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Everything has its Jaguar. A narratological approach to conceptualising Caribbean Saladoid animal imagery

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Chapter 6. Becoming acquainted with the feathered ones

The Trio (Cariban) classify “birds” as *tëpërikenton* (roughly translated: “feathered ones”), which presents us with an example of how the indigenous classification of animal/birds *can* be based on morphological features such as feathers. This chapter is similar in layout as Chapter 5 and will begin with discussing “birds” in general, as a holistic, not a species specific-category. However, as the specific “birds” (e.g., “parrot”, “vulture”¹²⁷) are also identified in iconography and as actors in the studied narratives, too, this chapter will also focus on specific “birds”.

Section 6.2 discusses specific “birds” identified in the narratives. Sections 6.3 to 6.5 focus on three clusters of bird-groups, i.e., birds of prey, scavenger birds and nocturnal birds.

6.1 “Birds”

All particular “birds” addressed here are dealt with similarly, thereby describing their roles and attributes as encountered in: (a) the narratives, (b) in nature, (c) in iconography, and (d) by means of their status within Amerindian cosmologies as a means to better grasp the indigenous conceptualisation of these feathered ones.

¹²⁷ The specific “birds” referred to here are: (a) parrot-like birds (e.g., macaw, parrot), (b) ducks, (c) shorebirds and waders (e.g., heron, ibis), (d) hummingbirds, and (e) woodpeckers.

6.1.1 “Birds” in the narratives

In olden times there was a village near a river. When someone approached this village a Bird always warned the villagers of the stranger’s arrival. In this village lived a happy family: father, mother and two daughters. The elder daughter never left her mother’s side. One day mother fell ill and died. The daughter was inconsolable. The elder daughter saw her mother’s footstep one day and she cried. The Bird asked her what was wrong and as she told how her mother had died, the Bird told her it could help, telling the girl to make a basket. She did as told and next the Bird told her to get into the basket. Then the Bird flew off with the basket. It took the girl to heaven. There the girl met her mother, but when Tamusi saw the girl, he sent her back. [Story no. 415 (Cariban); abridged]

In total 67 specific “birds” have been documented in the narratives, including the general category “Birds”. Those 67 specific “birds” account for 490 records occurring in 303 narratives, equalling 43 percent of all narratives incorporated in this study. In 81 cases either a “Bird”-actor or a reference to “Birds” (in general) is included.

The fact that tales featuring “Birds” are very common is reflected by a wide distribution across the core area and even far beyond, comprising fifteen language families (see Fig. 6.1). The linguistic distribution of the “Bird”-narratives is in line with their overall dissemination, and express no significant variations (Appendix D, section B. General remarks).¹²⁸

All in all, 277 narrative functions have been documented for 81 cases, displaying a discrepancy when compared with the general pattern (see Appendix C, Table C-7 for a complete list of all narrative functions of the “Bird” narratives).¹²⁹ The most common narrative function is validating the world with dominant sub-function: the origin of “animal/bird” traits and habits. Other common narrative functions are: encoding social behaviour and informing. The function identity has been recorded as relatively frequent (between 4 and 7 percent in general).

The narratives depict “Birds” as being helpful, protective, providing food, Masters of Drink or Food, or as acting as messengers for shamans and protagonists within a more mundane setting.

¹²⁸ The Chi-squared analysis serves to establish if the distribution of the “Bird”-narratives is in line with the general pattern as established in Chapter 4. The result of this analysis was: $\chi^2(7) = 7.76$; $p = 0.35$ (not significant).

¹²⁹ $\chi^2(4) = 9.53$; $p = 0.049$ (significant, critical value $\alpha 0.05 = 9.24$).

