

Cunning as... a Wolf

Multispecies Relations Between Humans and Wolves in Eastern Siberia

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Abstract Recent anthropological reasoning fostered by the ontological turn debate, has tackled the issue of multispecies ethnography: it deals with the lives and deaths of all the creatures that for decades have stayed on the margins of anthropology. According to this approach, animals, insects, plants and other organisms have started to appear alongside humans with legibly biographical and political lives. Focused on the changing contours of the 'nature' wriggling within whatever 'human nature' might mean, multispecies ethnography recalls that "human nature is an interspecies relationship", as Anna Tsing would put it (Tsing 1995, 94). This last statement may also refer to the connections between humans and animals. In my paper I will take into account relations and connections between wolves and humans among hunters in Sakha-Yakutia, Eastern Siberia.

Keywords Multispecies relations. Human-nonhuman others. Anthroology of animals. Wolves. Siberia.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Relations, Connections, Consequences. – 3 Friend or Foe? None of Them, Simply an Opponent. – 4 Conclusions.



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1 Introduction

Within the purview of the biological sciences, human-wildlife relations are apprehended as the actions resulting from people and wild animals sharing landscapes and resources, with outcomes ranging from being beneficial or harmful to one or both species. The social sciences, instead, and Cultural Anthropology particularly, advocate viewing these relations through an interdisciplinary “multispecies lens” in which humans are observed as one of the multiple organisms that interact with other species to shape and create environments (Parathian et al. 2018). In doing so, anthropologists have repeatedly challenged environmental discourses that oversimplify the complex relationship between humans and non-human species, in an “effort to destabilize the anthropocentrism that persists in the label of human-non human relations” (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010, 564).

Multispecies ethnography is a term deployed for work that acknowledges the interconnectedness and inseparability of humans and other life forms, and thus seeks to extend ethnography beyond the solely human realm. Such investigations of social and cultural phenomena are attentive to the agency of ‘other-than-human’ species. According to this approach, animals, insects, plants and other organisms, even viruses – what Agamben has referred to as “bare life” (1995) – have started to appear alongside humans with their own biographical and political lives, thus highlighting the multiple entanglements between animal species, microorganisms and socio-economic phenomena (Keck 2020). Similar understandings suggest “a more-than-human approach to ethnographic research” (Locke, Münster 2015, 1) and an “anthropology beyond the human” (Kohn 2007, 6).

Focused on the changing contours of the issue of ‘nature’, wriggling with whatever ‘human nature’ might mean, multispecies ethnography reminds us that “human nature is an interspecies relationship”, as Anna Tsing would claim (2012, 141). All this suggests that *Homo sapiens*, *Faber*, *Ludens* has, as Haraway puts it, “never been human”, or at least never only (2008). From Lestel and Taylor’s “ecoanthropology and ethnobiology” (2013) to Haraway’s “companion species” (2008), researchers have endeavoured to develop innovative frameworks to conceptualise relationships between human and non-human species (Parathian et al. 2018).

Research on multispecies, however, not only acknowledges that humans dwell in a world necessarily comprising other life forms but also contends that their entanglements with human lives, landscapes, and technologies must be theoretically integrated into any account of existence.

Deeply intertwined with the issue of multispecies is the growing interest for the topic of human-animal relations. In the past two decades there has been a marked post-symbolic turn in anthropo-

logical studies of animals: by the end of the twentieth century, animals were mainly conceived as a symbolic means used by humans in their social relations with other humans (Mullin 1999). In Lévi-Strauss' famous critique on the functionalist explanation of totemic animals (and plants), particular species "are chosen not because they are good to eat but because they are good to think" (1969, 162). Much of the subsequent anthropological work on animals has documented the human practice of thinking with or "signifying animals in different cultures" (Willis 1990, 50). Central to this structuralist approach to animal symbolism has been an emphasis on the role of classification in establishing the meanings of animals.

