

Culture within the boundaries of nature. Daniel Everett and the Pirahã

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Despite centuries of violence and missionary work, the Western civilisation still has not managed to win over all people on earth to its values. Particularly insensitive to our cultural achievements are members of the so-called indigenous peoples. After three decades of converting the Pirahã people, living in the Amazon Basin, the American missionary Daniel Everett not only abandoned his own faith and missionary vocation, but also split up with his wife and children, received a PhD in Brazil and questioned one of the foundations of modern linguistics – the dogma of recursion. The history of confrontation between the “white” missionary and the Brazilian Indians allows us to notice the problem of the relations between culture and nature also where the supremacy of Western culture would seem obvious – in the Amazon rain forest. Reversing the main topic of this issue, I will try to demonstrate that Daniel Everett could not have converted the members of this small tribe to Christianity, because his cultural mission was not rooted deeply enough in nature.

The myth of the “savage barbarian”

In his book *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle* (London 2008), Everett paints a surprisingly honest picture of the process of acculturation of a Californian missionary, i.e. himself, by the inhabitants of the Amazonian jungle. Daniel Everett came to a Pirahã village on 10 December 1977. He was a 26-year-old fervent Evangelical Christian and wanted to preach the Gospel to members of the tribe in their own language. However, after a few days he was forced to stop learning the Pirahã language, because the Brazilian

government told all missionaries to leave Indian reservations. However, Everett was stubborn and obtained a special residence permit to stay in Amazonia. Soon he returned to the jungle, but this time with his wife Karen and three small children.

Taking his wife and children to the jungle may have seemed not a very wise move, to say the least. In the 1970s tribes living in the Brazilian rain forests were considered to be dangerous, preoccupied with endless wars and virtually possessed by murderous desires. Such a vision of Amazon Indians became dominant after 1968, when Napoleon Chagnon, a young American anthropologist, published his book *Yanomamä: The Fierce People*. The book quickly became a bestseller, has had five editions to this day and it is estimated that four million copies have been printed. No other anthropological publication has enjoyed similar success.

Another American anthropologist and film maker, Timothy Asch, helped Chagnon with making a series of popular ethnographic films about the Yanomami, which undoubtedly have contributed to the success of the book. The first film, *The Feast* (1970, 20 min), in which one village invites another to a feast in order to renew their alliance and together attack a third village, won every competition it entered. The second, *Magical Death* (1973, 28 min), contained a scene featuring a shaman under the influence of hallucinogenic drugs, with green mucus dripping from his nose. The documentary won a Blue Ribbon at the American Film Festival. *A Man Called Bee: Studying the Yanomamö* (1974, 40 min) showed Chagnon involved in field work, while *The Ax Fight* (1975, 30 min) documented a conflict between two villages.

Chagnon presented his most radical opinion about the innate brutality of the Amazon Indians in famous article "Life histories, blood revenge, and warfare in a tribal population". He argued that in the Yanomami tribe the biggest reproductive success was achieved by murderers. They had more wives and children than men who had not killed anyone¹. The thesis that people living in the jungle were naturally violent strengthened the stereotype of the "savage barbarian" and was popular in the media. Although some anthropologists raised objections to such a vision, Chagnon seemed, however, to be a credible scholar, having visited the rain forest twenty-six times and having spent over sixty-three months among the Yanomami.

A breakthrough came in 2000, when an investigative journalist, Patrick Tierney, published a book entitled *Darkness in El Dorado: How Scientists and Journalists Devastated the Amazon*. Tierney accused Chagnon of unethical behaviour – according to the journalist, the anthropologist knowingly caused wars by giving gifts, fabricated data and staged various scenes in his films. According to Tierney, the theory of the Yanomami's innate violence was also used as an argument against granting the Indians the right to have their own reservation in Brazil. The

¹ N. Chagnon, "Life histories, blood revenge, and warfare in a tribal population", *Science* 239, 1988, pp. 985–992.

book caused a storm. The controversy surrounding the Yanomami sparked a debate about a redefinition of modern anthropology, as was demonstrated by Robert Borofsky, who gave the floor to all parties to the conflict in his excellent book *Yanomami: The Fierce Controversy and What We Can Learn from It* (Berkeley 2005). The myth of the “savage barbarian” was created by Western philosophers, anthropologists and journalists. It still sells very well and justifies the exploitation of indigenous peoples.