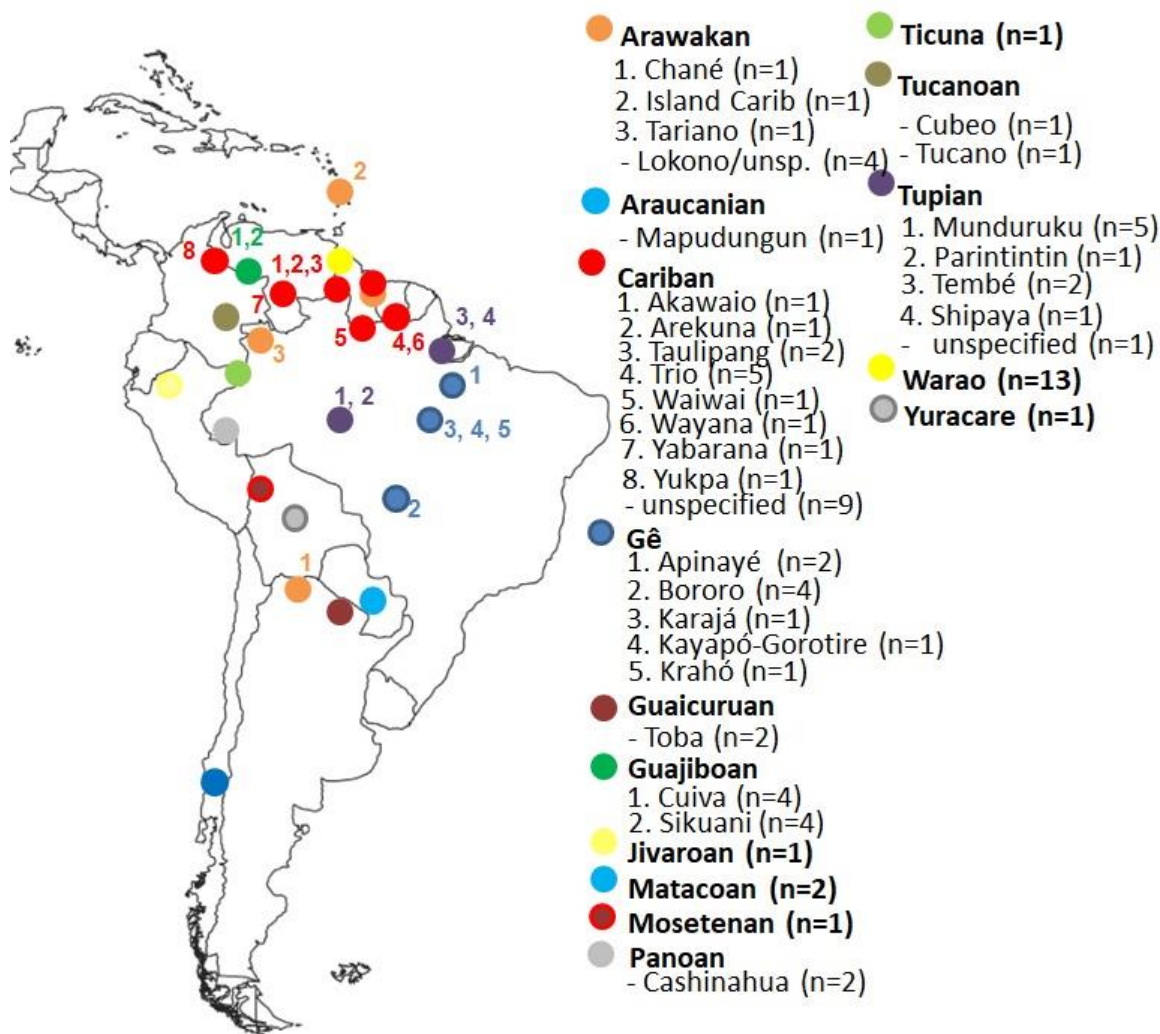


Fig. 6.1. Plot of “Bird” narratives in the study region, i.e., the Caribbean and South America; survey composed by the author.

Actors, events and settings (“fabula”)

Compared to the overall distribution of Greimas’s actants (see 4.2.2), we observe a significant variation as to the ascribed roles played by “Birds”¹³⁰, indicating that the members of this category are more likely to serve as helpers and receivers. “Birds” are less likely to act as opponents and subjects.

In six cases, “Birds” are the embodiments of spirits or souls (Story nos. 21, 248, 452, 477, 629, 711; 2x Cariban, 2x Warao, Gê, Guajibuan), for instance, as auxiliary spirits through which shamans communicate, the actual souls of deceased Amerindians, or as (malevolent) spirits. Hunted “Birds” or those already caught as game have been recorded on six occasions (Story nos. 157, 196, 309, 348, 360, 591; 2x Tupian, Guaicuruan, Cariban, Warao, Guajibuan). However, in other cases, the event of “hunting birds” actually leads to subsequent actions,

¹³⁰ $\chi^2(5) = 21.83$; $p = 0.00056$ (significant). See Appendix D, section B. *Fabula* for a more elaborate description.

e.g., a hunter had set off to catch birds and lost his way, or met a “Jaguar” (Story nos. 192-4, 476, see Appendix D, sections B. Fabula and B6a). No “Birds” (in general) at all are kept as pets. This is presumably the result of the fact that the “Birds” kept as pets in the narratives are specified (e.g., parrot) (see 6.2).