Since then, however, another perspective has gained traction: it rejects "symbolic reductionism" (Knight 2005b, 1) and asks anthropologists to treat animals as "*parts* of human society rather than just *symbols* of it" (Knight 2005b, 1; italics in the original). Animals, according to this view, are not simply a "symbolic resource for different human players, but rather play the role of active participants in a number of different human-animal-technical social relations" (Candea 2010, 243).

To treat animals as part of human society means dealing with them as subjects and not just as mere objects; consequently, this approach views animals, people and things (Ogden et al. 2013) on the same level: connections, relationships and engagement are the key matters of concern (Candea 2010).

Viewing non-human animals as interacting organisms endowed with agency, seen as an effect rather than the product of subjective intentionality (Latour 2005) that shape and create ecosystems, reflects the worldviews of many indigenous communities but is also embraced by the biological sciences through the issue of niche construction (Barker, Odling-Smee 2014) and that of "*naturalcultural* contact zones" (Fuentes 2010, 607; italics in the original). Augustin Fuentes (2010; 2012) and Donna Haraway (2016) consider "contact zones" the interface between animals and humans and recognise that broad species characteristics, as well as individual idiosyncrasies, are both the cause and outcome of the ways individuals act and interact. In doing so, Haraway introduces the concept of "sympoiesis", meant as "making with: nothing makes itself, nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing [...], it is a word for worlding with, in company" (2016, 61), whereas Fuentes argues that the boundaries separating humans and animals are broken down as the overlapping ecologies of these coexisting species generate coproduced niches (2012). These contact zones, implying a shared habitat, landscape and resources between species, not only can engender conflict dynamics but can give rise to ambivalent and complex relational patterns, as the one I will illustrate in my paper.

One of these "*naturalcultural* contact zones" is Sakha-Yakutia, a Sovereign Republic of the Russian Federation in Eastern Siberia.

According to the 2010 Census, in this area different ethnic groups coexist: the Sakha-Yakut (49.9%), the Russians (37.8%), the Evenki (2.2 %), the Ukrainians (2.2%), the Even (1.6%) and Tatars (0.9%), together with other ethnic minorities such as the Dolgans, the Chukchi and the Yukagirs.¹

The Sakha-Yakut, which is the group I have always worked with, are cattle – specifically horse – breeders; however hunting had and still has a relevant role in their daily life and in the ways they relate to animals, where hunters and prey play out their roles according to a predetermined system of relationship. This is stressed by Evelyn Lot-Falck, who states that:

[m]an is but one ring of the chain. He identifies and is one with everything surrounding him. For hunting societies, like those of the Siberians, man is more intimately connected to animals. It is not a matter of superiority between man and animal: there is no substantial difference. (1953, 8)²

What Lot-Falck means when she refers to “intimate connection” is in a way not too far from Donna Haraway’s “living with” (2008) animals. In many areas of Eastern Siberia, including Sakha-Yakutia, people do not only live on animals but with animals, in such a close relationship that conceives them as non-human relatives. This entails and calls forth the idea that humans and non-human animals are on the same level to such an extent that in some Siberian contexts animals are thought to lead parallel lives to humans: they hunt, marry, have a social life that mirrors that of their human counterparts. As again Lot-Falck argues, “the animal is only one of the aspects that characterize being human, and not the least relevant” (1953, 33).

¹ The Sakha-Yakut are the largest ethnic group after whom the Republic is named. They are considered semi-native, as they settled in this area from the tenth century CE; the Russians and the Ukrainians are residents resulting from internal migrations, whereas the native Evens, Evenki, Dolgans, Chukchi and Yukagirs are ethnic minorities (<https://rosstat.gov.ru/>, *Vserossiyskaya Perepis' Naseleniya*).

² Original version: “L’homme n’est que un maillon de la chaîne. Il s’identifie au monde, il communique avec ce qu’il entoure. Chez des peuples chasseurs, comme les Sibériens, l’homme se sent le plus intimement lié avec les animaux. D’espèce humaine à espèce animale, il ne saurait être question de supériorité; il n’y a pas là de différence d’essence” (Lot-Falck 1953, 8; Author’s translation).

