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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/jsa/15899>

DOI: 10.4000/jsa.15899

ISSN: 1957-7842

Publisher

Société des américanistes

Printed version

Date of publication: 15 June 2018

Number of pages: 281-286

ISSN: 0037-9174

Electronic reference

Ernst Halbmayer, "On Dimitri Karadimas' "Gods, warriors, and celestial parasites. Perceptions, myths, and images in South America" and his canonical version of iconographic perception", *Journal de la Société des américanistes* [Online], 104-1 | 2018, Online since 15 June 2018, connection on 07 September 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/jsa/15899> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/jsa.15899>

On Dimitri Karadimas' "Gods, warriors, and celestial parasites. Perceptions, myths, and images in South America" and his canonical version of iconographic perception

Ernst HALBMAYER *

Dimitri Karadimas' oeuvre, which was discussed on June 3, 2016, by the *jury de soutenance* of his *habilitation*, is impressive both for its outstanding quality and for its sheer productive volume. When we had the pleasure to engage with his inspiring work, various members of the committee, myself included, not only appreciated Dimitri's current achievements but also expressed the hope that he would direct his attention and the potential offered by his approach to specific fields and questions in the future, unaware that we would be hit by the announcement of his premature passing only 10 months later. We lost an extraordinary colleague and a friend, whom I had known since I had been a research associate at the Laboratoire d'anthropologie sociale between 1999 and 2001. As a fluent German speaker, he was also the French Amazonianist who kept the closest contact with the South Americanist anthropology of the German-speaking world.

For his *habilitation* he had submitted 36 papers published in various journals and languages, an unpublished manuscript of 500 pages entitled "Dieux, guerriers, parasites célestes. Perceptions, mythes et images en Amérique du Sud," as well a concise synthesis of his work of about 100 pages. Not only is the volume of the presented work remarkable, even more so is its theoretical coherence and the rigorous way in which he elaborated a line of thought that was established by Claude Lévi-Strauss in order to understand the cognitive structures of the human mind.

The innovative character of Dimitri's work is expressed most clearly by his ability to cross boundaries between areas that otherwise remain largely separate, such as ethnography and archeology, the South American Lowlands and Highlands, as well as myth and iconography, ranging from pre-Columbian goldwork to ceramics, from Amazonian masks, baskets, and the decoration

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of clubs to Mesoamerican iconography. In numerous instances he convincingly demonstrates his proposition that Amerindian representations, even of seemingly imaginary or chimerical animals, depict real species. Based on the recognition of mental images, he developed a theory of “iconographic perception.” Central recurring topics in Dimitri’s work are the analysis of myth and the modes of figuration, the anthropology of the body, sexuality, and substances (Karadimas 1997), as well as anthropomorphism and the analogism underlying the mental projections of forms (Karadimas 2012). The code of the body and its substances, the astronomical code—especially the role of the Orion constellation—and the zoological code—especially with regard to entomology—played a key role in his thinking.

The inquiry into these topics led him to the seemingly odd and otherwise largely neglected area of insects: beetles, caterpillars, worms, and parasitic wasps. This might seem like a highly idiosyncratic project were it not to demonstrate the existence of unexpected underlying structures and logics of thought that suddenly make sense, give coherence to a range of phenomena, and establish new understandings beyond accepted wisdom of phenomena that range from the Yurupari to Mesoamerican iconography.

Although I was familiar with central aspects of Dimitri’s work, I was unaware of the broad range of his efforts and the energy he invested in understanding pre-Columbian goldwork, especially from the northern Andes. He revisits a topic treated by Reichel-Dolmatoff in his *Goldwork and shamanism* (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1988) but goes beyond the latter’s “shamanizing thesis.” Dimitri pays attention to the differences in religious leadership, priesthood, and shamanism in a region characterized by complex and hierarchical social systems. He presents a solar or stellar analysis in which Orion plays a central role and extends it to Amerindian iconography beyond gold objects and the regional setting.

