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My Mother or Father. Person, metaperson and transcendence in ethnographic theory

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Abstract:	How do humans, who are materially composed biological constructs, come to transcend, that is, to see themselves as present in the world? This paper sustains that, in order to understand transcendence in personhood, we have to see the latter as a product of dividual not individual participation, as initially proposed by Lévy-Bruhl and recently developed by a number of phenomenologically inspired cognitive scientists. Personal ontogeny is what explains the relation between essence and existence in the case of metapersons (ghosts, deities, ancestors, some animals, etc.). In order to explore this problem, I discuss a minor occurrence that took place in my presence without my noticing it at the time when I was visiting an Afro-Brazilian temple compound in coastal Bahia (NE Brazil) in July 2011.
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My Mother or Father.

Person, metaperson and transcendence in

ethnographic theory

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The writing of this paper was suggested by a minor occurrence that took place in my presence without my noticing it at the time when I was visiting an Afro-Brazilian temple compound (*terreiro*) in coastal Bahia (NE Brazil) in July 2011. It involved a gender shift in the attribution of filiation. Through it, my attention was drawn to the way in which a young person was unselfconsciously capable of routinely transcending her immediate condition in the world. More than that, this occurrence highlighted to me how this capacity for transcendence of persons is rooted in their process of self-constitution (personal ontogeny) in intersubjective environments of care.

At the beginning of his *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life,* Emile Durkheim calls our attention to the fact that the transcendence of humans is a central challenge to our anthropological understanding:

> It is necessary to show whence [humans] hold this surprising [power of transcending experience] and how it comes that we can see certain relations in things which the examination of these things cannot reveal to us. ... The real question is to know how it comes that experience is not sufficient unto itself, but presupposes certain conditions

which are exterior and prior to it, and how it happens that these conditions are realized at the moment and in the manner that is desirable. (1915 [1912]: 15)

At root is the quandary of knowing how humans, who are materially composed biological constructs, can come to see themselves as present in the world, as well as attaining a measure of free will when faced with worldly determination. I propose that, in order to answer this question today, we have to look back again at a strand of argument concerning the ontological nature of the person that developed in anthropology during the first half of the twentieth century but remained relatively peripheral during the second part of the century largely due to the powerful individualist ideology that came to dominate globally after the Second World War.

Durkheim explicitly tells us that his views concerning transcendence had been changed by the notion of *participation* proposed by Lucien Lévy-Bruhl (Durkheim [1912] 1915: 235 n 733). This was also the case with Edmund Husserl, who also stresses how the French master's observations, based on the careful study of ethnographic reports, influenced his thinking about personhood at a time when he was launching the foundations of phenomenology (Husserl 2008 [1935]). As a matter of fact, subsequently, both Emmanuel Lévinas (1957) and Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1988: 419) were to engage directly with Lévy-Bruhl's ideas in their formulations concerning personhood.

Evans-Pritchard too was deeply taken by them. At a time when he was preparing what was going to be his masterpiece—W*itchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande* (1976 [1937])—, he wrote an appreciative essay on participation (1979 [1934]) about which he later corresponded with Lévy-Bruhl (1952). Finally, in his 1984 Lewis Henry Morgan Lectures, Stanley Tambiah sketches an anthropological overview of explanations of magic and religion where he engages creatively with Lévy-Bruhl's ideas concerning participation (1990).[1] Curiously, however, he is only moderately successful in his effort, because he is

incapable of distancing himself from the individualist and representationist background assumptions that dominated anthropology in his day.

Initially presented in 1910 as a critique of the British intellectualist school in anthropology (see Lévy-Bruhl 1951 [1910] and Evans-Pritchard 1933), it was not until the end of his life, in 1938, that Lévy-Bruhl came upon his more radical formulations, finally freeing himself from the 'primitivist' assumptions concerning the difference between modern Europeans and non-modern Others (1998 [1949]). In 1934, he explains to Evans-Pritchard:

> I admit that in my work … the savage is presented as more mystical and the civilized man as more rational than they in fact are. … I have no objection to all that you say; that the savage is not so exclusively mystical, that the civilized man is not so consistently rational. Perhaps I have been wrong in insisting so strongly on these differences. I thought that the anthropological school had done enough to make the similarities evident. (Lévy-Bruhl 1952: 119)

People like Lubbock, Tylor or Frazer had initially approached the matter of transcendence mostly in terms of "religion" or "belief in spirits", but soon it became apparent that such formulations were ethnocentric, universalising a modern individualist ontology and a Christian notion of spirituality. Rather, some form of transcendence was more generally a condition of being a person, and beliefs in what Europeans might be tempted to call 'souls' or 'spirits' were a function of the processes of constitution of the person. As Lévy-Bruhl puts it, "To be, to exist, is to participate" (1998 [1949]: 18-19), that is, participation is a condition of human ontology to the extent that it is what launches each one's process of becoming a person, one's ontogeny. We should not disregard the impact of Freud's thinking among the anthropological disciples of Malinowski during the inter-war period concerning the dynamic complexity of the constitution of the self.

