

NOT ANIMAL, NOT NOT-ANIMAL: HUNTING, IMITATION AND EMPATHETIC KNOWLEDGE AMONG THE SIBERIAN YUKAGHIRS

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Among the Yukaghirs, a small group of indigenous hunters in northeastern Siberia, it is commonly held that humans and animals can turn into each other by temporarily taking on one another's bodies. However, this is dangerous for a hunter, because he may thus lose sight of his original species identity and undergo an irreversible metamorphosis. He therefore assumes the viewpoint of his prey, but not in any absolute sense, which would mean literally becoming the animal. This article explores the mimetic practice that allows the hunter to be similar to the animal impersonated, yet also different, giving him a 'double perspective' by which he can seduce and kill his prey.

It is a commonly held assumption in the West that attributes of personhood, with all that this entails in terms of language, intentionality, reasoning, and moral awareness, belong exclusively to human beings. Animals are understood to be wholly natural kinds of being, and their behaviour is usually explained as automatic and instinctual. However, among the Yukaghirs a different assumption prevails. In their world, persons can take on a variety of forms, of which human beings are only one. They can appear in the shape of rivers, trees, and spirits, but it is, above all, mammals that Yukaghirs commonly see as 'other-than-human persons' (Hallowell 1960: 36). Moreover, humans and animals can move in and out of different species' perspectives by temporarily taking on alien kinds of bodies. Indeed, among the Yukaghirs, as I show below, this capacity to take on the appearance and viewpoint of another species is one of the key aspects of being a person.

In this article, I examine Yukaghir conceptions of animals as persons. My approach consists of a merging of two kinds of theories: the proposition of 'Amerindian perspectivism' (Viveiros de Castro 1998) and notions of 'mimesis' (Tausig 1993). The first theory provides a framework for understanding the ontological principles on which Yukaghir ideas about non-human personhood are based. Viveiros de Castro (1998) proposes that, for cultures which subscribe to what he calls 'perspectivist notions', different subjects or persons, humans and non-humans, inhabit the world. Each of these has a point of view or perspective which provides it with a 'humanness', such that it sees itself as humans see themselves; animals and spirits thus live in households and kin groups similar to those of humans. However, an evil spirit or a predatory

animal will see a human as prey, to the same extent that prey animals will see humans as evil spirits or predators. The point is that different species see things in similar or identical ways to humans, but what they see is different and depends on the body they have. However, bodies and the particular perspectives which they facilitate are exchangeable, because behind them lie subjectivities in the form of souls, which are formally identical in human and non-human persons. Thus, Viveiros de Castro argues, humans and animals can traverse the ordinary Self/Other divide but remain essentially the same.

I argue that, although Viveiros de Castro's outline of perspectivism explains the conception of the body and its relation to the dynamics of identity and alterity among the Yukaghirs, it remains an abstract model, detached from the real experiences of people in a life-world. While Yukaghirs do take on the bodies of animals when they go hunting, it is not something that can be done easily, because it involves the risk of losing one's original species adherence and undergoing an irreversible metamorphosis. Therefore, what Yukaghirs strive for when transforming their bodies into the image of prey is not to take on its perspective in any absolute sense, which would mean literally becoming the animal. Rather, they attempt to assume the point of view of the animal, while in some profound sense remaining the same. Mimetic practice, I argue, provides this ability to be like, yet also different from, the animal impersonated; it grants the hunter a 'double perspective' whereby he can assume the animal's point of view but still remain a human hunter who chases and kills the prey. In fact, I will go so far as to argue that it is through mimetic practice that the symbolic world of perspectivism is made possible. Without mimesis, perspectivism as represented in myths and other types of narratives would bear no resemblance to the world of lived experience – indeed, it would be nothing but a cosmological abstraction. Thus, my point is not to challenge perspectivism as outlined by Viveiros de Castro. Rather, my argument is against undue abstraction in ethnographical analysis and I see perspectivism, as it stands, as too abstract for ethnographic application. Mimesis, I suggest, may strengthen the 'ethno-perspectivist' literature in that it reveals that there is a practical side to perspectival thinking, which registers both sameness and difference, of being Self and being Other.

However, let me start out by providing a brief overview of the Yukaghirs, their geographical location, demography, and history, as well as describing the fieldwork context in which my research was conducted.

The Yukaghirs

The Yukaghirs are a small indigenous population living in the basin of the Kolyma River, in the northeastern part of the Russian Republic of Sakha (Yakutia). Roughly speaking, they consist nowadays of two groups who speak mutually incomprehensible dialects of the Yukaghir language: the Upper Kolyma group, whose main settlement is the village of Nelemnoye in Verhnekolymsk Ulus; and the Lower Kolyma group, who live in Niznekolymsk Ulus (see Fig. 1). It is the former group with whom I have worked, and it is they who are the focus of this article. The most remarkable difference between the two groups is that while the Lower Kolyma group

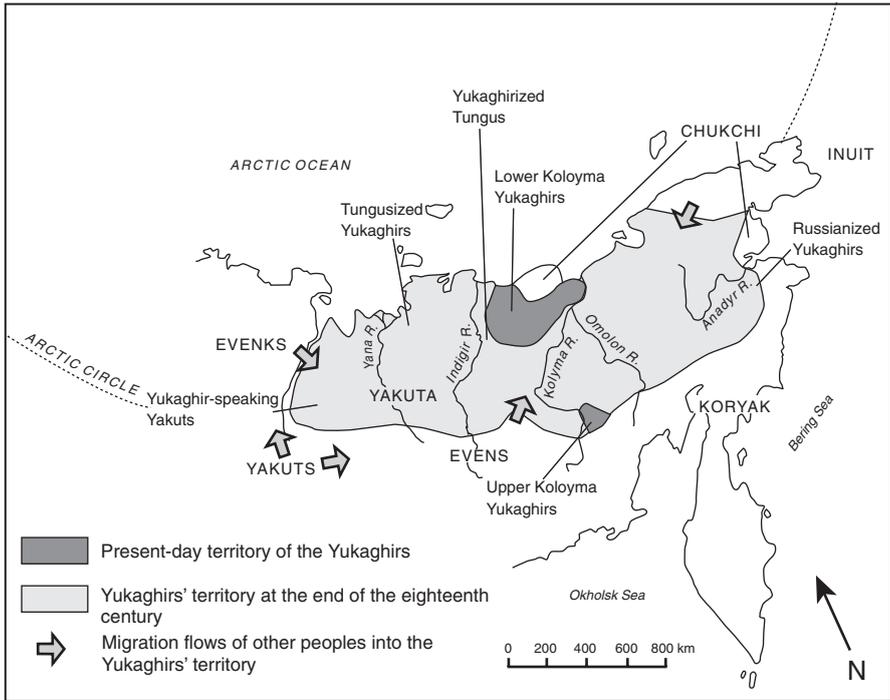


FIGURE 1. Map of the Yukaghirs' territory.

lives mainly from reindeer-herding (which they are thought to have adopted in relatively recent times from the Evenki, a local herding population), members of the Upper Kolyma group have remained hunters and fishermen, and the dog is even today their only domesticated animal.