2 Relations, Connections, Consequences

After several years spent investigating issues connected to shamanism and its revival, during my last fieldwork in 2019 in Sakha-Yakutia, I approached for the first time the topic of the relationship between humans and non-human animals. I carried out my research with a colleague anthropologist from the University of Yakutsk between June and July in the Oymyakon district, a mountain region about 682 km from the capital city Yakutsk, in three villages: Oymyakon, Tomtor and Üchügèy. This area is occupied both by the ethnic majority Sakha-Yakut and by the native Even (Tungus in pre-Soviet literature), also called 'small indigenous groups' (*malochislennye narody*), as they count no more than 21,000 people all over Siberia. The latter were and still are reindeer breeders and at the time of my fieldwork they were all grazing, scattered along the mountainous surrounding areas. For this reason I got mainly in touch with reindeer herders of Sakha origin who are hunters too, specifically wolf and bear trappers. I also happened to have interviews with a Chukchi teacher whose family herds reindeer from the Northern village of Kolymskoe and with a biologist working in the Institute of Biology in Yakutsk. What follows are reflections and thoughts shaped on the basis of my last fieldwork experience, which at that time was meant to be a preliminary research to be pursued in the following year but that, for obvious sanitary reasons, did not occur.

The reasons why I started to carry on fieldwork on human-animals interactions and specifically on human-wolves were mainly three:

1. I realised that ethnographic accounts from native and Russian scholars, particularly those who focus on animals, rarely mention the wolf in favour of other predators that have been under constant scrutiny from a cross-cultural point of view. I am precisely referring to the bear, which for a long time has been – and still is – in the spotlight: a closer look on ethnographies within the area of Sakha-Yakutia reveals that the bear still holds a prominent position in many writings.³ In this respect, it is worth mentioning a major work by Vladimir K. Zelenin, *Tabu Slovo Narodov Vostochnoy Evropy i Severnoy Azii* (Tabooed Words in Eastern Europe and Northern Asia), published in 1929, which appears as a real compendium of an-

³ Among the main publications on bear in Sakha-Yakutia, it is worth consulting Alekseev 1980; 1984; 1992. Although these volumes do not deal explicitly with the bear but with shamanic practices, there are specific sections devoted to the cults and rituals involving this animal; see also Slepcev 1997; 2018; Medvedeva 2011. In European literature the contributions on bears from a cultural perspective are numberless: among other authors, see for example Pentikäinen 2007; Pastoreau 2007; Grimaldi 2003; Grimaldi, Nattino 2007; Comba, Ormezzano 2015.

imal tabooed names, dealing particularly with hunting practices in Western Russia and Siberia. Little attention is devoted to the wolf in favour of other animals as the bear but this comes as no surprise: as we will see later on, these two predators are often put into comparison both in literature and by the hunters themselves.

2. The second reason is that a good number of authors⁴ who have dealt with animals in my same research area have mostly devoted their attention to reindeer and consequently to herders and pastoralism. So, apparently, reindeer have been under constant scrutiny over the past 15 years, with few insights on hunting societies, represented mainly by the works of Roberte Hamayon (2010), Rane Willerslev (2007), and Donatas Brandikšauskas (2019).
3. The third, and maybe most important reason, refers to the current situation in Italy as to wolves. They are among the big-size predators, like the bear or the lynx, that have literally been wiped out from a specific area, the Alps,⁵ as a consequence of overhunting practices that led, back in 1970, to a scant amount of 100 surviving specimens in the Southern mountain areas of Gran Sasso, Sila and Maiella. It was probably from the Apennines that they gradually spread to other suitable habitats, among which the Alpine chain.

