological world, down to the simplest single-celled organism. Comprising icons and indices, they are more susceptible to the qualities, events, and patterns of the world than is symbolic reference, whose mode of representation is more indirect. Human ability to partake in these more basic forms of semiosis establishes a continuity between human and nonhuman modes of representation.

The language of birds – and perhaps some other non-human beings – resembles what early Western philosophers termed a “natural language” – one with a direct, necessary and contiguous connection to the world (DiPiero 2009:347). The sounds of birds do not simply figure as vehicles or carriers for meanings that are “pinned on” to them by culture-bearing humans; nor is their language entirely spiritual and abstract: it has an irreducible material dimension that can to some extent be apportioned like any other physical substance, as demonstrated, for example, in practices of rubbing toucan tongues on dogs to make them speak better. I would suggest that these features of bird speech go a long way in accounting for their prophetic abilities. Partly by virtue of its non-arbitrary modes of reference, prophetic

language establishes a sense that meaning is immanent in the world, merely awaiting discovery, rather than externally produced or constructed by humans. As such, it is seen as having privileged access to truth, potentially capable of collapsing language, time and space.

Birds do not merely produce speech with an unmediated connection to its motivating cause, along the lines of a cry of pain or pleasure. While their propensity to “sing for joy” is highly regarded by Urarina, birds also act as mouthpieces for others – often invisible, powerful and non-human - further associating their speech with knowledge that humans lack. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this is also the model of powerful and authoritative speech that ritual specialists strive for. Bird sounds are effective models for such speech in part because they do not demand, for their interpretation, reference to the intentions of the individual speaker. If prophecy is typically associated with inspired and even enigmatic speech, then we might further suggest that “inspiration” here means quite literally the presence of one being within another, a state of permeation in which boundaries between individual identities are blurred and ambiguous. The authority of ritual speech, like that of birds, lies both in its privileged access to reality as well as its derivation from a source that lies beyond experience, giving voice to the unspeakable. In depicting the heart-souls of persons as like birds, the Urarina are perhaps suggesting that we are all, in a sense, inhabited by a discourse not of our own choosing, but which nevertheless shapes and sustains our identity. As language stretches behind and in front of us as we speak, always slightly outside our control, it displays the extent to which human and non-human others enter into our words.

## NOTES

1. Cartesian dualism is of course often invoked in simplified form, as a straw man; my intention here is not to trace any kind of history of linguistic theory, but merely to point to animal speech as a recurring trope.
2. For discussions see, among others, Leach (1970) and Carroll (1980).
3. See also Hugh Jones (2006: 88), who writes that Tukanoan men “do not reveal their secret names but in rituals they act like birds. As birds reveal their names in their onomatopoeic songs and coloured plumage, so men wear their names on their bodies as ornaments, play them in their flutes, and sing them out in their chants and songs.”

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