At the time of the Russian conquest of northeastern Siberia in the mid-seventeenth century, Yukaghir-speaking groups are estimated to have numbered a total of about 5,000 people (Zukova, Nikolaeva & Dëmina 1993) occupying a vast territory (about 1.5 million km²), covering most of northeastern Siberia (see Fig. 1). However, during the first three centuries of Russian rule the Yukaghirs underwent the most rapid decline ever recorded among northern Siberian peoples. Thus, the 1859 census found no more than 2,500 Yukaghirs, the 1897 census 1,500, and the 1927 census only 443. Wars with invading neighbouring reindeer-breeding peoples, including the Evenki, Evens, Koryaks, Chukchi, and Sakha (horse- and cattle-breeders), greatly reduced the population.¹ The introduction of European diseases also had a disastrous impact, with very large numbers of Yukaghirs dying out in epidemics of smallpox and measles. Changing ethnic membership to avoid paying fur tribute (*iasak*) may also have contributed to the steady decline in numbers of Yukaghirs (Morin & Saladin d'Anglure 1997: 168). According to the 1989 census, there are a total of 1,112 Yukaghirs, of whom approximately half belong to the Upper Kolyma group. However, many people with different ethnic backgrounds register themselves as 'Yukaghir' in order to qualify for a variety of welfare entitlements for which only Yukaghirs are eligible (Derlicki

2003: 123). Thus, the official data tell us very little about the actual demographic situation.

The Yukaghir language belongs to the so-called 'Palaeo-Asiatic' group, resembling no other spoken language. However, it has been under strong pressure from Russian, which began to eclipse Yukaghir in the late 1960s and is now almost completely ascendant. Today, only the oldest generation is competent in the indigenous language. For everybody under 60, the primary language is Russian or Sakha, although the mother tongue of many is Yukaghir (Vakhtin 1991). Not until the mid-1980s did Nelemnoye get its own village school (during Soviet times, the children were studying at a boarding school), and only in 1986/87 did the Yukaghir language become part of the compulsory curriculum of the school. This was part of a larger attempt of ethnic revival, set in motion by a handful of Yukaghir intellectuals. However, from my own experience, the local children hardly ever speak Yukaghir among themselves or with their parents, switching rather to Russian the moment they leave the classroom.²

During the Soviet period, Nelemnoye's hunters were subject to the region's official planning regimens; they were set target figures for the number of sable skins they were required to deliver to the local *sovkhos* (state farm), in return for which they received cash payments. Subsistence hunting remained a major element of their livelihood until the mid-1960s. Thereafter, however, the village was increasingly incorporated into the Soviet state economy, which entailed waged employment and centralized consumer goods deliveries, and hunting came to constitute a supplementary livelihood. Yet following the collapse of the collective farm system and the economic crises which accompanied the disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991, the region's hunters have returned to a predominantly subsistence-based lifestyle. Virtually no wages have been paid since 1993, while the prices of essentials have risen by several hundred per cent. Consequently, most of the population of Nelemnoye are now totally dependent on hunting and fishing for their survival, and apart from bread, tea, and tobacco, no imported food products are consumed on a day-to-day basis. Old people, women, and children set nets for fish (white fish, trout, pike, and turbot), gather berries (cloudberries, great bilberries, and red bilberries), and set hoop snares for white grouse and hares near the village, while the men travel deep into the forest, where they spend eight or more months of the year hunting for big game, especially elk.

Although I have been doing fieldwork among Yukaghir hunters since 1993, it was not until 1999-2000, when I spent a full year in the region undertaking research for my Ph.D., that I began to engage in the activities of a full-time hunter, and much of the material presented in this article derives from this period of fieldwork. Thus, I cannot claim to represent all the Yukaghirs, or even all the Yukaghirs of Nelemnoye. Therefore, when I use the terms 'Yukaghir', or 'the Yukaghir people', I am resorting to ethnographic shorthand for those individuals among the Yukaghir population 'whom I know the best' (cf. Atkinson 1989: 5). These are predominantly hunters, but include various members of the older generation. However, because I spent most of my time in the forest, I did not come to know the village-based population very well: teachers, administrators, and the younger generation of Yukaghir women. My

work reflects that fact: for better or worse, this article is written mainly from a male hunter's perspective.

The category of person

In the world of Yukaghir hunters, everything – human, animal, or object – is said to have an *ayibii*, or what we would call a 'soul' or 'life essence'. For them, the whole world is thus animated by living souls. While everything is understood to be alive, people do nevertheless differentiate between conscious and unconscious beings. On a conceptual level, their distinction corresponds, at least roughly, to our categories of the animate and inanimate. An elderly Yukaghir hunter told me that animals, trees, and rivers are 'people like us' (Russian: *lyudi kak my*) because they are 'moving', 'growing', and 'breathing', but distinct from inanimate objects such as stones, skis, and food products, which, he claimed, were alive but 'immovable'.³ He continued his argument by saying that things that are static are not people because they have only one soul, the 'shadow-*ayibii*', whereas things that are active are considered to be people because they have two more souls in addition to their 'shadows': the 'heart-*ayibii*', which makes them 'move'⁴ and 'grow', and the 'head-*ayibii*', which makes them 'breathe'. He ended by saying: 'Only things that can move come to us [in dreams] and give us presents', thereby implying that hunters only engage in social relationships of exchange with animate entities that they consider to be persons.

It is important to realize, however, that the hunter's categorical distinction between those things that are 'alive', and those which are both 'alive' and also 'persons', is far from rigid. While the category of person recognized by hunters is by no means limited to humans (in that it includes various animate beings), there are nevertheless certain points at which this continuum of personhood breaks down (Descola 1996: 324). First, the status of person is not ascribed to all animate beings. Hunters generally seem to reserve this classification for the principal species of prey – the elk and reindeer – and also the predatory mammals, including the bear, wolf, wolverine, and fox. Certain species of birds may also be thought of as persons, most notably the raven. Other kinds of animate beings, including insects, fish, and plants, are hardly ever spoken of as conscious beings with powers of language and intentionality, and are in general seen to lead a mechanical, inconsiderable existence (Descola 1996: 325). Therefore 'nature', as we understand it, may indeed exist for the Yukaghirs, but instead of being perceived as a unified realm, it is a randomly occurring series of ruptures to be encountered here and there within an otherwise highly personified world (Pedersen 2001: 416).

Moreover, while some animals are considered to be persons, there is nevertheless a difference between the ways in which human and animal personhood are conceived. As Ingold has pointed out, whereas northern hunters tend to refer to humans by their proper name, conferring upon them a unique identity, the animal is regarded more as a type of its species than as an individual, and 'it is the type rather than its manifestations that is personified' (1986: 247, his emphasis). With regard to the Yukaghirs, we see this revealed in their mythology, in which animals tend to bear the names of their species,

sometimes with the suffix ‘man’ or ‘woman’, such as ‘bear-man’, ‘hare-man’, and ‘fox-woman’, in contrast to mythical human characters, who tend to have individual names. Ingold has suggested that this implies that northern hunting peoples do not regard the animals themselves as persons, but only their higher ranked spiritual owners, who represent the beasts of its kind (1986: 247). His argument, however, does not hold good for the Yukaghirs. Although hunters do not usually distinguish between an animal and its associated spiritual being, whenever I asked hunters, they frequently insisted that animals do not simply derive their personhood from their master-spirits, but that both are persons in their own right. In his classical study of the Yukaghirs, Jochelson also seems to have observed this. He writes:

[I]n the opinion of the Yukaghir, a lucky hunt depends on the good-will of the animal’s guardian-spirit but also on that of the animal itself. Thus they say: ‘tolo’w xanice e’rietum el kude’deti’ – that is: ‘if the reindeer does not like the hunter, he will not be able to kill it’ (1926: 146).