A stern Christian meets gentle savages

Everett came to the Pirahã at a time when successive editions of Chagnon’s book and his films were extremely popular in the United States. The young missionary, with just elementary education, took his wife and three children to the dangerous jungle. This was a rather controversial decision given the vision of dangerous, murderous Indians popularised by the media. In order to justify his eccentric behaviour, Everett created or, rather, rekindled the myth of the “noble savage”, in response to the “savage barbarian” myth. In the Amazon Jungle it turned out that it was not the Indians but the Americans that were brutal.

In *Don’t Sleep, There Are Snakes*, Everett says with disarming openness that when he came to the Pirahã, he was faithful to the Christian tradition of administering corporeal punishment to unruly children, for “to spare the rod was to spoil the child” (p. 99). So when he decided that his oldest daughter, Shannon, spoke to him improperly, he told her to bring a switch from the forest to administer spanking. However, the girl began to protest loudly and to cry, which intrigued the inhabitants of the village. Several Pirahã came to Everett to ask what he was doing. They could not understand why the missionary wanted to beat his own children and they managed to prevent the spanking. The Pirahã do not beat their children. Everett eventually abandoned these practices, and in the book he praises the peaceful nature of the Amazon people.

The Pirahã were, of course, capable of violence. On page 84 of his book Everett writes that his wife Karen witnessed a gang-rape of an unmarried girl by most men in the village. However, he gives this piece of information in the brackets, immediately adding that the Pirahã did not tolerate aggression – as if the rape was not an aggressive act, but a momentary weakness of the “noble savage”.

In order to justify evident acts of violence in the village – including murder – and at the same time save the myth of the “noble savage”, Everett tells stories about the fatal influence of “bad” strangers on the “good” Pirahã. The main source of violence in the village turns out to be – like in western films – cheap alcohol provided by demoralised traders. River merchants offer sugar cane rum (Portuguese: *cachaça*) in exchange for highly valued Brazilian nuts (Portuguese:

sorva). Like a lonely hero in a Hollywood film, Everett of course tries to intervene to stop the Pirahã being turned into drunkards. One day a dishonest trader gives some men in the village, in an act of revenge, rum and guns, suggesting that they kill Everett. In a surprising turn of events the entire Everett family is suddenly in mortal danger. And then the American, thanks to his extraordinary courage coupled with great intelligence, outwits and disarms the attackers – the whole story ends happily.

Alongside the figure of a lonely hero, Everett also introduced, following Carlos Castaneda's example, the figure of a noble fool. In the third chapter of his book, "The Cost of Discipleship", he describes how he nearly contributed to the death of his loved ones. When his wife Karen and daughter Shannon became gravely ill, Everett diagnosed that they had typhoid fever, because he had experienced the disease himself. However, typhoid medications brought no improvement. Karen became aggressive and started to have visions, while Shannon would become unconscious more and more often. Desperate, Everett borrows a boat and decides to take the two patients to the nearest hospital. Of course he does not know the way and gets lost. However, thanks to the help of many strangers, he eventually manages to bring his wife and daughter to the hospital. Almost at the very last moment. It turns out that they are not suffering from typhoid fever but from malaria. The Pirahã have known it all along, but Everett did not even thought about asking them.

Taking his wife and three small children to the jungle may have been intended to increase the efficacy of the missionary zeal. Yet, despite months of hard work, neither Everett nor his wife managed to convert anyone and radically changed themselves instead. Daniel Everett began to accept the system of values of the rain forest, definitely abandoning Christianity. On the other hand, his wife Karen, who came from a strict family of missionaries, responded to hardship by becoming stronger in her faith and eventually abandoning the apostate Daniel. In one of his interviews Everett complained that his daughters did not want to talk to him. He was regarded as a traitor.