The chronotope in which the “Bird”-personage is staged, is either in a forest (land) or a sky world. As to “Aquatic birds” in particular a water setting has (more) frequently been recorded. The spatial setting within the narratives is thus in accordance with the natural habitat. This phenomenon can also be observed within the temporal setting, for instance, when the sun sets or rises, i.e., moments when many birds are most vocal.

Zooming in, we encounter 158 motifs directly linked to the “Bird” personage. The most common motifs concern the origin, acquisition and creation of things (n=35), the helpful “Birds” (n=37), transformations (n=23), shamanism (n=21), and the devastating “Bird” (n=14), see Appendix D, section B. Fabula.

The origin motifs encompass motifs concerning: (a) the discovery of the land-layer (See Story nos. 475-6, 484; Warao), and (b) the event leading to the differentiation of “animals/birds” and the origin of people (Story nos. 99, 170, 185; Warao, Chané (Arawakan), Yuracare). In total 23, “Bird”-narratives can be considered “origin stories” (see Appendix D, B. Fabula).

The following main clusters of narratives have been identified and then further analysed resulting in: (a) helpful “Birds”, in which they act either as messengers, advisors and speakers of the truth or as providers of goods, and (b) origin of “Bird” colouration (see Appendix D, section B1 to 2).

Helpful “Birds”

Within this sub-cluster (n=30), three main themes were identified in which the “Bird” is: (a) a messenger, advisor and speaker of truth (n=10), (b) a provider of goods (n=8), and (c) a helper with task (n=8).¹³¹ The most common motifs include: tasks/quests (n=17), origin of things and/or characteristics (n=17), culture hero(es) (n=12), transformations (n=11), and family affairs (n=9).

“Birds” can be helpful to the protagonist, or to others, in various ways, e.g., by carrying an Amerindian to the upper world (Story no. 415; Cariban), or by providing wings enabling the protagonist to fly there by himself (Story no. 182; Chimane, Mosetenan). In addition, “Birds” provide mankind with various gifts, for instance, tobacco and wine/*cassiri** (Story nos. 121, 247, 336; Arawakan, Gê, Ticuna). The “Bird”-actors often hold a large drinking vessel, which

¹³¹ Their number is too large to list them all (see Appendix D, section B1). The language families mentioned in the sub-cluster “Helpful birds” are: Arawakan, Araucanian, Cariban, Gê, Guajiboan, Mosetenan, Ticuna, Tucanoan, and Tupian.

could refer to the fact that these “Birds” officiate as Master (see 3.4.2 under the sub-heading *Mastery or “ownership”*).

“Birds” also advise or direct with regard to journeys, provide shelter, deliver warnings, and teach mankind arts and crafts (Story nos. 2, 170, 182, 185, 336, 448; Wayana (Cariban), Chané (Arawakan), Mosetenan, Yuracare, Ticuna, Warao). Nevertheless, the most common motif comprises “Birds as messengers” (see Fig. 6.2, Story nos. 2, 102, 132, 198, 408, 415, 448; Cariban (Wayana, Taulipang, 2x Carib), Bororo (Gê), Warao).



Fig. 6.2 .“Woodpecker” protecting a fish trap; artist’s impression of Story no. 78 (Arawakan) by L.J.M. Arts (2018).

Recurrent tasks involving “Birds” consist of, for instance, carving a vagina into a wooden statue of a maiden/women (Story nos. 99, 324, 386; Warao, Cubeo (Tucanoan), Warao/Cariban), or spying (Story no. 198; Bororo, Gê) and killing or scaring off a dangerous “Snake” (Story nos. 185, 497; Yuracare, Warao). Other more specific tasks include emptying a well with an open basket, regrowing trees after a global fire, moving the sky upwards in mythic times or catching the Sun who had escaped (Story nos. 158, 280, 348, 463; Tembê (Tupian), Matacoan, Yabarana (Cariban), Warao). “Birds” are also often associated with a “quest” undertaken by the

protagonist, e.g., a search for a home or a wife (Story nos. 170, 366; Chané (Arawakan), Ticuna), for the end of the world or for other worlds (Story nos. 102, 182; Cariban, Mosetenan).