Therefore, it is not simply that the animal’s personhood is an extension of its master-spirit’s personhood. **Rather, animals are themselves persons.** I suggest below that this particular Yukaghir conception of the animal’s personhood – as a type for its species rather than as an individual attribute – derives in large part from the particular manner in which hunters tend to engage with their prey through mimetic practice.

Human-animal transformations

While Yukaghirs are quite clear in their minds about which body belongs to any given person, they do regard it as possible for someone to take on the body of a being from another species. The process of body transformation implies changes in the person, which must inevitably entail the assumption of an altogether alien perspective comprising a radically unfamiliar linguistic, social, and moral code. Taking on the body of another species can, therefore, only be done for short periods of time and is risky. It is possible that temporarily belonging to an alien species’ body can result in the loss of one’s own original species identity. When this happens, a true metamorphosis occurs. A transformed individual thus becomes an ‘Other’ and his memories of past experiences are lost. An elderly Yukaghir hunter powerfully evoked an instance in which he was gradually alienated from ‘humankind’:

I had been following a herd of reindeer for some long time, about six hours, I believe. As I searched the track, I had a strange feeling I was being watched. I looked up and saw an old man, about twenty metres ahead of me. He smiled at me. I asked him who he was, but he did not answer me. Instead, he gestured with his hand, showing me that I should follow him. I thought he had a cabin close by and some food, so I did so. All the time he did not speak. I noticed his footprints were those of a reindeer. ‘Strange’, I thought, because the man was wearing *kamus* (skin-covered) skis. But then I thought I was just hallucinating because I was tired and hungry. We walked up a hill and behind it was a huge camp. There were people of all ages, children playing, old men sitting smoking, and women cooking. The old man took me to his tent. He spoke to his wife by grunting just like a reindeer, and she grunted back. I did not understand. ‘Who are these people?’ I thought. The woman served me food, and I saw it was not meat, but

moss. I ate it and it was not too bad. As time passed and we sat there in the tent, I started forgetting things. I thought, for instance, about my wife, who was waiting for me back home, but I realized I had forgotten her name. Then we went to sleep. I dreamt that I was surrounded by reindeer. Someone said to me, 'You do not belong here, go away'. I do not know who spoke. I woke up and thought I had to get away. I sneaked out of the tent and started walking home. In the village, people were very surprised to see me. They said they thought I had died. 'What do you mean?' I asked them, 'I have only been away for a week'. 'No,' they said. 'We have not seen you for more than a month'. It seems that the people I met were reindeer, and I should have killed them, but at the time I did not know.⁵

From this, we see how the hunter experienced prey, in this case reindeer, as human beings, which is how reindeer and other non-human persons are said to see themselves. Similarly, the reindeer saw the hunter not as a predator or cannibalistic spirit, but as one of their own kind. 'In normal conditions, [Yukaghirs] do not see animals as people, and *vice versa*, because [their] respective bodies (and the perspectives that they allow) are different' (Viveiros de Castro 1998: 478). Perhaps what underlies the story is the fact that hunters, when approaching reindeer or elk, attempt to deceive an animal by taking on its bodily appearance, movement, and smell. However, here the hunter himself was tricked, so that he started seeing the world from the perspective of his prey. He was thus on the verge of undergoing an actual metamorphosis.

I recorded yet another experience of transformation while hunting sable with a young Sakha man from Nelemnoye. He used to work as an electrician in the village, but had turned to hunting out of financial necessity. We worked very hard setting traps and were surprisingly fortunate in taking sables. In time, we became increasingly obsessed with accumulating furs. We hardly took any time to rest, eat, or collect firewood, but left our one-room cabin before dawn to set traps and did not return until after dark. We always fell asleep in a cold cabin, exhausted and hungry. Then one evening, when we were lying side by side on our plank bed, my companion said: 'Can't you feel it?' 'Feel what?' I asked. 'How we are turning into greedy predators, just like wolves. We have this need to kill more and more. Even if we had two hundred sables we wouldn't feel satisfied, would we? Just like the devil, you see'. He paused for a while. Then he added, 'I suggest we calm down (Russian: *uspokoit'sya*) and stop hunting for a week or so'.

Unlike elk- and reindeer-hunting, which involve imitating these animals by moving, smelling, and sounding like them (Figure 2), trapping does not require such bodily transformations. Instead, 'skilful trappers' (Russian: *sobolyatniki*) talk about the need to 'think like a sable'. However, this involves not only the skill of imaginatively internalizing the animal's viewpoint, but also the equally important skill of avoiding the loss of one's sense of human personhood in the process. Thus, hunters claim that sable and other predators, such as the wolf, wolverine, and fox, are creatures of insatiable greed and blood-lust. If given the chance, they will kill any form of prey which they encounter. Hunters therefore call these predators *gryaznyi* ('dirty', in the sense of being 'sinful'). They also say that they are 'children of the devil' (*chyortevy deti*). Similarly, a human person who kills recklessly is called 'a son of the devil' (*chyortov syn*). The devil's character is said to be that of carelessness. He has no sense of either past or future, but lives only in the moment of the present, and he is therefore incapable of feeling any sense of responsibility for his actions. This



FIGURE 2. The hunting leader communicating with other hunters by imitating animal sounds (photo: Rane Willerslev).

was what my hunting mate was referring to when he became overcome with anxiety, saying that we were becoming devil-like and should seek to calm ourselves in the cabin for a while before going out to hunt again.

I did not encounter any other first-hand experiences of transformations, but the notion of different species taking on each other's appearance and perspective is found in many Yukaghir myths. Thus, one finds a whole series of stories in which members of the giant cannibal tribe, *cou'liye* (Mystical-Old-People),⁶ turn themselves into nice-looking lads to seduce Yukaghir women and eat them. **These cannibalistic non-humans call their intended human victims their 'elk' or 'reindeer'** (Jochelson 1900: 31; 1926: 302-3; Spiridonov 1996 [1930]), so they address and experience human beings as animal prey, just as the human hunter does his prey. However, we also find stories in which the giant cannibals abandon their own communities to live among their new host species. Jochelson (1926) recorded one such story, in which a giant cannibal boy marries a Yukaghir girl and lives with her human kinsmen. However, the transformed cannibal cannot entirely forget about his desire for human flesh, and once, while lying in bed with his wife, he touches her breasts and says, 'My late father used to feed me with such things' (1926: 304). The wife gets worried and tells the rest of the camp about the episode. The people agree that the former cannibal is not entirely transformed and so they kill

him. However, since they have in fact killed one of their own, i.e. a relative, they have committed an immense sin. As a result, the 'Sun deity' punishes them by taking away their fire, and they all freeze to death.

The implications of transformation are also strikingly revealed in another story recorded by Jochelson (1900: 24–5). It was about two girls who set out to take revenge on an old man called Lower Jaw, who had killed their parents. Simply by moving on their hands and knees like wolves, the girls turned into these predators. After they had killed the old man and his son, they ate the flesh of their victims. Cannibalism is normally seen by Yukaghirs as a terrible sin that leads to punishment from either God or the Sun deity (Jochelson 1926: 304). But in this case it was apparently acceptable, on the grounds that the girls were in a transformed state of being and thus subscribed to the moral code of wolves rather than that of humans. The story ends with the girls taking on their human shapes and living ordinary human lives again.