As Evans-Pritchard put it: "Lévy-Bruhl had no need to make a distinction between categories of magic and religion, and ... whereas to Tylor and Frazer the savage believes in magic because he reasons incorrectly, to Lévy-Bruhl he reasons incorrectly because he believes in magic." (in Lévy-Bruhl 1952: 119) In other words, explanatory anteriority is granted by Lévy-Bruhl to the propensity to engage in what he called 'mystical participation' (a category that conjoins *transcendence* with *affective investment* in personal constitution). Transcendence, therefore, should not be approached as something that cultures teach persons; something which is imposed on them by particular religious or ontological narratives. Rather, it is a disposition that human persons can hardly dispense with if they are to be persons at all.

Lévy-Bruhl's approach involved a questioning of some of the basic notions of Western philosophy and, crucially, a querying of the very bases of modernist ontology:

> The verb 'to be' (which moreover is non-existent in most of the languages of undeveloped peoples) has not here the ordinary copulative sense it bears in our languages. It signifies something different and something more. It encompasses both the collective representation and the collective consciousness in a participation that is actually lived, in a kind of *symbiosis effected by identity of essence.* (1926: 75, my emphasis)

Characteristically, in this passage, Lévy-Bruhl is taking recourse to the difference between essence and existence, [2] which he inherits from scholastic theology via Malebranche,[3] to help him move beyond the neo-Kantian views concerning logic that were dominant at the turn of the twentieth century and which were prone to overemphasise the inner-outer distinction (see Makkreel 2014:23).

Contrary to the individualist approaches to personhood that came to dominate the discipline after the Second World War—which assume that persons are automatic and unitary by-products of human biological life—for many of the more famous

anthropologists who worked during the first decades of the twentieth century, human persons were seen as socially constituted. For example, Maurice Leenhardt, in his justly famous essay on Melanesian personhood, declares: "The person is capable of superabundance. And, through it, we learn that man is not a totality because a totality is never more than the sum of definite, finite elements, but man, as a person, is a plenitude." (1979 [1947]: 169)

Forty years later, once passed the high moment of sociocentrism, we find anthropology once again reengaging these ideas, as when Marilyn Strathern famously stated about personhood:

> In one sense, the plural and the singular are the 'same'. They are homologues of one another. That is, the bringing together of many persons is just like the bringing together of one. The unity of a number of persons conceptualized as a group or a set is achieved through eliminating what differentiates them, and this is exactly what happens when a person is also individualised. (1988: 13-14)

Over the past two decades, an approximation between anthropological and phenomenological approaches to transcendence has allowed for a renewed interdisciplinary exchange in this regard (see Robbins 2016). In particular, in contemporary approaches to embodied cognition, personhood is no longer seen as "natural" but as the complex result of a dynamic process of emergence (see Chemero 2003, Thompson 2007, Hutto and Myin 2013). These approaches place the focus once again in what Sir Raymond Firth, in his 1936 study of Tikopia, had called *personal ontogeny* (1936: 120, 128, see also Toren 2012), that is, live persons undergo a pilgrimage of self-constitution within a historically shaped social habitat (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 99-135). Marshall Sahlins, among others, has been dialoguing with these ideas in his recent work. In his essays on kinship, he revisits Lévy-Bruhl's notion of participation (2011a and 2011b) and, in his inaugural

Hocart Lecture (SOAS 2017),[4] he calls our attention to the difference between persons and metapersons—that is, non-human entities to which consciousness is attributed such as sprites, gods, sacred animals, devils, or ancestors.

By making this distinction, Sahlins highlights how the ontological agnosticism that has shored-up ethnographic relativism since the 1930's[5] is no longer really a sustainable analytical solution. "Other's belief" is insufficient grounds for the attribution of existence to metapersons because, if we were to follow our ethnographic relativism to its logical conclusion, we would be obliged to take on board very serious and mutually contradictory implications. For example, in what way do the limbs of young albinos facilitate the discovery of gold in Southeast Africa? This is not just a simple attribution, for it has deep ethical implications in that innocent young people are being maimed and often losing their lives, playing a central role in naturalizing the great white/black ethnic divide (see Pina-Cabral 2013a). But if metapersons and their attributes are nothing but the unfounded opinion of our respondents, how can we explain the existence of metapersons everywhere around the world as well as our own personal experience of being ready to interact with them? (see Pina-Cabral 2015) These were, after all, the concerns that fired up Evans-Pritchard's initial study of Azande witchcraft ([1937] 1976, see also 1933).

My main contention in this paper is that, if ethnographic theory is going to navigate around these aporias, we have to overcome the individualist understandings of *personhood* that are taken implicitly as the foundation of contemporary anthropological theory. In many ways, this was the ghost that Marcel Mauss struggled with unsuccessfully in his famous essay on the person (1985 [1938]), but which Lévy-Bruhl, in the same year, managed to overcome by his profound epistemological repositioning, evident in his posthumously published *Carnets* (1998 [1949]).

Emmanuel Lévinas put this in a concise way which might help us understand also how mother turns seamlessly into father in the small ethnographic example that I am about to present,

> Whilst participation opens up a dimension leading to the supernatural, this supernatural is not a simple replica in superlative mode of the world, or a sublimation of objects structured like them and only separate from them by a purely formal abyss of transcendence; its supernaturality is directly accessible to emotional experience, to an 'experience-belief', as Lévy-Bruhl would come to call it. … Things transform into each other because their shapes count for little beside the nameless powers that command them. (Lévinas 1957: 564)

There is yet a further reason why we must engage with participation and personhood seriously in our anthropological analyses, thus leaving behind the Cartesian assumptions that have grounded twentieth century anthropology: this is necessary in order to further the task of reconciling anthropology with the broader project of Science by building an interdisciplinary bridge with recent developments in cognitive science, developmental psychology, and neurophenomenology (see Gallagher 2007).