The situation, albeit very interesting and in a way promising, is far more complex than it seems. The “consequences of the return of wolves”, as is titled the volume by Luca Giunti (2021), were fostered by many factors: most notably, the injunction to freely kill them, following the 1977 and 1992 Laws “On wildlife management and conservation” and the 1992 European Council Directive.⁶ Meanwhile, the whole Italian peninsula witnessed a twofold process: on the one hand, the decline of agropastoral activities and forestry practices in alpine areas at least since 1950-60, triggered by a wider process of depopulation, prompted the gradual progression of pine woods. This resulted in the woods starting to gain ground and draw closer to the villages; on the other hand, wild species such as boars, mouflons,

⁴ Among the most prominent anthropologists who have worked in Siberia and have dealt with reindeer herding it is worth mentioning, for instance, Anderson 2021; 2017; Valikivi 2009; Vitebsky 2006.

⁵ I am referring specifically to the Western Alpine chain, as it is the area where, since 2006, I have been carrying on a parallel fieldwork to that of Siberia.

⁶ Legge 968, 1977 and Legge 157, 1992, “Principi generali e disposizioni per la protezione della fauna e la disciplina della caccia” (<https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/>); Council Directive 94/43 EEC of 21 May 1992 on the conservation of natural habitats and wild fauna and flora (www.eur-lex.europa.eu).

deer, fallow deer, roe deer were deliberately introduced for hunting purposes. The lack of natural predators, the creation of new habitats almost free of human influence and rich in food (let us think, for instance, of abandoned grasslands and, more broadly, of rewilded woods which nowadays look like jungle-like tangles of branches), fostered the return of wildlife predators, such as wolves. In their specific case, these animals too, just like other wild species, have recently started to draw very close to villages, causing many side effects ranging from killing and eating domestic animals in households (smaller dogs, cats), to being run down by cars and, most significantly, predate sheep, goats and other flock or herded animals.

This has triggered a wide array of reactions: the attack of wolves is opposed by herders fearful of livestock losses. The regional legislation of Piedmont, the area I live in, allows herders to get a compensation for any specimen eaten or killed but does not account for the specific type of individual: be it a pregnant female, a cub, an old male, a sick female, the amount of money received is the same. As a result, this often turns into poaching, with herders taking up the rifle and shooting or claiming help from professional hunters. These conflicts, which take shape as relations of rivalry or antagonism between human beings and wild animals, typically arise from territorial proximity and involve reliance on the same resources or a threat to human well being; they are universally found but tend to be especially marked in human settlements in forest-edge regions (Knight 2000).

Another type of reaction, which also appears to be the most interesting to me, has to do with those who stand up in defence of the wolf, seeing in this animal both a powerful symbol (the wolf as ‘king of the Alps’, or a sacred animal in many cultures), mainly drawing from a romantic and idealised perception, and an animal that needs to be protected. The re-appearance of the wolf has actually attracted different EU funds that were channelled into specific projects addressed at studying and monitoring its movements across the Italian peninsula (*Life Wolfalps EU* is only the most recent).⁷ But, as Sergio Dalla Bernardina (2020) and Philippe Descola (2005) point out, this vision also entails the idea of a “natural model” where the wolf becomes an animal that can be eventually tamed, an embodiment of a sort of ‘ani-human’ being, behaving, acting and thinking like humans: a partner and, ultimately, a friend. Kay Milton defines this practice as ‘anthropomorphism’, a label for a *mistaken* attribution of human characteristics to animals. She also argues that in many situations that are commonly referred to as ‘anthropomorphic’ no particularly

⁷ *Life Wolfalps EU* belongs to EU financed LIFE programmes for environment and climate action and is an ongoing project. *Wolfalps EU* has benefitted from a double funding period: from 2013 to 2018 and from 2019 to 2024 (<https://www.lifewolfalps.eu/>).

good grounds exist for assuming that the human who is attributing certain characteristics to an animal is doing so with any reference to humanity or animality. Such cases, Milton urges, should more properly be termed “egomorphism”: it implies that “I understand my cat or a whale, or my human friends on the basis of my perception that they are like me rather than ‘humanlike’” (Milton 2005, 259).