I suggest that these and similar stories support my earlier point about the way in which so-called 'perspectival' notions form an essential part of Yukaghir animism. In his paper on Amerindian perspectivism, Viveiros de Castro argues that it is an ontology which converts Western ideas about 'uni-naturalism' and 'multi-culturalism' into very non-Western ones of 'uni-culturalism' and 'multi-naturalism' (1998: 470). While Western ontology is founded on a belief in 'the unity of nature and the plurality of cultures', perspectivism is founded on a 'spiritual unity and a corporeal diversity' (1998: 470): 'The ability to adopt a point of view is undoubtedly a power of the soul ... but the differences between viewpoints ... is given in the specificity of bodies ... Animals see in the *same* way as we do *different* things because their bodies are different from ours' (1998: 478, his emphasis). Thus, he claims, species persons, human as well as non-human, can travel to and from bodies, but remain essentially the same. This is precisely because the 'point of view' that one adopts is a function of the particular body in which one has taken abode and not of a particular life essence or soul, which is understood to be the same for human and non-human persons alike (1998: 478).

Although Viveiros de Castro succeeds in conceptually identifying perspectivism, on an initial basis, as a particular type of ontological way-of-being-in-the-world, it remains an abstract model, detached from the real experiences of people in a life-world.⁷ This is not to deny that people may think abstractly, but even the most abstract domain, our imagination, has its basis in our bodily-being-in-the-world – that is, the world in which we exist and act before we begin to theorize about it in order to explain our experience and the forms it takes. What I am arguing, in other words, is that we need to go beyond our anthropological preference for abstract representations to their roots in the concreteness of everyday perceptual experience. This is not least true with regard to Yukaghir hunters, who have a clear preference for the concrete and experiential (doings) over the abstract and theoretical (sayings). Hence, their perspectivist representations, as we find them expressed in myths and other types of discourse, are not just intellectual constructs, but are in a significant sense practical, inseparably bound up with the hunting activity in which they are engaged. The challenge, it seems to me, is therefore to bring perspectivism 'down to earth', as it were, and re-embed it within its primary context of hunters' actual perceptual engagement with prey. Taking this condition of

engagement as a point of departure, I believe that we can find a way to place Yukaghir conceptions of such matters as human-animal transformations in the lived-in world of experience instead of simply attributing them to some overarching cosmological model.⁸

An appropriate point at which to begin an investigation of this topic is the important element of risk involved when travelling between one's own body and an alien one. This is not something that can be done easily, because it involves an experience of deep-felt anxiety of self-alienation, or what I earlier referred to as losing one's sense of human personhood. Thus, an element of self-awareness or reflexivity is crucial to safeguarding oneself against being carried away by an alien body. We see how the reindeer-man made tracks in the shape of reindeer hooves, despite his human appearance. Similarly, the fox-woman is said to keep her strong smell and the bear-man can be recognized by his jog-trot way of moving. Thus, it is imperative for humans and animals, when changing bodies, to retain some of their former physical qualities, which identify them as beings of a special class who act in a manner similar to, but not altogether identical with, their host species. People who have taken on a body of a species other than their own do not therefore simply become copies of the host species. At least, they are not what we would call faithful copies, whereby body-parts correspond point-for-point with other body-parts. Instead, they are incomplete images of the host species. It follows from this that what the Yukaghirs strive for is not to adopt the 'point of view' of a non-human person in any absolute sense. That would mean actually becoming the animal, and, as we have seen, this should be avoided at all costs. Rather, Yukaghirs attempt to assume an animal's point of view by intentionally acting as an incomplete copy of it. All performances in alien kinds of bodies therefore share a kind of double-negation: the person is not the species he is imitating, but also he is not *not* that species (cf. Schechner 1985). Taking on an alien body, therefore, does not imply making one person into another in any absolute sense. Rather, it permits the person to act in-between identities. It gives him a new potential for action, free as he is from the bodily limits of both his own species and those of the species imitated.

This makes sense when we realize that Yukaghirs do not take on the bodies of animals just so as to represent them. They do so in an effort to manipulate the world around them. Often, this is directly aimed at tricking prey by means of its own image: what in an older language is known as 'sympathetic magic', whereby 'the magician infers that he can produce any effect he desires merely by imitating it' (Frazer 1993 [1922]: 11). However, what Frazer never explained is why such mutual resemblance of the copy and the original should grant the representation power over the represented. He ascribed sympathetic magic to be a mistaken form of causal thinking, similar to a scientific theory, but grounded in error. He simply evaded the question of why sympathetic magic persists if, indeed, the expected results are not materialized, attributing its persistence merely to wrong-headedness and conservatism on the part of the 'savages'.

In a book about the 'mimetic faculty', Taussig (1993) argues that the basis of sympathetic magic is not a tragic misunderstanding of the nature of physical causality, but is founded on a particular way of perceiving things, objects, and people outside ourselves. To mimic something is to be sensuously filled

with that which is imitated, yielding to it, mirroring it – and hence imitating it bodily. It is, he claims, a particularly powerful way of understanding, representing, and controlling the surrounding world. He illustrates this with a number of different examples, mostly from the colonial milieu, in which indigenous peoples imitate their colonial masters as a means of manipulating and controlling them.

What I find particularly valuable in Taussig's account is his insightful observation that *mimesis collapses such dichotomies as Self vs Other, nature vs culture, and essentialism vs constructionism* (1993: 252). 'It plays the trick of dancing between the very same and the very different' (1993: 129), 'between the real and the really made-up' (1993: xvii). The important point for my argument, which can be inferred from this, is that the manipulating power that is present in hunters' imitation of prey rests in their dual capacity to incorporate its 'Otherness' while in some profound sense remaining the same. Let me illustrate this point. *When hunters mimic the elk to bring it into the open so that they can shoot at it, they act simultaneously within two motivational spaces, which could be called 'the space of predatory mastery' and 'the space of animal imitation'*. The first has to do with the hunter's intention of killing the prey animal, the second with his need to take on its identity in order to fulfil that intention. The hunter, we might say, acts with a dual nature: he is both hunter and animal. To act in-between these two identities is a highly complex task. If he lets his intentions as a hunter show through his actions, the prey animal will either run or attack him.⁹ If, on the other hand, he allows his intentions to merge with his bodily movements (which are that of an elk), he will surrender to the perspective of prey and turn into it. The hunter therefore needs to be aware not only of the prey animal, but also of himself being aware of prey, to make sure that his perspective is neither that of a hunter nor that of the animal, but somewhere in-between or both at once. *In other words, the success of the hunter rests in his ability to keep up a 'double perspective', or act as a 'double agent'*.¹⁰

'Mirroring of perspectives'

Under normal conditions, a person's body is not presented to him as an object in the world, a thing that he can encounter or straightforwardly observe. Rather, *it is an object only from the perspective of another*, in the same way as another's body is an object from the perspective of ego. However, I wish to argue that, in the situation of the hunter mimicking his prey, this conceptual distinction between subject, 'the body I am', and object, 'the animal's body', somehow dissolves, and that the hunter comes to experience his own body as well as the body of the animal ambiguously as both subject and object, Self and Other.