Everett's book destroys the myth of an objective, uninvolved observer. Studying a foreign culture turned out to be a series of interventions and led to surprising transformations not so much in the observed community but in the researcher himself and in his family.

The Pirahã communities are egalitarian and have no hierarchical structure. Life in the jungle imposes specific conditions. People have to be able to survive in an extreme environment, often alone. From the Western perspective indigenous practices may seem cruel. For instance, Everett describes the killing of an orphaned infant or a mother who gives a toddler a knife to play. The American missionary openly confesses that for a long time he could not understand, not to mention justify, such practices. Initially, he even tried to fight them. Without much success, it has to be said. Eventually, Everett did agree with the Pirahã.

In the Amazon Jungle nature usually problematises such categories as “violence”, “tolerance” or even “culture”. From the Pirahã’s perspective it was Everett who was a person without culture and requiring re-education. The Pirahã culture is very distinctive and – in Everett’s view – we can distinguish four main elements in it: (1) living in the present, (2) language devoid of recursion, (3) principle of immediacy of experience and (4) contacts with the spirits. I will examine each element to show what was meant in practice by Daniel Everett’s cultural re-education in the Amazon Jungle.

Living in the present

The Pirahã love to dance and sing. They use no instruments for the purpose, because they do not produce much. Everett saw people dancing three days in a row². They only stopped for short breaks but ate nothing. Dance is often an introduction to sex – Everett stresses that he never took advantage of any propositions and remained faithful to his wife, an attitude that the Pirahã women could not understand. By telling such stories Everett, of course, builds his own myth. In the book’s epilogue, despite their break-up he gives the biggest thanks to his wife for her help. The dance described by Everett could also function as a substitute of sexual intercourse. No external rules imposed limits on the form or duration of the dance. It lasted until it ended. Everett did take part in such a dance, for scientific purposes, of course.

The Pirahã live in the present. They ignore the past and the future. Everett describes how the Pirahã would often talk to him and then, still in his presence, would continue the conversation among themselves, as if he were not there³.

What constitutes a special testimony to the Pirahã’s unique immersion in the present is their language⁴. It has no perfective aspect. The past or the future are expressed by adding the morphemes *-a* (“distant”) and *-i* (“close”) to verbs. The Pirahã have not developed any forms in their language that could be used to refer to events that have no links to the present and immediate experience.

According to Everett, the Pirahã language also lacks the distinction between the plural and the singular; there are no numbers and the concept of counting⁵,

² D.L. Everett, *Don’t Sleep, There Are Snakes: Life and Language in the Amazonian Jungle*, London 2008, p. 76.

³ See *ibidem*, p. 210.

⁴ See D.L. Everett, “Cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã: Another look at the design features of human language”, *Current Anthropology* 46, 2005, pp. 621–646; A. Nevins, D. Pesetsky, C. Rodrigues, “Pirahã exceptionality: A reassessment”, *Language* 85, 2009, pp. 355–404.

⁵ See P. Gordon, “Numerical cognition without words: Evidence from Amazonia”, *Science* 306 (5695), 2004, pp. 496–499; M.C. Frank et al., “Number as a cognitive technology: Evidence from Pirahã language and cognition”, *Cognition* 108, 2008, pp. 819–824.

there are no words to denote colours. It seems that the Pirahã consciously reject the use of abstract terms, because such terms would distance them from immediate experience of reality and complicate their life in the present.

In the Pirahã language a special role is played by verbs modified by means of numerous suffixes – one verb may have even as many as sixteen suffixes! Suffixes are used to denote the source of information or knowledge of the speaker. The Pirahã allow only three possibilities: hearsay, own observation or reasoning. Evangelical relations cannot be subordinated to any of these categories.