3 Friend or Foe? None of Them, Simply an Opponent

This long but necessary premise is just to lay the groundwork of my paper and of my last fieldwork. “Ideal opponent” was a statement by Innokentij Michailovich, the biologist whom I interviewed and who works at the Institute of Biology in Yakutsk. I think this encapsulates a whole bunch of ideas on this animal and how it interacts with humans in this area of the world. The underlying idea that inspired my fieldwork and that I still hold in this paper is not to turn to Sakha-Yakutia as a model of native wisdom or folk knowledge about wolves, nor to set a cross-cultural comparison between Italy and Eastern Siberia.

My purpose, instead, was, and still is, to investigate whether the two reactions I mentioned earlier on referring to the Italian Alpine chain are experienced in Sakha-Yakutia too and which conditions determine them. The broader question is: how do people relate to this animal? Is there a tendency toward egomorphism, as Milton would suggest or do other views emerge instead? Is there a conflict between wildlife, specifically wolves and reindeer herders? This paper and the thoughts that follow wish to offer an insight on these matters, reporting how hunters, and hunters only, relate to wolves in a particular area of Siberia; however my considerations figure only as a small part of a broader project that will cover my fieldtrips in the following years, where I plan to extend my research to other interlocutors, specifically reindeer herders of Even origin too, but also people who are not directly connected to hunting practices.

“The wolf is a pest. When we see a wolf, we shoot at it”. This apparently simple statement told by Michail I. Andreev, retired reindeer herder and hunter, on which all the other interlocutors also agreed, reveals the complexity and ambivalences of the relationships between hunters and wolves. At present in Sakha-Yakutia there are more or less 10,000 specimens that in fact are considered as pest both for herders and for the public opinion: scrolling the main pages of Sakha newspapers, it is almost impossible not to bump into an article about wolf hunting. There is also a good number of hunting-oriented blogs and social networks entirely devoted to these animals that disclose a well grounded idea about how wolves should be han-

dled: “In Sakha-Yakutia wolves had it all”, “The war is still going on”⁸ and other similar headlines are among the most followed Sakha news.

From the accounts of my interlocutors, wolves are cunning and sly, and their main skill lies in unobtrusively watching and monitoring human activities, in order to ‘take advantage’ of the situation. The issue of wild fauna benefitting and adapting to humanised environments is a well documented practice, commonly referred to as “commensalism”, whereas the subsistence and use of human spaces are sometimes labelled “commensal habitats” (Southwick, Siddiqui 1994, 24). The most recurrent example of a commensal habitat is the road: when people cut down trees in a wood to make themselves a path, even to be run by vans or by *Uazik*, Soviet Land Rovers, wolves will probably use that same track for themselves without making any effort. The aspect of “making no effort” is associated to their shrewdness, which involves the ability not only to understand human thinking and talking, but also to anticipate human actions.⁹ To this extent, wolves are often compared with bears: all my interlocutors agree in maintaining that wolves are far smarter than bears, as the latter are gluttonous and “never learn from their mistakes”. In specific points of the *tayga* one can find bear traps, which consist in a narrow cabin made of piled logs that stretch upwards. Once attracted inside, bears cannot get out any more [fig. 1]. In spite of the extensive use of these traps and of the fact that bears are frequently cornered inside, they keep getting caught. According to my interlocutors, wolves would never make such a mistake: they learn where to go and are also very quick to dodge bullets, this is why hunters (or at least the ones I interviewed) rarely shoot at them, preferring to trap them; until 2018 poisonous pills were also used to catch wolves, however, since 2019 they are illegal in the whole Sakha area. The comparison with bears emerges even in terms of competition with humans for food resources. Although it is bears who are omnivorous and often get very close to houses or stores in order to steal food,¹⁰ they are

⁸ <http://www.ykt.news/>, Sakha daily news; <http://www.klub.okhotnikov.ru/>, are sites that deal with hunting; <http://www.klub.okhotnikov.ru/> is a Sakha hunting blog (last viewed 10 September 2021).