In short, this paper sustains that, in order to understand transcendence in personhood, we have to see the latter as a product of *dividual not individual* participation (Strathern 1988, Pina-Cabral 2017). As Godfrey Lienhardt suggests in his cryptic essay on African personhood (1983), everywhere persons are endowed with an *internal arena of presence and action* (a self, see Johnston 2010), which is as transcendent as the presence of spirits or deities and, therefore, it is mystical. Indeed, it is the person that launches transcendence, not the deity. Therefore, ultimately, I will argue in this paper that personal ontogeny is what explains the relation between essence and existence in the case of metapersons.

On an overcast day in July 2011, I went to visit Mãe Nina's temple compound (*terreiro*) in the company of my colleague Vanda Aparecida da Silva (see Pina-Cabral and Silva 2013). The set of houses that is occupied by Mãe Nina and her close followers is part of a larger settlement, clustered loosely underneath the high fronds of tall palm-oil trees not far from the waterline in the coastal mangrove. It was mid-afternoon and we found her at her partner's oil press, where a group of friends and neighbours were working together. She received us with great kindness and we were immediately drawn in by her readiness to talk about herself, her *terreiro* and the school that she had founded. She drew a link between her having moved from the big city (Salvador) to this rural backwater to found her *terreiro* and the possibility that this gave her to open up a school for young people that the state administration would not repress. She talked explicitly and insightfully about the need to "deconstruct", as she put it, the prejudice that still haunts *afro-descendentes* in Brazil by introducing young children to a positive image of their heritage.

She took us to the temple area and she showed us around. We met there her *equedes* (trainee priestesses) and her main *ogã* (male temple assistant). The older *equede* was a lively young woman with a skin slightly lighter than Mãe Nina's. She was dressed in a loose-collared, deep blue gown—the colour of the deity whom she impersonates, Ogúm-Xeroquê, the ambivalently syncretic entity who, in Catholic formulation, crosses St. Anthony of Padua (in his military manifestation) with the Devil (Exú, the mediator). As she explained to me, "Ogúm-Xeroquê is racially mixed [*miscigenado*]. It is a mixture of the slave with Ogúm. Ogúm is chief, Exú is the slave. He is naughty [*danado*]. Ogúm himself is a hard one, but this one … (She makes an emphatic whistle)." I was later to be shown his *assentamento* (shrine, lit. sitting) where the older *equede* was about to sacrifice the popcorn that she was making and that she kindly offered to us (cf. Goldman 2006).

Next to the roots of an immense tree, Mãe Nina showed us the shrine of Tempo, also known as Irôko, the name of the tree—the chief entity in her compound and its founding shrine. There she introduced us to Taniele, her younger *equede*—a happy, bright-eyed twelve-year-old. I asked the young girl where her house was, but she responded ambivalently, all the time checking with her eyes for Mãe Nina's approval. It turned out that she had been raised in the *terreiro* since she was three, when her birth mother could no longer afford to keep her at home. So, she replied: "I love living here ... my home [*casa*] is here. … My mother … my father … my godmother, also ... My father is Dói [Mãe Nina's partner], also … because it is him that is raising me." Note how she places herself by relation to her foster parents by manipulating the terms "mother", "father" and "godmother" in succession. She uses the terms in classificatory fashion (note the use of the adverb "also", *também*), since she readily acknowledges that she has a "birth mother" as well as the foster mother who is raising her. The same kinship terms, again used in classificatory fashion, turned out to be the central reference in the song the main priestess was later to sing as she entered in trance: "Blessed be the father, / Blessed be the mother, / Blessed be the son, / He casts the blessing on father and mother." As I heard her sing, I thought that this was precisely what the young girl had been doing when she explained her position to me.

Whilst Vanda stayed discussing issues of education with the head priestess, I went with the young girl, who took me around the compound, introducing me to the different aspects and the different shrines and telling me about her life there. I was carrying with me, as I often do in such occasions, a telephone-sized video camera, which I use with the purpose of steadying my memory, not really of producing film. With her enthusiastic support, our visit to the compound, guided by the things that she wanted me to see and film, was being recorded *pari passu*.

She showed me the shrine of Oxalá, for the upkeep of which she is personally responsible. She spoke with love in her voice, as she explained that she brooms and sweeps the dust in the darkened room and she "wipes the sweat off his face." She then showed me her own *assentamento*, as she put it, a pile of crockery covered in the same bright yellow cloth that she was using as a head wrap. It was only later, when she introduced me to the images of the "saints" in the walls of the main hall, telling me how beautiful they were, that I asked which one was hers and she approached the yellow-dressed and veiled image of the goddess Oxúm. She placed herself to be filmed next to the image on the wall, with a big smile, her hand touching the hand of the "saint" in a gesture of tender surrogacy (see Pina-Cabral 2013b)

A few days later, we went back there to make a small financial contribution as a sign of gratitude and to leave with them a DVD of a rough-cut of the video. It was only in preparing this that we realized the camera had captured things that we had not heard or to which we had not been attentive at the time. For example, as we went through the various shrines, we had come upon one of the largest ones, immediately outside the main hall. When I asked Taniele which one was this, she hesitated, so she whispered across the open window to Mãe Nina, "Which one is this?" The older woman whispered back without even turning her head, "It is your mother's", meaning it was her own and the *equede* turned to me and replied, "Here is the shrine of Oxúm … Oxúmarê, that is why it has a snake." In other words, Mãe Nina's "saint" was a manifestation of the young girl's own divine identity—the surrogacy with the saint was of a piece with the surrogacy with her foster mother.