The Pirahã language consists of hard to understand performances⁶. Men use only three vowels (i, a, o) and eight consonants (p, t, k, s, h, b, g and a glottal stop marked by the apostrophe '). Women use the same vowels as men, but only seven consonants (they pronounce the s and h phonemes as h). The Pirahã language, along with the Rotokas language from the East Papuan group and Hawaiian, is among the languages with the smallest number of phonemes.

Pronunciation, like in ancient Greek, is based on a tonal accent and syllables of varying length. Each phoneme in a word can be pronounced with the pitch raised, which radically changes the meaning of the word. As an example, Everett cites four different ways of pronouncing a series of five phonemes in the word 'aooi (the ' accent over a vowel denotes a raised tone): 'aóóí ("skin"), 'aóóí ("uneven", e.i. "foreigner"), 'áoóí ("ear") and 'áoóí ("Brazil nut shell")⁷. In the Pirahã's speech Everett also identified five different lengths of syllables.

Thanks to the musicality of their language – small number of phonemes, metre and tonal accent – the Pirahã have been able to develop four additional communication systems on the basis of their language, systems that are very useful in a tropical forest. Mothers communicate with their children by murmuring just the melody of the words. Adults communicate over long distances, shouting the musical forms of the words on the "a" vowel. Men, when hunting in the jungle, whistle the words in order not to frighten away the animals. In addition, in exceptional situations the Pirahã emphasise the musicality of their speech. When they want to communicate some important news or when they address the spirits, they exaggerate pitch differences and give their speech an artificial rhythm. This melo-declamation is often used when people are dancing⁸. Each of these extraordinary communication systems enables the sender to produce the full utterance, which is usually perfectly understood by the receiver of the message.

Such communication strategies could have developed only in close contact with nature. Nature and culture seem to permeate and determine each other. In the Pirahã's cultural education an important role is played not only by relations between humans but also relations with the whole environment, not only animals

⁶ D.L. Everett, "Cultural constraints...", pp. 177–208.

⁷ D.L. Everett, *Don't Sleep...*, p. 185.

⁸ See *ibidem*, pp. 186–187.

and plants, but also water and earth. Men spent a lot of time in solitude, hunting on the river during the day and at night. Detailed and profound knowledge of the “laws of nature” has become an integral part of the Pirahã culture.

Everett understood the extraordinary depth of the Indian’s knowledge of nature during a joint expedition to the jungle. The American of course put on protective clothing, covering himself from head to toe, and brought along lots of necessary objects – following the popular image of the hunter in the tropics. Bedecked with metal props, he made such a noise, that the Pirahã had to ask him to stop and wait for their return. Left alone for hours, Everett discovered that in order to survive in the jungle, he had to be able to live in it “here and now”.

Nature, demanding living in the present, not only seems to inspire the inhabitants of Amazonia to develop specific areas of knowledge and communication systems, but also influences the grammar of their language. Everett’s most controversial and the most famous thesis is that the Pirahã language lacks recursion.

Recursion

In 2002 three renowned American scholars – Marc Hausner, Tecumseh Fitch and Noam Chomsky – published a famous article, arguing that an essential feature of every human language was the ability to communicate by placing some structures inside others⁹. This is what is meant by recursion. Non-recursive sentences like “John likes Mary” and “John is walking” can be turned by people into a recursive sentence: “John, who is walking, likes Mary”. And this, according to Everett, is what the Pirahã do not do. They communicate only using non-recursive sentences. Everett goes even further and claims that the Pirahã consciously give up recursion, because compound sentences would distance them from direct experience of the world¹⁰. This means that grammar may depend on local behaviour and context, so, contrary to what Chomsky believes, there is no universal model of human language. If further studies confirm Everett’s hypotheses, we will be able to say that language, the main bastion of culture, is at least to some extent determined by nature.

Although Everett did not find recursion in the Pirahã language, he did find it in their minds. When the Pirahã provide an account of something, they add to the main, dominant thread accounts of less important events. Everett considers recursion to be a characteristic feature of the way the human brain processes information about the world. The thesis was expressed most radically by Michael Corballis, a professor emeritus of psychology from New Zealand, who has an-

⁹ M.D. Hausner, N. Chomsky, W.T. Fitch, “The faculty of language. What is it, who has it, and how did it evolve?”, *Science* 298 (5598), 2002, pp. 1569–1579.