⁹ There are many tabooed expressions used before and during hunting. The bear and the wolf, in particular, in Siberia are called in many different ways (see Zelenin 1929), but in Sakha-Yakutia, where the bear's name is already a tabooed one (*èhè* ‘the grandfather’), this animal is addressed as ‘the old’ (*kyrd’aǵas*), ‘the one from the *tai-ga*’, (*tyataaǵy*), whereas the wolf is called ‘the one with a tail’ (*kuturuktaakh*). It is interesting to note that the same word, *kuturuk*, in Sakha language, with the affix *hut* indicating a profession or occupation (*kuturukhut*), is used to identify the shaman's helpers (Alekseev 1984).

¹⁰ A typical situation with bears occurs during *bania*, the bathhouse in the open air. *Banias* are simple wooden cabins with three rooms: a steam room, a washing room and an entrance room. The latter has pegs for hanging clothes, benches and tables where



Figure 1 A bear trap in the taiga, Sakha-Yakutia, 2008. Photo by the Author

normally considered to be only gluttonous and do not pose a serious threat. Wolves, instead, are defined as ‘greedy’, ‘bloodthirsty’ as they not only ‘steal’ the same prey from humans, but adopt a wasteful attitude towards their victims. They often slay reindeer but do not eat them on the spot, leaving the carcasses there (apparently) to rot. What really happens is the other way round: they ‘save’ the killed animals for a further visit, when they will eat them up.

Wolves are normally hunted for their furs, which are then sold to companies across the country and abroad. Some of the latter are also leather manufacturers and dealers, such as the biggest and most famous fur shop in Sakha-Yakutia, *Sakha Bult*,¹¹ based in Yakutsk, where it is possible to purchase a wide variety of crafted goods rang-

tea, coffee, water and food are kept. After staying in the steam room, the *bania* goes cool off in a nearby lake or in the washing room, then the *bania* is re-entered and the whole process is repeated again several times. It is not uncommon that, while people are inside the steaming room or are bathing, a bear will sneak into the entrance room to steal food, thus obliging the *bania* goes either to hide or to lock themselves inside, until the animal quietly walks away.

11 The Sakha word *bult* ‘hunt’ comes from the verb *bul* ‘to find’. This is an important lexical element, hinting at the fact that the wildlife living in the *taiga*, equally called *bult*, belongs to the category of the ‘animals to be found’, thus setting them apart from domesticated horses or cattle.

ing from souvenirs to amulets to clothing, among which the winter boots *untý* and, obviously, wolf furs.¹² When a wolf is hunted down, the skin is removed whereas the entrails and the rest of the body are placed on a raised platform (Russian *labaza*, Sakha *aranǵas*), which is put up soon after killing the animal. To a minor extent the entrails are used for specific purposes such as healing remedies or amulets. When I asked the reason of such a way of disposing of the wolf's body, my interlocutors replied at first that their elders did it this way (which is a typical and frustrating answer the anthropologists often receive). After some more focused questions from my side, however, what emerged was that this treatment, which prevents other animals from reaching and eating the carcass, is not reserved to other predators, even medium and big sized, like the wolverine for instance. The only exception is represented by the eagle, which is sacred to the Sakha-Yakut and cannot be killed or eaten. If accidentally an eagle gets shot down, its body is placed on the same platform.

