

OAC PRESS

Art of Anthropology Series #1  
ISSN 2045-578X (Print)

**An Amazonian Question of Ironies and the Grotesque**  
**the arrogance of cosmic deceit, and the humility of everyday life<sup>1</sup>**

**Joanna Overing<sup>2</sup>**  
University of St Andrews

© 2012 Joanna Overing  
Open Anthropology Cooperative Press  
[www.openanthcoop.net/press](http://www.openanthcoop.net/press)

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No  
Derivative Works 3.0 Unported License. To view a copy of this license, visit  
<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/>

---

1 Paper originally presented in Santiago Chile, July 2003.

2 Joanna Overing is a Social Anthropologist, and a Professor Emeritus at the University of St Andrews, Scotland. Her fieldwork and interest, since 1968, has been with Piaroa people, who live in Venezuela along tributaries of the Orinoco. A broad research concern has understanding 'egalitarianism' and 'individualism' as these are understood by the indigenous peoples of Amazonia. Her work attempts to spell out the understanding and philosophy of power, modes of equality and materiality expressed by Piaroa people in their cosmology, shamanic exegesis and in daily practice, discourse, and rhetoric. A second area of research has centred on the problem of translation in anthropological analysis. Her overall concern is to wed issues usually dealt with separately by ethnography, philosophy, and social linguistics. Her recent research deals with sensory ways of knowing, and their relations to the genres of the grotesque and the sublime – as used in Piaroa narrations of myth – and, most important, their accomplishment of a 'human' sort of society. Her books: 1975, *The Piaroa: a People of the Orinoco Basin: A Study in Kinship and Marriage*. 1977, *Social Time and Social Space in Lowland South American Societies* (ed.). 1985, *Reason and Morality*, ASA Monograph 24, (ed.) 2000 and 2007, *Key Concepts in Social Anthropology*, with Nigel Rapport. 1999 *Anthropology of Love and Anger: the Aesthetics of Conviviality in Native South America*, (ed. with Alan Passes).

## 1. The place of humour.

My strongest memories of Piaroa people of the Venezuelan Amazon Territory involve experiencing their humour. The ludic was vital to their everyday life. These were people who were lovers of slapstick and witty, outrageous play on words. There was their punning, their satire and irony, where the use of the apt and mischievous trope was given especially high value. It was through hilarity that I felt I actually understood my Piaroa teachers. It was then that I felt at one with them.

I will dwell upon the connection between this love of slapstick, the apt pun and their egalitarian antipathy to hierarchy, rules and regulations. To begin to understand this link between a love of laughter and the feeling for social and political equality of both men and women, it is necessary to consider the absurd grotesqueries of creation time hubris, which the Piaroa shaman unfolds through his singing narrations of mythic time, as he conducts his daily healing ceremonies. My main interest is in this telling of the monstrous modes of power set loose in creation time by the creator gods – and of course their repercussions. We find that the stress upon the grotesque in these healing narratives is strongly related to the shaman's thorough understanding of the dangers in the present day of the monstrous modes of power unleashed by the gods when they created the world. It is through exploring these mighty, but highly dodgy, powers of creation time that we (as anthropologists) can begin to understand their connection to the rich social philosophies of folly that are attached to the egalitarian practices of Piaroa people as they interact in 'today time' sociality.

Along the way, I shall unfold the two diseases of folly and madness that Piaroa people may experience in the course of everyday life. The names of these two illnesses are *ki'raeu* and *ke'raeu*. The former, *ki'raeu*, was a comparatively minor disease of social irresponsibility which could lead to such errant behaviour as crazy laughter, promiscuity, wandering at will – and also diarrhoea. Sufferers of such symptoms are considered victims, led to their waywardness (such as their excessive use of orifices) by the social irresponsibility of others who perhaps taunt, or are unduly arrogant toward, them. The taunter blatantly displays a lack of regard to familial matters and good etiquette, which leads their victim into a state of minor madness.

*Ke'raeu* – in contrast to *ki'raeu* – is a much more serious threat to the social fabric: its symptoms involve more violent display, such as accompanies the madness of hubris, paranoia, extreme arrogance – and also murder. As happens today, characters in mythic time also fell foul of both illnesses, with behaviour becoming truly grotesque when *ke'raeu* seriously set in. We find a major irony here. These stories speak of the original violent creation, acquisition and stealing of grotesque powers that would allow for the culinary arts. However, it was these very toxic powers that led eventually to the creation of beautiful, but dangerous culinary skills that enable Piaroa people today to achieve the sort of life that they could consider to be human.