When approaching an elk, the hunter wears wooden skis, covered underneath with smooth skin from the leg of an elk so as to imitate the sound of the animal when moving in snow (see Figure 3). In addition, he will move his body like an elk: from side to side in a waddling manner. During my fieldwork, I saw this imitation-based hunting technique practised several times – and in fact, I myself learned to practise it with some success. Provided that



Ski (23 cm wide, 2 m long).



Ski pole.



FIGURE 3. Hunters' skis are covered underneath with smooth skin from the leg of a moose so as to imitate the sound of the animal when moving in snow (artwork: Mads Salicath).

the hunter's mimetic performance is convincing, vivid, and alive, the elk will leave its hiding place between the trees and bushes and begin to walk towards him, apparently taking him for one of its own kind rather than a human hunter. The two parties will thus approach one another with each doing what the other is doing – that is, imitating the actions of the Other. The question is: what goes on within the head of the hunter during this act of mimicry? It is difficult to say, as direct questioning about such matters often proved fruitless. One hunter, for example, replied: 'This is your matter, not mine. We bring you out here so that you can find out for yourself what it is like'. However, other hunters would argue that the encounter with the elk is like meeting a loved one or a dear and honoured friend. What this suggests, I believe, is that this key moment during the hunt can be considered as providing, in some fundamental fashion, the experiential ground for hunters' perspectival representations. For what takes place, it seems to me, is in fact a reciprocal mirroring of perspectives.¹¹ While the elk sees its body through the hunter's act of mimicry – that is, it sees its own species kind – the hunter for his part 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 towards him, he also sees himself from the 'outside', as if he himself were the elk – that is, he adopts towards himself the kind of perspective that the Other (as subject) has on him (as object). By this I do not mean that a metamorphosis occurs. This would imply that the hunter surrenders to the single perspective of the (subject) elk, and that is, so to speak, the inherent danger of the game, against which one must be eternally on guard. Rather, the hunter's 'double perspective' implies a kind of optical oscillation in which 'he as subject seeing the elk as object' and 'he seeing himself as object being seen by the elk as subject' shift back and forth with such rapidity that the inter-species boundary is affected and some degree of 'union' is experienced (Gell 1998: 120).

My point is that, as a result of experiencing this duality of 'looking-at' and 'being looked-at', of 'objectifying' and 'being objectified', the hunter will experience the animal as a person, with a point of view which is similar to, but not altogether identical with, his own: that is, the animal comes to reside in a paradox of 'like-me-but-not-me'.

Let me clarify this point. We have seen that during the act of mimicry, the hunter's human perspective – that is, his awareness as a self-conscious subject, who has his own subjective point of view on the world – transcends itself and becomes, so to speak, projected 'outwards' onto the elk, which is therefore experienced to take on his human perspective. At the same time, the hunter himself undergoes an experience of 'de-humanization': that is, through observing the elk's acts, which mirror his own mimetic performance, he comes to see himself from the 'outside' as an object, from the viewpoint of the Other as subject. Accordingly, the hunter's human identity comes to reside in his mimetic double rather than in himself. He can find himself mainly in the elk, which therefore comes to hold the 'secret' of what he really is. Paradoxically, then, the hunter cannot easily deny the elk's personhood, because this would in effect mean rejecting his own personhood. Were he, in other words, to think to himself that the elk is just a pure object-in-the-world without powers of intention, consciousness, and emotionality, he would also

deny himself these qualities, and would in a sense be left 'Selfless.' The hunter's psychological security, his self-awareness as a person, thus depends on the animal as a person.

Still, the hunter's experienced 'humanization' of elk is not complete. The elk's body is perceived from the 'outside', meaning that it is external and thus somewhat alien to the hunter. Thus, the hunter knows, or rather needs to know, that the elk and he himself are not exactly the same. If this were not the case, he would literally have surrendered to the single perspective of the (subject) elk and have transformed into it. Therefore, the elk is perceived as similar to, but not altogether identical with, the hunter himself.

In other words, what we are dealing with is a strange fusion or synthesis of me and not-me into not-not-me: I am not the elk, but I am also not *not* the elk. And likewise: the elk is not human and yet it is also not *not* human. This fundamental ambiguity of being like yet also being different from the Other is, I believe, exactly what we find expressed in Yukaghir narratives in which animals and humans, while taking on each other's bodies, act in a manner similar to, but not altogether identical with, the species impersonated. Moreover, what the hunter encounters in the context of mimicry is not an animal as a unique individual self, but rather an animal as a prototype of a person. That is, the animal is experienced not as a self-sufficient person, but rather as a mirror, vehicle, or channel of personhood. This is why, I suggest, in Yukaghir myths, time and time again, a specific hunter, bearing a proper name that is all his own, encounters an animal bearing the prototypical name of its species with the somewhat anonymous suffix 'man' or 'woman'.

Seduction, love and metamorphosis

It is important to note, however, that Yukaghirs do not simply conceptualize the hunter's imitation of the elk as a purely technical manipulation of the environment, but tend to see it as the climax of a long process of 'opening their bodies', and which I shall describe in terms of a process of sexual seduction. This process is set in motion several days before the actual act of hunting itself, when the hunter attempts to 'conquer' his human smell by going to the *banya* (sauna). At this point, he also abandons ordinary speech in favour of a special linguistic code, which skilfully screens out the reality of being a human predator. Thus, allegorical expressions or special terms are employed for animals, which cannot be addressed by their real names. The elk, for instance, is generally referred to as 'the big one' (Russian: *bol'shoi*), whereas the bear is called 'the bare-footed one' (Russian: *bosikom*). The expressions used to announce a hunting trip are also vague and full of double meanings or word-play. Thus, I rarely if ever heard people say, 'Let's go hunting for elk'. Instead, they would say something like: 'Let's take a look at the big one', 'I'm going into the forest', or 'I'm going for a walk'. Likewise, when on occasion a hunter comes across an animal's track, he can only pass this information on in coded form. Once, for example, a hunter returned to the encampment and told us that he had seen the footprints of a Russian in *valenki* (felt boots), and that he believed that his cabin was not far away. Our hunting leader replied, 'We'll

pay him a visit tomorrow'. To my surprise, it turned out that what they had actually been talking about was not a Russian but a bear, which had its den nearby. Furthermore, hunters tend never to use the word 'kill' (Russian: *ubit'*) in their conversations. Instead, they will make a downward movement with their hand, thereby indicating that an animal has fallen to the ground. It is also considered ill advised to sharpen one's knife or clean one's gun on the day of the hunt, as this would expose violent intentions and thus cause the process of seduction to fail.

Moreover, the evening before setting out in search of prey, hunters will sacrifice exotic trade goods to the fire. This 'feeding the fire' is seen as an essential part of the process of seduction. Thus, hunters told me that the goods they throw into the fire, especially vodka and tobacco, help to get the master-spirit into a lustful mood. Moreover, they explained that the alcohol dims the spirit's senses, so that it fails to recognize the true identity of the hunter's *ayibii* (soul), which during his nightly dreams travels to the spirit's house in disguise as an animal. The spirit, which is 'blinded' by drunkenness and sexual desire, will perceive the intruder as a harmless lover and a member of the family, and the two will jump into bed. As explained by a middle-aged hunter:

They live in a wooden house. There is a barn too. I assume they keep the animals in the barn. They are always glad to see me, the three sisters. When I arrive, they are a little drunk. They start to play around with the front part of me [penis]. If I'm hunting at the upper part of the river, I'll take the oldest sister and we'll go to bed. If I hunt at the middle part, I'll pick the middle sister. And if I'm hunting at the lower part I'll go with the youngest one. When I wake up I know that I will have good luck.