"The wolf is a pest, but we respect it", said the hunter Michail Ivanovitch Andreev: in spite of its role as an opponent, this statement reveals a higher degree of consideration and awe. This also recalls many reported examples of hunting based societies (see Hamayon 1990; Vitebsky 1995; Müller 2011), where hunters re-arranged the skeleton and the remains of the killed animals to let them have a chance in the other world either to join the herds or the flocks of their spirit masters or to come back to this world in order to be killed again in a sort of never-ending reproductive circle. This is well documented by Rane Willerslev when he illustrates the cycle of life and death among the Yukagirs. He states that:

[w]hen one kills an elk or another animal, its *ayibii* (soul) will go to [...] the Land of Shadows where they will regain their shapes and stay until they are reborn in a new house in the Middle World. (2007, 31)

A similar conception is also to be found in Sakha's world structure, which is made of an upper dimension, inhabited by a number of god-

¹² In 2019, during the *Yhyakh* annual summer festival, among the stands selling local products like food, drinks, handmade crafts and other goods, a *Sakha Bult* stall was also there, proudly featuring wolf furs and displaying a whole pack of stuffed wolves, but also a throne made of plastic swords and covered by wolf skins, a clear reference to the books and TV series *Game of Thrones* [figs 2-3]. On the other hand, there are a few controversies about *Sakha Bult*: the company appears to have monopolised the fur trade within the territory of Sakha-Yakutia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Rane Willerslev, in his volume *Soul Hunters*, recalls that he came under the attack of the Sakha fur company for helping the Yukagirs, with whom he was carrying on fieldwork, to sell their furs directly to the European fur-auction houses. He was charged of illegal trade and poaching by Sakha police and he had to flee the village and stay in the forest for quite a long time with Yukagir hunters (Willerslev 2007).



Figure 2 Stuffed wolves displayed at *Sakha Bult* stand, *Yhyakh* summer festival, Sakha-Yakutia, 2019. Photo by the Author

Figure 3 A *Game of Thrones* fashioned cape covered in wolf fur, *Sakha Bult* stand, *Yhyakh* summer festival, Sakha-Yakutia, 2019. Photo by the Author



spirits (the *Ajyy*), and spirit masters (the *itchi*); a middle realm, dwelt by humans and non-humans alike and an underworld, which is abode to different categories of evil creatures: the *abaahy*, the *jör*, but also the dead's souls.

It is commonly held that the Sakha-Yakut have three souls: a mother-soul (Sakha *ijè-kut*), an earth-soul (Sakha *buor-kut*) and an air-soul (Sakha *salgyn-kut*). When an individual dies, the earth-soul turns into dust, the air-soul vanishes whereas the mother-soul, the most relevant one, goes to the Upper World: it transits through the underworld and then is sent to the upper realm, where specific god-spirits related to fertility and regeneration establish when it will return to the Middle World. In the case of animals, the issue of *kut* is still debated: according to pre-revolutionary ethnographer Vaclav Seroshevski (1902), the only animals to own at least one out of the three *kut* are horses, which also represent the main herded animals; wildlife, instead, seems to be devoid of *kut*, or at least of the mother-soul and are consequently excluded from the above-mentioned process of rebirth. Ethnographic sources devoted to the analysis of death practices among the Sakha-Yakut (Alekseev 1984; Bravina 2005; Khudyakov 2002) do not mention the idea of animal regeneration. Nonetheless the wooden platform that harbours the remains of wolves in Sakha language is called *aranğas* and it refers to a particular sort of burial system, consisting in an aerial grave to be built deep in the forest. It is made of a wooden floor fixed between two logs where the carcass is laid several metres over the ground. According to Seroshevskii (1993), this burial method was probably introduced by nomadic peoples like the Evens or the Yukagirs, and its function was linked to the need of leaving the dead bodies behind without abandoning them on the ground, thus preventing scavengers from feeding on them. This system is still practiced up to our days, specifically in case of shamans' deaths, so that the mother-soul can easily fly out of the body. So, there might be connections between the two aspects, but this point needs further investigations. What is certain is that awe, respect and consideration are feelings that are expressed both when speaking about the wolf (the hunters I interviewed never used tabooed words but never called the name 'wolf' either) and when facing it: in a video sent to me by one of my interlocutors, before killing a wolf, the hunter utters these words:

Eeee, great hunter,
I acknowledge that you are strong and intelligent,
but there's too many of you!
So, forgive me and reach your ancestors in the world of rest

This repeated cross-reference to human actions and attitudes (being smart and cunning, greedy, learning from past mistakes, taking ad-

vantage of somebody else) recalls a parallel to human life and above all behaviour. This, however, does not correspond to egomorphism, rather to a higher degree of both detachment and 'becoming other'.