When we went back to the main hall, Mãe Nina entered in trance and rapidly and discretely everyone in the compound interrupted their routine domestic activities to attend to the saint's needs and to accompany with their prayers and gestures of greeting the now manifested saint. She was being possessed by Caboclo—the ambivalently black figure,

dressed as a Plain's Indian with a long-plumed headdress, that represents in Bahia the achievement of American autochthony by the descendants of exogenous slaves. After the greeting song I reported above, the Caboclo went on to sing: "It is a hug / Given with good heart. / The same as a blessing. / A blessing, an attention [in the sense of a gesture of generosity]." Later on, Mãe Nina explained that she had been possessed by the King of Snows, the Caboclo of the sea.

When the saint came to greet me, Taniele quickly approached me and took the camera off my hand, so the rest of the session was filmed by her without my intervention. Soon after, the priestess in trance left the main hall with all of us following her, posing for a while to allow Taniele to film her. She moved towards the schoolroom where the images of the Caboclo are kept. As she entered the room, one can see in the video recording that she turns to the little girl and says "Go call those kids [*guri*] over there." Quite unselfconsciously, the little *equede* runs towards her small friends further down the street whilst holding my camera in her hand. As she does so, she calls to them by name, "Listen X, listen Y, my father is calling you!" In short, she shifted the gender of the priestess, whom she earlier on had called "mother" by now saying "father".

When Vanda and I saw the film later on, we immediately realised to our surprise that she had automatically assumed that, as the priestess was being possessed by a male entity (the *Caboclo*), the order she received to go and call her friends was given to her by her classificatory (spiritual) "father" not by her classificatory (foster) "mother". Briefly, my point in presenting this example is that, at that moment, by shifting gender attribution, she shifted attributions of personhood from a person to a metaperson. She did so automatically and unselfconsciously and she could not know that I would later be attentive to what was being recorded by the camera, which she was distractedly holding in her hand. As a matter of fact, when she calls out to them, her little friends echo her sentence, calling

back "The father! The father!" (*O pai! O pai!*), thus showing that they understood they were being called to a séance, not to any other kind of event.

In this young girl's daily life, persons and metapersons interact and participate in each other mutually in a complex set of constitutive participations that are, as Sahlins calls them, "mutualities of being" (2011a, see Pina-Cabral 2013c). What I mean to highlight with this example, then, can be put in the following simplified question: in reporting this encounter, do we attribute the same ontological status to the person the little *equede* calls "mother" as to the person she calls "father"? How do we relate the young girl's personal awareness of who she is—her internal arena of presence and action—to her mutuality with persons (meta and not meta) that surround her and towards whom she warmly expresses gestures of surrogacy?

PERSONS AND METAPERSONS

In their analyses, apart from live human persons, ethnographers recurrently encounter two main categories of persons to whom the people they study attribute consciousness and that we might call metapersons: on the one hand, humans who are no longer alive but with whom the living continue to be in close participation and, on the other hand, entities who were never embodied as human but who are attributed personal status (in one of many forms and intensities) and with whom humans feel that they can communicate. *Metapersons* are, in this way, seen to be similar but different from *persons-who-wakingly-live-in-the-world*, as Husserl would put it: that is, members of the human species like you and me, who have entered into personal ontogeny and accessed propositional thinking and who are embodied within the normal human life-cycle that starts with birth and terminates with death.

In anthropology, since the days of Tylor and Frazer, this whole area of discussion has traditionally been subsumed under anthropological theories of 'animism'—which assume that what brings together these entities and 'persons' is that they are all considered

to be moved by 'spirit/soul'. The problem here, as Lévy-Bruhl definitively demonstrated (1926 [1910]: 61-75), is that the category 'spirit' by no means helps us clarify the issue—to the contrary, due to its ethnocentrism, it only muddles it further. In fact, in his lectures on Anthropology, Kant himself had already been troubled by the conjoining of 'soul' with 'spirit' and 'mind' in characterising personhood (Makkreel 2014: 21).

But even if we disregard that tradition of critique, the 'animism' of Others (as opposed to what would be our 'materialism'—see Descola 2013) provides no satisfactory answer to our question. In this attribution to metapersons of personal status and of a capacity for active response, a 'mystical' aspect (in the sense both of transcendent and affective) is always assumed. Together with the late Lévy-Bruhl (and contrary to his early books as well as to many of our contemporary colleagues), it does not seem useful here to characterise this type of attribution as typical of 'primitive', 'pre-modern', or 'Other' cultures. Indeed, the attribution of personal status and capacity for active response to metapersons is encountered in one way or another in all major human traditions that have been studied by anthropologists and historians, both in contexts of Euro-American modernity and elsewhere.

