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For a comparison of the ways of living with bats among the Kasua of Papua New Guinea and the Ni-van of Santo Island, Vanuatu

This contribution aims at extending Frédéric Laugrand's epistemological will to resituate and valorize bats in the inter-relational context in which they are involved with humans in Papua New Guinea and Vanuatu. If, on the one hand, the Kasua, having a semi-nomadic livelihood, live immersed in the dense tropical forest of the lowlands and low mountains, on the other one, the Ni-van occupy an island covered with a mantle of more sparse greenery, cradled by the fishy waters of the Pacific Ocean. However, their territories both enjoy exceptional karstic regions where bats live in society. Their species, of course, are not identical: we find the *Miniopterus* sp. in Vanuatu, and the big *Dobsonia magna* in Papua New Guinea. But still, a comparison of Kasua and Ni-van conceptions and practices towards these animals is relevant in order to identify common features and to single out certain ethnographic differences. In order to establish our point, we will not have recourse to the notion of "companion species" identified by Haraway – so useful in the naturalist Western universe –, for in the worlds described here, human beings perceive themselves from the outset as living with non-humans, participating in a cosmological and ecological relational mode; in short, as evolving in a continual and dynamic interspecific companionship at the basis of their existence and society. Their world is thus qualified by a formidable complexity; it is assimilated to a cosmos where, alongside living beings (human and non-human), spirits also co-evolve. In all the tribes encountered – the Kasua and six Ni-van tribes –, all admit the co-presence of several categories of spirit whose identity can vary from one tribe to another: spirits of ancestors, spirits of the clan, spirits incumbent to certain spaces or species (animal, floral, marine), spirits of fertility, etc. However, as diverse as they are, all these spiritual entities have in common that they can materialize in visible life in the form of living beings, and express themselves through natural phenomena. Finally, they all hold the power to harm human life (through disease or death), if humans do not fulfill their reciprocal obligation toward them. Humans are therefore forced to maintain a certain relational and ecological harmony by practicing rituals, sacrifices or offerings, as well as by observing numerous behavioral taboos with regard to either spirits, living beings, or the spaces of which the latter are the guardians – in this case, karstic cavities. It is in light of this context that we can understand the original relationships that are formed with bats.

The first common feature is undoubtedly bats' habitat. Indeed, whether they are dry or drowned, followed or not by a resurgence, located on the coast or in the mountains, all the identified cavities are the subject of a myth relating their origin, their properties or remarkable occupants. The mechanisms underlying the morphogenesis of the karstic landscape are almost similar in all the myths recorded. Among the Ni-van, it is mythical humans, or rather their subsistence activities – hunting, tuber digging, fishing – who are at the origin of their formation. They will suddenly cause a collapse of the walls, the creation of a well, or the deadly gush of underground water. All these upheavals will

lead to their own metamorphosis into animals, snakes or eels, the new masters of the place. Among the Kasua, this is the work of a giant named Tawalume, whose name refers to the karst region Tawalu. Clumsy and abrupt, he is the master and the landscaper since it is his gestures – jumping, bumping, pulling his bow out of the wall, undressing, etc. – that cause the sudden depressions, the digging of cavities, the precipices. Beyond the actors, the mythology thus emphasizes the formidable geological instability governing the karstic landscape. As such, it warns human populations of the mortal danger that they would incur if they came to perpetrate there even the most anodyne practices. Subject to unexpected metamorphoses, these places can only be inhabited by exceptional beings, capable of living with the phenomena of erosion: bats.

The second common trait is the attitude required to enter into a cave inhabited by our exceptional beings. It is based on a very rigorous code of conduct, often similar in each tribe. Generally speaking, entering a cave arouses a strong apprehension in these individuals, some of them even refusing to enter. This emotion takes all its meaning in light of the risks incurred. First of all, although the entrance to a cave is not totally forbidden, all humans do not necessarily have the right to enter it – for instance menstruating women, or men whose wives are gardening or giving birth. Violating this rule would lead to the collapse of the cave or a deadly flood: too much fertility kills. In fact, only men from the clan territory where the cave is located have the right to enter it, but only as long as they greet the masters of the place and making offerings to them.

The bat hunt practiced by all the tribes is therefore governed by these requirements. This gives it an exceptional character, which is a third common trait: on the one hand, it is always collective, and on the other, it only takes place twice a year, to conclude either funeral rituals, weddings, or initiations. Bats are explicitly the companions of passage of humans, but also those which unite humans between them. Their catch can amount to 175 specimens, making it possible to feed and bind several clans simultaneously. It is the abundance, the joy that comes from the greed of their firm flesh. Only the hunting techniques are different. They can be explained by the configuration and size of the karstic habitats and of the bats, which are smaller and lower in Vanuatu than in Papua New Guinea. In Vanuatu, lit by a bamboo torch, men may use a spear, a stone or only their hand, taking care to cover their arms and hands with a magical plant anointing to guarantee the capture of prey. Among the Kasua, whose caves are gigantic, another technique is used. While some men enter the cavity with a torch and emit cries and howls to incite the bats to leave the cavity, others, installed in the trees at the exit of the cavity, armed with a long thorny broom made of rattan liana, wait for them to fly away to catch them in their fearsome broom. The fact remains that all these hunters respect the same imperative law: never kill the whole population of animals, or the whole of their human community would die.

From these practices, a remarkable ethological knowledge of bats emerges. If their dreaded habitat is a hindrance to the experiences shared *in situ*, and thus to the knowledge of their behavior in cavities, the ethology of their external behavior is very

precise. It concerns the trajectory of their collective flight whose rubbery sound image is present daily, – their cries too when they bicker for a fruit. These flights are moreover real announcers. Realized in full daylight, sometimes suddenly, they announce the coming of a cyclone, or of a climatic or tectonic disturbance. Ethology is of course about their food, each tribe being able to precisely enumerate the fruits they habitually conquer, and in which they participate in the zoochore diffusion.

Their company is thus vital to these tribes. Guardians of fragile but unique ecosystems, they are sources of exceptional abundance, a sign of extraordinary fertility necessary for the relational and ecological regeneration of the forest cosmos.

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