

# Pros and Cons Of Considering Epicurean Philosophy To Be A "Religion"

**Post by "Peter Konstans" of March 24, 2024 at 1:15 PM**

The Epicurean acceptance of the existence of the gods didn't just rely on abstract theories but also on the idea that the existence of the gods is an empirically verifiable fact because of visions or images of them streaming into our mind. So Epicurus is basically telling us that we know gods exist because many people have actually seen them.

This strange idea ceases to be strange if we recall that mass hallucinations of the sort described below were probably common in ancient communities. They could have been the result of chronic use of hallucinogenic substances traditionally consumed in religious rituals.

The anthropologist Daniel Everett who observed an Amazonian tribe for years describes witnessing the remarkable occurrence of a whole village simultaneously observing the presence of a 'spirit' that he and his daughter just couldn't see. If you asked these people how they know that 'spirits' exist they would simply tell you that they have seen them. In other words primitive communities experience shared hallucinations.

The following Paragraphs are from his book.

Often when I first opened my eyes, groggily coming out of a dream, a Pirahã child or sometimes even an adult would be staring at me from between the paxiuba palm slats that served as siding for my large hut. This morning was different.

I was now completely conscious, awakened by the noise and shouts of Pirahãs. I sat up and looked around. A crowd was gathering about twenty feet from my bed on the high bank of the Maici, and all were energetically gesticulating and yelling. Everyone was focused on the beach just across the river from my house. I got out of bed to get a better look—and because there was no way to sleep through the noise.

I picked my gym shorts off the floor and checked to make sure that there were no tarantulas, scorpions, centipedes, or other undesirables in them. Pulling them on, I slipped into my flip-flops and headed out the door. The Pirahãs were loosely bunched on the riverbank just to the right of my house. Their excitement was growing. I could see mothers running down the path, their infants trying to hold breasts in their mouths.

The women wore the same sleeveless, collarless, midlength dresses they worked and slept in, stained a dark brown from dirt and smoke. The men wore gym shorts or loincloths. None of the men were carrying their bows and arrows. That was a relief. Prepubescent children were naked, their skin leathery from exposure to the elements. The babies' bottoms were calloused from scooting across the ground, a mode of locomotion that for some reason they prefer to crawling.

Everyone was streaked from ashes and dust accumulated by sleeping and sitting on the ground near the fire.

It was still around seventy-two degrees, though humid, far below the hundred-degree-plus heat of midday. I was rubbing the sleep from my eyes. I turned to Kóhoi, my principal language teacher, and asked, "What's up?" He was standing to my right, his strong, brown, lean body tensed from what he was looking at.

"Don't you see him over there?" he asked impatiently. "Xigagaí, one of the beings that lives above the clouds, is standing on the beach yelling at us, telling us he will kill us if we go to the jungle."

"Where?" I asked. "I don't see him."

"Right there!" Kóhoi snapped, looking intently toward the middle of the apparently empty beach.

"In the jungle behind the beach?"

"No! There on the beach. Look!" he replied with exasperation.

In the jungle with the Pirahãs I regularly failed to see wildlife they saw. My inexperienced eyes just weren't able to see as theirs did.

But this was different. Even I could tell that there was nothing on that white, sandy beach no more than one hundred yards away. And yet as certain as I was about this, the Pirahãs were equally certain that there was something there. Maybe there had been something there that I just missed seeing, but they insisted that what they were seeing, Xigagaí, was still there.

Everyone continued to look toward the beach. I heard Kristene, my six-year-old daughter, at my side.

"What are they looking at, Daddy?"

"I don't know. I can't see anything."

Kris stood on her toes and peered across the river. Then at me. Then at the Pirahãs. She was as puzzled as I was.

Kristene and I left the Pirahãs and walked back into our house. What had I just witnessed? Over the more than two decades since that summer morning, I have tried to come to grips with the significance of how two cultures, my European-based culture and the Pirahãs' culture, could see reality so differently. I could never have proved to the Pirahãs that the beach was empty. Nor could they have convinced me that there was anything, much less a spirit, on it.

As a scientist, objectivity is one of my most deeply held values. If we could just try harder, I once thought, surely we could each see the world as others see it and learn to respect one another's views more readily. But as I learned from the Pirahãs, our expectations, our culture, and our experiences can render even perceptions of the environment nearly incommensurable cross-culturally.

Everett also describes another hilarious shared hallucination among the tribesmen. When I first read it, I just couldn't stop laughing.

The morning after one evening's "show" an older Pirahã man, Kaaxaóoi, came to work with me on the language. As we were working, he startled me by suddenly saying, "The women are

afraid of Jesus. We do not want him.”

“Why not?” I asked, wondering what had triggered this declaration.

“Because last night he came to our village and tried to have sex with our women. He chased them around the village, trying to stick his large penis into them.”

Kaaxaóoi proceeded to show me with his two hands held far apart how long Jesus’s penis was—a good three feet.

I didn’t know what to say to this. I had no idea whether a Pirahã male had pretended to be Jesus and pretended to have a long penis, faking it in some way, or what else could be behind this report. Clearly Kaaxaóoi wasn’t making this up. He was reporting it as a fact that he was concerned about. Later, when I questioned two other men from his village, they confirmed his story.