We insist on qualifying metapersons as persons for essentially two reasons. Firstly, because ethnographers have recurrently noted that people attribute to metapersons the features of live persons and communicate with them as if they possessed conscious minds with an active and reflexive presence, such as persons do. Secondly, because this is a historical tradition that would be difficult to disregard. After all, the very notions of 'participation', 'transcendence', and 'subjectivity' are steeped in centuries-old debates that not only treat metapersons as persons, but in fact define persons by reference to metapersons. In Christian theology, for example, God, not humans, constitutes the archetype of personhood. A very similar argument could have been made for 'ancestors' and the Confucian philosophical tradition to which we are also heirs today.

As it happens, there is a third kind of entity that has been characteristically treated as 'person'. I refer here to the legal tradition of attributing 'corporateness' to collective entities (see Pina-Cabral 1989). Like Sahlins, however, I do not include these in the broad category of 'metapersons', since they are seldom granted the capacity to communicate with humans; they are treated *as if* they were persons but not *as* persons possessing consciousness, whilst metapersons are as a rule expected to possess a person-like mind, even when they lack a body, or when they cannot communicate directly with humans (as when they communicate through shamans). There are, of course, situations where live persons and collective persons come to conjoin in permanent co-presence (as noted by Fortes 1987 [1971]: 253). These are here treated as a special case of personal participation.

The problem is particularly hairy for anthropologists because ethnographic rigour obliges us to query whether to be a person is always the same thing wherever humans live. And, of course, the answer to this question was already given by Marcel Mauss long time ago (1985 [1938]): no, personhood is a variable of culture—we encounter different traditions of personhood in the ethnographic register. To what extent, then, am I entitled to speak of personhood in general? And again, the answer to that is not simple, since I can only ask the question in the first place because I assume that all of the different instances of being a person that ethnographers and historians have described are instances of a more general category of personhood.

To put it perhaps too simply: the epistemological question gets in the way of the ontological enquiry. We cannot afford, however, to go down either way: that is, either to delve on the ontological differences bypassing the epistemological question (as the so-called 'ontologists' proposed) or to delve into the epistemological question bypassing the ontology (which would be the 'positivist' solution). The reason why both solutions are blocked is that one can only speak of persons because one works with an analytical hypothesis that such a thing as personhood is a feature of all forms of human life, whilst

one has to recognise at the same time that persons do not manifest themselves in the same way in different traditions—personhood being triggered off in the human infant by the "framework of formats, rules, procedures, knowledge and tests that purport to be generally applicable, a reality sustained by institutions that determine its shape".[6]

We are embarrassed by our desire to achieve an all-or-nothing type of answer (see Pina-Cabral 2009), whilst the solution would have to be found in acknowledging that all human gestures (including science) are historically rooted and evolve gradualistically. To be brief, what allows me to know that persons exist in all cultures is also what allows me to know that personhood manifests itself differently in different cultures. I propose, therefore, that this problem can only be solved if, instead of focusing on the ontological problem and on the epistemological problem separately, we focus on what makes them both possible: *the ethnographic gesture*, the presence of an ethnographer who wakingly-lives-in-the-world.

PARTICIPATION

As Heidegger insisted ([1929/30] 1995), personhood is always "amidst," always subject to an anteriority that both produces it and confronts it; personhood "responds and recalls", he said. The *partibility* caused by this anterior alterity opens the person to future *dividuality*, to use Strathern's distinction (1988). Yet this does not occur to a disembodied agent—it happens to "mortals", embodied humans immersed in socially pre-existent contexts, persons who wakingly-live-in-the-world.

Participation, in the sense Lévy-Bruhl attributed to it, is best defined as *the ambivalent encounter between the singular and the plural in the formation of the person in the world* (see Keck 2008). In dividual participation, the person *transcends* not only by relation to other persons but in being invested in the world that surrounds him or her. This transcendence, however, should not be seen as a question of 'meaning' or 'belief', as it is immanent, in the sense of

being emergent from the person's embodied condition. To use the example of personal naming: once attributed and accepted, the name becomes part of the person, not in the way of Erving Goffman's mask-like social roles that are superimposed upon a naturally given individual ([1967] 2005: 52); but in a more essential manner that allows for the sort of participation in identity that Marcel Mauss evinced famously in his analysis of the gift ([1925] 2016), where the relationship between the given object and the giver is one of participation with significant implications for the persons involved. It is not that the people 'believe' that part of them goes with their gift or with their name; it is rather that they *actually* participate in the gifted thing or in the name (see Pina-Cabral 2013b). The reason for this is that, as emergent properties, what brought each one of us together as a person in the first place were our participations.

