

Critical Review of “*Not Animal, Not Not-Animal: Hunting, Imitation and Empathic Knowledge among the Siberian Yukaghurs*” (Willerslev 2004)

In this essay I will provide a critical review of ‘Not Animal, Not Not-Animal: Hunting, Imitation and Empathic Knowledge among the Siberian Yukaghirs’, an ethnographic analysis authored by Rane Willerslev (2004). I will describe the theory of the mimetic practises of the Yukaghirs, a group of Siberian indigenous hunters. The Yukaghirs hold the belief that humans and animals can temporarily assume the perspective of the body of the other. I chose this topic because it offers an interesting proposition because it is outside of commonly held Western beliefs, concerning the attributes of animals as natural creatures governed by instinctual behaviour.

Willerslev’s fieldwork involved taking on the role of a fulltime hunter with the Yukaghir men from the Upper Kolyma area in the Northeast of Siberia. This group of people still live a subsistence-based hunter gatherer lifestyle. I will offer an overview of the “Yukaghir conception” (Willerslev 2004, pp. 629-65) of animals as persons and an appraisal of Willerslev’s approach of merging two theories, to better understand the Yukaghir beliefs.

I will begin by describing Amerindian Perspectivism. “[W]hy should concept not be... open to manipulation? Why should it not be a part of their use that the ambiguity of words, the logically illicit transformation of one concept into another (like a spirit appearing in diverse forms) is exploited to the full by the users of what seems to be ‘one’ concept?” (Gellner, 2003; 39). Developed by Brazilian anthropologist Viveiros de Castro, Amerindian Perspectivism is a cosmological term developed through his ontological studies of indigenous American Indians and used to describe the way in which different ‘persons’ see and view the world around them and each other.

In his book ‘The Relative Native, Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds’ (2015; 58), De Castro describes that all animate beings such as humans and nonhuman animals, spirits and trees amongst other animate objects each share the same “generic soul” (de Castro, 2015) containing a “human consciousness”. In the case of the Yukaghir hunters this soul is called the ‘ayibii’. As each being sees the animated environment, they live in from a unitarian perspective, it means that everything views their world in the same way. Each entity is considered as a ‘shell’ of various forms such as perhaps elk, reindeer, wolf, tree, human and so on, and each species perceives each other as humans will perceive themselves. De Castro explains that what different species of nonhuman animals sees will be the same object that we see but that they will see it in a different way. It is a world of “constant epistemology and variable ontologies”.

A mound of earth may be a mound of earth to a human but may be a ceremonial temple to a wolf. This explains various views in one world. Nonhuman animals see themselves as human persons in this ‘shell’ which contains their spirit and their human self, which can only be seen by another of the same species, or shamans who can travel through the different species.

References

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