## 2. Sociology, Political Anthropology

It is important to note that my exploration of Piaroa understandings of the grotesque and other modes of power is intended as a foray into political anthropology. For instance, I find that certain comparisons of modes of power can be highly enlightening. For example, in Greek myth, Zeus, who becomes sovereign of the whole universe, gets away with hubris and excessiveness, while Wahari (the creator god of Piaroa people) does not. Why this difference? To answer such a question, we need to widen our horizon of

concerns greatly to understand its importance. Obviously, the cultural context (for instance, the aesthetics of living together) and histories (within which modes of power are enacted) vary considerably with regard to matters of social and political value. It is certainly legitimate to question the worth of comparing the political values of a Greek city state with those of an Amazonian village. On the other hand, with our horizons expanded, we might well find gold. In comparing the political concerns of the citizens of Thebes with those of a Piaroa village I discovered that they shared a number of egalitarian values and practices. For instance, in both cases it is particularly the women, as chorus, who take responsibility for unfolding to the people the irresponsible actions of a tyrant – or a shaman – gone mad.

Perhaps we need to understand that an aesthetic of living may well play a large part within most political agendas. For quite a long time political anthropology has been deeply in need of new sociological ways of thinking, talking, examining – and most importantly imagining.

Exploration of this kind is needed to open up sociological categories and ways of thinking and even to begin to understand the extraordinary political repercussions (and lessons) emerging from the respective fates of these two creator gods – Zeus and Wahari. The former is king of hierarchy, teaching its 'wonderful attainment'. As for Wahari, it originally was his desire to create for his world a moral order comprised of equals. However, it was his plight that he was foiled in following through with his plan. On the other hand, he did succeed in creating a people who held tight to his original dream of creating a moral order of equals. They also had the intelligence to understand how difficult it is to actually achieve this state of existence – one capable of creating beings who were actually *human*.

### **3. Modes of Power:**

I shall begin by sketching some of the basic characters within Piaroa cosmology and the *modes of power* attached to each:

**First there is Tapir/Anaconda:** This monstrous, almighty, subterranean Tapir/Anaconda let loose all those mighty powers that eventually allowed for an animated existence on earth. The great granite outcrops of the ancient Guianese landscape are the result of his defecation: Lying beneath the earth, he propelled his waste upwards, like worm casts, to sit on Earth's surface. His granite shit became the source on earth for all 'life force' of a sensual sort: it thus plays a crucial role in the empowerment of each Piaroa individual: the casing for their beautiful, interior 'beads of life' is made of these potent defecatory granite upcastings of Tapir/Anaconda. It is this casing that allows for their 'life of the senses' and thus all of their physical capacities. When the terrifying and violent Tapir/Anaconda wandered along the earth's surface, s/he wreaked mayhem in his/her wake.

**Next there is Kuemoi:** Tapir/anaconda was the father of **Kuemoi** who became the Master of Rivers and Lakes. Tapir/Anaconda grew Kuemoi within the womb of the Mistress of the lake, feeding him with wildly poisonous hallucinogens from the rust of the sun and the centre of sky down of the sun. Through these hallucinogenic powers from the dreadful heat of the sun, *Kuemoi became the father of all cultivated food. He was the creator of all those forces that belong to the culinary arts:* gardening, hunting, curare, cooking fire. He is also a tyrannical, grotesque, little madman and is portrayed as a diabolical buffoon, raucously laughing with each plot he hatches, shrieking in outrage when foiled: he

stamps his feet when foiled: *a figure of high comedy*, not tragedy. When overtaken by total madness, he runs endlessly around in circles. (He reminds me of Robert Nye's depiction of the devil in *Merlin*: “He grins like a fox eating shit out of a wire brush; the Devil is 'snoring as loud as a pig'; 'he giggles and he writhes’”). This is the hilarious, absurd and mockable side of wickedness.