Anthropologists working in non-Euro-American contexts have recently provided sophisticated accounts of people's attempts to curtail relations with non-human animals (Fausto 2007; Kohn 2007). Eduardo Kohn, in his study of transpecies relations in an Amazonian village, depicts a careful balance of engagement and detachment and notes the linguistic and pragmatic firebreaks that the Runa inhabitants of the village establish between themselves and their dogs. He notes that, in a perspectivist universe,

entertaining the viewpoints of other beings is dangerous business. In their attempts to do so, the Runa do not, for example, want to become dogs. That is, transpecies intersubjectivity entails some degree of becoming other, and this carries risks. To mitigate such dangers, the Runa make strategic use of different communicative strategies. (Kohn 2007, 7)

The Runa, in Kohn's account, strive to live in a tension between two equally undesirable extremes: "cosmological autism", in which one loses the ability to be aware of the other selves that inhabit the multinatural cosmos, and "becoming other" (192), which would dissolve Runa distinctive selfhood and position in the cosmos as human beings. In a related argument, Carlos Fausto describes across numerous Amazonian contexts the careful procedures that must be in place to ensure the objectification of prey, thereby minimising the risk of the wrong relationships being fostered (Fausto 2007; Candea 2010). In the case of Sakha-Yakut hunters, on the one hand they need to entertain the wolf's perspective, otherwise they would not have developed such a deep system of know-how and skills when it comes to hunting; there are nonetheless dangers in excessively transformative engagements: they must guard against losing themselves to the point that their identity as hunters suffers a lapse, also abstaining from transforming wolves into friends. The practice of becoming other but 'not too other' is the point of Willerslev's notion of "double perspective". He speaks in fact of a "mimetic double" when referring to Yukaghir hunters and their practices: before and during hunt, they 'become' the prey, pretending to be the victim, in a sort of mimicry which, instead, is just apparent. This mimesis in fact aims at attracting prey and catching it. What is relevant about this 'mimetic double' is that the double is never identical to its original form, but it is an imperfect copy: this feature enables the hunter to be aware and confident that he is not an animal, or, as Willelev would put it, "not animal, not-not animal" (2004, 269).

4 Conclusions

When I was in the field, a common matter of discussion, not only with hunters, revolved around a controversial film from 2010. That year, a film called *Loups* (wolves), by director Nicholas Vanier, had been shot right in the Oymyakon region. I did not know about this film before and I first heard of it when I was there, as almost everyone mentioned it to me. They said that it took the team almost two years to shoot it and, after such an effort, the film premiered right in Oymyakon. The plan was to distribute it throughout Siberia and maybe to Europe, however it did not go as expected and the audience reacted to it so badly that the film was withdrawn from cinemas; only a web version is now available. The reasons why my interlocutors and, more broadly, the people I spoke to disliked it so much were many, starting with the choice of non-human ‘actors’: the wolves starring in the film came from Canada and were very different in size, in the paw shape, colour of the fur from ‘native’ ones. The main human actors were all French, albeit with Asian appearance but not with the features of the people living in this area who were used mostly as extras in background scenes. Some points of the script had actors say and do very improbable things on how to herd and behave with reindeer. Nonetheless, to my interlocutors’ eyes, all these mistakes were still forgivable. What was not forgivable at all was the script itself, which deals with a reindeer herder and a pack of wolves becoming friends. To their eyes, there cannot and there will not ever be a friendship between humans and wolves, this is completely out of reality, out of the state of things and not attainable at all. “You can tame a wolf or a wolf cub, but sooner or later the wolf will reveal its nature”, said Andrei Nikolaevich Vinokurov, a hunter and forest ranger. Its nature, whatever nature means, is what makes the wolf an opponent. An ideal opponent.

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