

Tora Holmberg

## Animist Hunting

**Rane Willerslev. *Soul hunters. Hunting, animism, and personhood among the Siberian Yukaghirs*. University of California Press: Berkeley and Los Angeles: 2007. 235pp. \$24.95**

This book is based on eighteen months of fieldwork among the forest-living male hunters of Yukaghir. They hunt mainly elk, reindeer, and sable, but also bear and fox. The main theme of the book is that of animism—of ascribing personhood to non-human creatures such as the animals the Yukaghirs hunt and the spirits that inhabit their world. Rane Willerslev’s main argument is that the Yukaghirs of his study live a life in which they constantly move in and out of different identities, so that they live a life in a “hall of mirrors” world. The Yukaghirs, in their in-between positions, come to form relational identities—through a continuous flow of identities. However, this moving in-between does not erase a person’s identity. On the contrary, constituting difference or distance is highly important to avoid metamorphosis—a loss of identity when everything becomes one and the same. The second main argument is that animism as a cultural phenomenon has not been taken seriously by anthropologists, but has been rationalized as a flawed view of reality. The author shows how animism, through the practice of mimesis, forms a very rational or logical way of relating to the world, of being in the world. Mimesis is understood as, “the meeting place of two modes of being-in-the-world—‘engagement’ and ‘reflexivity’—while also including other members of the mimetic family such as ‘sameness’ and ‘difference,’ ‘self’ and ‘other,’ ‘me’ and ‘not me’” (9). Mimesis can also be understood in terms of creation of a second nature, a nature that is “reflexively aware of itself as standing somewhat apart from nature” (26, italics in original). The theoretical framework rests mainly on the work of anthropologist Tim Ingold, and is heavily inspired by his phenomenology and notions of embodiment.

What strikes me when reading the book is how deeply rooted the rules of the game seem to be, that is, how the rules of hunting may vary in content across cultures, but how much they nevertheless are at play. I wonder how this trait could be understood in Darwinian or Marxist terms, or if another form of theory is needed in order to deal with what seems as a deep and common trait of human-animal encountering and living in

the world. The rules seem to function as a way to handle the inherent dilemma in killing other animals for one's own survival (and/or pleasure). In this specific case, the Yukaghir hunters, as Willerslev shows, are afraid of spiritual counter-predation if they indulge in indiscrete hunting. They also fear that, since it is perceived as morally wrong to kill other animals, the spirits will come and take the hunter's soul. Ways of handling this particular dilemma are either to distort the hunt, to make the spirits think that someone else did the hunting, to share the prey, or to say that the animal gave itself up. There are some additional distinct codes of conduct expressed. The hunter should be modest and never brag about his achievements. On the contrary, he should rather understate the success of the hunt. He should also share the meat according to the principle of generosity. There are, according to the author, always two sides of the killing; one of over-hunting which is believed to increase the future animal population since the spirits of the animals are set free, and the other is the moral idea and strategy to keep the killing to a minimum. The hunters usually handle this dilemma by killing every animal that gets in their way, but stopping when the good luck seems to override what is considered "normal" luck. This way, the two logics of "overkilling" versus "not killing" seem to constitute each other as forms of resource and risk management strategies (49). Moreover, the animals most desired for their meat are also seen as most moral, as pure, and thus most prominent moral dilemmas are involved in the killing. For example, one hunter states that when killing an elk or a bear, it sometimes feels as if he had shot a human. But he shoves these feelings away, or else he would "go mad from shame" (78).

Moreover, the Yukaghir men in the study view other animals as persons, but only within defined relations that can be viewed as important: the elk within the hunting situation, the dog, the wolf. How is this achieved? The hunter takes the other's perspective, and engages in perspectivism: "These are not alternative points of view of the same world, but rather result from a carrying-over of the same point of view into alternative realities" (87). Every species, according to the hunters, will perceive the world from the same perspective as humans do, although what they will perceive will be entirely different, because of their species-specific embodiment and place. Thus, perspectivism is about one view, but from different bodies. It is about incorporating the other, while staying the same, which is not an easy task for the hunter. The idea is perhaps best portrayed in this descriptive quote:

For what takes place, it seems to me, is in fact a reciprocal mirroring of perspectives. While the elk sees its body through the hunter's act of mimicry—that is, it sees its own species kind—the hunter sees the reflected image of his own body through the acts of the elk, mimicking his acts of mimicry. In other words, the hunter does not just see the elk walking toward him, but he also sees himself from the 'outside', as if he himself were the elk—that is, he adopts toward himself the kind of perspective that the other (as subject) has of him (as object). (98-99)

Moreover, the author discusses mimicking as making possible a sort of mimetic empathy with a corporeal dimension, a discussion that comes very close to Ralph Acampora's notion of "corporal compassion," or symphysis (2006) and could have been developed further.

