A non-Christian mathematics: Unstable sets in Indigenous Amazonia

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In the Amazonian literature, the scarcity of numerical terms and lack of interest in counting, which characterize diverse indigenous groups in the region, are usually associated with linguistic issues or cultural limitations. My purpose in this paper is to take a different approach and relate the enumeration processes of one of these peoples, the Wari’, to the perspectivism that traditionally organized their perceptual world. My hypothesis is that the qualitative indefiniteness of this universe, where subjects and objects change their forms and affects according to the relational context, has implications for the quantitative instability of the sets that could be counted.

Aparecida Vilaça is Professor of Social Anthropology at the Museu Nacional, Federal University of Rio de Janeiro. Vilaça studies sociocultural changes among indigenous peoples in Brazil, with an emphasis on conversion to Christianity and schooling. She has carried out ethnographic research among the Wari’ people in Southwestern Amazonia for over three decades. She is the author of Strange Enemies: Indigenous Agency and Scenes of Encounters in Amazonia; Praying and Preying: Christianity in Indigenous Amazonia, co-editor of Native Christians: Modes and Effects of Christianity among Indigenous Peoples of the Americas and of the forthcoming book Science in the Forest, Science in the Past.

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