¹⁰ D.L. Everett, *Don’t Sleep...*, p. 237.

nounced in his recent book that recursion is the main property that distinguishes the human mind from the minds of all other animals¹¹. Can we thus say that the *Homo sapiens* is a creature capable of recursion?

In 2009 Mathias Osvath, a primatologist from the University of Lund, described extraordinary behaviour of Santino the chimpanzee in the Furuvik Zoo in Sweden¹². When the zoo was closed to visitors, the male would calmly collect stones in small piles, doing it only in selected parts of its enclosure that could be seen by the public. Over ten years of observations, from 1997, Santino built up hundreds of piles. When visitors came, the chimpanzee would throw stones at them. For Osvath such behaviour could be treated as evidence that the animal planned its future actions, thus it was able to imagine the future in the present, which would testify to its capability of recursion. In her review of Corballis' book for *The Times Literary Supplement*¹³ Barbara J. King quotes other examples of recursion in animal behaviour. Chimpanzees from the Tai National Park in the south of the Ivory Coast hunt the colobine monkeys, animals from the Cercopithecidae family, closely cooperating with each other, predicting not only the colobine monkeys' movements, but also the impact of the tactics employed by other chimpanzees on the future behaviour of the colobine monkeys¹⁴.

Thus the question of using recursion to define human beings remains open. Once again it turns out that the distinction between culture and nature is sometimes difficult to define. There seem to be more similarities than differences between human beings and nature.

The principle of immediacy of experience

Everett took with him to the jungle not only his large family, but also many objects produced in the West, which he could not do without. When he decided for the first time to spend a whole year among the Pirahã with his wife and children, he needed 250-litre metal barrels, wooded boxes, fuel containers, suitcases, woolen sacks and cardboard boxes to transport all his possessions. In chapter nine of *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes*, entitled, significantly, "Land to live free", Everett explains that all these things were to help the American family survive in the jungle without bothering the people from the village. This sounds strange in the context of opinions, often repeated by himself and other authors, that the Pirahã's

¹¹ See M.C. Corballis, *The Recursive Mind. The Origins of Human Language, Thought, and Civilization*, Princeton 2011.

¹² M. Osvath, "Spontaneous planning for future stone throwing by a male chimpanzee", *Current Biology* 19 (5), 2009, pp. R190–R191.

¹³ 26 October 2011, also: <http://www.the-tls.co.uk/tls/public/article807136.ece>.

¹⁴ See C. Boesch, H. Boesch-Achermann, *The Chimpanzees of the Tai Forest: Behavioural Ecology and Evolution*, Oxford 2000.

is one of the simplest and poorest material cultures known today. On page 151 Everett assures the readers that people in the village were never interested in the objects brought from California, which is to justify the decision to bring hundreds of things to the tropical forest.

Everett does not see any colonial ideology in his behaviour. This year I saw with my own eyes the strategy employed by the Chinese to colonise Tibet. Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, is still the centre of religious pilgrimages of the Tibetans, but the city is systematically being developed and rebuilt in the Chinese fashion. Each day modern railways deliver new Chinese people and new products, which are gradually driving away indigenous people and traditional architecture. New, good roads make it possible to launch a military intervention in case of a mutiny. The Tibetans seem not to notice this avalanche of consumerism and militarism, but the Chinese are gradually taking over the country's entire economy and relentlessly fight any signs of independence. At the same time they are destroying local crafts, flooding the market with cheap and omnipresent fakes. Lhasa has already become a Chinese city with a bizarre Old Town and crowds of picturesquely-clad pilgrims – religious practices are turning into a performance for tourists, mostly from China. The littering of the Amazon Jungle with foreign objects also modified the Pirahã's environment.