The main aim in life for Kuemoui is to gobble up as many beings of the domain of the jungle as possible. Coming out of water, he was the evil cannibal predator of all beings of the jungle. He stalked all jungle beings as food. He lusted after their meat. He devoured them raw, he ate them cooked. To catch them used cunning and an odious use of guile and sorcery. He was the master of horrid traps! The king of stealth! The trap he enjoyed most was his own daughter, 'Maize'. When she was sleeping, he filled her womb with piranha fish and electric eels – as a seductive trap for the handsome young men of the jungle, who then became his meal at night. He created all creatures nasty to jungle beings, each as a trap to catch them for a meal: the jaguars and all other cats, ticks, biting insects, the stingray, poisonous snakes. He is the father of opossum and electric eel, the grandfather of bat, vulture, quarrelling, sting ray and boils.

He was the owner of what the Piaroa call the '*crystal boxes of tyranny, treachery, and domination*'. He epitomizes excessive power – the power of the true tyrant. Kuemoui released all the horrors from these boxes of primordial powers full blast into this world. Kuemoui was the owner of the '*crystal boxes of Night*'. It was he who in great glee released night and all its dangerous creatures into earthly space. All of these vicious beings are Kuemoui's *weapons*. In fact *all of Kuemoui's creations* serve as his weapons, *including the culinary arts*. All have powers either to kill or to poison. He transformed himself during his escapades as jaguar, vulture, mudfish or anaconda.

Through all this he achieved the clothes of physical might. A small, but monstrous two-headed figure, Kuemoui had one head to eat meat raw, and one to eat meat cooked. Kuemoui is the archotypically evil figure of creation time – and its most ridiculous. This very *foolish god who has all the knowledge of the culinary arts* speaks nonetheless to a highly sophisticated theory of ethical behaviour and to the side of human nature (as the Piaroa perceive it) that gives all human beings the potential for odious and wicked behaviour. A deep cruelty drove Kuemoui and the use of his might. The power of his thoughts, that had their source in the poisonous hallucinogens he took, though sufficiently mighty to create the culinary arts, continually *poisoned his will*. Overtaken by total madness, Kuemoui *always acted without reason*. *He had no dignity*. Evil here is clearly associated with knowledge and thus with too much power. Kuemoui had far too much of both. He ever experienced an extreme poisoning of his emotions (the disease that the Piaroa call *ke'raeu* – paranoia, hubris, the desire to murder). *This condition of suffering poisonous unmastered knowledge is firmly attached to an imagery of madness and buffoonery*. The political lesson is clear.

**Then there is Wahari:** The greatest adversary of Kuemoui in creation time was **Wahari**, the Master of the Jungle, and the creator god of the Piaroa. As such, Wahari was the opposite side of the coin to Kuemoui's evil – at least at the start of creation time. Wahari, who was also created through Tapir/Anaconda's efforts, was fed on different hallucinogens from those given Kuemoui. Wahari was given the power of earthly space, of the day, light and sociality (although in the end it all went wrong). He with his brother, worked together to create many of the aspects of terrestrial space that made it

habitable. They took the sun and moon from their homes beneath the earth, and jumped with them into the sky to give themselves light by day and night. Wahari created air, breeze and the skies for the comfort of the earthly creatures of his domain. He created all branch animals and birds of the jungle. The hummingbird, eagle hawk and the lapa were the most important manifestations of his power. They were his transformations, his thoughts and as such his sons. He used the force of the hummingbird to fly above and beneath the earth in his flying canoe. He, like Kuemoui, had mighty powers of transformation. He too had the power of cunning, guile and the arts of trickery, combined with mighty sorcery.

But Wahari had the benevolent desire to create a good life for his inhabitants of the jungle. He wanted to provide them with the civilised conditions for a human life on earth, including the culinary arts, and the capabilities for civilised sociality and social virtue. He spoke the principles of a moral social life for his people. Certainly at the beginning of creation time, *he was the god of unity and accord*, including that which should hold within the family. But Wahari strongly wanted to capture the culinary arts from his father-in-law, Kuemoui. With this desire began a treacherous cosmic comedy of errors. None of Wahari's benevolent desires were accomplished in creation time – and that is its tragic irony. The narrations tell how Wahari begins mythic time with the gift of social finesse, but the moment he tries to trade with Kuemoui, cosmogenesis becomes a bag of tricks, a high comedy (then tragedy) of errors. The genre of the bawdy grotesque slips in the end to true tragedy.

#### **4a. Creation Time Hubris and its Landscape of Monsters.**

This we can gather through the tales about creation time and the shaman's skilled performance of the hilarious, bawdy, grotesque episodes of mythic time through which the ludicrous conditions of being human are disclosed. The narrations disclose the subtle lessons of two-edged folly – that which is good, engendering health and well-being, and that which is disastrous. Erasmus' sermon on Lady Folly would fit well here.