What the hunter has in mind when talking about 'good luck' is the notion that the feelings of sexual lust that his *ayibii* evokes in the master-spirit during their nightly intercourse are somehow extended to the spirit's physical counterpart, the animal prey. Thus, when he locates an elk the next morning and starts imitating it, the animal will run towards him in the expectation of experiencing a climax of sexual excitement, and he can shoot it dead. Thus, what we are dealing with is in principle two analogous hunts: the 'visible' hunt of the hunter seducing the elk, and preceding this, the 'invisible' hunt in which his *ayibii* seduces the animal's master-spirit. Each is, so to speak, the shadowy mirror-image of the other.

It follows from this that the principles at work in hunters' dreams are much the same as those at work in their waking life. Thus, when a hunter seeks to approach and seduce the invisible counterpart of the animal, its spirit, his *ayibii* must take on the bodily appearance of an animal, in much the same way as the hunter himself does when he attempts to seduce his prey in waking life. The *ayibii*'s altered bodily form is also the reason why the spirit tends to be encountered in the shape of a human, because, as explained in the preceding discussion of perspectivism, this is how all beings that share the same body are believed to see each other. Still, just as in waking life, the hunter must keep up an element of self-awareness or reflexivity to safeguard his *ayibii* from being carried away by its animal body. Thus, a hunter described how, during his dreams, he would alternate between catching sudden glimpses of himself in his ordinary human shape and in the shape of a fox. The reflexive element is also apparent in a small wooden figure that was given to me by a hunter

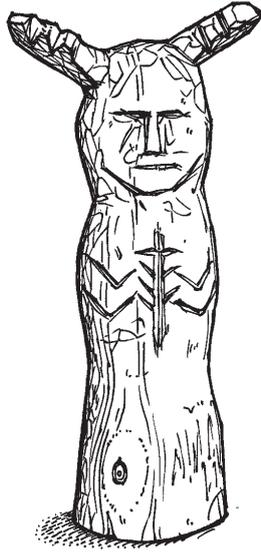


FIGURE 4. Wooden representation of hunter's *ayibii* (3.5 cm wide, 14 cm high) (artwork: Mads Salicath).

to help me establish contact with spirits in my dreams. The figure, which is said to portray a hunter's *ayibii* during its nightly journeys (see Figure 4) has the appearance of a human, but with the horns of an elk. Moreover, it holds a crucifix in its hands; this serves to protect it against evil spirits that it might encounter on its way. I was told to put this object under my pillow before I went to sleep, and whenever I killed something, I should feed the figure with fat or blood as a way of repaying it for its services and to make sure that it did not abandon me for another body.

I shall not say more about the various phases of the hunting process in this article, continuing instead with my reflections on the relationship between mimetic practice and seduction, love, and metamorphosis. Gebauer and Wulf have noted that '[s]eduction depends on lending form; the seducer's weapon is an image ... As soon as the object of seduction becomes fascinated by this ... image she falls under the power of the seducer ... Only because the object of seduction herself desires does she let herself be seduced' (1996: 213). Thus, the success of the seducer rests on his ability to create an image of the seduced – which, however, is not an exact image of how his victim experiences herself, but rather an ideal representation, a fantasy image of what she could become. Seduction is in this sense inherently narcissistic. It is rooted in the attraction of like to like, in the mimetic exaltation of one's own image, or rather an ideal mirage of resemblance. Indeed, this seems to be the reason why the Yukaghir hunter's fur clothing traditionally had to be carefully and beautifully made (cf. Chaussonnet 1988: 208–26). When imitating his prey, he would set in motion an ideal reflection of the animal, which in turn could not resist submitting to such self-reflection. Even today, parts of hunters' dress, for instance the ammunition belt, are often highly decorated with bands and beadwork of different colours. Also, their sheath knives are beautifully ornamented

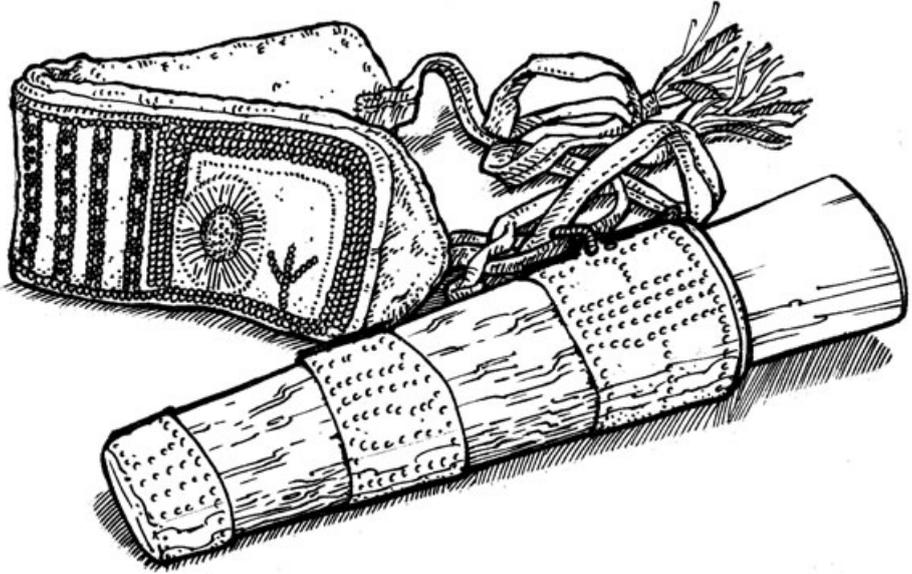


FIGURE 5. Hunter's ammunition belt and knife (artwork: Mads Salicath).

with metal work (see Fig. 5). Hunters say that the animal may be so pleased by what it sees that it 'gives itself up' (Russian: *otdat'sya*) to them.

A slight detour is necessary at this point to obviate any possible misunderstanding. In emphasizing that the animal 'gives itself up', Yukaghirs do not mean to suggest that it generously presents itself to be killed by the hunter. Anthropologists often assert that animals are perceived among northern hunters as allowing themselves to be killed if shown proper respect, and are thus seen as assuming a wilful part in the course of their own death. As Rasmussen puts it with regard to the Eskimos: 'Animals have in reality no objection to being killed by human beings, as long as the rules of life are observed by the latter. It may even happen, and not infrequently, that an animal will approach a human being, actually desiring to be killed by a particular person' (1929: 58). This is also the view of Sharp in relation to the Chipewyan Indians of the Canadian boreal forest. Thus, he writes: '[They] often explain, in English, the willingness of animals to die, by saying of a specific hunter that "they like him" ... [The Chipewyan] depend upon the willingness of prey species to yield their own physical existence on behalf of the maintenance of human physical existence' (1991: 186 and 187).