Everett often stresses in his book that the Pirahã ignore all material goods. They do not become attached to any objects, even those they have made themselves with great difficulty. They do not show any interest in writing either. For eight months Everett and his wife in vain tried to teach the inhabitants of the village to count and write. Tim Ingold, an anthropologist from the University of Aberdeen, has described writing as a reification of speech, transformation of language into an object¹⁵. According to Daniel Everett, the Pirahã culture is defined by the "immediacy of experience principle". Members of this tribe reject all symbolic objects and systems of representation, including writing and art. They appreciate only direct access to reality. They do not store anything, even food. After each hunting or fishing expedition, they feast until they run out of food. Their household items are limited to an aluminium pot, a spoon and several knives. They can weave baskets, in which they deliver valuable Brazilian nuts to river merchants, but they immediately throw them out after a deal has been struck. A new exchange means a new basket being woven¹⁶.

The Pirahã are a "water people". The Maici River is their main source of food. Yet they do not built boats, although they often use them. When they need a boat, they steal it from a neighbouring tribe or ask their current guest to buy them a canoe from the Brazilians. When they asked Everett, he advised them to make a

¹⁵ See T. Ingold, *The Perception of Environment: Essays in Livelihood, Dwelling, and Skill*, London-New York 2000, pp. 92–93.

¹⁶ D.L. Everett, *Don't Sleep...*, p. 73.

boat themselves. Their reply was: “The Pirahã don’t make canoes”. Therefore, the American decided to invest his own money and teach the Pirahã to build boats. Under the watchful eye of the best specialist from the Pau Queimado village, over the course of five days the men made a dugout canoe. They were very proud of themselves. However, after a few days the same men returned to Everett with another request to buy them a new boat. When he protested saying that they could make a dugout canoe, they replied: “The Pirahã don’t make canoes”¹⁷.

For the Pirahã, a credible account worth listening to is one by an eye-witness. Initially, Everett tried to convert the Indians using Evangelical parables, which he had translated into the Pirahã language with great difficulty. One day, after hearing another lesson, the men asked him to tell them whether Jesus had been dark-skinned, like them, or fair-skinned, like the American. Everett tried to avoid a straight answer, saying that he had never personally seen Jesus and only knew his words. “Well, Dan,” the Indians went on, “how do you have his words if you have never heard him or seen him?” And when it turned out that none of Everett’s friends or relatives had met Jesus personally either, the Pirahã lost any interest in the Gospels¹⁸. With time Everett, too, stopped believing in Biblical parables.

No fixed scenarios, for instance rituals, regulate the Pirahã’s life or customs. The Pirahã know no marriage or divorce ceremonies. The funeral consists in burying the deceased, usually in a sitting position, because it requires less digging¹⁹.

The rejection of symbolic objects does not mean, however, that the Pirahã use no tools whatsoever. The main weapon used by men during their hunting expeditions is bow. A tool — as the Scottish philosopher Andy Clark argues in *Super-sizing the Mind: Embodiment, Action, and Cognitive Extension* (Oxford 2008) — extends the mind and does not distance the user from the external world. It is an effective way of becoming involved in reality. Our neural system quickly learns and treats the tool as an extension of the body.

Everett keeps saying in his book and on many other occasions or in other publications that objects play a minor role in the Pirahã’s life, but the stories and anecdotes he tells may suggest otherwise. The bow is not the only ever-present attribute of these hunters-gatherers. The Pirahã also make primitive jewellery. In addition, they become attached to new objects. Everett, not indifferent to suffering, gave people in the village medications, and the Pirahã quickly learned to ask him for them. They were able to recognise their function and value. Thus, the objects brought to the tropical forest did modify the Pirahã’s behaviour, in spite of Everett’s naive claims that they ignored material goods.

The Pirahã do not build houses. Fragile roofs supported by sticks serving as temporary dwellings – if they are erected at all – do not provide any protection

¹⁷ Ibidem, pp. 75–76.

¹⁸ Ibidem, pp. 265–266.