Lévy-Bruhl's most profound insight at the end of his long working life (1998 [1949]: 250), quite as much as Sahlins' (2011b), is that transcendence is a function of participation. This is how Lévy-Bruhl explains it in his notes to himself:

> Participation is not simply a mysterious and inexplicable fusion between beings that lose and keep at the same time their identity. It enters into the constitution of these same beings. Without participation, *they would not have been a given of their own experience*: they would not have existed. ... Participation, therefore, is immanent to the individual, as he owes what he is to it. (1998 [1949]:250, my emphasis)

Participations do not happen to a 'pre-existent individual'. Sociality predates personhood, because intentionality (that is, the capacity to address the world with purpose in primary intersubjectivity) is anterior to and a condition for personal ontogeny leading to the secondary intersubjectivity of the conscious mind (see Hutto and Myin 2013). But the passage from one type of intersubjectivity to the other only arises in humans during their early life *if* they are raised within a human caring environment; feral children never

come to develop personhood, as we have known for a very long time. The sharing of existence with other humans who, in their own infancy, were raised as persons, is a condition for becoming a person. In order to speak in terms of the first-person singular, and thus fully access language, the person has had to position itself as a third person; he or she has had to transcend (Pina-Cabral 2017: 106-8).

Furthermore, recent studies of embodied cognition allow us to expand significantly on an insight that was present in the late thought of Lévy-Bruhl and Mauss as they moved significantly beyond Durkheim in the decades after the master's death: namely, that participation occurs not only with other animals of the same species but also with animals of other species *and* with things, broadly defined. Persons expand into their environment through their participation in the more relevant features of the world that surrounds them. Beyond persons, participation also occurs with relevant animals, objects, places, names, spiritual entities and even with some conditions of the world. In arguing for a model of 'extended mind', where cognitive operations are profoundly world-dependent and occur way beyond the operations of the brain, contemporary philosophers of cognition unwittingly validate Lévy-Bruhl's insights concerning how persons 'participate' in the objects and situations that have a personally constitutive co-presence (see Clark 2010). In the process of self-constitution (ontogeny), persons are invested in the world. In fact, our capacity to address the world—our openness to 'things'—is a function of life's sociality.[7]

PARTICIPATORY SENSE MAKING

One of Lévy-Bruhl's more challenging insights is enshrined in his use of the concept of 'mystical'. By that he meant that the participations that humans experience with each other, with certain animals, and with the things that surround them are both transcendent *and* affective, that is, participation is both a cognitive and an emotional disposition—indeed, he came to reject the validity of the polarisation (1998 [1949]: 10).

The traditional boundary between reason and affect was being challenged in that both seemed integral to the forms of participation that the ethnographic register proposed. Over the past decades, however, this has become far easier to contemplate than it was at mid-century when Lévy-Bruhl formulated it. The view that emotion and sociality are necessarily involved in the more basic forms of cognition has come to find recognition in cognitive science over the past decades. One of its more successful recent formulations involves the notion of 'participatory sense-making', which De Jaegher and Di Paolo define as: "the coordination of intentional activity in interaction, whereby individual sense-making processes are affected and new domains of social sense-making can be generated that are not available to each individual on their own." (2007: 497)

Perception, they argue, is not a passive reception of sense impressions: "Perceiving is a matter of getting along with other people as well as getting along in one's surroundings." (Bower and Gallagher 2013: 125) Rather, it is part of the dispositions through which animals endowed with intentionality intervene meaningfully in their environment (see Gallagher 2013). As an active engagement with world, therefore, perception necessarily includes an affective dimension. "Natural cognitive systems are simply not in the business of accessing their world in order to build accurate pictures of it. They actively participate in the generation of meaning in what matters to them; they enact a world. Sense-making is a relational and affect-laden process grounded in biological organization." (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 488).

We should not assume that the perception of objects can occur at all outside sociality; all sense-making necessarily occurs within an affect-laden interaction with others (Gallagher 2009): "our understanding of the world is shaped by our interactions with, and in our understanding of, other people." (De Jaegher and Di Paolo 2007: 298) In short, sociality is a condition not of persons alone but also of all live beings. Participation, therefore, does not happen only after the singular person emerges into secondary

intersubjectivity in the course of early childhood, but it is a condition for the he world to emerge to the singular person, for "worlding" (see Pina-Cabral 2017: 99-134). As Heidegger insisted, we are "thrown" in the world.

The challenge for anthropologists today is to understand how the intentionality of basic mind, which humans share with their mammalian cousins, gives rise in human infants who are cared for in human company, to conscious forms of thinking. The emergence of personhood during the first year of the child's life, and the subsequent passage from primary intersubjectivity to a less fusional and more categorical type of intersubjectivity that Trevarthen calls 'secondary intersubjectivity' (Trevarthen and Hubley 1978), does not cancel out or obstruct the initial process of intentionality with its affect-laden forms of sense-making. Participation, however much it cohabits with conscious thinking in the course of secondary intersubjectivity, remains rooted in the sort of continuities and mirrorings that Lévy-Bruhl identified.

As cognitive scientists have come to propose, shared intentionality—that is, "perceptually co-present joint attention" (Tomasello 2008: 91), the capacity to engage jointly with others in world-related activities within the caring environment—is what triggers secondary intersubjectivity in humans and, in turn, allows persons to emerge as autonomous, self-preserving entities (see Gallagher 2007). At the very beginning of personal ontogeny, therefore, at a time when the human infant is becoming a person by entering into language (the first nine months of life), the infant has had to acquire the capacity for reflexivity—that is, the capacity to recognize his or her own self as other of another, to transcend his or her own condition. This transcendence is a central aspect in the passage from the intentionally driven *basic mind* that we are born with to the aptitude for conceptually driven thinking that we acquire as we become persons—*scaffolded mind* (Hutto and Myin 2013: 173).