As Brightman (1993: 189) has appropriately pointed out, ethnographic accounts such as these bear obvious resemblance to images in Western food industry advertising, which represent animals as being eager to become food or participating actively in the cooking process.¹² However, I do not know any Yukaghir who would regard this as an accurate representation of the hunter-prey relationship. As a matter of fact, Yukaghirs are very much aware that the interests of prey not only differ from their own, but even conflict with them. This they clearly express when they say that, from the animals' own point of view, they are the ones who are humans, while human hunters are seen as cannibalistic spirits. Still, the Yukaghirs do have sayings such

as, 'Only if the elk likes the hunter will he be able to kill it'. What they mean to suggest by this, however, is not that the animal willingly gives itself up as food. Rather, the manifest idea is that of sexually exciting the animal so that it draws near enough to be shot. In order to achieve this, the hunter must appear sexually attractive to his prey, and thus friendly and harmless. Indeed, this is why he undergoes the long process of preparation by which his body is modified into the image of the animal. It will then come to perceive him not as an evil spirit or a predator, but as a harmless lover and a member of its own species. We might say that the hunter, by taking on his prey's identity and acting in a manner that resonates with its behaviour, senses, and sensibilities, establishes an 'empathetic relation' with it. Because of this empathy, the animal suspends its disbelief and inherent hostility towards him and 'throws' itself at him.

Surely, we ourselves experience the powerful mechanisms of empathy in our everyday lives, when, for example, we watch Hollywood romantic comedies. They tend to be concerned with the universe of rich people, whose lives are filled with love, with problems caused by love, and with the drive to achieve and retain love. The characters, being rich, beautiful, and likeable, establish an empathetic relationship with us as spectators. Through this empathy, we are seduced into abandoning our own universe and incorporate, empathetically, the universe of the characters in the film, and we begin to experience as completely as they do those desires for love, that propensity to sacrifice everything for love. This occurs no matter how simple and banal the storyline might be, and despite the fact that we may consider ourselves to be 'realists' and despise the emotional orgies that the films present.

My point is that empathy functions even when there is an objective conflict of interests, and this is exactly what makes it such an efficient weapon. Animals have no objective desire to yield up their own physical existence on behalf of human beings, but are manipulated into doing so by the hunter, who, by establishing relations of empathy with his prey, transforms its perception of reality into a manipulated fiction, which he then deliberately uses to kill it. It follows from this that what the Yukaghirs have in mind when they say that a hunter will be able to kill the elk if it likes him is not the hunter as human predator, but the hunter in his animal disguise, playing his deceitful role as harmless lover.¹³

With these observations in mind, I now return to the issue of seduction, love, and metamorphosis. Seduction, as we have seen, is basically a game in which the seducer, by playing on his victim's narcissistic inclinations, seeks to excite her to the highest pitch, so that she is willing to sacrifice everything to him, even her life. The seducer himself, however, must remain emotionally unavailable. That is, while he needs to show his victim empathy or affection, he should not allow himself to fall in love with her. Love is rather like metamorphosis. It is self-surrender; the consignment of self to another. 'The goal of love', write Gebauer and Wulf, 'is the broadening of the self, the assimilation of the self to a counterpart' (1996: 287). In this sense, love is very different from seduction, which, at least in its ideal form, is nothing but pretended love on the part of the seducer and vanity on the part of the seduced. The boundary between love and seduction is, nevertheless, uncertain. The game of seduction always implies the risk that real emotions of love will

develop between the two parties. Thus, hunters told me how they sometimes might feel pity and even love for the animals they kill. However, they always emphasized that such sentiments are dangerous and should be banished.¹⁴ Still, they argued that it does occasionally happen that a hunter becomes so absorbed in some enticing trait or action observed in the elk that he forgets about the task at hand until it is too late and the animal is out of range. Failure of this kind they explained as the hunter falling in love with his prey. Consumed by this love, he cannot think about anything else, stops eating, and after a short time dies. His *ayibii*, hunters explained, will then leave the cycle of human rebirth to be reincarnated as an animal and go off to live with the prey. This, they said, is the reason why one occasionally comes across an animal that behaves in an extraordinary way. If, for example, an elk walks right into an encampment of hunters, it is likely to be the manifestation of an animal with a human *ayibii*. It retains traces of memory from its former life, which is why it seeks the company of humans.

What we might conclude from this, then, is that the actual killing of prey does more than simply provide the hunter with meat. It prevents his game of seduction from transforming into uncontrolled feelings of love for the animal, thus making it possible for him to secure his boundaries and to preserve his human personhood.

‘Mimetic empathy’ and perspectivism

Having reached the end of this article, I now wish to return to the issue of perspectivism. What I have sought to show is that the perspectivist quality of Yukaghir animism, as expressed in myths and other types of discourse, has a practical side, or at least that these narratives contain within them the traces of a practice. This practice, I have argued, is ‘mimesis’, or what might be more appropriately characterized as ‘mimetic empathy’. The latter term emphasizes the fact that what we are dealing with is not just some outward mimicry, simulation, or aping, but something deeper and more intense, which is the ability to put oneself imaginatively in the place of another, reproducing in one’s own imagination the form of the Other’s perspective. To say that such adoption of another’s perspective is imagined implies that I cannot experience another’s viewpoint directly. I can only take it up in an imaginative manner, because to see the world through another’s eyes in an original fashion would entail the impossibility of me literally being the Other’s body. I can therefore never know for certain what the world is like from the viewpoint of another being. However, by mimicking another’s bodily behaviour, senses, and sensibilities empathetically, I can assume the quality of the Other’s perspective, because although the experiences that I come to share with the Other through practices of mimetic empathy are imagined as shared, they are not fictive. By this I mean that they are not pure fantasies, but acquire a sense of ‘reality’ through their connection to my lived body. This might be exemplified through my own fieldwork experience, in which I learned to be painfully watchful for tracks and other signs of prey whenever I was out hunting, and during my nightly dreams occasionally had sexual encounters with spiritual beings. Yet, my adoption of a Yukaghir hunter’s perspective was

not mere representation, but had a **materiality** grounded in my bodily experiences of their life-world – which through my mimetic mirroring of their behaviour, senses, and sensibilities in day-to-day events and routines became our shared life-world. Mimetic empathy, we might say, does not imply therefore simply representation or imagination, but has a decisively corporal, physical, and tangible quality from which the former ultimately emerges and from which it derives its ‘material’.

Now, it might be argued that it is one thing to claim that we can understand other humans by empathetically projecting ourselves into their life-worlds, and quite another to make this claim with regard to other life forms. Even in relation to fellow humans, our understanding of what it is like to be them can only be partial, and when we move to species whose corporal nature is very different from our own, it seems obvious that a much lesser degree of understanding will be available. As **Vendler writes: ‘[I]t requires some imagination to make sense of such positive contexts as: “Now I understand this jaguar,” or: “Try to understand my washing machine.”** No such effort is needed to appreciate similar contexts about people: It is possible to understand Castro or Gadaffi if one tries’ (1984: 203). Yet it might be easier than we suppose to transcend inter-species barriers with the aid of our embodied imagination. Thus, in his well-known paper, **‘What is it like to be a bat?’** (1997), Nagel suggests: ‘[B]lind people are able to detect objects near them by a form of a sonar, using vocal clicks or taps of a cane. Perhaps if one knew what that was like, one could by extension imagine roughly what it was like to possess the much more refined sonar of a bat’ (1997: 172). I believe that a similar argument can be made in relation to Yukaghirs, who undergo a process of corporal ‘de-humanization’ in order to be re-shaped into the image of their prey. Surely, their understanding of the animal’s viewpoint cannot in any way be complete (indeed, they do not intend it to be complete), but I consider it plausible that, when using their own bodily experiences to achieve a vicarious understanding of an animal experience, they can, at least roughly, form a conception of what it is like to be that animal. In making this claim, I take for granted that higher mammals, such as the elk, have conscious mental states – a standpoint that is supported by much evidence among animal researchers (Noske 1997: 126–57). Personally, I do not wish to speculate about what precisely is the nature of the elk’s conscious experience. Following Nagel, I hold simply that **‘the fact that an organism has consciousness experience at all means, basically, that there is something it is like to be that organism’** (1997: 166, his emphasis), and it is this ‘something’ that hunters attempt to assume when they project themselves, through practices of mimetic empathy, into the life-world of their prey. Practices of mimetic empathy provide the entrée, so to speak, to the perspective of the animal. In fact, this is the closest a hunter can come to experiencing an animal’s viewpoint without being that animal in an absolute sense. And indeed, this is the new twist to the problem of perspectivism that I hope to convey: the aim of the hunter is not to become an animal and adopt its point of view in any absolute sense. Rather, he uses acts of mimesis to achieve what I have called a ‘double perspective’, which allows him to assume the point of view of his prey, while still remaining a human person with the intention of killing it. Thus, perspectivism among Yukaghirs is not really about