Dimitri’s oeuvre forcefully advances a theory of mental images that is based on findings from cognitive psychology. The act of perception is as much a “projection” as a capture of salient forms from the environment that is based on analogy and anthropomorphism. Such perception generates, mostly unconsciously and involuntarily, cognitive “target” images that are similar to, but slightly different from, the perceived “source image.” Thus there is no naturalistic causality in the metaphorical relation between the two and the perceived thing may be perceived through its form, movement, or shape and may assume the quality of a subject. If these images and formulations as expressed in iconography and myth are visible to all but understood only by few, as Dimitri writes, what methods of iconic decryption are used to evoke their meaning? As structuralist reasoning has established new methods and subsequent understandings of myths and kinship, what difference is established by a structural “*iconographie sauvage*”?

I personally hoped that Dimitri would have had the time to systematize and formulate more explicitly the iconographic method underlying much of his work.

There are only few anthropological approaches to iconographic analysis and his work exceeds them in scope. There is thus a need to delineate the applied analytical procedures. Two sets of questions regarding the empirical material seem to be of specific importance. First, by what criteria are objects and images selected from the broad range of existing ethnographic and archeological material, and what steps guide that selection? How far is that selection based on an understanding of the corpus of images and objects and their internal logics and structures concerning a specific culture, style, or region? How far is it legitimate to selectively pick items suitable for the development of one's own theory and leave others aside? The second question refers to the procedures in the analysis and interpretation of specific objects and images. If the description of an image can only be achieved by breaking it down to its fragments, how can the combination of the parts that compose the image and their interaction with each other be analyzed? Such procedures should be made explicit, especially in distinction to approaches from related disciplines like art history. Names like Abby Warburg or Erwin Panofsky come to mind.

One could try to deduce such methodological treatment from the existing analysis. However, I would find it extremely helpful if the innovative potential of Dimitri's "*anti-chimérique*" (Karadimas 2015b) approach were not confined to the personal capabilities of a gifted scholar but became a recognized and trainable method. Dimitri undertook first steps in that direction in his "*synthèse de travaux*." His analytical deciphering strategy is based on identifying the source terms for visual and verbal analogies in the human body and the natural world and the hidden "images" in visual metaphors. He detects the deployment of analogies between source and target terms in the creation of iconography, ritual, narrative, and the names of animal species.

One of the strengths of Dimitri's work is without doubt his use of Lowland Amerindian mythology to understand iconography. The ethnographic foundation of his approach lay in his research among the Miraña and other northwestern Amazonian indigenous groups like the Bora and Witoto. For this reason, Miraña myth, ritual, architecture, and analogistic theory of the fabrication of the human person constitute the base of his analysis and his efforts to discover variation and structural similarity.

He demonstrates in an especially convincing manner the relationship between the Miraña and neighboring groups, on the one hand, and the pre-Columbian Southern Colombian Andes (Nariño) and El Charchi (Ecuador), on the other. There the iconography of the four monkeys known from Miraña myths is beautifully depicted in archeological remains. His comparison, however, expands beyond that region toward the north—following Reichel-Dolmatoff—to the Sierra Nevada and even Central America, the Caribbean Islands, and the Guianas, as well as further south in the Andes.

Dimitri expanded the notion of a pan-American transformational system established by Lévi-Strauss in his analysis of myths by focusing on the forms of figuration in Amerindian iconography. At the same time he repeatedly uses the term *intermediate area*. It is unclear to me, however, where exactly he locates this area and what are its specific features. Is northwestern Amazonia part of this intermediate area? How does Dimitri's use of the term relate to Kirchhoff's "Chibcha area" (Kirchhoff 1943), Haberland's (Haberland 1957) or Costenla's (Costenla Umaña 1991) "intermediate area" or Hoopes and Fonseca's "Isthmo-Colombian area" (Hoopes and Fonseca Z. 2003)?