In speaking of scaffolded mind, the supporters of radical embodied cognition are

generalizing the proposition that learning is essentially a process not of imitation but of participation in tasks in a world where affordances are shared: "Scaffolding supports higher-order thinking, which begins in socially mediated interactions and gradually becomes part of an individual's cognition." (Belland and Drake 2013: 904) Humans invest their meanings in the world (they reify meaning) and then interact with these reifications—theirs and other people's. Even if I am alone, I permanently engage with the traces left by other persons by means of the categories I share with them. In their sensorial immediacy, these affordances both provide alternatives to meaning and shape meaning, in that they communicate their properties by relation to available routines (Lupton 2015: 623). Indeed, as developmental psychologists have amply demonstrated, the very development of problem solving and skill acquisition in children is a process of scaffolding, to the extent that adults provide the child with pathways for problem-solving (see Wood, Bruner, and Ross 1976: 90).

The world of persons includes 'forms of life' that involve symbolic reification with which humans interact, way beyond and long time after their own immediate interhuman communications (what Boltansky calls 'reality', 2014). Becoming a person in ontogeny involves writing oneself into the physical environment to which one belongs at the same time as into the 'form of life' that pervades one's social environment. Our actions are 'written into' the world (in language, in dwelling, in names, in manufactured objects, in writing, etc., etc.) and reflect back onto us a 'reality' that was always already shaped by former participations. This is what triggers in organic humans the emergence of an internal arena of presence and action, thus launching the person (cf. Pina-Cabral 2017). In short, as they shape themselves as persons, persons participate in the reifications that their own and other people's past actions on the world have produced, constituting a *habitus*.

As she was telling me of "her own *assentamento*", the little *equede* in Bahia was both participating with the objects that constitute the saint's shrine and with the "saint" whose

existence depends on her (and many other people) continuing their cult practices. In approaching the image of the divinity, she and the divinity participate in that they are surrogates for each other. As she goes for the saint's hand, the girl finds her own personal value in the "beauty" that she attributes to *her* saint. As it turns out, her own co-presence with her foster mother is then redoubled and validated through the presence of Oxúm. This participation is "mystical", as Lévy-Bruhl put it, to the extent that it is at the same time both affective and transcendental (that is, rooting an essence in existence, postulating a presence). Oxúm, with her distant origins in Africa and in Afro-Brazilian slave syncretism, antedates Taniele by many centuries, but at the same time it is the little priestess's own transcendence and her affective engagement with the deity *and* the foster mother that reproduces Oxúm's existence.

Scaffolding, therefore, is a mediation of sense-making and it is the trigger of transcendence; each one of us as persons receives from the world an impact that is pervaded by participations to which we were not present. The young *equede* had not really been aware of the identity of the large shrine next to the great hall's window. In being informed "it is your mother's", she confirms it is dedicated to the snake living in the shallow waters of the mangrove next to which the *terreiro* was founded (Oxumarê, itself a co-presence of Oxúm). The world scaffolds emotionally her presence and her principal participatory co-presences, thus engaging her in forms of secondary intersubjectivity based on participatory sense-making. This is what symbolical signification is all about, as it constitutes the difference between the intentional thinking of all animals and the propositional thinking of human persons.[8] The word 'reification'[9] is used here by relation to the Medieval notion of 'essence'[10] to describe the way in which propositional thinking relies on category formation (on hypostatisation), that is, on the attribution of durability to patterns of experience that become continuous beyond the person's immediate presence by making part of a form of life.

In short, because the world of humans is *scaffolded*, it speaks to us in ways that the world of animals does not, thus opening up the path to 'mystical participation'.

In order to come to a conclusion, let us now look at the matter of metapersons from the contrary direction of that in which it presented itself to us earlier on. Let us suggest that it is not metapersons who are like persons, but persons who are also metapersons. We started by putting the matter the wrong way around, because that is how it presents itself to the ethnographer in the field. She can only access the personhood of the respondents in the field due to the exercise of her own personal disposition for transcendental intersubjectivity. The ethnographer does this, first of all, with the live persons who surround her in the field; as I did with the little *equede*. Only in time does the ethnographer start to attune to the existence of metapersons in the environing world. She becomes aware of their existence whilst not necessarily ever reaching the point of personally participating in them. As metapersons, Ogúm-Xeroquê, Yemanjá, Oxumarê presented themselves to me as ethnographer as a result of my co-presence with the people of Bahia, inspiring in me a sense of their possible presence. This is what Evans-Pritchard meant, one assumes, when he declared that it was the Nuer who taught him about God, leading to his conversion in Libya in 1944. But note: he did not convert to Nuer metaphysics, of course, but to Roman Catholicism ([1973] 1976: 245).

All of us, to the extent that we are capable of transcending our embodied condition and looking at ourselves as creation, share in the condition of sprites, gods, and sacred animals. But there is a difference: it is only because *we* can do so that *they* exist at all, because if we had not been able to hypostatise them (grant them entity status, an essence) they would not have stood up on their own in our midst. This is why there is presently no evidence that dogs, crocodiles or mountains ("sacred" as they may be) believe in gods,

spirits, or ancestors. Animals do not possess the propensity for this kind of transcendence that is so characteristic of human persons in society.