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 81–82.

against dangerous reptiles and amphibians. Therefore, Everett decided that his family should live in a solid building. With the Pirahã's help he built a wooden house in the village, with an attic to serve as his study. With some amusement he tells how, whenever he left the village with his family, the Pirahã immediately moved in to his house and made holes in the roof, because they liked to look at the sky at night. The Pirahã never sleep throughout the night. They sleep two hours at most, usually only fifteen minutes, both at night and during the day. Lack of sleep, just like scarce food, is for them a way to strengthen their bodies. When Everett went to bed, the Pirahã would tell him: "Don't sleep, there are snakes". Hence the title of the book: *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes*.

The problem of the relation between nature and culture seems complicated. Everett stresses that he has never met a member of the Pirahã tribe who has adopted any elements of the Western worldview or would like to emigrate to a more civilised place. The Pirahã refer to themselves as "simple" (*Híaitíhi*), call foreigners "crooked" (*'aoói*) or those who cannot act correctly. They use only their mother tongue and categorically refuse to learn foreign languages. Despite two centuries of contacts with Brazilians, no Pirahã can speak Portuguese fluently. The Pirahã believe that a foreign language cannot be used to communicate with the spirits. Thus, losing their own tongue would mean losing contact with the spirits, without which it would be difficult to survive in the jungle.

In touch with the spirits

All Pirahã meet the spirits nearly every day. In the prologue to his book *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* Everett talks about a mysterious event that he witnessed on an August morning in 1980. Around half past six he was woken by noises and shouting. The entire village gathered on the river bank. Intrigued, Everett asked his principal Pirahã language teacher for explanations. The man, very tense, pointed to other side of the river. But Everett could see nothing there. The Pirahã explained impatiently that one of the inhabitants of heaven is standing on the beach, shouting that he will kill everyone daring to go to the jungle. People of the village, agitated, were shouting and gesticulating in the direction of the beach. Only Everett and his daughter saw no one on the other side.

The Californian family, surrounded by objects brought from home, did not take part in the life of the village. Everett often forbade his daughter to play with the Pirahã boys, because he did not accept their favourite game, i.e. grabbing each other by the penis. He himself would drink hot coffee during almost every conversation with the villagers, which, of course, was not a traditional custom of the Pirahã. Yet contemporary anthropologists increasingly stress the fundamental role of participation as an integral part of each observation.

"The spectator who stands at a distance, in order to make an objective study," claims Tim Ingold, "is observationally blind"²⁰. Ingold calls on anthropologists to "enliven" objects in the world. He keeps saying that only experiencing people and the environment as a rhizome of living processes can enable an anthropologist to notice what is really going on. Everett's analytical mind does not cease to catalogue and define, thus dividing reality into separate beings. In Ingold's view, however, people and the environment together make up a tangle of stories; getting to know the world means, in a way, "growing into the world", inhabiting experienced as wandering, movement. A wayfarer's task is not to follow a script provided by the ancestors but to negotiate a path through the world²¹. The Pirahã keep saying to Everett, who is drinking his coffee: "Dan, you're not a Pirahã". The villagers see the world around them as a living, moving reality, which is why they see spirits and ignore most "dead", because immovable, objects brought from America.

However, sometimes the spirits manifest themselves to everyone. One night Everett and Peter Gordon, a professor of speech and language pathology at Columbia University, met a woman who had just died. She visited one of the men. He suddenly jumped out of the jungle, with a cloth on his head imitating her long hair. Speaking in a high falsetto, he began complaining about the cold and darkness under the ground. He was uttering syllables in groups of two, speaking in a rhythm decidedly different from colloquial speech. After a brief performance the oddly-dressed man disappeared in the jungle, only to reappear naked a few minutes later, this time as a comical spirit. He was pounding the ground with a heavy log, threatening to beat up anyone who would stand in his way. His voice was now low and gruff. The villagers were roaring with laughter. During one of such performances Everett asked the performer whether he could record him. The man immediately returned to reality, gave his consent in his normal voice and then went back to this unnatural voice²².