Such questions do not concern Dimitri's work alone, but raise general issues regarding a comparative Amerindian anthropology. They center on the questions of which comparisons make sense, which levels of generalization are we aiming at, and what is the role of empirical evidence in comparative reasoning? Which role do highly distinct areas play in the light of more general and overarching transformational logics? In other words, what is unique and what is shared among certain groups and what is pan-American or even universal? How do we avoid projecting structures and logics of transformation on to cases that follow different logics? In a deductive search for cognates and similarity, how much cultural or areal context and recognition of existing differences and alternative interpretations is necessary?

With regard to ethno-astronomy, Dimitri's comparative work focuses on the role of Orion, e.g. in terms of the different appearances of its trapeze when rising and setting in relation to solstices and equinoxes, and its relation to the sun and moon. Dimitri links the annual equatorial movement of Orion to widely distributed iconographic figurations. Recalling the work of Edmundo Magaña (Magaña 1988) on Guianese ethno-astronomical concepts, which also constitutes a central point of reference for Dimitri, I wonder what is the reason for this unique treatment of Orion and why other constellations that are related to Orion in local mythologies, like the Pleiades or Hyades, do not receive equal attention? Magaña analyzed over 150 myths, mainly from the Guiana region, and showed the great local variability in the association between myth and specific constellations, not only between different groups but even between settlements and families of the same group. For the length of a whole book he struggles with identifying aspects of a general structure underlying the enormous messiness of his empirical data.

In Dimitri's work, by contrast, a general scheme emerges from one Miraña myth that forms the base for an iconographic continuity across millennia and widely dispersed cultures. For this reason I consider his proposal a hypothesis—one whose value and fruitful application he is able to demonstrate with regard to a wide range of diverse examples. This hypothesis opens up new ways of interpreting archeological iconography and far exceeds the established

interpretive schemes in scope. In many respects it appears to be the best one available today. Nevertheless it remains a hypothesis whose scope, boundaries, and limitations remain to be identified in the future.

Dimitri had recently extended his argument—successfully, as I believe—to the Guiana region. He offered a new interpretation of the sky disks (*maluwana*) in the Wayana houses (*tukusipan*) and revealed a connection to a specific kind of wasp nest of the Apoica species (Karadimas 2015a). I am not convinced, however, that in the Guianas, despite the existence of the widespread praxis of wasp rituals, the idea of parasitic solitary wasps that stand in contrast to the social wasps of the Guianas¹ plays a role similar to that in northwestern Amazonia.

Finally, Dimitri's work represents a French intellectual tradition that extends from Durkheim to Lévi-Strauss and seeks theoretical generalizations beyond local ideas and concepts. Durkheim expresses this approach in his *The rules of sociological method* when he argues that to create new scientific concepts we “must lay aside common notions and the words used to express them” (Durkheim 2013, p. 81). Lévi-Strauss criticizes Marcel Mauss for sticking to local notions like *mana* and *hau* and asks “why did Mauss halt at the edge of those immense possibilities, like Moses conducting his people all the way to a promised land whose splendor he would never behold?” (Lévi-Strauss 1987, p. 45) In line with this tradition, Dimitri is skeptical of the idea that local research partners can play a central role in confirming theoretical analytical findings and his own “naturalist” explanations. These are much more likely to be rejected, as he shows with regard to the reaction of laypersons to his analysis of the Brothers Grimm's “Little Red Riding Hood” tale, as well as by the reaction of local interlocutors to his interpretation of the Yurupari.

Dimitri has convincingly demonstrated the potential of his work to enter into a critical dialogue with first-rate theorists like Dan Sperber and Pascal Boyer, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, and Carlo Severi. Its undoubtedly highly original and innovative character will definitely exert a lasting influence. I propose that his “iconographic perception” might be understood as a metaphorical version of Claude Lévi-Strauss' canonical formula of myth, accompanying the general narrative structure of myth with a general theory of cognitive mechanisms of perception.

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