The third most common motifs in this sub-cluster addresses the origin of a constellation (or a star) (Story nos. 2, 102, 132; Cariban (Wayana, Taulipang)), and the origin of the night (Story nos. 158, 348; Tembé (Tupian), Yabarana (Cariban)). Other motifs concern the origin of mankind, men or the distribution/spreading of communities (Story nos. 99, 170, 185; Warao, Chané (Arawakan), Yuracare), the origin of tobacco (*kumi*) (Story nos. 417, 133), maize (Story no. 133), rivers/creeks (Story nos. 182, 121), or fire (Story nos. 2, 170; Wayana, Cariban). Motifs relating to “animal/bird” traits and habits deal with smells and cries (Story nos. 2, 121, 280, 336).

Noteworthy as to the present category, even when considering “Bird”-narratives in general, are the numerous motifs which concern “family ties”. These recurring motifs apparently place the “Bird”-personage (literally) within a family context. For instance, they describe receiving help from a grandmother (Story no. 2; Wayana (Cariban)), a husband and wife (Story nos. 132, 133, 185, 198; 2x Taulipang (Cariban), Yuracare, Bororo (Gê) and a mother and son (Story no. 2; Wayana (Cariban)) or siblings (Story nos. 132-3, 185; 2x Taulipang (Cariban), Yuracare), or a disapproving mother-in-law (Story no. 336; Ticuna). Slightly related motifs tell of how culture heroes are born, raised or nursed and of their adventures (Story nos. 2, 182, 185, 336; Wayana (Cariban), Mosetenan, Yuracare, Ticuna). These cases also inform as to the deeds of culture heroes e.g., ascending to Heaven (Story nos. 102, 132; Cariban (1x Taulipang)), slaying the “Snake” son of his sister (Story no. 448; Warao) or to the lonesome culture hero (Story no. 185; Yuracare). It may be added here that “Birds” often assist a culture hero who may also be referred to as a *demiurge**, an artisan-like figure responsible for the fashioning and maintenance of the physical universe.

The setting of these narratives featuring “Helpful Birds”, in space and time, is in line with the placement of “Bird”-narratives in general. However, the duration aspect is not in agreement. These tales by and large cover a long narrated time i.e., 72 percent (n=18) span either months or years whereas “Birds” in general amounts to 48 percent. Only six cases go on for less than one day or a few days of narrated time.¹³² Real time shows no inconsistency whatsoever.

Origin of “Bird” colouration

The second cluster concerns the origin of the “Bird” colouration and comprises fourteen narratives.¹³³ The motifs are fairly similar to the first cluster (Helpful “Birds”). This sub-cluster

¹³² $\chi^2(1) = 5.77$; $p = 0.016$ (significant). See Appendix D, section B. *Story*.

¹³³ Story nos. 29, 80, 131, 193, 257, 260-3, 480, 496, 596, 597, and 691 (Trio (Cariban); unknown, Arekuna (Cariban); 2x Apinayé (Gê); Aré (unknown); Matacoan; Shipaya (Tupian-extinct); Guarani (Tupian); Munduruku (Tupian); 2x Warao; 2x Cuiva (Guajibuan)). See Appendix D, section B2.

deals less with “family ties” and culture heroes, but more with motifs related to punishments (n=6).

The motif “origin of the colour of a bird” has been recorded in twelve cases (Story nos. 29, 80, 131, 193, 257, 260-3, 480, 496, 691). A more detailed motif has also been recorded e.g., the origin of the colour of “Woodpecker” (Story nos. 260, 496; Matacoan, Warao), or as to why a “Vulture” is black (Story nos. 260, 480, 596-7; Matacoan, Warao, 2x Cuiva (Guajibaoan)). With regard to other (physical) animal traits and habits: Story no. 480 (Warao) informs us why a “Bird” has a short tail. More generalised motifs pertaining to the origin and nature of a “Bird’s” beak, or claws (Story nos. 29, 260, 263, 480; Trio (Cariban), Matacoan, Munduruku (Tupian), Warao) also occur as they describe the creation of “animals/birds” themselves (“Vultures”) by means of transformation (Story nos. 596-7; Cuiva, Guajibaoan).

Other motifs partly explain the origin of “animals/birds” or their traits and habits. For instance, when the manifestation of a “Bird” is the result of marking or painting (Story nos. 262-3; Parintintin, Munduruku (Tupian)). Or, when the “Bird” receives his characteristics as a reward (Story nos. 80, 131; unknown, Arekuna (Cariban)).