Creation time, much as with Sophocles' Oedipus cycle, moves from a kind of naughty irony, filled with crazy jokes such as reversing heads and buttocks or grabbing a penis hovering in the air in order to create men. They also tell of mistakes that lead to intentions backfiring, for example when putting up the sun and moon, and in the antics of monkeys. Finally, a more grotesque, dark place of the *tragedy of hubris* emerges, where excess pride, arrogance, greed tend to lead to the ruin of the transgressors. We here find similarities with Foucault's reading of Sophocles' Oedipus, whereby the downfall of Oedipus is caused not by innocence, but a monstrous excess of knowledge, and too much power. This rings true with the experiences of Wahari. There are also similarities to the often erratic destiny and suffering found in the historical tyrants of Sophocles' time, with their tendency to rely on their own *solitary* knowledge, rather than solving problems by conversing with 'the people' and other 'knowledgeable' advisors. Such lack of regard can lead easily to 'real' tyranny, which is associated with the tendency to excess. This in turn leads to the hubris and asociality of tyrants who misuse power. In dwelling on these problems, classical Greece comes up with democracy as a solution.

All of the vignettes from the shamanic narrations below come from the cycle on the origin of the craziness disease, *k'eraeu*. This disease gives you delusions of grandeur and paranoia. It is the 'fall down' disease, the 'go round and around disease', the 'twirling circles' illness. *K'eraeu* is the most

deadly illness you can get and the most destructive malady of folly imaginable. It leads to *deranged intentionality*. You can die from it and with it you are very likely to damage and kill others.

**Here is the history:** Creation time becomes the battleground between the two powerful creator gods, Wahari and Kuemoi, and ends with a cannibalistic war of all against all. Wahari tries to trade with Kuemoi, to acquire his powerful hunting spells and powers for the cultivation of plants; in turn, Kuemoi tries to poison Wahari with his powerful hallucinogenic drugs, in order to capture and eat him. So Wahari stealthily tries to steal from Kuemoi the means to civilised life. He tries to rob all the edible fruits and vegetables from Kuemoi's great tree of life. But suffering from the poisons of Kuemoi's spells, Wahari instead becomes desperately ill, thirsty; he lusts after women and spends many years chasing after foreign beauties. *He becomes insufferably arrogant*, destroying all of his personal relationships with kin. He sells his sister to the Master of White Man's Goods for 6 boxes of matches; he sodomises her, an event that leads to the birth of his son Diarrhoea, whom he tries to kill. He suffers hubris: his mockery infuriates his relatives, who take revenge, by further zapping him with Kuemoi's disease, *k'eraeu*, the craziness illness: his head hurts, he runs in circles. It makes him want to kill. The terrible twirling circles of *k'eraeu* really captures Wahari: maddened, he announces that all of his own creations (people) will suffer this disease. He wanders in the world, lost, arrogant, beautiful. However, he returns again and again to steal Kuemoi's powers for civilised eating. He manages to steal Kuemoi's daughter (after cleaning her womb of piranha fish). Next comes a god-awful series of battles between Wahari and Kuemoi, where they both indulge in villainy, thievery, trickery, deceit and disguise, traps and general mayhem. In hilarious episodes, Wahari often outwits Kuemoi because he foresees his intentions. He manages to give Kuemoi diarrhoea and causes him to rape his own daughter (Wahari's wife). Kuemoi runs round and round in circles.

Wahari becomes crazier and crazier as he becomes increasing zapped by Kuemoi's poisons. On one occasion Wahari becomes locked in the midst of a *k'eraeu* circuit comprised of the narrow translucent streams of *k'eraeu* descending from four of Kuemoi's mountains. He then falls into Kuemoi's trap of poisoned hunting charms, filled with vulture down, sky rust, centre of the sky down. He goes off hunting and then fishing, through yet other traps set by Kuemoi, and manages to kill, not a deer, but his much beloved old grandmother. He cries and wails at this mistake.

