

# The bororo people and descartes essay



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Anthropology attempts to understand the question “ what does it mean to be human? ” The Bororo people of South America create meaning for their individuality as humans by associating each clan with a specific totem, one being a red-breasted parrot. A Bororo male’s declaration that “ I am a red-breasted parrot” is essentially different than a Western individual saying “ My professor is a strange bird” because calling themselves “ red-breasted parrots” is something more than just a name given to the Bororo. Instead, it is a spiritual totem that a Bororo clan associates itself with. These spirits are thought to be immortal and immaterial.

They are the ideal type, the essence, the more real than real name of a Bororo’s social identity. The significance of the Bororo resides in the fact that they seem to express a completely different notion of identity than a western thinker. What the Bororo are trying to express is actual identity; that they can be both human beings and birds at the same time. Primitive mentality in cultures like the Bororo have no problem believing that life as a human being and as an animal can exist as one and at the same time.

By doing this, the Bororo people’s belief that a man is a red-breasted parrot objects to the non-universality of western rationalism. According to western thought, the self asserts its identity, discovers proof of its existence, and becomes aware of its existence in an encounter with its other. On the other hand, the Bororo people believe that the two species of man and animal are identified as one or another aspect of a single whole such as the clan or some universal spiritual substance. Having man and animal exist as a single but dualistic spiritual entity is the Bororo people’s way of reaching the

spiritual cosmos. The man/animal dichotomy unites to bring the Bororo people spiritual freedom.

This mystic mentality that cultures like the Bororo practice is a large and important aspect for savage cultures. Although the primitive way of thinking is a polar opposite to the civilized way of thinking, they are alike in the fact that both consist of a dichotomy that unites to create perfection. If a typical western speaker uttered the words “ My professor is a strange bird,” most westerners would be very confused and see no spiritual or significance in the expression. Modern western thought was born from the ideas and concepts of Rene Descartes, a crucial philosopher in the history of western thought.

According to Descartes, using rationality distinguishes men from the beasts. This concept conflicts with the Bororo’s way of thinking that men are birds. Descartes would say that birds are machines that do operate but there is a gap between them and human beings; animals are just a body while human beings consist of both a body and a soul where when the human being dies, the soul doesn’t die with it. Descartes said “ I think, therefore I am. ” He thinks that he can doubt everything, but he can not doubt that there is reasoning going on and that he is the one doing it. He can only be certain that he exists and that he is this reasoning and thinking.

He can not be sure that he exists as a body. All this thinking led him to the binary distinction that the mind is the subject and the body is the object. In an objective world, you can’t count on God coming down. There’s no mysticism involved with objectivity. In a subjective world, humans are

subject to the intervention of a God and spirits. The argument he makes, although, offers a proof of the existence of God.

According to Descartes, humans can't possibly arrive at perfection on their own. God has to be responsible for this perfection. If you have imperfection, there must be perfection somewhere, which is well outside of us. He is saying there is a duality that exists between the body and mind and when God adds to the equation, there is perfection. Although Descartes' idea of the mind/body dualism conflicts with the Bororo's way of thinking that a man is a red-breasted parrot, both the civilized and the savage way of thinking are alike because both reside on the fact that two become one to form a dualistic union which reaches spiritual perfection. The argument of a mind/body dualism proposed by Descartes makes more sense to me than the Bororo's argument that a human being can simultaneously be at one with himself as a human being and an animal at the same time.

Even before taking this course, I have committed myself to numerous reflections on this subject and have realized that without the power of my mind, my body would not exist. Without a thinking mind, I wouldn't be aware of the fact that my body was operating and that it was operating because of my mind. Therefore, if I was absent of a mind and was still operating at fundamental level, I would no longer be a human but instead a machine. I do not, although, disagree with spiritually attempting to coexist as an animal and a human being like the Bororo did by calling themselves red-breasted parrots. Even though I have grown up in a modernized western culture and obviously would never call myself a parrot, I firmly believe that an

individual's method in reaching the spiritual realm should be personally unique towards their beliefs.

Ultimately, having the choice to reflect and then decide on one's own method, is what creates meaning for the individuality of human beings.