This matter can best be understood if we consider the intrinsic ambiguity of the borders between personhood and metapersonhood, for example in the case of dead persons. The personhood of the recently dead person is nowhere in the world simply denied. Rather, there is a manipulation of their personhood through processes that we might qualify as levels of ontological shading. As Mark Johnston explores brilliantly in his book *Surviving Death* (2010), persons survive death and yet they only do so on condition that others participate in them. In short, others who wakingly-live-in-the-world are the bearers of transcendence both of the persons who cohabit with them and of the metapersons who are assumed to surround them.

The meta-hood, so to speak, that persons share with metapersons is transcendence, that is how shells or pigs can participate in people and people in shells or pigs; when aspects of their persons are inscribed in such entities (see Strathern 1984). We are vehicles for transcendence in that, when we became persons, we became capable of receiving and reproducing symbolic messages. Our mind was scaffolded; we came to recognise the reifications that are written into the world and to reproduce them. The capacity to be bearers of essence (of identity) that results from the intrinsic dividuality of persons who wakingly-live-in-the-world, our dividuality, is what produces meta-hood. In this sense, others that no longer are persons (such as ancestors) or others who were never wakingly persons (such as divinities, animals or mountains) have their personhood reproduced parasitically in each one of us through a stochastic process.

The existence of persons who wakingly-live-in-the-world, therefore, is a condition for the personhood of crocodiles among the Tallensi (see Fortes 1973 1987) or of ancestors among the Chinese, or of God among the followers of the Religions of the Book, because such persons are the bearers and reproducers of transcendence. The existence of

metapersons is not a function of each person who transmits them, in as much as any other person might have done the same and, there being by definition many persons involved in these forms of collective engagement, none of them individually is the unique bearer of this transcendence. Oxúm, for example, does not exist only in the little priestess; she exists in all of the persons who, over the centuries, have approached the reification of Oxúm, who have scaffolded Oxúm by inscribing her in the world, myself included and now, because you have read this, also in you. Admittedly, the profound constitutive engagement that Taniele and her foster mother have with their saint fires up Oxúm's transcendence more pointedly. But there are many such persons in Brazil and Africa who participate constitutively in Oxúm. Without the singular existence of each of the believers in particular, the existence of the divinity would not be sustainable. Existentially, therefore, metapersons are parasitic on personhood not in a mechanic but in a stochastic sense—and this applies both to metapersons and to persons.

The border region between personhood and metapersonhood is particularly ambivalent in the case of absent persons. I do not speak of short-term absences, during which the redolence of the intersubjective encounter continues to move us; but, for example, of cases like royalty, politicians, or famous artists, who are very much alive although we never experience transcendental intersubjectivity with them. Are they to be treated as metapersons? Their case is not very different from that of people who were close to us but with whom we have lost contact: e.g., one's half-brother who went to Argentina when he was 17 and none of us ever contacted again; or the estranged father of one's sister's daughter who left for Australia many years ago. What status should we attribute to people with whom we are no longer in regular contact? The answer to these questions is necessarily ambivalent and there is no problem in that, because it is not persons who differ from metapersons, but metapersons who differ from persons. They do so in that they only share some of the features of persons and their existence is parasitic

upon the transcendence of those who wakingly-live-in-the-world.

In this way, this paper suggests that, by building on the lessons of Lévy-Bruhl, we can now renew an *anthropology of ethics* based on an analysis of personhood as a socially emergent phenomenon (see Robbins 2016). In terms of ethnographic theory, our principal aim is to avoid ethnographic agnosticism whilst preserving methodological relativism, that is, to be able to explain how essence and existence meet each other in the case of all persons, meta or not.

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[1] In addressing this theme, I benefited from the excellent studies of Lévy-Bruhl published by Goldman 1994 and by Keck 2008.

² The word 'essence' (the what-ness or quiddity of a thing) is used here in the sense that Thomas Aquinas attributes to it when he says "the essence [*essencia*] is that which is signified by the definition of a thing." (1997 [1252-53], chap. 2)

³ He attributes to Malebranche the expressions 'participable individuals' ([1910] 1951: I/II, 69) and 'the living are participated by the dead' ([1910] 1951: III/IV, 86).

⁴   https://www.soas.ac.uk/ethnographic-theory/events/29apr2016-inaugural-hocart-lecture.html

⁵ And that the 'ontologists' wanted to resolve by means of an 'ontic' *fiat* (see Vigh and Sausdal 2014).

⁶ What Boltansky confusingly calls 'reality' and I call 'a form of life' (2014 [2012]: 16).

⁷ Husserl's notion of *transcendental intersubjectivity*, influenced as it was by the work of Lévy-Bruhl (see Husserl [1935] 2008), aims at describing just this dynamic (see Gallagher 2007).

⁸ I follow here the lesson of the late Pierce concerning "symbolic" thought (see Short 2007).

⁹ I am not adopting here the Marxist-critical meaning of 'reification' that Axel Honneth proposes in his eponymous book (2009: 58), which implies a negative moral evaluation. To the contrary, I am inspired in Heidegger's considerations about 'thing' ([1950] 1971: 179).

¹⁰ For a recent approach, which valuably adjourns this discussion, see Olwig 2013.