#### **4b. Wahari then decides to create his own culinary arts:**

He tries to create his own fire, his own sweet and wild fruits and hunting paraphernalia, but he fails badly. These are tales usually told with rather hard-edged slapstick comedy. Each and every creation was false and perverse because of Kuemoi's poisoning of his will, making Wahari crazy. At one point he tries to kill his own brother. The more he tries to create the culinary arts, the more Wahari proclaims *his own* greatness – as master of the universe, the jungle, and the rivers. It was his *hubris* that created the forces of a *monstrous, perverted culinary arts*. His 'fire' blossomed as skin disease, burns, and boils, a fire that scorched but could not cook; his cures backfired on the user and became the miscarrying of women and the bleeding of adults from the mouth, the anus, the vagina; his hunting charms became paralysis, his fish hooks, sore throat... All these useless, poisonous creations became the diseases *that human beings suffer today* and not the useful artefacts for civilised living that Wahari so desired for them. These creations today *impregnate* human beings with disease. As in Greek myth, life for human beings is not easy; the gods made it so.

### **5. How do humans receive all these horrors? This is the story:**

It was when Wahari invited most of the people beings of the jungle to a great feast. He gets them drunk and then transforms them into animals, to become game for him to hunt and eat. He takes away all their powers for thought and intentionality *and gives them instead all of his perverse creations*. The animals will not suffer them, but instead they will pass them on to human beings. Piaroa people thus *do* receive Wahari's artefacts, but in the form of diseases given to them by the animals. Wahari, the star of mythic time, becomes *its worst villain*, all due to his mistakes and his arrogance.

Today, human beings (ironically) have to use the dangerous forces for the culinary arts that were originally let loose by Kuemoi, not Wahari. All of Wahari's efforts turned out to be useless. In fact, it is only earthly human beings who can use the powers created by Kuemoi. There are all sorts of dangers there for folly (their intentions can so easily be poisoned by Kuemoi's deadly powers). Today, human beings must, through *everyday hard work*, manage the culinary arts on their own, transforming the ugly and dangerous powers for the hunt and the gardens into beautiful forces, safe for a civilised life. They must *cleanse* their vegetables and fruit from the poisons of Kuemoi and all their game and fish from those of Wahari. And, they must deal with the fact that the game they eat is really human in origin.

### **6. The relation between the culinary arts and the arts of conviviality:**

This everyday work of the culinary arts and civilised sociality is at the same time accomplished through a good deal of practice in the comic arts. Indeed the practice of the arts of conviviality become a sign that the powers they use are those of civilised eating, a practice which keeps hubris at bay. *The wisdom of folly is highly valued*.

On the other hand, there is no resolution of the great conflicts of mythic time. The villainy of the ludicrous, ironic, treacherous practices of creation time generate the ambiguous conditions for the humans who live today on earth – civilised eating, civilised sociality – are all to be acquired at great cost, with great difficulty, with great suffering, and with a good dash of treachery. We who use the powers of the cannibal god, Kuemoi, can also be poisoned into greedy, arrogant behaviour. The domesticated Piaroa can hardly separate themselves in any absolute way from the animal other. As human beings they are hardly innocent. This takes us to the genre of the grotesque, that genre that retains to the bitter end its unresolved conflicts and ambiguities.

### **7. The Genre of the Grotesque: the mythic narratives and the unresolved incongruities of history:**

Mythic imageries of the grotesque and the absurd are not unusual. The French scholar, Vernant, speaks of the robust, multi-layered imagery of mythic narrations, their hilarity and the intellectuality attached to them. And, we may add, their strong connection to particular social philosophies, to distinctions of moral worth, to treasured ways of doing things. He calls for deeper cross-cultural comparison of mythic styles (with which I strongly agree). Is there a particular style of mythic presentations? I suggest that the genre of the grotesque is one such widespread style. The powers sufficiently mighty for creation are typically violent dramatic stories, as we see from Vernant's own disclosure of the ancient Greek mythology, and ours from Amazonia.

*The story of creation time is one of poisoned intentionalities, of cosmic follies: it is a story of greed,*

*hubris and mental derangement.*

The genre of the Grotesque is calculatingly used by the narrator of Piaroa myths in unfolding, disclosing, evoking the deep absurdities of human existence and its pre-conditions as played out in creation time. Wisdom depends on understanding the message of the grotesque. We need to pay attention to such messages.

The 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries had a pejorative view of the grotesque, judging it a vulgar species of the comic, deprived of the serious. In general it was viewed as a genre of ludicrous exaggeration, a genre of the fantastic. However, more recent responses (Kayser 1963, Thomson 1972) have understood it otherwise, stressing its power to speak to *reality*. They note that its explosive force serves to make us see the real world anew. It jolts one into a transformation of perspective on what reality might be.