moving from one point of view to another. Rather, it is about not surrendering to a single point of view. It is concerned with action in-between identities, in that double-negative field which I have characterized as 'not animal, not *not*-animal'.

NOTES

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¹ Both in the past and more recently, Russian anthropologists have distinguished between Yukaghirs, Koryaks and Chukchi, who have long been regarded as aboriginal peoples of the northern Yakutia region (Ertiuikov 1990; Fedoseeva 1980), and groups such as the Evenki (Tungus) and Sakha (Yakuts), who are generally thought to be the descendants of more recent incomers from the south who moved into the region between the seventh and fourteenth centuries AD (Vainshtein 1989: 62). The Evens (Lamuts) population is thought to have come into being even later; they are widely described as the product of unions between immigrant Evenki and the local Yukaghir populations (Arutiunov 1988: 36).

² Elsewhere (Willerslev 2004) I have argued that the academically widespread view of knowledge as a matter of linguistic representations is essentially misleading. Thus, I show how Yukaghir spiritual knowledge and dreaming are based not in language in any fundamental way, but in everyday practical activities of hunting and dreaming.

³ When talking about rivers and trees as being 'persons', I am not entirely sure whether the hunter was referring to the master-spirits of these entities or to the entities themselves. However, animals are, as I shall argue, often conceived as persons in their own right.

⁴ The Yukaghir word for heart, *cobo'ye*, also means 'running' and 'motion'.

⁵ It should be pointed out that this story, expressed here as something that happened to the teller, also appears as a common myth. Thus, two different elders told me essentially the same story about how the hunter, while out hunting, becomes able to see the world from the perspective of his prey. We also find this theme used strikingly in myths among other groups of northern hunters, such as the Cree and Ojibwa Indians of the Canadian sub-Arctic (Brightman 1993: 41-8; Hallowell 1960: 36; Tanner 1979: 136-7) and the Inuit (Saladin d'Anglure 2001). The theme is also found among hunting peoples of Southeast Asia, such as the Chewong of the Malay tropical forest (Howell 1996).

⁶ At the time Jochelson did his fieldwork, the Yukaghirs had a whole series of narratives about these cannibal giants. As he writes: 'The first place in Yukaghir folklore is taken by tales of the Mythical-Old-People. They are the most genuine Yukaghir folk tales' (1926: 303). At the time of writing, however, these giant cannibals have been replaced with the Sakha demon Abaslla'r as the main characters of these narratives.

⁷ It has to be said that Viveiros de Castro does explicitly acknowledge the practical aspect of perspectival thinking when he writes: 'The animal clothes that shamans use to travel the cosmos are not fantasies but instruments: they are akin to diving equipment, or space suits, and not to carnival masks' (1998: 482). Still, his argument is centred on the essentially symbolic world of shamanism (see Viveiros de Castro 1998: 472, 483). For my part, I argue for a plausible grounding (if not origin) of perspectivism in real-life observations of animals and experiences of hunting. This is not to say that perspectivism is restricted to the hunting context. As a matter of fact, it is present in a great variety of activities, such as in Yukaghir shamanism and dancing, in which people imitate animal movements and cries with great vivacity, as well as in trapping, where the hunter 'tries to think like the sable'. Yet, the impact of these activities on people's experience of animals as persons with a (subjective) point of view is, I believe, less intense compared with elk-hunting, which involves a situation of direct face-to-face mimicry and where the bodies of hunter and prey blend to a point that makes them of the same kind. Thus, in my view, hunting is the paramount reality of the daily life of Yukaghirs from which their perspectival thinking ultimately emerges. This may also explain why it is, as Viveiros de Castro himself observes, that the dynamics of predator and prey are fundamental to perspectivist thinking (1998: 471).

⁸ In making this claim, I am drawing heavily on Ingold (2000), who argues for a phenomenologically inspired approach to anthropology that places abstract mental representations in real-life types of practical engagements with the environment.

⁹ As Nelson correctly points out, the elk (or moose) is probably more dangerous than any other animal in the northern woodlands (1983: 166). I have recorded countless stories about elk that have seen through the hunter's trick of imitation and attacked him. The elk will lay down its ears as a sign of aggression, and the hunter must slowly withdraw. Otherwise, he will be trampled to death by the enormous animal.

¹⁰ I take the term 'double agent' from Hastrup, who uses it to address the 'never-ending reflexivity of the split consciousness of the western actor, who both "is" and "is not" himself on stage' (1998: 40).

¹¹ In my description of the mimetic encounter of hunter and elk, I have found great inspiration in Gell's (1998: 118–19) analysis of looking at the Hindu idol, as well as in Hegel's (1971 [1830/1845]: 170–8) famous account of the 'master-slave' dialectic. Both confront the same issue as I do, namely the psychological impact of seeing oneself being seen by the person or entity at which one is looking.

¹² I take this analogy from Brightman (1993: 189).

¹³ The element of trickery is also reflected in the fact that what I describe as a process of seduction, hunters often refer to as *pákositit*, meaning 'to play dirty tricks', in Russian.

¹⁴ In Yukaghir ideas about hunters' relations with the animal master-spirits, metamorphosis, marriage, and love are all understood to be variants of one and the same theme, namely death. Thus, they say: 'If the spirit loves the hunter it will kill him'. This implies that the spirit, out of love for the hunter, will strike him with sickness and death so as to drag his *ayibii* (shadow/soul) back to its household as its spouse.

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Ni animal, ni *non*-animal : chasse, imitation et connaissance empathique chez les Yukaghirs de Sibérie

Résumé

Les Yukaghirs, petit groupe de chasseurs indigènes du nord-est de la Sibérie, partagent une croyance commune en la capacité qu'ont l'homme et l'animal de prendre l'aspect de l'autre en lui empruntant temporairement son corps. Cela est toutefois dangereux pour le chasseur, qui risque d'oublier l'espèce à laquelle il appartient et de subir une métamorphose irréversible. Le chasseur adopte donc le point de vue de sa proie, mais pas dans le sens absolu où il deviendrait littéralement cet animal. L'auteur étudie la pratique du mimétisme qui permet au chasseur de devenir semblable à l'animal incarné tout en demeurant différent de lui, pour obtenir un « double point de vue » grâce auquel il pourra tromper et tuer sa proie.

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