(Menstrual) blood being a single recurrent cause of the colouration of “Birds” is encountered in the narratives. “Birds” are either spattered by this fluid or bathe in a pool of blood. This combination of motifs is also widely spread and recorded for narratives stemming from various language sources such as Trio (Cariban), Warao, Aré, Matacoan and several Tupian versions of a certain narrative. The only other recurrent cause of the “Bird” colouration concerns the scales of the “Snake/Water boa”. Occurring in two cases, merely one of the language sources is known: Arekuna, Cariban. How “Birds” kill the “Snake” to next divide its skin/scales, hereby acquiring their colours is described here.

Generally speaking, the chronotope (i.e., how configurations of time and space are portrayed in language and discourse) mirrors in general that of the “Bird”- narratives, the duration of which in this cluster reveals a discrepancy. Real time is in line whereas the narrated time is considerably shorter. The reason for this is: only 27 percent (n=4) of the records span a narrated time continuing for either months or years (compared to 48 percent in general). The shorter narrated time indicates not only that the narratives unfold around a specific event in time (i.e., the origin of “animal/bird” traits and habits, e.g., the colouration of “Birds”), but also that they deal less with an (epic) adventure of heroes.

Remaining motifs

The common motifs yet to be addressed are: shamanism (n=21), transformation and “Birds” as tokens of water, and devastating “Bird” (n=14).

The motifs concerning shamanism involve “magic” acts, or magic objects/results, brought about for instance by way of: (a) intoxication or bathing (Story nos. 162, 261, 299;

Arawakan/Tucanoan, Tupian, Jivaroan), (b) motifs on magic objects e.g., magic (menstrual) blood (Story nos. 257, 260-3, 480, 496; unknown, Matacoan, 3x Tupian, 2x Warao), darkness, fire, song (Story nos. 47, 280, 348; 2x Cariban, Matacoan), (c) motifs concerning tasks/activities performed by applying magic e.g., producing a storm/wind, rain showers, causing the sky to rise/descend, or a pond to fall dry (Story nos. 133, 158, 170, 247-8; Cariban, Tupian, Arawakan, 2x Gê).

Story no. 711 (Trio, Cariban) states explicitly that spirits have transformed into “Birds” and that shamans communicate through these “Birds”. Similarly, in Story no. 477 (Warao), a “great white Bird” (the soul) appears to inform the Amerindians it was going to meet with companions and that all Amerindians would follow. In an abandoned village, one other day, the Amerindians meet souls crying as they felt hungry and thirsty. From then on they provide food and water for the souls. A link between “Birds” water and excessive thirst is found on more occasions. Protagonists transmute into “Birds” in search of water (Story nos. 152, 545; Gê). In Story no. 247, ill-treated men transform into “Birds”. They inform their brother that if he ever was thirsty, he should imitate their call “toka, toka ka”, and rain would fall (see Appendix D, sections B6b and 5.3.4 for other references to “Birds” as tokens of rain). In Story nos. 9, 146 152, 190, 511, 545 and 571 (Arawakan, 5x Gê, Tupian; see Appendix D, section B6b), “Birds” are the result of transformation.

Motifs linked to malevolent, or devastating, “Birds” contrast motifs regarding helpful “Birds”. The former report on abduction (Story no. 623; Sikuani, Guajiboan), mutilation (Story nos. 299, 364; Jivaroan, Cariban; whereby in Story no. 364, “Ants” mutilate the “Bird”), rape (Story nos. 386, 480; Cariban, Warao) and treacherous “animals/birds” (Story nos. 21, 157; Cariban, Tupian). In certain cases, “Birds” are described as ogres or cannibalistic demons (Story nos. 308, 608-9, 629; Guaicuruan, 3x Guajiboan), see Appendix D, sections B. Fabula and B6c.

With whom is the “Bird”-personage associated?

“Snake” (n=14), “Scavenger birds/Vulture” (n=11), “Jaguar” (n=9), “Woodpecker” (n=9), and “Monkey” (n=9) frequently co-occur with the “Bird”-personage. The latter is ostensibly by far the most associated with the Amerindian protagonists, who call for the “Bird’s” help. In his role as an assistant, the “Bird” often betrays, or tells on other “animals”, thus opposing these personages.

In the cluster dealing with the origin of the “Bird’s” colouration, the “Bird”-personage does interact with other “animals/birds”. Within the same tales, multiple “animals/birds” (e.g., “Woodpecker”, “Vulture”) also obtain their coloured plumage (see 6.1.1 under the sub-heading *The origin of the “Bird” colouration*). A clear association with “Snake” can be encountered within this context. For, once killed, the skin of this reptile is divided amongst all “birds” providing them with their colouration and/or other features.