Some relevant points with regard to this re-assessment of the genre of the grotesque to our understanding of the mythic narration performances are the following:

1) The genre of the grotesque (also read as the genre of mythic narrative) is *more attached to realism than fantasy*. It is extravagant, but not fantastic. However strange the grotesque world is, *it is also our world*. The mythic narration, in partaking of this genre, has as its first and foremost aim to express *the problematic nature of existence, and its preconditions*, to unfold the absurdities of our life, its ambivalences, as played out originally in the ironic grotesquery of creation time.

2) *The comic is necessary for the genre of the grotesque to work*. There is its playfulness and its terror, its confusion and interplay of heterogeneous elements: the monstrous and the ludicrous; humans, animals, and vegetables. There are its paradoxes and ironies (the creator of fire devouring meat raw), and also its shock tactics (Wahari eating stew discovers he is eating his own son). We react to the slapstick experience of such horror with glee, as opposites continually clash. We laugh at the tale of deceit, trickery, mischief, hubris, illness, death, cannibalism, treacheries, greed, general mayhem. Part of the glee comes from the question ever rising over 'who are the victims? who the victimisers?'

3) There are the physical deformities, the (bawdy) bodyliness of it all (see Bakhtin). We have the 2-headed god of culture; the huge sexual organs, male and female (Think of Cronus' enormous member). Wahari, creator of people, transforms himself into the monster supreme deity beneath the earth, the dangerous chimerical Tapir/Anaconda, preying intently on his own kinsmen.

4) The most distinctive trait of the grotesque, according to Thomson (1972), is the unresolved nature of grotesque conflict, separating it out from neighbouring genres (e.g. the absurd). In Piaroa myth, this grotesquery of the origin of culture is never resolved – Wahari did not succeed (Zeus did, but earthlings didn't). Thus, the forces for creation continue into today as the uncleaned product of the deadly hallucinogens that the creator god of the culinary arts withdrew from the rust of the sun and the heart of the armadillo. The gods were creators and as such, killers.

5) The emotional and intellectual tension continues through the story: *it is one of poisoned and poisonous intentionalities*. Despite the human capacities of Piaroa people (their capabilities for the

culinary arts, for reasoned intentionality and therefore sociality), *there remains this deep ambiguity to being human. For as humans they are hardly innocent.* Their reflections upon alterity recognise that the violence of foreign politics demands from the start an unleashing of poisonous forces from themselves not so very different from those of exterior others – or the gods (Overing 1996).

### **8. Ironic practices of the everyday**

How should we as anthropologists interpret the Piaroa reactions to their absurd universe? We have then the ironic performances/rituals of everyday life among an egalitarian people who love their freedom and also their sociality. These are a people who are very fond of the comic; they find the practice of folly essential to their well-being: a very Amazonian way of thinking. My interest is how such a cosmogenesis and the philosophy of the absurd that comes from it (as understood by the Piaroa) are linked to their social psychology and to their egalitarianism. As we know, our own social theory of the comic is indeed weak, as too that of the grotesque.

For insight, we might be wise to turn to the likes of Vico on the political use of tropes (the more hierarchical people's values the more literalness is approved of) and Kenneth Burke on true irony being attached to a *deep humility with regard to our own frailties*. We need to think about an irony that does not make us 'superior' to the enemy, for we have some of the same attributes as he/she - and indeed we are indebted to this enemy. (For Piaroa - *the gods are cannibal predators, and so are the Piaroa themselves*).

Perhaps it is with lessons from the Taoist Monks (e.g. see Peter Berger) that we might begin to *understand the comic as a mode of knowledge*. Thus perhaps the Amazonian case is not totally alien. Let us look at the connections:

- 1) The role of the jokester shaman leader has much in common with the raucously laughing Taoist Monk. For both, *the comic is a mode of knowledge*.
- 2) The humour of both is forthcoming from a profound sense of the *incongruities (lack of reason) of the universe, and of human behaviour within it*.
- 3) There is a strong use of tropes. According to Peter Berger, the Ch'an/Zen way of teaching is through parables, through riddles, and *most solutions are in the form of jokes*.
- 4) What is more, *a self-mocking humility is taught*. The Piaroa shaman is the teacher of this attitude of the world – he starts with the children when they are five years old. Success in the ability of *not* taking oneself seriously is a good test of whether liberating, true learning has taken place, one that is *conducive to the deconstruction of reality*, with the disclosure of all its incongruities – albeit the shaman's job, but to a lesser, yet important extent by each individual.