The Pirahã always address a possessed person using the name of the spirit, never the private name of the possessed. The possessed, on the other hand, do not remember anything. Even when they listened to the recording of their own performance, they swore to Everett that it had not been their voice but that of the spirit. The Pirahã do not distinguish between the role and the performer. They are a perfect audience of such spirit performances. They always believe what they see and never question the veracity of the performance. Everett notes that every member of the tribe is haunted by the spirits from time to time. In the egalitarian Pirahã community there is no function of a "shaman" or "priest" with exclusive access to "the other world". Thus, no one is sufficiently singled out to be able to

²⁰ T. Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, London-New York 2011, p. 224.

²¹ T. Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment...*, pp. 146–147; T. Ingold, T. Kurttila, "Perceiving the environment in Finnish Lapland", *Body and Science* 6 (3/4), 2000, p. 192.

²² D.L. Everett, *Don't Sleep...*, pp. 138–141.

rule the tribe. Relations within the community are not regulated by any coercion system. Transgressions are sometimes punished by exclusion from food sharing, by ostracism or upbraiding by the spirit²³.

The Pirahã's contacts with the spirits are not limited to possession. The spirits may also harm people. In order to protect themselves against evil beings, the Pirahã wear necklaces. They are often painted bright red to be easily visible from a distance and to signal the presence of human beings. For evil spirits, like wild animals, attack mainly when they are surprised and scared²⁴.

Everett stresses that the spirits serve regulatory functions in Pirahã communities. They instruct members of these communities and correct their behaviour. This egalitarian society has developed a unique form of external authority in the form of collective projections. The cult of possession has become one of the methods to survive in the jungle.

Studying the Pirahã, Everett experienced a series of transformations in Amazonia. He learned through experience. As a result, just like the Pirahã, he changed his identity several times – the Pirahã sometimes abandon their old names to assume new ones. Today, despite his fame as a scholar, Daniel Everett is a tragic, uprooted figure. He has not become a Pirahã. His fellow learned colleagues question his scientific competence²⁵. His family do not talk to him. Those who listen to him carefully are mainly students and journalists.

To sum up: culture within the boundaries of nature

Daniel Everett's experiences and transformations are a testimony to the problematisation of such categories as "nature" and "culture". New developments in neuroscience stress the plasticity of the human brain and question the Cartesian division into the body, the mind and the external world. The mind is increasingly perceived as a set of criss-crossing streams or, even better, processes, permeating each other, removing the fixed boundaries between the internal and the external. The two foundations of the Pirahã culture – living in the present and focusing on immediacy of experience – perfectly reflect the vision of human nature after the discovery of the mirror neurons. Our relations with other human beings or the world on the fundamental level are not mediated by any systems of representation. The development of civilisation is just one of possible ways of being a human

²³ Ibidem, pp. 110–112.

²⁴ Ibidem, p. 74.

²⁵ Cf. A. Nevins, D. Pesetsky, C. Rodrigues, "Pirahã exceptionality. A reassessment", *Language* 85, 2009, pp. 355–404; comments in *Current Anthropology* (no. 46, 2005) after Everett's article "Cultural constraints on grammar and cognition in Pirahã".

on earth. Rain forests also stimulate life according to values, but these values are rooted in biology and nature.

Daniel Everett came to the Amazon Jungle by plane, wore huge boots, and had lots of objects in his boxes and barrels. His body, effectively protected against tropical dangers, was locked in a cultural “cage”. The cover of his book *Don't Sleep, There Are Snakes* depicts two people on the Maici River. A smiling naked Pirahã man is sitting in a canoe, holding a huge bow. We see the Indian's naked body, with the exception of his feet. To the right, Daniel Everett's head emerges from the river. The rest of his body remains hidden and not present. It seems that the Pirahã easily converted the American missionary, because his system of values was rooted only in the mind, was a collection of teachings, ideologies, ideas and rational concepts. This whole complex structure fell apart when confronted with life in the present and immediacy of experience.