The book is full of thorough ethnographic notes and quotes from interviews, which in a very clever way enables the, at times complicated, theoretical apparatus to come through. There are several contributions in this book to the HAS field, although the author himself fails to acknowledge the connections. As I see it, the first one is obviously that the study contributes to the literature on hunting, in that it discusses the cross-cultural dilemmas inherent to hunting and killing animals. The second contribution is the discussion of personhood, personification, and trans-species engagement beyond the concept of anthropomorphism. I think the author is at his best when he engages different theories of the body and embodiment as a way to get at the Yukaghir hunters corporal engagements with other animals, and their mimicking acts as being highly embodied as not animal, and not not animal. Last but not least, I also think it contributes to an understanding of indigenous people's engagement with nature and with other animals, which moves beyond a romanticism of them being closer to nature.

If I would need to be critical about the book, it is precisely the fact that it does not engage with the HAS field. The analysis would have been even richer and the claims stronger, if the author had looked at other hunting studies, apart from a few anthropological accounts of some indigenous people, because it is truly striking how some of the hunting narratives and norms seem almost universal; the feelings of shame that need to be managed and the rules of the game and their enforcement (see for example Marvin, and The Animal Studies Group). I think that could have been done, without losing the specificity of the case. One example where this could have been done, which is in fact the weakest part of this book, is the section that deals with

seduction, sexuality, and hunting. In trying to understand the interconnectedness of sexuality and hunting, the author refuses the, as he calls them, “analogical” connections between human-animal relations and gender relations on the grounds that even though gender relations have changed, the imaginings stay the same. This is a very weak argument since it is a well known fact that the symbolic, cultural level changes very slowly. Thus the author goes on to analysing this in terms of yet another analogy, namely the idea of risking to lose oneself both in hunting and in sexual encounters. It would, however, lie closer at hand to view this as a form of masculinity performance, but since the gender perspective is totally absent in Willerlev’s analysis (“gender perspective” seems to equal comparing men and women, and since there are almost no women in the study, the author excuses himself from a gender perspective). Looking at embodiment, hunting and mimicking through the lens of masculinity and animals, would have added some “meat” to this weak discussion. What if, for example, it is not, as the author claims, that the fact that women in the post-Soviet context have moved away from hunting to paid labour in the village, and thus in a sense have left the men alone in their hunting world, is an indicator of the weak bond between masculinity and hunting, but instead a reason to believe the opposite: that in fact that the more women move away and the traditional bread winner masculinity is in a state of crisis, the more important the hunting become in order to become a man. The subsequent sections of the book, discussing humans and other animals as a continuum rather than as different kinds, and understanding animal personhood, are unfortunately almost similarly weak. It is a rather banal truth that there are always different frameworks simultaneously at work when perceiving other animals. We both worship and sacrifice, love and despise other animals. So do the Yukagihrs, and there is nothing strange about that. What the author does not readily acknowledge is that just as for Swedes, Californians, or Egyptians other animals’ personhoods are defined by their relations to humans, and not as anything innate. And surely the discussion of biologists’ views is simply wrong. Here, the author would have gained a lot by looking at the interdisciplinary field of HAS and not just at anthropology. Having said that mainly because a review needs to critique and not just praise, this is a truly wonderful book that will tell the reader a wonderful, intriguing and also deeply tragic story about hunting in Siberia.

### Works Cited

Acampora, Ralph. *Corporal compassion. Animal ethics and philosophy of body*. Pittsburgh: U Pittsburgh P, 2006.

Marvin, Gary. "Ritual, respect and dignity in hunting." (Unpublished Paper.) SLSA conference, 2009.

The Animal Studies Group. *Killing animals*. Chicago: U Illinois P, 2006.