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

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Citation

Paulsen, E. R. (2019, September 5). *Everything has its Jaguar. A narratological approach to conceptualising Caribbean Saladoid animal imagery*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/77630>

Version: Publisher's Version

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Note: To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

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Issue Date: 2019-09-05

Summary

This dissertation is a contribution to the conceptualisation of the Caribbean Saladoid zoomorphic iconography (i.e., a ceramic series dating to between 800/200 BCE-400/600 CE). To this end, indigenous South American narratives have been analysed, serving as a framework in order to investigate the imagery on display. It is with reason that we humans tend to tell stories from the very moment we are able to speak. For, storytelling is a strategy through which we make sense of the world around us. In addition, narratives are a means to share and transmit knowledge. They, therefore, themselves provide information not only on the people that tell them but also on how they perceive the world and which information is vital to either share among each other as well as forward to future generations.

As Caribbean archaeologists, we aim to understand past Caribbean cultures by means of their material culture, in the broadest sense. We seek to reconstruct political and social structures, belief systems and the everyday lives of communities. The focal point of the archaeological study presented here is the Saladoid zoomorphic iconography, in particular ceramic modelled and incised animal/human figurines or head lugs (*adornos*). Identified zoomorphic *adornos* have been introduced as case studies in order to answer the central question: what does this imagery tell us about the indigenous peoples who created it?

Iconographical studies conducted by other scholars show that a number of specific zoomorphic motifs are more prominent in the archaeological record than others. The aforementioned *adornos* are of particular interest here: an abundance of these animal figurines have been recovered in the Caribbean. Iconographical studies pertaining to these

adornos indicate preferences in zoomorphic motifs as observed on both mainland South America and the insular Caribbean.

An underlying premise of this research is: the act of depicting iconographical imagery as well as the act of storytelling are part of the same “artistic behaviour” and discourse. Both are expressions of such behaviour. Iconography and stories are thus part of the same paradigm. The present study then focuses on, mainly South American, oral narratives as a means to not only contextualise but also to conceptualise the zoomorphic imagery recovered from the Caribbean region.

In order to execute this research a total of 706 narratives have been brought together and analysed according to methods gleaned from the field of narratology. First, the most common motifs, themes, (animal) actors in this conglomerate were established, all not only in relation to each other but also in relation to the specific contexts of space and time encountered in the narratives themselves. An outcome of this analysis comprises an overview of the most common animal personages. It is concluded that the most common animal actors indeed correspond rather well with the majority of the identified zoomorphic motifs. Thus, animals playing a role in the stories are also identified as Saladoid *adornos*.

Next, the stories have been clustered based on animal actors in order to enable an in-depth analysis, again according to narratological principles. The main objective now was to contextualise each animal in the stories at hand, hereby facilitating a study into the animal actors not only in relation to themes and/or motifs encountered in the stories but also in relation to other (animal) actors. This procedure was again carried out against the backdrop of a specific spatial and temporal context. This analysis indicates that specific themes and/or motifs, as well as contexts, are linked to specific animal actors. However, it also revealed a complex web consisting of associations, relationships, roles and contexts pertaining to each animal. Instead of identifying a fixed set of associations ascribed to each animal, these associations and roles vary according to various (narratological) settings or contexts.

In addition to narratological method, the concept referred to as perspectivism has been introduced in order to further interpret the narratives from a more “inside” native viewpoint. Perspectivism describes how Amerindian peoples from Lowland South America conceive themselves in relation to other beings (both human and nonhuman). Amerindian ontologies are based on one joint (human) culture and numerous natures. This implies that all animals, spirits and “things” with a consciousness consider themselves to be human and thus perceive the world as humans do (i.e., one culture shared by all beings). Therefore all humans and nonhumans with a consciousness reside in villages, set on off hunting parties, drink cassava beer, etc.

Introducing perspectivism as a framework in order to make sense of the narratives, contributes to understanding not only the implication of the various settings but also the sets

of associations pertaining to each animal. The dog is a helper, friend and protector of Amerindians as well as a predator (i.e., “jaguar”) to the animals it hunts and kills. Comprehending these various roles, sets of associations and perspectives is helpful when conceptualising the possible roles which the animals played in the stories and the iconography. The usefulness of the perspectivism concept as an explanatory model further increases when in addition to *adornos* other expressions of Saladoid material culture (e.g., animal teeth, stone/shell amulets) are included, hereby revealing that ways or manners of display are linked to specific animals and/or sets of associations linked to animals. For instance, the function (or “meaning”) of a dog *adorno* probably differs from a dog teeth pendant.

The Caribbean is rich in archaeological material. Nevertheless, (in)material things that cannot be recovered (e.g., perishable goods made of wood, cotton, but also performing “arts” such as ritual and dance). Archaeologists often apply insights drawn from ethnography in order to partially fill this shortcoming. Ethnographic and ethnohistoric sources are therefore included in the present research. Incorporated are (17th- to 20th-century) ethnographies originating from the Island Carib (Amerindians from the island of Dominica), and from the (15th-century) “Taíno” culture of the Greater Antilles. However, more recent insights based on Lowland South American ethnographies have included whenever considered relevant. These sources provide us with additional views as to how animals played a role in the daily cultural lives of the Amerindians as well as their place within indigenous cosmologies.

Each animal is thus studied by means of its role in: (a) the narratives, (b) the Saladoid iconography, and (c) the indigenous cosmologies. Finally, the role of each animal in nature is addressed, because natural behaviour and physical traits can contribute to the specific associations ascribed to them. For example, the migration behaviour of a specific bird can link it to (the arrival of) either the dry or rainy season.

The multiplicity of contexts in which each animal is studied here provides a broad frame of reference. Animals on display cannot be deciphered like a foreign language, nor do they have any “meaning” as is the case in a fixed set of associations and connotations. Their ways of display, the (social) contexts in which they are utilised, all form an integral part of their indigenous “meaning”. The narratives themselves reflect a multiplicity of contexts, ascribed attributes and qualities when considering each animal actor. This phenomenon is apparently reflected by means of the variety in which each animal is portrayed by another medium: an animal is displayed as a ceramic *adorno*, or a design, as an amulet, as a tooth pendant, and/or in the performing “arts”. Each medium and way of display refers to a specific set of associations, which can also be conceptualised as a specific identity of this animal. The narratives thus contribute to unravelling these identities (i.e., sets of associations) on display.