**Berger lists these components of a comic philosophy (as followed by the Taoists):**

- 1) The diagnosis of the world as a mass of incongruence

- 2) The radical *debunking of pretensions of grandeur and wisdom* (the breeder of hubris)
- 3) A spirit of mocking irreverence
- 4) A profound discovery of and appreciation of freedom

Such a list fits as well the attitudes and teachings of the Piaroa shaman who teaches of the importance of humility – in light of the enemy within – and stresses at all times the craziness of the expression of anger and arrogance, true signs of a tyrannical temperament destructive of the accomplishment of a human sort of life. These are the lessons of the two diseases of craziness: *k'iraeu* and *k'eraeu*.

These are also philosophical insights that lead to a stress on the immense importance to sociality of the accomplishing affective comfort. The hierarchical and the literal are both too direct for affective comfort and well-being. The hierarchical and the literal can too easily and treacherously poison intentionality.

### **9. The comic, the social and the creation of a counterworld**

Finally, a word on the notion of comedy as a counterworld and as 'anti-rites'. See M. Douglas and others on the notion that jokes are an intrusion of the comic into everyday life. **They see jokes as 'anti-rites'**, rebellious of ordained patterns of social life. They understand the comic as a *temporary* suspension of social structure!

However, for many Amazonian peoples, *folly lies at the heart of the social*. Far from the comic as an intrusion into everyday life, the view is that the human social condition can only be accomplished through the spirit of folly. Through an understanding of an ironic, grotesque cosmogenesis, Amazonian peoples tend to stress the value of playing out in social life a sociable 'humble irony'. For example, with Piaroa, ludic practices allow for sociable living and working together. They enable the bringing up of children, feeding them, curing them, and most important, teaching them the arts and decorum of Folly. In other words, ironic practice allows them to deal with the poisonous forces within that are at the same time conducive to a human way of life. *These are a people who recognise well the happiness of foolery, its poetics and also its necessity, its health-giving properties.*

*In Amazonia often the achievement of the social forms a counterworld that protects against all those absurdities of the universe.* Thus the ironic practices: a spirit of mocking irreverence, a debunking of all those pretensions of grandeur and wisdom, but coated with a good dose of well-considered humility in the face of it all. For those absurdities not only always intrude upon the everyday, they also rest within each person, corporeally so to speak. At any moment, and you never know, anyone can suffer *k'iraeu* (promiscuity, crazy laughter...) and any shaman could be attacked by *k'eraeu* (paranoia). This is the misery of cosmic Folly. It is the comic as a mode of knowledge that provides insight into this downside of folly: by knowing it, and practising in its light, we can, for a time at least, fool the cosmic comic incongruities of existence and of this world on earth. The latter being an environment created by means of poisonous, deadly hallucinogens.

### **Some Bibliography:**

- Bakhtin, Mikhail (1968) *Rabelais and his World*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- Berger, Peter (1997) *Redeeming laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience*, New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Douglas, Mary (1975) *Implicit Meanings*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Fernandez, James & M.T. Huber eds (2001) *Irony in Action: Anthropology, Practice, and the Moral Imagination*, Chicago: the University of Chicago Press.
- Kayser, Wolfgang (1963) *The Grottesque in Art and Literature*, Bloomington.
- Meyer, Michael (1995) *Literature and the Grottesque*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Overing, Joanna (2000) 'The efficacy of laughter: the ludic side of magic within Amazonian sociality', in Overing & Passes (below), *The Anthropology of Love and Anger*.
- (2006) 'The Stench of Death and the Aromas of Life: Poetics of Ways of Knowing and Sensory Process among Piaroa of the Orinoco Basin', *Tipiti, Journal of the Society for the Anthropology of Lowland South America*, Volume 4, numbers 1& 4, June & December.
- Overing, Joanna & Alan Passes eds (2000) *The Anthropology of Love and Anger: the aesthetics of conviviality in Native South America*, Routledge.
- Thomson, Philip (1972) *The Grottesque*, Methuen & Co.
- Zijderveld, Anton (1963) *On clichés: The supersedure of meaning by function in modernity*, Routledge & Kegan Paul.